







# Bratva Baby (Barkov Bratva Brothers #2)

**Author:** *Lux Devon*

**Category:** Urban

**Description:** I'm offered as a bride to the merciless Bratva...

I'm fresh out of college and about to start a job in the real world.

Until daddy tells me I have to marry a much older member of the Bratva to avenge my family.

I don't want to give my new husband my innocence and a baby...but I have little choice.

I'm furious that I got forced into this situation.

I'm furious that I didn't stand up for myself.

Now I'm walking down the aisle in a dress that's as black as death.

I vow that I'll never be his little trophy wife, and we'll never consummate this marriage.

But my behavior only makes him more determined to break me, to make me his personal doll.

He kisses me roughly and makes my helpless body melt against him.

And just when I'm about to beg, he taunts me by breaking away.

All the while he says my body, soul, and freedom belong to him. As does my pregnant belly.

When he finds out my secret...will he break me for good?

The Barkov Bratva family controls the underworld of New York. They're ruthless, manipulative, and violent, especially when you don't obey their rules, submit to their laws, and give yourself to them fully...

**Total Pages (Source):** 27

## Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:59 pm*

Blood covers the pavement in wide arcs, as though someone wanted to make a statement and chose the most gruesome way to do it. It's five in the morning, and I've been on the move for hours, chasing shadows that refuse to settle. My head throbs from lack of sleep, but there's no time to rest. One of our most dependable allies is lying here, cold and robbed of life.

I stand over the body, ignoring the metallic tang I can sense with each breath. Pavel's stare is vacant and haunting. Maksim steps up beside me. He rubs a thumb over his watch face, then nudges one of the scattered casings on the ground with the toe of his boot.

"Looks like at least three guns," he observes with a drawn-out exhale. "He never stood a chance."

Akim crouches by Pavel's outstretched arm and brushes his gloved hand along the edge of a torn jacket sleeve. "This was a slaughter."

Nikolai hovers near the exit of the alley, scanning the quiet street beyond. We agreed to meet here with a skeleton crew in an effort to avoid drawing attention from the local authorities or any potential enemies who might still be lurking. We've got bigger concerns than cops—like who had the nerve to gun down a man under the protection of me and my brothers.

The Barkov name carries weight in this city. We don't ask for respect; we take it. I'm the second in command, and together with my brothers—Aleksei, Nikolai, Dmitri, Maksim, and Akim—we form the backbone of the Bratva. Each of us has earned our place through blood and grit. It's a name no one crosses lightly, and anyone who

dares learns quickly why.

My mind fogs as I fight off a wave of fatigue. Pavel was crucial to our operations. Eliminating him sends a message that someone wants a piece of us, or they want us to believe a certain party is responsible. I scan the area, stepping around droplets of blood that curve across the concrete like some twisted map.

“Grigor,” Nikolai calls from near the street. “You might want to see this.”

I follow him past a broken crate and around a corner. It’s quiet, no spectators, no strays. Not surprising at this hour. Then, I notice something snagged on a row of splintered wooden boards. At first, I assume it’s just another piece of Pavel’s clothing. But Nikolai reaches out and tugs it free, revealing a frayed scrap of fabric about the size of my palm.

“Bring it over,” I instruct.

He hands it to me, and I flip it around. It’s black, with a small emblem in the corner. It takes me a second to recognize it. “Thorne’s crest.”

Nikolai’s brows knit. “Could be a setup.”

“Or it could be Evan Thorne,” I reply, letting my voice drop. “He’s been lying low since our last business deal went south, but he may have decided to strike.” Either that, or someone’s being clever by leaving this here so we go after Thorne. Regardless, I need to look him in the eyes.

Akim steps out from the alley, and his eyes move between me and the fabric. “You think it’s him?”

“Let’s not jump to conclusions. But I’m not ignoring it. Maksim, organize a cleanup

crew. I don't want any sign we were here once we go."

Maksim stares at Pavel's body and sighs. "He was a good man, Grigor."

I nod. There's nothing else to say. We'll avenge him, no question. I give a quick signal to our men waiting in an unmarked SUV. They'll take care of the remains, and we'll see that Pavel's family is compensated. But first, I have a visit to make.

Tall iron gates guard the entrance of Evan Thorne's estate, flanked by men who pass suspicious looks at me as I roll up in my car. One of them steps forward with his firearm raised, then he recognizes my face and waves me through. Even if our alliance is fractured, I'm still not someone they'll turn away unless they want a war on their doorstep.

The long driveway is paved with stone and lined with manicured hedges. By the time I reach the main house, a butler or attendant—I can't tell the difference—hurries to open the door for me.

I make my way into a foyer that's covered top to bottom with polished marble. Thorne has always liked to parade his wealth, even when it's built on blood and shady dealings.

A pair of double doors opens at the far end. Evan Thorne steps out, wearing a robe, a mild frown on his face that deepens when he sees me. He lifts his chin, trying to appear composed, but I know him well enough to see through the act.

"Grigor Barkov," he greets in a stiff voice. "To what do I owe this unannounced visit at dawn?"

I don't bother with pleasantries. I open my palm, revealing the scrap of fabric. "Familiar?"

He takes a closer look, and his jaw ticks as he eyes the crest. “Where did you get that?”

“Found it on the body of Pavel. He’s dead.”

The man’s mouth parts as I watch for a hint of guilt or surprise, and what I see is something in between. Genuine shock, or a performance? It’s hard to tell.

“Pavel? Killed?” He steps aside, gesturing for me to move into a private room. It’s lined with ornate shelves and leather-bound books, a place designed to impress visitors. The door closes behind us with a near-silent thud.

I let the silence drag for a moment. “As of a few hours ago, yes. We found him in a side alley, bullet-riddled. And this,” I hold up the fabric again, “was found at the scene.”

Thorne crosses his arms over his robe. “I’m sorry to hear about Pavel, but do you really think I’d be foolish enough to leave my family emblem at a murder scene?”

“That’s the question, isn’t it? Sometimes, a man’s arrogance gets the better of him. Other times, it’s a setup.”

He doesn’t break my stare. “You and I haven’t done business in a while, Barkov. The last time we spoke, we decided to go our separate ways because our goals didn’t align.” He shrugs, forcing a note of calm into his tone. “I wouldn’t see a reason to kill one of your associates unless I wanted a war.”

“And do you want one?”

His eyes thin. “Of course not. When our paths diverged, I wasn’t happy, but that doesn’t mean I’d commit suicide by going after your people. You know better than

that.”

I weigh his words. He’s not wrong; launching an attack on someone so close to us is a dangerous gamble, especially if he leaves evidence pointing directly at himself. But men have made bigger mistakes under the sway of pride or desperation.

“You’ll come and talk to my brothers and me,” I declare. “We’ll set a time. You’ll explain what you know, and we’ll decide if you walk away from this.”

“I can do that. Name the time and place.”

“Tomorrow. We have a location in Queens. I’ll text the address to your staff.”

Annoyance crosses his features at my dictating the arrangement, but he doesn’t protest. That tells me he’s either innocent or trying to appear so. Thorne gestures for me to follow him back toward the foyer.

“Of course. I’ll be there. I have nothing to hide.”

We reach the living room, where I notice two of his guards now standing by. They stare at me with barely masked hostility, but nobody says a word. Thorne’s posture remains guarded. I can almost see the gears turning in his head as he calculates his next steps.

I glance around, making sure no unwanted ears are eavesdropping. “If I find out you had anything to do with Pavel’s death, you’ll regret it.”

“I understand.”

I turn on my heels, leaving him to stew as I make for the exit. Part of me wants to do a full sweep of this place, see if there’s any sign of a hidden weapon or a direct link to



the murder. But I doubt he'd leave something so incriminating in plain view. I settle for a vague threat: he knows I'm watching him now.

Just as I pass beneath an arch leading back toward the entrance, I sense movement from a side hallway. I pause, glancing out of the corner of my eye. A figure steps into view, seemingly in a rush. I consider ignoring it, but curiosity gets me, and I turn to track it.

That's when she collides with me.

She's not tall—her forehead barely reaches my collarbone. She stumbles, then snaps her head up, and I'm met with bright blue eyes framed by long black hair that tumbles well below her shoulders. There's a moment where her gaze meets mine and my lungs hitch. It only lasts an instant, but in that fleeting heartbeat, she steals the air from my lungs and the thoughts from my brain.

She mutters under her breath, then notices my suit and my stance, and apparently makes her own assumptions. "You," she hisses, stepping back. "Watch where you're going."

A biting remark forms in my head, but I hold back. I notice her clothes are casual, a simple top and jeans, and she's clutching a small backpack like she's been somewhere she shouldn't.

She's about to walk past me when she freezes, eyeing me more carefully. Then she sets her jaw, evidently deciding she doesn't care who I might be. "Did my father hire you recently?" Her tone suggests I'm beneath her. "Haven't seen you around before."

I stand there, watching her. The directness of her question is jarring, especially given the circumstances.

This must be a family member, most likely the daughter I've heard rumors about: Seraphina Thorne. I never bothered to confirm names or faces because Thorne's private life didn't concern me. She has a fire in her eyes and a body that stirs a carnal desire in my blood.

She plants a hand on her hip and repeats, "Are you new here? Listen, I'm not supposed to be coming in at this hour. If you know what's good for you, you'll keep your mouth shut about seeing me."

My eyebrows lift at her boldness. She has no idea who I am. She's half my age, with a glare that challenges me to speak up, and her posture hints she's ready for a fight—or at least a confrontation.

"Just pretend this little run-in never happened. If my father finds out I was out all night..." She trails off, letting the implication hover.

I glance back down the hallway. Evan Thorne might wander into view any moment, which could get messy for me, for her, for both of us. "You're—" I start to say, but she cuts me off.

"Don't talk. I'll pay you if that's what it takes. Or I'll make a scene right here, right now. Tell my dad you tried something slick."

Well, this is new. Usually, the women around these families wilt under intimidation or authority. They know their place. She obviously doesn't realize she's messing with the second-in-command of the Barkov Bratva.

Her hair falls over one shoulder, silky and dark, and something about her bright eyes has my attention. She's undeniably attractive, but the brashness in her attitude is what really stands out.

She rolls those striking eyes. “If you so much as whisper my name to my father, I’ll—”

I lift a brow, inviting her to finish the threat. Part of me finds it ridiculous, part of me is... intrigued. She puffs out a short breath before glancing behind her and adding, “I’ll make sure you regret it. Got it?”

I tilt my head, considering her. The rational side of me says to ignore her entirely. Let her run to her room or wherever she’s headed, then focus on the reason I came here: dealing with her father’s possible connection to a murder. But something about her tone is hooking me. She’s naive enough to threaten a man whose name alone inspires terror in many corners of this city, yet I can’t fault her confidence.

The girl has spunk, and God help me, I find it sexy as hell.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:59 pm*

I nearly fall backward when he closes the distance between us, like he's trying to prove a point. One second, I'm spitting threats and telling this idiot to shut his mouth. The next, I'm swallowing my words because this man is towering over me, blocking my view of anything behind him. The hallway seems to shrink. His presence is so commanding it's impossible to focus on anything else.

My heart thrashes in my chest. I still feel the rush of adrenaline from sneaking into my own home, but now there's another layer—something I wasn't prepared for. He looms close enough that I catch a scent that's both pleasant and disorienting, a combination of warm spice and clean soap that doesn't match the gritty aura I expect from someone with that stance.

He's huge—easily a head and a half taller than me. His suit jacket stretches across broad shoulders, and when he moves, I notice the bulge of muscle in his arms. There's nothing lean or boyish about him. He's all power in a perfectly tailored ensemble.

He could be mid-thirties, maybe pushing forty, and that fact alone would make most women flinch. In this world, with age comes a certain brutality and ruthlessness. It's a learned behavior. You can't help but become jaded after witnessing so much crime and violence. But I'm not like most women. Instead of shrinking away, I square my shoulders and stand taller. If he thinks he can intimidate me just by existing, he's got another thing coming.

But I can't deny something about him does catch me off-guard. He doesn't look like the other brutes who work for my dad.

His jawline looks chiseled from stone, covered in a hint of dark stubble that outlines his mouth and accentuates lips set in a hard line. His hair is ebony black, cut short on the sides and slightly longer on top, combed back with the methodicalness of someone who pays attention to detail. A faint scar crosses his left eyebrow, giving his face an intensity that draws the eye. He has the kind of features that make me want to stare.

I'm trying not to get lost in the color of his eyes—dark brown but with threads of gold swirling near the pupils. They're locked on me in a way that sends a tingle across my skin. If he's just a guard, he's the most impressive one my father has ever hired. Yet something about him feels too refined for that. The fabric of his jacket doesn't look like the standard off-the-rack suits Dad forces on his bodyguards. This is finer, with subtle stitching. I catch a glimpse of polished cufflinks gleaming at his wrists.

I press my lips together, determined not to back down, even though a part of me is screaming, What are you doing ?

“Are you done?” he rumbles in a voice that threatens to knock the wind out of me. He angles his head in a way that forces me to tip my chin up if I want to keep eye contact.

My stomach clenches. “Done with what?” I shoot back, refusing to let him see how rattled I am.

His eyes narrow. “Yelling at me in your father's hallway like you own the place.”

I grit my teeth. “I do live here,” I bite out. “And for the record, if you're one of my father's new hires, you might want to work on your manners.”

He leans closer, enough that I feel his body heat searing into me. “You have no idea

who I am, do you?”

“Should I?” The words come out more defiant than I intend. I’m teetering between fury and wanting to jump this man’s bones.

He doesn’t answer. He just fixes me with a stare that makes me gulp. I smell his cologne again—rich, masculine, and it stirs up my nerves. My knees feel shaky, so I straighten my spine. I’m not about to let him see me sweat.

His lips curve upward. It’s not exactly a smile, but more like amusement. He backs off a fraction, giving me space to breathe. I blow out a quiet breath and scowl at him.

“Just because you’re wearing an expensive suit doesn’t give you the right to—”

He moves so quickly that I don’t have a chance to finish the sentence. Suddenly, he’s leaning in and whispering near my ear as though he’s telling me a secret. “I’ve had about enough of your attitude. Watch your mouth before you say something you regret.”

My pulse hammers. “Is that a warning?”

He straightens and adjusts his cuffs with deliberate slowness. “Take it however you want.”

He turns his back on me and heads down the hall like he’s already forgotten I exist. I stand there with heat crawling up my cheeks, watching him. Who the hell is this guy?

I watch the way his suit fits his frame and the confidence in his stride. All my earlier assumptions that he’s just a run-of-the-mill guard dissolve. My father hires brutes who do everything in black T-shirts and cargo pants, or cheap suits that they throw away after a few weeks because they get torn up on the job. This man is in a different

category. The thought of my father employing him for menial security duties starts to seem laughable.

He glances over his shoulder once and lifts his dark brow as if to say, Keep running that mouth of yours, see what happens . Then he's gone, disappearing around a corner.

I let out a breath and try to steady myself. My heart still pounds from the adrenaline of sneaking in and colliding with that man. I tug on the bottom of my shirt, as though that might help me regain composure. What if he tells my father? A jolt of panic hits me. I threatened him, practically accused him of assault. If he works for Dad—or even if he's something else—he might report my little escapade. But then again, if he was just passing by, maybe he doesn't care enough to cause trouble for me.

Damn it. All I wanted was a night out with my friends. A few hours of freedom. Apparently, that was too much to ask.

I shuffle down the corridor, trying not to look too suspicious. My father's estate has multiple wings, each laid out with immaculate decor that screams extravagance: marble floors, gold-framed paintings, plush rugs. I've grown up in this environment, but it's never felt like home. Dad's presence is all over these walls, from the antique rifles he mounts like trophies to the stiff furniture that's more for display than comfort.

As I approach the main foyer, I see a pair of staff members huddled together. There's a tension in the way they keep glancing toward my father's office. Usually, Dad handles his shady deals offsite in warehouses or those private clubs he frequents. His conducting business here is never a good sign.

"Excuse me," I say quietly, hoping to glean some information. "What's going on?"

One of them, a short woman in a dark dress, shoots me a fleeting look. She's obviously fearful. She parts her lips but doesn't speak. The man beside her shakes his head like he's warning her not to say a word. My father's staff knows better than to gossip around me, or maybe they're just protecting themselves.

I sigh and continue on my way. So much for finding out anything from them.

Before I can head upstairs, I catch sight of my sister, Cecily, hovering near Dad's office doorway. She's peering through a slight gap, looking like she's trying to eavesdrop. Normally, Cecily is the proper one—quiet, obedient. It's out of character for her to be snooping like this. My eyebrows shoot up.

“What are you doing?” I hiss, creeping up behind her.

She whirls around, pressing a finger to her lips. “Shh!” Cecily's eyes are big, and her skin looks paler than usual, which is saying something because we share the same alabaster complexion. She grabs my hand and pulls me behind a decorative pillar, away from direct view of the office door.

I whisper, “Seriously, what's happening?”

She looks around, making sure no one else is within earshot. “I heard a commotion from my room, so I came to check. Dad's pissed.”

“Pissed about what?”

“I don't know. Something about deals and betrayal. People have been walking in and out. There was a guy here I've never seen before. Dad sounds furious.”

A chill runs down my spine as I recall the earlier encounter with that mysterious man.



I gesture for Cecily to follow me so we're not standing in the middle of the hallway. We move a little farther from the door and duck behind one of the tall decorative screens that are there for aesthetics, giving us a partial view of the office through a narrow gap.

Cecily lowers her voice to the faintest whisper. "What were you doing out last night, anyway?"

My heart clenches. "If you must know, I needed some air. I was at Nadia's."

She looks worried. "Dad's going to kill you if he finds out you were gone all night. You know how he is."

"Did you catch any names?" I ask, diverting the attention back to him. I know all too well how our father is. I don't need to be reminded.

"I heard the name Barkov once or twice," Cecily says, biting her lip. "Isn't that one of the families Dad used to deal with?"

My pulse ticks up. Barkov. That rings a bell. Dad used to be allied with them, but something went wrong. I heard bits and pieces but never the full story. Dad keeps me and Cecily in the dark when it comes to his dealings.

We inch closer to the edge of the screen, and Dad's voice booms out, but I can't make out a word he's saying followed by a muffled, almost panicked response.

Cecily and I exchange a concerned glance. Dad's rage is so thick in his tone I can practically feel my stomach twist. I've seen him in these moods before, and it never ends well for whoever he's confronting.

"What the hell are you two doing?" a voice growls from behind us.

I jolt and swing around. One of Dad's older guards, Garrett, is standing there with his arms crossed. He's a tall, lanky man with gray creeping into his hair, and he's always had it out for me and Cecily—probably because Dad told him to keep us in line.

"Move along, ladies," Garrett orders. "You shouldn't be near Mr. Thorne's office right now."

I open my mouth, but Cecily grabs my arm and steers me away before I say something that'll get us in trouble. We end up in a side corridor that connects to a smaller lounge room—one Dad rarely uses. I close the door behind us, muffling the noise from the main hallway.

Cecily presses her hands to her cheeks. "This is bad. Whatever it is, this is bad."

I nod and start pacing the small space. "Didn't Dad say he cut ties with the Barkovs months ago?"

She shrugs as she perches on the edge of a loveseat. "He did. Which means something changed."

I think back to the man I ran into moments ago, the one with the broad shoulders and commanding presence. He said something about me not knowing who I was dealing with. Could he be from the Barkov side? Or maybe he's part of a new arrangement Dad made.

"What if Dad's about to do something extreme?"

I grimace. "What else is new?"

Ever since we were little, we've known Dad's business wasn't legitimate, but it's escalated in the last few years. He's grown more paranoid, more ruthless. I'm not

naive to the fact that violence is part of his world. Still, the idea of it happening right here in the house makes my stomach churn.

We flinch when we hear raised voices again. This time they're closer, like Dad stepped out of his office or into the corridor. We hurry to the door of the lounge, carefully cracking it open an inch so we can listen.

A thunderous shout makes Cecily jerk backward. My father is yelling, "If you're trying to get me killed, have the balls to at least say it."

Then, a different voice answers, trembling with desperation. "Sir, I swear, I didn't—"

We hear a thud, then a cry of pain. My heart rate spikes. Dad must've thrown him against something or struck him.

"Please, Sir," the man pleads, "I'll do anything to fix this—"

Cecily grips my hand and mouths, Let's go . But my feet stay rooted to the floor. I can't turn away, even though I'm terrified of what we might see or hear.

We hear Dad again. "You think you can double-cross me and walk away?"

The man sputters incoherent apologies. My father's tone grows lethal. "Get on your knees."

Cecily's hand trembles in mine, and my entire body tenses with dread. Please don't do anything rash . But I already know Dad's capable of the worst.

There's a moment of silence, broken only by the man's ragged breathing. Then Dad says, "That's right. You should beg."

A strangled whimper echoes, followed by a loud noise that cracks through the hall. My heart seizes in my chest, and Cecily's free hand flies to her mouth. I squeeze her fingers, trying to keep her calm while my own pulse thunders.

We both recognize what happened. Dad just pulled the trigger.

He shot him. He's never been squeamish about killing, but doing it so openly in our home... This is crossing a line.

Cecily's eyes are glossy. She's about to speak, so I press a finger to her lips. We need to be absolutely silent. Another voice in the corridor, probably one of Dad's underlings, says, "Sir, what do you want us to do with the body?"

"Clean it up," Dad barks. "Do I have to spell everything out for you?"

I suck in a slow breath and glance at Cecily. She looks like she's on the verge of fainting, so I tug her away from the door and into the center of the lounge. Her chest heaves, and tears brim in her eyes.

"I'm sorry," she mumbles, wiping at her face, "I didn't expect—"

"I know," I say, wrapping an arm around her shoulder. "But this is who he is, Cecily. We can't pretend anymore. This is our father."

She shakes her head. "Why did he have to do it here?"

Anger surges within me, fueled by fear. "He doesn't care."

We share a moment of silence, each coping with the horrifying reality of what we just witnessed. It's not that we haven't known Dad is dangerous—everyone who crosses him ends up in a shallow grave, or so the rumors go—but I can count on one hand the

times I've seen him kill someone outright. Usually, he's more discreet. There must be something huge at stake.

After several minutes of tense silence, we hear more footsteps outside in the hallway. A muffled voice says, "Mr. Thorne, would you like us to reach out to the cleaners?"

Another reply—Dad's. "Do you think I want bloodstains in my corridor? Of course I do." Then there's a pause, followed by, "And get ready for tomorrow's meeting with the Bratva. I'll need one of my pawns."

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:59 pm*

I slam my palm on the conference table the instant the last man enters the room. “Sit.” My tone leaves no room for argument. Everyone in the room knows why they’re here—and they know better than to test my patience right now.

They shuffle into chairs arranged around a long, imposing table. Each one of these men has a role in the Bratva—some are my own captains, others enforce territory control for my brothers. Overseeing them all is my job tonight, whether they like it or not. Aleksei, our Pakhan and my brother, placed me in charge of this meeting while he’s away.

A few of them keep their eyes and heads down. Others meet my stare, bristling with barely hidden opinions. The tension is, in part, because of the way we lost Pavel. No one has the right words for that, but they’re waiting for me to address it.

I stand at the head of the table. “Pavel is gone,” I say, not bothering with a preamble. “One of our most reliable allies, executed in an alley without warning. We have evidence pointing toward Evan Thorne—or at least suggesting he’s involved.”

A chorus of unsettled chatter fills the space. For years, Thorne’s relationship with the Bratva has been precarious. Officially, we cut ties a while back. Still, more than one man in this room wonders if we should have eliminated him a long time ago.

I hold my hand up until they quiet down. “We found a piece of cloth marked with Thorne’s crest near Pavel’s body. Might be a frame job, or it might be Thorne flaunting his nerve. I don’t care which. Pavel is still dead, and we need to respond.”

I flick my gaze around the table. Maksim is seated on my left, and Dmitri has taken a

seat on my right. My brothers are silent but attentive. Two men—Leonid and Fyodor—exchange looks that set my teeth on edge. They’ve had issues with me taking the lead before. I’m sure they think I’m only in this position because Aleksei is my brother, but the smart ones at this table know that’s not the case. I’ve earned my position as second-in-command.

Maksim speaks first. “What’s the plan, Grigor? An attack on Thorne? We can’t let this stand.”

A few men nod in agreement, but another voice breaks in. “We should be sure before we declare open war,” Leonid suggests. “Thorne’s got resources. We don’t need more complications.”

I point a finger at him. “What’s more complicated is letting Pavel’s murder go unanswered. The streets will see that as weakness, and the Bratva doesn’t show weakness.”

Fyodor shifts in his chair, letting out a low snort. “And what do you propose we do about it? Aleksei should be the one who calls the shots on a matter of alliances.”

I lock eyes with him. “Aleksei handed me this responsibility while he’s occupied. That should be enough.”

He doesn’t mask his disdain. “I’d rather hear it from Aleksei himself.”

My temper stirs. This isn’t the time for a pissing contest. “We can hash it out together, but I’m leading this meeting. Get on board or get out.”

Fyodor lets the chair scrape against the floor, like he’s ready to stand. “Might as well get out, then. I’m not here to take orders from second best.”

A hush falls. Even Leonid looks uneasy. Half the men glance at me, waiting to see if I'll let that disrespect slide. I stare Fyodor down. "You think you can walk away from this? Go ahead."

He pushes himself up, and the outline of a sidearm is visible beneath his jacket. The guard at the door tenses, but I raise a hand—my signal to remain still.

Fyodor's mouth twists into a sneer, and he heads for the exit. The men nearest the door shift in their seats, glancing between me and him.

With one fluid motion, I draw my pistol and fire a single shot. The sound ricochets off every surface. Fyodor's leg gives out, and he collapses with blood trickling onto the polished floor. He bellows a curse and clutches his thigh.

I lower the gun. "Anyone else feel like leaving?"

Silence hangs in the air, broken only by Fyodor's ragged groans. I motion to two of my enforcers. "Take him to get stitched up. He'll live. Maybe next time he'll think before he mouths off."

They drag him out, leaving a crimson trail that sends a message to every man in this room: I don't have time for insubordination.

When the door closes, I press my palm flat on the table. "We're done with power plays. We have a real threat: Thorne. If he's behind Pavel's death, we settle it. If it's a setup, we need to find out who's trying to pit us against him. Either way, Pavel's murder can't go unpunished, but we're not declaring full war on Thorne without hearing him out. The plan is to confront him. If he's guilty, we settle it by force. If he convinces us he's innocent, we look for the bastard who framed him. Simple."

Dmitri folds his arms. "Thorne said he'd show up tonight, right?"



Sergei, a wiry captain, taps the table with his fingertips. “He’s late.”

My jaw ticks. “I noticed.”

Hushed comments circle the table. Thorne’s tardiness feels like a direct insult. He knows how serious this is. Maksim fiddles with the corner of a file, Dmitri stares at the clock on the wall, and Leonid glances repeatedly at the spot where Fyodor fell.

I clench my teeth. He’d better show soon, or this might get ugly fast.

Right on cue, footsteps sound in the hallway. Then the door opens, revealing Evan Thorne flanked by two of his own guards. He saunters in, scanning the room like he’s making a grand entrance at a party. My soldiers stationed near the walls grip their weapons, prepared to draw if he tries anything.

He lifts his hands to shoulder level, palms out in a mock gesture of peace. “Gentlemen, apologies for the delay. Urgent matters demanded my attention.”

That smug voice grates on my nerves. He’s wearing a tailored suit in dark gray, unbuttoned at the front, exuding a confidence that’s almost insulting. I rest one hand on my pistol, which is still set on the table. “You’re late.”

A faint shrug. “Sometimes unavoidable. But I’m here now, ready to talk.”

Maksim looks ready to snap. I send him a warning glance. Let me handle this .

Thorne steps forward, not bothering to hide the slight curl of his lips as he addresses the others at my table. “I heard about Pavel. A tragedy, truly.”

I slam my fist on the table. “Cut the act. You’re either guilty or being set up.”

He stops just short of the table, eyeing the empty chair across from me. “Mind if I sit?”

I motion toward it. “Make it quick. We’re not in a forgiving mood.”

He settles, crossing one leg over the other. His men remain by the door. He arches a brow at the darkened patch on the floor where Fyodor’s blood is still smeared. “Busy night?”

“You have no idea. Tell us how you plan to explain your name being tied to Pavel’s murder.”

Thorne exhales like he’s indulging a group of small children. “I can’t fathom why I’d kill him. It gains me nothing but the risk of angering the Barkovs. You’re not exactly a bunch I want as enemies.”

“Then how do you explain your crest at the scene?” Dmitri demands.

Thorne spreads his hands. “I can’t. Perhaps I was framed. Perhaps one of my men went rogue. You know how big organizations are—someone might want to set me up for reasons unknown.”

Maksim grimaces. “We’re not fools. If you’re lying, we’ll find out.”

Thorne’s gaze sweeps across the table. “I’d expect nothing less.” Then his eyes land on me. “But I didn’t come here just to offer half-baked denials. I’m fully aware your trust is broken. So, I’ve brought you an option. One that might mend the rift.”

My teeth grind. “Speak.”

He gives a small nod, as though we’re in a friendly negotiation. “Since we parted

ways, I've always thought that we should solidify our alliance again—under the right circumstances, of course. But recent events have made that more pressing. I want to assure the Barkovs that I'm not the threat you think."

Leonid snorts. "You think we'd welcome you with open arms just because you say so?"

Thorne smirks. "Hardly. That's why I'm offering something substantial."

"Get to the point," I snap.

He sits up straighter, spreading his coat so we can see he's not reaching for a weapon. "A marriage alliance."

A sudden silence grips the room, as if everyone stopped breathing at once. Across the table, Leonid's lips part, but no sound comes out. Sergei's jaw drops. Even Dmitri's expression betrays his shock.

I blink, making sure I heard correctly. "A marriage alliance? Are you out of your mind?"

He lifts one shoulder in a casual shrug. "Sometimes the old ways hold power. If I bind my family to yours through marriage, you'll have a reason to trust my intentions. I'll be placing one of my own blood under your care, effectively ensuring I can't afford to cross you."

This is beyond anything I expected him to say. Arranged marriages in our world aren't unheard of, but they're usually between families that already trust each other or want to merge resources. With Thorne, we barely have a civil relationship.

Maksim recovers first. "Why would we agree to that? You show up late running your

smart mouth, and then drop this nonsense?”

“Because it’s the best way to quell the suspicion that I orchestrated Pavel’s murder. If I intended to spark a war, I wouldn’t sacrifice one of my daughters to the Barkov Bratva. No father would risk that. This offer is proof of my sincerity.”

A stunned wave ripples through the men. His daughter ? The man is offering his offspring like she’s a bargaining chip. I knew Thorne was heartless, but this takes it to a new level.

I stand, pushing my chair back as I do. “You think a marriage is going to erase the fact Pavel was killed? You’re out of line.”

“I lost contact with the Barkovs once. I’d rather not see that fracture grow. The city’s got bigger problems, which demand that we move as one if we’re to remain strong. Let’s be honest: I might be your prime suspect, but what if I’m telling the truth? This could be an opportunity to reunite our families. To stand against whoever really wants to see us destroy each other.”

Leonid rumbles under his breath, “We don’t make alliances lightly.”

Thorne nods. “Nor do I. And I don’t expect a decision this minute. But if you’re serious about finding the truth, you’ll consider my proposal.”

Maksim looks at me, tension evident in his posture. Dmitri’s stare flicks between Thorne and me, waiting to see how I’ll respond. Marriage alliances in the underworld are potent. They tie families together in a binding way that’s difficult to sever.

I grit my teeth and lean forward, pointing at Thorne. “You come in here, late, with Pavel’s blood on your reputation, and your best solution is to offer a daughter to the Bratva? Seems to me you’re either desperate or you’re scheming.”

His calm smirk remains. “Call it what you like. Desperate times, desperate measures. If it wins me the chance to prove I’m not your enemy, then I’ll do it.”

I want to hurl the table aside. This is madness. But if he’s innocent, the alliance might be beneficial—wealth, connections, a show of unity. If he’s guilty, this might be a twisted way to get inside our circle. My blood boils at how cunning he is, and how he wields that cunning as if we’re all pawns on his chessboard.

Leonid cuts in, “Which daughter? Everybody knows you have one with a... reputation for being difficult.”

Thorne sniffs. “The details can be arranged later. Let’s keep it simple for now: an engagement. If you accept, I’ll prove my loyalty. If you discover I’m truly behind Pavel’s murder, you can tear me apart before the wedding day. That’s fair, no?”

Sergei mutters a curse. My guess is everyone in this room is torn between wanting to shoot Thorne on the spot or at least giving him a chance to explain further. I sense the roiling discontent in the men around the table but also the spark of intrigue.

I meet Thorne’s gaze, aware that every second drags us deeper into this conversation. “You’re playing a dangerous game.”

He arches a brow. “I wouldn’t come here with an offer like this if I didn’t believe it could work. I have too much pride for empty theatrics.”

Silence falls again. Blood pounds in my temples, fueled by thoughts of Pavel’s final moments. I hate the thought of forging a bond with Thorne of all people, yet I also know the men want a solution—some path forward that doesn’t plunge us into an immediate war we might regret.

Thorne stands and adjusts his jacket. “I’ve made my offer. I’ll leave it at that.”

A few of my men look toward me, waiting for my response, as though I might push back or throw him out. I can't bring myself to utter a word. My mind is a storm of conflicting impulses: fury over Pavel's murder, suspicion of Thorne's role, and curiosity about why he'd propose something so drastic.

Thorne skims the room, lingering on the stain of Fyodor's blood for a moment before lifting his eyes. "I trust you'll make the right decision. Perhaps we can move forward without more losses."

He slides his hands into his pockets, and my men tense, but he doesn't reach for a weapon. He gives a final glance my way, and his expression stays maddeningly calm.

"Marriage," he repeats, voice echoing in the meeting space. "Consider it a token of my willingness to stand by your side against whoever truly killed Pavel."

There, he's laid it out. A bizarre, old-world solution that might chain our families together or drag us all into deeper conflict. My pulse still races with the gun resting by my side as I weigh whether to shoot him and end this conversation forever.

No matter what we decide, I have a feeling his offer will leave a scar.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:59 pm*

I kick open Cecily's bedroom door and glare at her like she's the one responsible for turning my life upside down. "Tell me again," I demand, my voice trembling with fury. "What did you hear?"

She sits on the edge of her bed and tightens her fingers around the hem of her dress. "The housekeeper was talking about a marriage proposal. She said Father intends to offer you to one of the Barkovs. The staff is in a frenzy."

A horrible sensation seizes me. I feel betrayed, outraged, and most of all, trapped. "Did the housekeeper say when this was decided?"

Cecily shakes her head. "No. Just that Father's been negotiating."

I pace the carpet, trying to stifle the wild emotions surging through me. A marriage proposal? In this day and age, the thought alone is ridiculous. "He didn't even bother to discuss it with me first."

She rubs her arms. "What are you going to do?"

I swipe my hair back from my face. "I'll talk to him." Fury flares anew when I realize I'm actually going to confront my father about my own future, as though I'm some commodity he can trade. "No," I correct myself. "I'm going to tell that asshole there's no way this is happening."

Cecily lowers her gaze. "Just be careful. He shot a man in the hallway last week. That's not exactly a sign he's willing to be reasoned with."

I surge across the room and yank open the door. “He’s going to hear me out whether he wants to or not.”

My footsteps stomp a determined rhythm on the floors of this over-decorated estate as I make my way to my father’s office. The staff dodges me, either sensing my mood or simply not wanting to be associated with a daughter who dares defy him.

I reach the door and shove it open without knocking. Father is sitting behind his ornate desk, scribbling in a ledger like he’s balancing his empire with a pen. He raises his eyes—calm, cold, and perpetually disappointed in everything I do—and sighs.

“Seraphina, don’t you have better manners than to burst in on me like a rabid animal?”

My blood boils. “Why should I knock when you’ve apparently decided my entire future without consulting me?”

He arches a brow. “I see you’ve heard. Good. Saves me the trouble.”

I close the distance, bracing my palms against the desk. “Is it true? Are you arranging a marriage for me, just like that?”

He sets the pen aside. “I’m finalizing an alliance with the Barkov family.”

“Alliance,” I echo, tasting the bitterness of the word. “You’re using me as a commodity. How very fatherly.”

His eyes narrow. “Watch your mouth. This is not a negotiation. You will do as you’re told.”

“I won’t,” I state, though a tremor ripples through me at the memory of him shooting



that man in our corridor. “You can’t force me.”

Irritation mars his face. “I can, and I will. The meeting is already set, and we’re having dinner with your future husband tonight. You’ll come, you’ll be polite, and you’ll accept what’s been decided.”

“You haven’t even bothered to ask if I find the man acceptable. He could be a monster for all I know.”

Father gives a harsh laugh. “Considering the circle I move in, ‘monster’ is a relative term. But since you’re so curious, you might appreciate knowing it’s Grigor Barkov who’s agreed to consider you.”

My knees almost buckle at the name. Grigor Barkov. Long after he’d left, I found out the imposing figure I ran into the other night, the one who towered over me in the hallway, was the very same man. The man with the broad shoulders, intense eyes, and a presence that made me both furious and... Nope. Grigor Barkov did not make me feel anything lust-adjacent.

“You’ve got to be kidding. He’s—he’s—”

Father interrupts. “Yes, he’s vicious. Ruthless, some say. That’s exactly the kind of ally I need.”

I can’t believe this is happening. My father is pushing me toward a man who’s rumored to be the muscle of the Barkov operation, second only to Aleksei Barkov. I remember the way he stared me down, as if I was something he could crush if I pushed him too far.

Father returns to his ledger, the subject apparently settled in his mind. “This will happen. Tonight, you’ll join us for dinner. Wear something appropriate. I don’t need

you bringing shame on this family.”

My gaze burns with loathing. “I refuse to stand by while you sell me to the highest bidder.”

“Leave, Seraphina. Your tantrums won’t change a thing.”

I let out an animalistic shriek as I spin on my heels and stomp out. If he thinks I’m just going to roll over and let this happen, that I’ll let him trap me in a marriage proposal that my father and the Barkov Bratva have orchestrated, he’s got another thing coming. I won’t let them do this to me without a fight.

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Hours crawl by. I spend most of them in my room, trying to decide how best to sabotage this arrangement. Cecily peeks in a few times, offering quiet words of concern, but I brush her off. She can’t help me.

Finally, the dreaded moment arrives: a formal dinner in one of the estate’s lavish dining rooms. The table is set with too many forks and spoons, and the draperies are pulled aside so the setting sun can bathe the place. I swallow the instinct to scream that I don’t want this.

I make my way downstairs, wearing a simple black cocktail dress. Father wanted me in something bright and eye-catching, but I refused. Black suits the mood I’m in—one that suggests mourning for my freedom.

The butler ushers me into the dining room. Father stands at the head of the table, conferring with two men from his organization, both of whom eye me like I’m a piece of merchandise. I try not to look at them.

From a doorway behind me, I sense another presence. My gut twists when I turn to see him step into the room: Grigor Barkov, just as imposing as I recall. His dark suit fits his muscular frame, and his face is just as handsome as I remember. Next to him stands one of his brothers—I can tell from the resemblance—but my focus narrows on Grigor.

He moves forward, offering a curt nod to my father. “Evan Thorne,” he greets. Then his gaze slides to me, and I see the slightest recognition in his eyes. “This must be your daughter.”

My father’s lips curve into a self-satisfied grin. “Seraphina, meet the man you’ll soon call husband, should everything go as planned.”

A rage I can’t contain blooms inside me. I give Grigor a dismissive once-over. “I already made it pretty clear that I won’t agree to that.”

Father bristles, stepping closer, probably to lecture me about decorum, but Grigor lifts a hand. “Let her speak.”

I roll my eyes. I won’t be pacified by that. “I’m only here because my father dragged me. Don’t think for a second that I’m excited to meet you.”

A faint curve touches Grigor’s mouth, but it isn’t a smile. “Noted.”

Father clears his throat as he shoots me a glare. “We should all be seated.”

Dinner starts with forced politeness punctuated by a stilted conversation about “opportunity” and “partnership.” Bowls of soup arrive first, then an array of appetizers—none of which I can bring myself to enjoy. Instead, I push the food around my plate, letting my anger simmer just beneath the surface.

Grigor sits across from me with his dark eyes fixed on me as if he's sizing me up. He tries to engage me in polite conversation once or twice, likely to keep up appearances for my father. But I refuse to play along. I follow every question with biting remarks, choosing my words carefully to needle him.

"What's it like, Grigor?" I ask out of nowhere, interrupting my father mid-sentence. "Commanding an army of men who probably only follow you out of fear?"

Father stiffens at the end of the table, but Grigor barely glances at him before turning his attention back to me.

"They follow me because I know what I'm doing," he replies.

"Oh, I'm sure," I respond with a sugary smile. "Nothing inspires loyalty like a well-placed gun to the head."

"Loyalty isn't given freely in our world. It's earned. I'm sure you'd agree."

I tilt my head, pretending to consider his words. "I wouldn't know. I've never had to bully someone into liking me."

"Seraphina!" my father chastises. "That's enough."

I ignore him, keeping my focus on Grigor. "And this whole marriage thing? What's that about? A strategic move to save face? Or are you just looking for someone to keep your bed warm?"

Grigor sets his fork down with deliberate care. The room feels smaller as he leans closer. "If I wanted a warm bed, Seraphina, I'd hardly need to arrange a marriage for it. You're smarter than that."

His words are calm, but the undercurrent of authority is unmistakable. I swallow hard as my bravado falters for a moment. But I force a laugh, brushing off the way he unsettles me. “Good to know. At least you’re not delusional enough to think I’ll be sucking your cock no matter what arrangement you and my father made.”

Maksim, seated near Grigor, raises an eyebrow, clearly enjoying the show. Father’s knuckles tighten on the edge of the table, and his face turns crimson. “Seraphina, I said that’s enough.”

“And I said I didn’t want to be here,” I snap, finally turning to him. “You’re trying to force me into some archaic agreement with a man I don’t even know, and you expect me to sit here quietly?”

Father’s mouth opens, but Grigor cuts him off with a subtle wave of his hand. “Let her talk.”

I glance at him, startled. He doesn’t look irritated—if anything, he looks intrigued. That alone makes me angrier. “I’m glad I have your permission,” I spit sarcastically. “Since we’re all pretending I have a say in any of this.”

“You’re not pretending, Seraphina. You’re making your objections loud and clear.”

His calm tone only fuels my frustration. I slam my glass down, sloshing the wine over the rim. “Of course I’m objecting! I’m not some pawn you can move around the board. You think marrying me will fix your little problems? Let me save you the trouble—it won’t.”

“You’re embarrassing yourself,” Father complains

“No,” I fire back, standing abruptly. “You’re embarrassing me by putting me in this position.”

Father eventually snaps, “Seraphina, behave.”

“Or what, Father? Will you do to me what you do to your enemies? You might try, but even you might have a hard time enjoying the rest of your meal while you wait for your sanitizers to scrape my body off the floor.”

He pales, no doubt realizing that I witnessed his last execution. Then, he slams his fork onto the plate. “That’s enough,” he speaks through clenched teeth. “Don’t test me. If you think you’re bulletproof just because you’re my daughter, you’re even dumber than I gave you credit for.”

To my surprise, Grigor throws his napkin across the table, right into my father’s face. “You’d better watch your tone.”

Father sneers. “Pardon me?”

Grigor lifts his chin. “Don’t speak to her like that. I don’t care if she’s your daughter. There are lines you won’t cross in my presence.”

My heart stutters. Did he just defend me? My father’s face looks like stone, and for a moment, I worry he’ll try to match Grigor’s bravado with a show of violence. But he just bares his teeth in a mock smile. “We haven’t finalized anything yet, Barkov. Don’t presume you have any say in how I treat Seraphina until you’ve accepted her hand. My blood, my house.”

I catch a flicker of disgust crossing Grigor’s face, or maybe I imagine it. I cling to the hope that he finds this arrangement too distasteful, that he’ll walk out and free me from this nightmare.

He tears his gaze from Father and turns to me. His voice comes out low, almost too quiet for the others to hear. “You’re not happy about any of this.”

I scoff. “A brilliant observation. I despise this entire setup.”

He nods, though I can’t tell what he’s thinking. Father abruptly stands, announcing that we’ll continue our conversation in a more relaxed setting. He gestures for everyone to move to the adjoining parlor, where dessert and drinks await.

The men file out, and I sense my father’s glare as I remain seated. He doesn’t say anything, probably deciding to keep his temper in check in front of the Barkovs. After all, he wants them to go through with this. If they witness me being dragged away by the hair, that might sour the deal.

Grigor trails behind the others, then looks back at me. “Seraphina. Will you walk with me instead of joining them?”

I blink, torn between wanting to refuse and wanting to get away from my father. “Fine,” I mutter. “But I’m not doing this to indulge you.”

He makes a subtle gesture toward the wide doors that lead out to the garden. I rise and head outside with my arms folded. If my father sees me out here with him, maybe he’ll assume things are going well. Perfect. Let him believe that. I have my own plan in mind.

The garden is silent except for the distant footsteps of guards circling the grounds. I keep pace a few steps ahead of Grigor, ignoring the warm glow of lanterns that dot the path.

“Why are you really here?” I ask, stopping near a row of trimmed hedges. “You don’t seem the type to accept a forced marriage. Or is it normal for the Barkov Bratva to take brides from men like my father?”

“I agreed to meet. That doesn’t mean I agreed to anything else.”

A spark of hope flares in me. “You can still back out, right?”

He rubs a hand over his jaw, mulling over his answer. “It’s complicated. But I’m not blind to the fact that he’s using you as a chess piece.”

My mind races. If he’s unsure, I can push him further away. That’s exactly what I need to do. I recall how Bratva men often prize certain qualities in a woman: loyalty, dignity, and a willingness to be obedient. If I show him I’m the opposite of all that, maybe he’ll reject the proposal outright.

I drop my voice, adopting a tone of sultry disinterest. “Well, if you’re looking for some perfect little mafia princess, you’ll be disappointed. I have no intention of playing house with a criminal.”

He levels me with a dark stare. “You think I’m searching for domesticated bliss? This would be about politics, power, and maintaining control.”

I feign a lazy smile, letting my hair fall over one shoulder. “And what if I’m a terrible ally who undermines your every move?”

A low chuckle rumbles in his throat. “Then I’d have to deal with you. One way or another.”

I flutter my eyelashes and drag my fingertips from his chest, stopping just above his waistline. “Or you could break it off right now. Save us both the headache.”

He doesn’t move. “Is that what you want?”

I let my lips curl into a suggestive grin. Time to lay it on thick. “Don’t sound so disappointed. You and I could... still have a little bit of fun. Enjoy the fun parts without all that nasty marriage business.”



His brows knit. “Why would you—”

I place a hand on his shoulder, sliding it along the lapel of his jacket in a movement I hope looks sleek. Bratva men hate women who are too easy. Nothing respectable about a woman who offers herself so soon, with no sense of pride or dignity. I almost cringe at how fake and unnatural this all is.

But then, understanding dawns in his eyes. I see it, clear as day: he knows what I’m trying to do. He knows I’m deliberately making myself appear unworthy of the alliance. He snatches my wrist before my hand can travel any farther south.

Then, he does the last thing I expect: he leans closer. So close, I can see the gold flecks in his irises.

His breath tickles my ear. His voice is low, husky, and utterly disarming. “You’ll have to do better than this, Seraphina.”

My confidence teeters. I force a laugh. “You’re underestimating how far I’m willing to go.”

He shakes his head, still holding my wrist in his strong, rough grip. The contact sends a thrill down my spine, and it only gets worse when he moves his mouth closer, so his lips are practically grazing my skin. “You know, I was having second thoughts for a minute there, but now, I think this might be exactly the kind of challenge I enjoy. You’re going to make a lovely bride, Seraphina. And I can’t wait until our wedding night.”

A wave of dread rushes through me. This is not how I wanted it to go.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:00 pm*

I grit my teeth as soon as Aleksei waves me over to his desk. He's been waiting there with his usual composed expression. Normally, I'd brace for another long lecture about leadership or some new threat looming on the streets, but today feels different. The moment I approach, my brother gets straight to the point.

"You don't have to marry her. If you want out of this arrangement, we'll deal with Evan Thorne some other way."

I rub a hand over my jaw. "We need this alliance"

He exhales, sliding a file across the desk. "We have other options. We can secure a new partner in one of the neighboring territories. Evan isn't indispensable. If you don't want Seraphina, say the word. Nobody will think any less of you."

It's the opening I told myself I wanted: a chance to walk away from this complicated marriage. Yet the thought of leaving her with that vicious father of hers makes my blood stir. I keep thinking about the last time I saw her, the way she threw insults at me during dinner—insults meant to drive me off. Instead of repelling me, it drew me in.

Part of me can't stand her arrogance. Another part respects her for daring to stand up to men like us. And then there's something else—an odd urge to shield her from that bastard father who treats her like an object. If not me, she'll end up being forced to marry someone else eventually. Of that, I have no doubt.

My silence stretches. Aleksei lifts a brow. "Are you sure you want this woman, Grigor? You barely know her."

I scowl. “I know enough. She’s defiant. She’s stuck under Evan’s thumb. He’d use her until there’s nothing left. I’ll take her away from that. And if it benefits the Bratva, that’s a bonus.”

He nods once. “So you’ve made up your mind?”

“Yeah.” I square my shoulders. “If I can protect her, and the alliance remains ours, that’s the path I’m taking. It’s best for everyone.”

Aleksei drums his fingers on the table, thinking. “Is it what’s best for you, brother? Marriage is a commitment. For better or worse, you and Seraphina will be bound together.”

I shrug. “I’m willing to make the sacrifice. This is necessary.”

Aleksei sighs, then pushes his chair back. “Fine. But don’t expect her to make it easy. Evan’s daughter is known for her stubborn streak. You’re sure you can handle that?”

I give a dry smile. “I’ll handle it.”

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The next day, I pick Seraphina up in one of our black SUVs. She’s dressed in tight jeans and a fitted turtleneck, an outfit that shows off her figure in ways that are distracting—though I suspect she absolutely knows this. She slips into the passenger seat without a word, keeping her gaze fixed out the window as if she’d rather look at anything but me.

I start the engine, resisting the urge to comment on the silence. If she wants to brood, that’s fine. For now, I plan on taking her to the upscale district for some wedding errands we’re expected to complete. Her father insisted on it. He wants this ceremony

to be flashy, something to parade before potential associates. But I'm not above using the day for my own purposes: flaunting my new catch in front of the whole damn city.

As we pull up to a boutique known for high-end wedding attire, Seraphina finally decides to talk. "Is this your idea or my father's?"

"He told me to escort you to find a suitable dress," I reply. "I'm just facilitating."

She snorts. "So I can't even pick out the attire for my forced wedding with my sister or friends. You know, like a bride is supposed to do." She pops open the door, stepping out before I can respond.

I follow her inside, stepping around a few gawking salespeople who recognize me. I give them a silent glare that has them all backing off. Good. I don't need them crowding her or making this any more uncomfortable than it already is. We reach the main floor, which is lined with pristine gowns in glossy cases.

The manager, a woman with a professional smile, approaches. "Welcome, Mr. Barkov. We've been expecting you. Shall we show your fiancée to a fitting room?"

Seraphina opens her mouth, probably to argue about the word fiancée. I give a small nod, ignoring the tension vibrating off her. "Yes, do that. Make sure she has the best selection."

The manager ushers Seraphina away, leaving me to wait on a plush sofa. I settle there, letting my mind wander. Aleksei's offer to back out lingers in my thoughts. This is my choice now. I could make a call, end it. But the memory of Seraphina's father sneering at her, treating her like a disposable asset, plays on repeat in my head. No. I'm not abandoning her to that fate.

My phone buzzes. It's one of my men, reporting that Evan's men are sniffing around nearby, spying on us. Typical. He wants to keep tabs on every detail. To be fair, my men are lurking in the background, too. I shoot back a curt text telling them to keep an eye on any developments.

When I look up, Seraphina is walking toward me, and for a moment, everything else fades. The gown she's chosen molds to her figure like a second skin, hugging every curve. The fabric is smooth and shimmering, catching the light with each step she takes. A high neckline draws attention to the graceful curve of her shoulders, while the sleeves taper elegantly to her wrists, leaving a hint of lace detail along the edges. The bodice is fitted, cinching at her waist before flaring into a cascading skirt that trails behind her in a soft, sweeping train.

My breath stalls for just an instant. The simplicity of the gown only serves to emphasize her natural beauty. She moves like she owns the room, and though her expression is all defiance—glaring at me with her chin high, her eyes daring me to say something—there's no denying how stunning she looks.

The manager stands by with her hands clasped in front of her chest, beaming in approval as if she knows she's witnessing a moment meant to impress. But it's not just the dress. It's the way Seraphina wears it, with a kind of fire that burns. She could stop hearts with that combination of beauty and attitude—and she damn well knows it.

“So?” Seraphina challenges. “Is this what a Barkov bride is supposed to wear? Or did you want something more... conservative?”

I rise from the sofa, stepping closer to her. The manager discreetly moves back. “You look good.”

She huffs. “Good? That's it? I thought you'd want your underlings drooling at the

sight of your new trophy.”

I narrow my eyes. “If I catch any underling drooling over you, I’ll knock his teeth out. Nobody stares at what’s mine.”

She flinches, and her eyes flash. “I’m not yours, Barkov. I’m forced into this wedding, but let’s get one thing straight: I belong to no one.”

A flicker of possessiveness surges in me. “For now, maybe. But soon enough, you’ll wear my ring.”

Her lips curl into a snarl. “Keep dreaming.”

I hold her stare, neither of us moving. Then, the manager clears her throat politely. “Would you like to try another gown, Miss?”

Seraphina scoffs and tears her gaze away from me. “Sure. Why not? Let’s see how many ways we can torture me with yards of overpriced fabric.”

She marches off to the dressing area. I go back to the sofa, raking a hand through my hair. My attention drifts to the men who hover at the edge of the store. A few well-dressed patrons glance our way, some with curiosity, some with cautious awe. I make a pointed glare at a younger guy who dares to stare too long at Seraphina’s retreating figure. He blanches and scurries off.

Minutes later, she returns in a gown that’s more traditional and less form-fitting. Still, the effect is stunning. The neckline draws the eye to her collarbone, and the skirt flares around her legs with elegance. She looks like the embodiment of every bride in those lavish wedding magazines. It strikes me that under her anger and defiance, there’s a certain vulnerability. Her father’s world never allowed her a normal life, and now I’m roping her into mine. A pang of something almost like pity twists in my

chest.

She catches me staring and arches a brow. “Don’t get any ideas. Just tell me which one to get.”

I shrug. “It’s your wedding. Wear whatever you want.”

She laughs without humor. “You say that like I have a choice. I’m just picking the least ridiculous option.” Then she murmurs something to the manager about adjusting the fit in the bodice. When the woman walks away, I take her place at Seraphina’s side.

“Why are you so determined to fight this at every turn?”

She whirls on me, and the gown swishes around her ankles. “Because I never asked for this. My father decided I’d be his bargaining chip. You’re no better, swooping in to claim me because it’s convenient for your Bratva politics. It’s insulting.”

I keep my voice calm. “I’m not swooping. I’m offering a way out of his house.”

She crosses her arms over the gown, shaking her head. “You act like you’re saving me. Did it ever occur to you that I’d rather save myself?”

My response is swallowed by a knock at the door from a sales associate. “Miss? We have another dress if you’d like to see it.”

She makes a pointed face at me, then disappears into the fitting room again. My phone buzzes once more—this time, it’s Maksim. He wants an update on how things are going with Seraphina. I type a quick message: We’ll be done soon. She’s picking a dress. Simple, direct. No mention of the verbal sparring match we’ve been locked in since we arrived.

Eventually, Seraphina reemerges, wearing her regular clothes and carrying a bag with the chosen gown. She tosses her hair back. “I’m done here.”

“Good.” I motion to one of the employees to ring up the purchase. While I pay, she stands off to the side, glaring at the poor mannequins.

When we exit onto the bustling street, I place a hand on her lower back, guiding her toward the SUV. She jerks away. “Don’t touch me.”

I grit my teeth but drop my hand. Fine. If she wants to play the ice queen, I’ll let her. But the need to mark my territory flares again when I notice a few bystanders gawking at her. They’re quick to avert their eyes once they see my expression.

We drive in silence, passing blocks of trendy shops and restaurants. I steer the conversation to the upcoming ceremony. “We need to meet the officiant tomorrow. Some paperwork to finalize the date.”

She folds her arms and stares at the traffic outside. “I’m not signing anything.”

I keep my attention on the road. “It’s just a formality. You’ll sign.”

She scoffs. “Arrogant as always.”

We fall quiet until I stop in front of her father’s estate. Guards linger near the entrance, eyeing the SUV.

“This is your final chance to walk away,” she warns. “If you don’t call off the wedding, you’re stuck with me. What a miserable life that would be.”

Amusement tugs at my mouth. “I don’t scare that easily. There are worse fates.”



“I’m serious. Don’t expect loyalty. Don’t expect love. Don’t expect me to play the obedient wife. You can force me to the altar, but you’ll never truly have me.”

Something about her rebellious declaration only fuels the possessive streak I’ve been trying to ignore all day. “You say that now, but once I have that ring on your finger, you’ll be mine. And you’ll learn what that means.”

She snorts. “Dream on.”

Seraphina shoves her door open, but before she can climb out, I grip her wrist. She tenses, startled. My voice drops. “When we exchange vows, Seraphina, you’ll be mine in every sense. That’s a promise.”

Her eyes widen before she jerks away and steps out of the SUV. She strides up the driveway, not bothering to look back.

I watch her until she disappears inside, with my blood pumping hot through my veins. There’s no going back now, not for me. Aleksei gave me the choice, and I’ve made it. She’ll be my wife, and she’ll know exactly what it means to belong to Grigor Barkov.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:00 pm*

I wake up feeling like I'm standing on the edge of a cliff, one step from plunging into something I can't control. Part of me wants to jump, if only to get it over with. It's my wedding day—the day I'm supposed to marry a man I can't decide if I despise or secretly crave. My head's a riot of emotions I can't label. But one thing is certain: I'm not going to give anyone the satisfaction of seeing me tremble.

I brush off the help of the maid, ignoring the pristine gown Grigor helped me choose a few days ago. A white, elegant thing that probably costs more than some families make in a year. All that lace and glitter doesn't suit me. Instead, I pull out the dress I ordered in secret, one my sister helped me smuggle upstairs without Father's knowledge. It's black—inky, scandalous, and guaranteed to send a clear message that I don't care about tradition or expectations.

The fabric clings to every inch of my body from collarbone to mid-thigh, with a daring cut that shows plenty of skin along my legs. Spaghetti straps and a deep neckline reveal more cleavage than a bride should, while the back plunges low, leaving almost nothing to the imagination. When I slip into it, I feel a wicked thrill. If they're going to force me to marry Grigor Barkov, the least I can do is scandalize everyone in the process. Let them call me a disgrace. I'd rather be that than an obedient doll.

I exhale, glancing in the mirror before I line my eyes with a bold sweep of black and add a smudge of deep red lipstick, the color Father always forbade me from wearing. Today, I intend to break every rule he's ever drilled into my head. If the Bratva has to see me as Grigor's wife, then I'll give them the most provocative image possible.

A knock on my door interrupts my reverie. Cecily peeks in, her face pale. "You're

really not going to wear the gown you got with Grigor?”

I smirk and smooth my hand down the tight fabric. “Fuck no, I’m not.”

“Father’s going to lose it.”

“Good. Maybe he’ll have a stroke and call this whole thing off.”

“Seraphina... please be careful. Father won’t forget a stunt like this.”

My heart squeezes for a moment, and guilt pricks at me. Cecily looks like she’s searching for a way to protect me, but there’s nothing she can do. We’re way past that point. I give her a curt nod and swallow the lump in my throat. “Come on. Let’s get this over with.”

Downstairs, the foyer is abuzz with guards and distant relatives I barely recognize, all wearing suits or formal dresses in predictable, dull colors. The minute I appear, conversations hush. It’s like I walked into a secret meeting unannounced. Good. Let them stare.

My father stands near the doors, and I don’t miss the way his face pales when he sees me in black. Fury burns behind his eyes, but he manages a tight-lipped smile for the guests. I angle my head, daring him to call me out in public. He doesn’t. I can practically hear his teeth grinding.

He gestures stiffly. “We’re behind schedule.”

I stride past him. “I’m sure everyone can wait a few extra minutes.”

He doesn’t argue, but the muscle in his jaw pulses. I revel in it. If I’m marrying Grigor Barkov, at least I can remind my father that I’m not his puppet.

A swarm of attendants fuss over me. They bring bouquets of white roses and baby's breath, as though that will transform my black dress into something bridal. I let them have their illusions. My father greets a few of his shady associates by the entrance as they step inside, plastering on a public grin. Meanwhile, Grigor stands off to the side, talking to his own set of men. He's in a black suit tailored to perfection with a crisp shirt, and a tie that complements his dark hair. He glances in my direction when he senses me approaching, and his eyes widen in surprise.

He recovers quickly. "I thought you'd be wearing the dress we picked out."

I lift a shoulder in a shrug. "I had a change of heart."

A slow grin spreads across his face, and he gives me a look that borders on admiration. "You like stirring up trouble, don't you?"

His amusement grates on my nerves. I wanted a reaction—outrage, maybe even fury. But he seems entertained, which only irritates me more. Before I can snap at him, an older man who's officiating calls everyone to take their places.

Rows of seats line our living room, with guests packed in. Most come from my father's side or Grigor's Bratva circle. After circling to the back of the room, I march up the aisle, ignoring the gasps and whispers that ripple when people get a look at my scandalous gown. Father is near the front, scowling. Grigor waits at the fireplace, which has been decorated to act as an altar, with his arms at his sides and his face composed except for a slight upward quirk at the corner of his mouth.

I stand next to him, refusing to look at his face. My father steps forward, though there's no fatherly love in his posture. He's fulfilling a duty, handing me off like a piece of property. An officiant with a script in hand begins some formal words about unity and bonds. I barely listen.

When it's time for vows, Grigor repeats the standard lines, and I watch him from under my lashes, studying the firm set of his jaw. Each word from his mouth is robotic. I brace for a wave of revulsion, but instead, a shiver creeps over me. Maybe I'm frightened of what happens once I'm officially his wife. Or maybe part of me is oddly intrigued by the idea of belonging to a man as dominating as Grigor, even if I swore I'd never give in.

My turn. I say the vows with forced politeness. It feels surreal, promising my life to a man I spent the last few weeks insulting. When the officiant asks if I take this man to be my husband, I tilt my chin up. "I do," I say with a bitterness that only someone not paying a lick of attention could miss.

He slides a ring onto my finger—a band of platinum with a small stone set into it. I wonder if he picked it himself or if some underling did it. Either way, it's now a symbol that I'm bound to him. Forever or until one of us ends up dead in a gutter, because that's how our lives usually go.

The officiant smiles before announcing we're married. Grigor doesn't waste a second. He grips my waist and kisses me in front of everyone—hard, insistent. My veins roar with a foreign heat, and a tingling floods through my limbs. It's not gentle or sweet. It's claiming, and something inside me responds to that demand.

My hands fly up, pressing against his chest, either to push him away or pull him closer. I can't figure out which. My brain scrambles. For a moment, I forget I'm angry. I forget my father's glare. All I feel is Grigor's mouth on mine, coaxing something out of me I didn't know existed.

Then he pulls back, releasing me. My breathing staggers and my body betrays me with a flush of heat. Grigor's eyes search mine, and that amusement is dancing there again, but now, it's mixed with something more primal. He knows he rattled me. I clench my fists, infuriated with myself for feeling this way.

The applause in the room is half-hearted, probably because most of these men don't care about romance. Father stands there with an expression like he wants to shoot Grigor on the spot for kissing me like that so publicly. But there's nothing he can do. We're married now, whether I like it or not.

The rest of the ceremony is a blur of fake congratulations and polite smiles. People shuffle around, chatting about partnerships and expansions. Grigor's men come to greet us, each offering a stiff nod or a few words of blessing. My father's associates do the same. Cecily appears nearby with her eyes wet to hug me from the side.

"You'll be okay," she whispers in my ear.

I give her arm a squeeze. "Look after yourself, yeah?"

She steps away, blinking back tears.

Eventually, Grigor beckons me to his side. "We should say goodbye to your father and gather your things. We'll leave for my place soon."

A surge of panic flips my stomach. I guess I always knew that once I married him, I'd have to live under his roof. We never discussed it in detail, but the reality is hitting me hard now. My father's face is a thundercloud when we approach.

Grigor opens his mouth to speak, but I hold up a hand. "I'll go alone. I need a private word with him."

Grigor's gaze moves to me, then to Father. He grants a curt nod. "Fine. I'll meet you by the car."

I follow Father into a corner of the house, away from prying ears. He stares at my black dress as though I've personally disgraced the entire family line. I guess that was

my intention.

“You brought shame on me today,” he snarls. “Is that your idea of a wedding gown?”

I cross my arms, unrepentant. “You’re lucky I bothered showing up at all.”

He exhales, reining in his rage.

I lift my chin. “I’ll be out of your house soon. But one thing before I go…” My voice quivers, though I fight to keep it steady. “Stay away from Cecily. Don’t you dare pawn her off as you did with me. If you even think of using her to broker some sick alliance, I’ll—”

He interrupts with a dry chuckle. “You’ll what? Run to your new husband for help?”

Anger bubbles in my chest. “I’ll do whatever it takes to keep Cecily safe.”

“I might listen to that request, but there’s a price.”

Dread coils in my stomach. Of course he wouldn’t give me anything for free. Not even on my wedding day. “What do you want?”

He glances around, confirming no one is within earshot. “Information. Barkov business, his plans, his deals. You’re in the perfect position to spy for me now.”

I may not love my new husband, but betraying Grigor is low on my list of things I want to do. He’s a dangerous man, and it’s not how I want to start my marriage.

Father reads the conflict on my face. “Agree to pass me details on the Barkovs, or watch me sell Cecily to the highest bidder next. If you think I won’t, you’ve learned nothing living under my roof.”

A wave of nausea hits me. My mind races, picturing Cecily forced into a marriage with some violent gangster who might not even bother with the pretense of respect.

“Fine. I’ll do it.”

He smirks, and I hate the triumphant gleam in his eyes. “Good. Make sure you don’t disappoint me. You feed me real intel, or the deal is void.”

I swallow the lump in my throat. “Understood.”

My father tips his head in acknowledgment. “Then go. Your husband is waiting.”

Bile rises in my throat, but I force it down. I spin on my heel and walk away, head pounding with the weight of what I just agreed to. This wedding felt like a nightmare on its own, but now I’ve tethered myself to an even more sinister path: spying on my husband for the man I hate most in the world.



## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:00 pm*

I slam the door of the SUV the moment we arrive, eager to get Seraphina inside before anyone gawks at her like she's an exhibit. She spent the entire drive staring out the window, refusing to talk after she and her father said their goodbyes. Now we're at my place—a sprawling estate I inherited from my family. It's where she'll live from now on, whether she likes it or not.

“Come,” I instruct, gesturing for her to follow.

To my utter shock, she does so without replying, though her shoulders are rigid and her posture is as defiant as ever. My men unload her luggage, casting wary looks in her direction. Apparently, word of her little display back at the wedding has reached here already. No one's quite sure what to expect from the new Mrs. Barkov, who just married their boss looking like a hooker.

We step through the main entrance, gliding over marble floors and polished surfaces that reflect our silhouettes. A group of staff lines up—some old-timers who served my father, others newer recruits who handle day-to-day tasks. I make a quick announcement: “This is Seraphina. My wife. See that her needs are met.”

She folds her arms and observes the faces like she's searching for weakness. My new wife doesn't say a word, so I continue. “Seraphina, this is my head housekeeper, Galina. You've met my driver, Konstantin. And—” I tilt my chin toward a bulky man near the end “—that's Anton. Your bodyguard.”

Her head snaps in my direction. “My what?”

I set my jaw, refusing to let her attitude derail me in front of my employees. “Your

bodyguard.”

“Lovely,” she grumbles through clenched teeth. “So I’m a prisoner already?”

I turn to the staff and dismiss them with a quick nod. They scatter, grateful to be out of the crossfire. Anton remains in the background, ready for orders. I address him curtly, “Make sure you stay close anytime she leaves the premises. For now, you’re excused.”

“Understood, Boss,” Anton replies.

She rounds on me the second he’s gone, and her voice lashes like a whip. “Who the hell do you think you are, assigning me some watchdog? I’m not a spy who needs watching, Grigor. Or is that exactly what you suspect?”

“Don’t put words in my mouth. The bodyguard is for your protection.”

“Protection from what? Your territory? Your enemies? Or maybe from you? Because I do agree I should have protection against the man who basically coerced me into marrying him.”

I step closer, forcing her to tilt her chin up to look at me. “You don’t get to question my decisions in front of my men. Understood?”

She lifts an eyebrow. “Do you expect me to salute too?”

“Watch your tone,” I bite out. “Being my wife comes with certain dangers, and I’m taking precautions to protect what’s mine.”

She scoffs. “I told you before, Grigor. I belong to no one.” Then she spins on her heels and marches down the corridor with her hair swishing around her shoulders

with every step.

I follow, refusing to let her walk off in this mood. “Seraphina,” I bark, lengthening my stride until I’m on her heels. “Where the hell do you think you’re going?”

She whirls around, nearly colliding with me. “Anywhere that isn’t in your immediate vicinity.”

I grip her wrist and tug, just enough to keep her there. My voice drops. “I told you: disrespect me in front of my men again, and we’ll have a problem.”

She rips her arm free. “You want respect? Maybe don’t treat me like a prized horse.”

“You think I enjoy dragging you into my world? I’m doing what needs to be done to secure our position.”

She doesn’t back down. “Let me guess: that’s the same line you feed everyone who’s forced to bend to your will. Spare me.”

I lift a hand to rub my temple. “God, you’re exhausting.”

She glowers. “As if you’re a breeze to be around. To be fair, I did warn you.”

A low sound of frustration rumbles in my throat, but I force myself to stay composed. “We made vows today. Even if you wore black and spat at the idea of being my wife, the fact remains that you are. Get used to it.”

She tosses her head back, laughing “Oh, this number?” she asks, stepping back to give me an eyeful. “I’m mourning one of our deaths. Whose, I haven’t decided.”

A spark of anger ignites in my chest. “You’re playing a dangerous game, Seraphina.”

She steps up to me, fearless. “I’ve been in a dangerous game since the moment I was born into my father’s house. Your little threats are nothing new.”

Silence hangs between us for a tense second, each of us daring the other to break it first. I see the pulse in her throat, rapid and strong, a sign of the turmoil beneath her bravado. Something about her fury draws me in like a magnet. She’s not meek or docile, and even though it grates on my nerves, it also stirs something raw inside me.

She arches a brow. “What’s wrong? Finally ran out of orders to bark?”

I ignore the barb and seize a moment to rein in my temper. “I don’t want you talking about death and mourning.”

She rolls her eyes, crossing her arms over her chest. “Please. Men like you and my father spill blood every day. One day, it’ll be yours. Or mine.”

“That’s exactly why I assigned Anton to watch you,” I grind out. “I’m trying to keep you alive in this brutal world. It’s not a joke.”

She snorts. “You’re so noble. Tell me another fairytale.”

I clamp my jaw shut. There’s no point explaining how many threats lurk around every corner. She’d just twist my words into another insult. Instead, I remind myself that I need to assert control. She’s my wife, and the men here expect me to handle her. If she openly challenges my authority, it sets a precedent I can’t allow.

I take a step forward, closing the gap. “Seraphina, you can fight me all you want. But I won’t tolerate you talking about wearing black because you’re mourning my death in front of my own staff. That’s a direct insult.”

“I’ll talk about whatever I please. I told you long before our wedding: I’m not playing

the role of your pretty, little trophy wife. And don't even think you're going to force me into consummating anything."

Heat flares under my skin. My hand snaps out, cupping her chin in a firm hold. "You say that now, but your mouth told a different story at the altar."

She tries to jerk away, but I tighten my grip just enough to keep her in place, not enough to hurt. "What do you think you're doing?"

I lower my head until my breath mingles with hers. "Proving a point."

She opens her mouth to retort, but before she can unleash another insult, I press my lips to hers in a fierce kiss. The tension fueling our argument erupts into something else—something electric and heated. She pushes at my chest, but I sense the hesitation in her movements, like she's at war with herself.

I angle my head and splay my fingers across her jaw to keep her close. My blood pounds in a rush that wipes out rational thought. Her lips part in shock, and I seize the opening, tasting her. The way she responds sends my pulse skittering. She's stiff at first, defiant, but then I feel her resistance falter. Her body leans in, just enough for me to notice. Her hands grip my shirt, as though she can't decide if she wants to shove me away or cling to me.

I can't stop myself from letting a low growl escape, fueled by the sensation of her melting under my touch. It's like she's made of fire, and everything we do—whether arguing or kissing—burns hotter than I'm prepared for.

Her breath catches, and a tremor runs through her frame. I slide my arm around her waist, pulling her closer until our bodies are flush. The friction of that contact shoots sparks through my veins, ramping up the need pulsing in my core. She inhales sharply through her nose as her fists tighten in my shirt. Her earlier threats about

never letting me touch her fade into the background as her lips press back against mine with surprising hunger.

I push her against the wall, caging her in. Our kiss becomes a battle for control—each of us trying to dominate the other. She's no shrinking violet, not even for a second. I break away for a millisecond, gulping down air, then crash my mouth onto hers again. Her nails dig into my shoulders, and I relish the bite of pain that shoots through me. It only fuels the desire thrumming inside.

Time warps. I lose track of everything except the heat of her body and the taste of her lips. Her back arches, pressing closer to me, and my hand skims down her hip to the bottom of her dress. A muffled whimper vibrates against my mouth, and I'm not sure if it comes from me or her.

My fingers dip between her thighs, tracing her over her underwear, and a wave of need rips through me when I find the fabric already damp. She gasps, and the sound makes my cock jump. I stroke her harder, savoring the way her body quivers under my touch.

My tongue invades her mouth, claiming every inch. She doesn't fight back. Instead, she returns my kisses with a passion that's almost feral. I've never felt so out of control.

My hand slips under her panties, and her hips jerk. A cry slips past her lips, and it's the sweetest sound I've ever heard. I drag the tips of my fingers over her slick flesh, feeling the wetness that's soaked through the material. It's all for me.

My heart slams against my ribs. She's finally giving in, submitting, and I want nothing more than to carry her to the nearest room and make her mine.

She rocks her hips against my hand, silently begging for more. My cock aches at the

idea of her wanting me so badly, and it's all I can do not to rip the panties right off her. I'd bury myself inside her so deep, she'd feel me for days.

Fuck, this woman is dangerous. Every cell in my body wants her—every thought is consumed with images of stripping her bare and ravishing her.

She squirms under me as I swipe my finger over her sensitive nub. Her breathing turns ragged. It's music to my ears. My lips trail along her jawline, down her throat, tasting her skin. It's addictive.

When I slide a finger inside her, her whole body shudders. I add another, and she bites back a moan. I curl them, searching for the spot that will send her flying over the edge. When I find it, her whole body goes rigid. I can tell she's close, so fucking close.

Just a little more, and I'll make her come harder than she ever has before.

I pump my fingers faster, driving her higher. She's trembling, her eyes are screwed shut, and her chest is heaving.

Then she lets out a strangled cry and convulses around my fingers. I don't let up. I keep stroking her, coaxing every last ounce of pleasure out of her. When she finally goes limp, I withdraw my hand and press a soft kiss to her lips.

Her eyelids flutter open, and her gaze is dazed. For the first time since I met her, she doesn't have a sarcastic comment. But I do.

"I hope you enjoyed yourself, because you'll be doing that a lot more from now on. You're my wife, and I'm not a patient man. Understand?"

She blinks, then her eyes narrow, and her voice turns venomous. "I hate you."

“Keep telling yourself that. Your body doesn’t lie.”

Without waiting for her reply, I turn and walk away, leaving her speechless.

I tell myself it’s just the thrill of the chase. Soon, she’ll learn her place. But a little voice in the back of my mind whispers that it’s more than that.

Her body may be the biggest threat I’ve ever come across, and if I’m not careful, it’ll bring me to my knees.



## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:00 pm*

I feel like I've lost control of my body. One day has passed since my disastrous wedding night, and I'm still furious at myself for surrendering to Grigor the way I did. That man made me crumble, turned my anger into something ravenous, and then walked away without a single glance back. Now I'm left replaying every second of that moment, disgusted that I allowed him to strip away my resolve so easily.

I'm holed up in what's supposed to be "our" bedroom, though I've barricaded myself inside. The walls are painted in neutral tones, and the furniture is all polished wood and luxury. It doesn't feel like my space at all; it belongs to someone else. Each time I look around, I remember how little say I had in coming here. When I think back on last night, I clench my fists so hard my nails bite into my palms. He made me want him, and then he left me at the peak of that wanting.

I want to hate him. Maybe I do. But there's a flicker in me, a shameful part that craves more, and I despise that feeling more than anything else. I clutch a cushion and bury my face against it, trying to block out my own thoughts. It doesn't help.

A knock at the door interrupts my brooding. I lift my head, scowling, and say nothing. Another knock. Still, I remain silent, hoping whoever is out there gives up and leaves me alone.

"Mrs. Barkov?" a soft voice calls. "Mr. Barkov said to tell you dinner will be served in thirty minutes."

I grimace at the title: Mrs. Barkov. How nauseating. The invitation is the last thing I want. "I'm not hungry," I snap. "Go away."

A muffled pause, and then the maid responds, “But your presence is requested, Ma’am.”

“Tell him I’m not coming.”

I hear a quiet shuffle from the hallway but no more words. I wait, half expecting some pushy response. None comes. Perhaps that’s the end of it.

I lean back against the bed’s headboard, trying to calm the storm in my mind. Does he think I’ll just glide downstairs, all smiles and courtesy, after what he did to me? He humiliated me—brought me to the brink of satisfaction and left me quivering. The memory heats my cheeks, and I force myself to focus on other things: my father’s threat to my sister, the uncertain future I face in this household, and the fact that I have to spy on Grigor for my father. None of it lifts my mood, but at least it keeps me from thinking about last night’s betrayal of my own body.

Minutes pass, and I sink into a swirl of resentment. Just when I think I can relax, the door slams open with a bang, hitting the wall. I jerk upright to find Grigor standing in the doorway, with his gaze fixed on me and a grim set to his mouth.

“You were told dinner is ready.”

“Get out,” I retort with a cold rush flooding through me. “I’m not going.”

He stalks forward and shuts the door behind him. There’s a tension in his posture that makes every alarm in my head ring. “You’re going whether you like it or not.”

I scoff and cross my arms. “You can’t force me—”

He’s across the room in an instant. Before I can scramble off the bed or even finish my sentence, he lunges to snatch my arm. I lash out with my free hand, aiming for his

face, but he easily dodges. The next moment, he lifts me off my feet and flings me over his shoulder like a sack of produce.

“Put me down, you bastard!” I shout, twisting and kicking.

He secures an arm around my thighs, pinning me in place. “Stop fighting. You’ll only make this harder.”

“Let me go!” I pound at his back, mortified by the position he’s put me in. He’s hoisting me around like I weigh nothing, marching out the door.

“Please, carry on,” I mock in a bitter tone. “I love being manhandled by my psycho husband.”

The hallway stretches ahead, and I catch flashes of the staff’s shocked faces. My cheeks burn. I try to hide behind my hair, but there’s no hiding from this humiliation. If I weren’t so busy kicking and snarling, I might burst into tears of rage.

He storms down a grand staircase, and each step jolts me until we reach the main floor. I hear voices from somewhere, conversations that abruptly stop when we enter the room. He heads toward a large dining room, complete with a massive table and more than a dozen chairs.

My fury only grows when I see new faces: men who have a strong resemblance to Grigor, plus a few others. They look up, startled, as Grigor strides in with me dangling over his shoulder. My heart drops to my stomach. I recognize his brothers from the wedding, though we were never formally introduced. There’s also a woman and three small children peeking from behind her. My humiliation soars to staggering heights.

He finally puts me down, gripping my shoulders to steady me. I stagger on wobbly

feet. My hair's a tangled mess, and I can't bring myself to look at these strangers, but I sense them watching.

"This is Seraphina," Grigor announces, a little breathless, whether from carrying me or from his anger, I'm not sure. "My wife."

One of the men rises from his seat. "I'm Aleksei," he says. There's an air of authority about him that reminds me of a king addressing his court. "Grigor's brother. You've already made quite the entrance."

I can't tell if that's amusement or irritation in his tone. Maybe both. I lift my chin, refusing to appear cowed. "Not my choice."

Something passes across Aleksei's face, and I get the feeling he's used to controlling situations. He's probably not sure what to make of me yet. Two more men stand as well: one with a more reckless vibe in his eyes, the other with a quieter demeanor. Grigor gestures to them in turn.

"That's Akim," he says, nodding to the one who looks like trouble in a suit. "And that's Dmitri." The reserved man merely inclines his head, not speaking.

A third brother remains seated, swirling a glass of what looks like liquor. He casts me a sidelong glance, then returns his focus to the drink in his hand. This must be Maksim, I realize. The one rumored to vanish on drunken benders. He doesn't bother introducing himself, and neither does Grigor, so I guess that's as much as I'll get.

Then there's the woman with the children at her side. She steps forward with her hand extended. "Bianca," she offers. "Aleksei's wife. And these are our triplets." She motions to the three little girls, each clinging to her skirt and peeking out with wide eyes.

For a moment, I soften. The girls look so young, each with big, curious gazes. One of them actually waves a tiny hand at me before burying her face against Bianca's leg.

"Welcome," Bianca continues, though she glances at Grigor with a questioning look, probably trying to figure out why I needed to be hauled in like a rebellious child.

"Thanks," I mutter, crossing my arms over my wrinkled t-shirt. I want to vanish. Or maybe lash out at Grigor in front of everyone. But I hold my tongue, mindful that I'm already in hot water for my open defiance. My father's threat of hurting my sister if I don't play my role rings in my mind, pushing me to keep my temper somewhat in check.

"Let's eat," Grigor suggests with a note of impatience in his voice. He points to a seat near the middle of the table, presumably for me. "Sit."

I glare, but I do as I am told—if only to avoid another humiliating scene. The tension in the room is thick enough to taste. I can't see what expression Grigor's wearing, and I don't want to. I focus on the polished tabletop, ignoring the plates of steaming food placed by the waiting staff.

Aleksei sits at the head of the table, with Bianca and the triplets seated next to him. Dmitri, Akim, and Maksim settle themselves. Grigor claims the seat beside me, and I shift away an inch. My pride still stings from the way he carried me in here.

The conversation starts up—mostly about Bratva business or local matters. It's more formal than I expected, with each brother contributing a piece of the puzzle. Akim cracks a few jokes, earning mild snorts from Dmitri. Maksim says little between sips from his glass. Aleksei steers the discussion, occasionally glancing my way as though assessing me.

I stay silent. Eating feels impossible. My appetite left me the moment Grigor

manhandled me into this seat. I poke at a piece of roasted meat, not really seeing it. The triplets giggle at their own conversation, unaffected by the undercurrents among the adults.

“So, Seraphina,” Bianca says, “I understand you only recently married Grigor. I’m sorry I wasn’t able to attend the wedding. Must be quite an adjustment for you?”

Her tone is gentle, maybe even sympathetic. I sense kindness in her eyes. If she’s Aleksei’s wife, she might understand what it’s like marrying into this family.

“Yeah,” I manage to say, forcing a tight smile. “It’s... different.”

“It was the same for me when I first joined Aleksei. The Bratva world can be overwhelming.”

I chance a glance at Grigor, but he’s ignoring me, cutting into his food with a single-minded focus. Good. Let him pretend I’m not here. I address Bianca again, “I’m not sure ‘overwhelming’ is the word I’d use.”

Bianca’s lips twitch in a sympathetic grin. “I remember feeling resentful, maybe even hostile, toward my husband. That changed over time, once I realized he wasn’t the monster I imagined.”

“It’s not the same. I’m here because...” I stop myself. I was about to say I’m here because I was forced, but I sense that might ignite another fight or, worse, put me under scrutiny I don’t want. Instead, I shrug. “Let’s just say I never asked for this, and I plan on letting him know that every chance I get.”

The triplets burst into giggles over something one of them said, and Bianca gives them a fond look, patting one on the head. Then she glances back at me. “I won’t pretend to know your circumstances, but I can tell you Grigor isn’t as bad as he

seems. He tends to be... guarded, that's all."

A bark of laughter escapes me, and I nearly choke on my water. "Guarded? That man is a raging brute who thinks carrying me over his shoulder is a reasonable way to have me attend dinner."

Bianca's eyes flick to Grigor, who's still ignoring us. "He's rough around the edges, sure. But he's loyal to his family, and once he cares about someone, he'll do anything for them."

I roll my eyes. "Yes, because nothing says 'caring' like hauling me down a flight of stairs in front of his entire clan."

Aleksei casts a glance our way, lips pursed, but says nothing. There's tension in his posture, as though he's listening even while conversing with Dmitri.

Bianca leans closer, lowering her voice. "He might surprise you in time. He's capable of kindness, though he doesn't trust easily. It was that way with Aleksei when I first married him. This family has lost a lot, and they keep their walls high."

I swallow a spike of bitterness. "I don't care about kindness or trust. I feel like a glorified prisoner." My voice trembles a bit, betraying the depth of my frustration. "I'm only here because it suited everyone else's plans. I married him to secure some alliance. And in exchange, I lost my freedom."

"I'm sorry you feel that way. I know we haven't met before today, but if there's anything I can do to ease this transition, let me know."

I don't answer. My face burns with anger, shame, and a hint of gratitude I don't want to admit. Grigor's presence beside me is like a black hole, sucking all the oxygen out of the room. I sneak a peek at him—still silent, still carved from stone. No sign of

remorse for humiliating me. Why should he care? He got what he wanted: a bride who could barely keep her anger in check.

I push my plate away and press my lips together. Bianca, sensing my mood, shifts the topic to her children, coaxing them to share about their day. Akim chimes in with a story about someone trying to cheat a deal. Dmitri mentions new shipments arriving next week. Maksim just swirls his drink, lost in his own thoughts. Grigor doesn't speak unless prompted.

I'm an outsider in this circle. A woman forcibly inserted into the Bratva's stronghold, with no real allies except maybe Bianca, who at least shows some compassion. Despite that hint of warmth, the entire situation feels suffocating. This dinner can't end soon enough.



## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:00 pm*

I press my forearm against the man's throat, pinning him to the metal chair with my weight.

"Talk," I demand, ignoring the sweat trickling down my back. We're in a dingy basement that smells of mildew and old bloodstains. My men stand at a distance, silent spectators to this grim work. The single bulb overhead casts harsh shadows on my prisoner's battered face.

He coughs and sucks in a ragged breath when I ease just a fraction. Blood trickles from a split in his lip, and I can see he's already close to breaking. But close isn't good enough. I need him to spill whatever secrets he's hiding. My hand tightens on the handle of the pliers I'm holding. He's one of Pavel's friends, or so he claimed when we caught him trying to flee the country right after we found Pavel's body. Suspicious timing.

I jab the pliers into the fresh cut on his shoulder, ignoring his muffled groan. "Answer my questions. Who orchestrated Pavel's murder? Why were you running?"

He spits blood onto the floor. "I don't... know anything," he rasps.

"Wrong answer." I motion to one of my men, who hands me a short length of chain. I loop it around the chair's back, securing our captive more tightly. He thrashes, but it's useless. My men have done their job, leaving him with nowhere to go. "We found you with a suitcase full of false identification documents trying to hightail it out of here. You expect me to believe you're innocent?"

His breath stutters. "I only wanted to—to escape what's coming. I didn't... kill

anyone. I swear.”

I lock eyes with him. “You were Pavel’s friend, or so you said. If you truly cared about him, you’d want justice, not a plane ticket out.”

He cringes. “I—I owe money. To men who’ll kill me if I don’t pay. You have to understand—”

My patience thins. I grab a fistful of his hair, forcing him to look up. “Listen carefully. Pavel died on my watch. I want the name of whoever arranged his murder. I’m told you have intel—something about a Rossi contact who pulled strings. Spill it, or I’ll make this hurt more than you can imagine.”

His eyes flick around the room, perhaps hoping for mercy in someone’s gaze. None of my men meet his desperate stare. We’re past the point of sympathy. He tries to clamp his mouth shut, so I yank out a finger clamp from my toolkit and pry open his jaw. A pitiful gasp leaves his lips, and I press the clamp on his tongue for a second, just enough to remind him who’s in control.

He whimpers. “Stop—please—I’ll talk.”

I release his jaw, letting him gasp for air. “Then talk.”

He sucks in a tremulous breath. “They... They said the Rossis wanted to expand. That they saw an opening with Pavel gone. I—I don’t know who gave the order.”

“Names,” I bark. “The name of whoever hired you to run messages or coordinate a hit.”

He grimaces, and his eyelids flutter as though he’s about to lose consciousness. “It wasn’t me who arranged anything. There’s a man—Davide—he’s the one who came

to me. Paid me to keep quiet about Pavel's route that day."

Davide. The name rings a bell: a low-tier Rossi enforcer, rumored to be climbing the ranks. "You took money to betray your friend?" My stomach churns with disgust. "Worth it?"

He chokes, and tears mix with the blood on his face. "I didn't mean for him to die! I thought... I thought maybe they'd just scare him off, not kill him."

"Pavel trusted you. You fed him to the wolves for cash. You expect me to believe you feel remorse now?"

He struggles for words. Before he can speak, his eyes roll back, and a ragged cough jerks through him. Blood dribbles from the corner of his mouth. My men shift in place as I grab him by the collar, shaking him. "You're not done yet. Tell me everything about Davide. Where does he operate? Who's backing him?"

He wheezes. "Warehouse... near the docks. He—he meets men there. Talks about... shipments. I swear that's all I know."

I slam my fist against the arm of his chair.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean—I never thought—" His words falter as his voice is reduced to a wet rasp. Then he exhales, and his body goes limp. The spark in his eyes dims as death settles over him.

"Shit," I mutter under my breath, releasing him. My men stare, waiting for orders. "Get rid of the body. Make sure no trace leads back to us." They spring into action, untying the corpse and hauling it away. I run a hand over my face, repressing the anger simmering inside. We only got limited intel before he croaked—a lead on Davide and the Rossis, but nothing that fully explains who's behind Pavel's murder.

By the time I exit the basement. The sun has dipped low, and my phone vibrates with a text from Maksim. He's off dealing with his own vices, no doubt. The message simply says: Any update? I ignore it. I'll fill him in later. Right now, I need a shower and some quiet to mull over what I learned.

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Driving back to my estate takes longer than usual. Traffic in the city's center is thick, and every red light feels like it takes an hour on its own. By the time I pull through the gates, night has fallen completely, and a bone-deep weariness clings to me. My clothes bear smudges of dried blood, and I can't decide if I'm too tired or too keyed up to care.

One of the housekeepers hurries over as I step out of my SUV with an anxious look in her eyes. "Mr. Barkov, welcome home."

I nod and toss my keys to the valet. "Where's Seraphina? Any trouble with her today?"

She glances at my shirt, gawking at the dark stains before she averts her gaze. "Your wife... She's in the garden, Sir."

That's surprising. After last night's fiasco at dinner, I assumed she'd hole up in her room again. "She is?"

"Yes," the housekeeper confirms. "She asked for a watering can. Something about wanting to help with the plants. She's been out there a while."

I wave the housekeeper off. "Thanks." She scurries inside, and I'm left standing in the driveway, debating whether to freshen up first or go to her. Curiosity nudges me toward the garden.

I walk around the side of the estate, following the path that leads to a cluster of neatly trimmed hedges and vibrant flowers. I half expect to find her scowling or plotting some new way to defy me. Instead, I stop short when I see her kneeling near a patch of blossoms with a watering can in hand.

She's wearing a simple purple sundress, and her midnight hair is pinned back. There's a softness about her posture that catches me off guard.

As I move closer, I notice she's admiring a butterfly perched on one of the flowers. A faint smile curves her lips, like she's briefly forgotten her fury. The image stirs something in my chest, a tug of guilt maybe, or longing.

I recall how she looked in my arms, panting and trembling on our wedding night. How quickly her defiance melted into raw desire. That memory hits me square in the gut, reminding me of her innocence that night—the tightness I felt around my fingers, the wet warmth that drove me insane. I know what a virgin feels like, and I'm certain she had never been touched like that before.

It took a measure of willpower I didn't know I had to stop, to keep from taking her fully. A virgin, married off to me for an alliance. I've bedded plenty of women, but I'm not the type to claim a virgin by force. I won't touch her unless she willingly spreads her legs. An odd sense of chivalry, I guess. Or maybe it's because I don't want to break her spirit if she's truly never known a man. I'd rather she come to me on her own accord, no matter how long that might take.

I clear my throat. She startles before glancing over her shoulder. For a moment, there's no scowl, no immediate glint of anger in her eyes. She lowers the watering can and rises to her feet, brushing off her skirt.

"Grigor," she greets me in a subdued tone.

It's the first time she's spoken my name without venom. "Hey." I notice a subtle shift in her gaze when she spots the bloodstain on my shirt. It's not massive, but it's noticeable.

She bites her lip, hesitant. "Long day?"

I weigh my words. Normally, I'd give a dismissive grunt, but I'd rather not call back the spite if I can help it. Instead, I shrug and answer, "Yeah."

Her attention drifts to the crimson blot before she sets the watering can aside. "That's... Is that...?"

I follow her line of sight. "Nothing you need to worry about," The last thing I want is to share details of my interrogation, especially since I barely trust her. She's my wife, but that means nothing yet.

She steps forward, drawing her brows together in either concern or revulsion. Maybe both. "You're bleeding?"

I shake my head. "Not my blood."

"Oh." The silence stretches between us. The butterfly that held her attention earlier flutters off, leaving only the faint chirp of insects. She doesn't press, and I'm oddly grateful.

She exhales before looking again at the flowers. "I figured these needed some care. Your gardeners do their job, but I like tending to them myself." Her tone is almost... gentle.

I tilt my head, studying her features. "You're... calmer tonight," I remark, half expecting a snide retort.

She lifts a shoulder. “I’m exhausted, Grigor. I’ve spent the day replaying everything that’s happened. I can’t be angry every minute.” A hint of vulnerability edges her words, and it sinks under my skin.

A breeze lifts strands of her hair, and she tucks them behind her ear as her eyes slide away from my gaze. My mind drifts back to the memory of her arching under my touch, how she clenched around my fingers, how she tasted of need and frustration. If I let that memory linger, I’ll be tempted to drag her into the nearest corner and show her exactly how I can make her come apart again. But I rein it in. She’s had enough forced contact from me lately.

Trying to redirect my thoughts, I gesture at the watering can. “So... you like gardening?”

She pauses, as if uncertain how to respond. “I guess. It’s relaxing.” Then she crosses her arms, as if protecting that small revelation. Her eyes drift down to my shirt again. “Did something happen out there? You’ve got blood. That can’t be good.”

“I handle a lot of things. Some of them get messy. That’s my job.”

She studies me, probably weighing whether to push for details. Her posture stiffens, like she remembers we’re not exactly confidants. “You’re not going to tell me, are you?”

I keep my face impassive. “No.”

Disappointment crosses her features. “Fine. I don’t really care anyway.” A lie, perhaps. But I don’t call her out on it. She turns back to the flowers, picking up the watering can once more. The conversation seems over, but a part of me wants it to continue.

I cast a quick glance toward the mansion. My day was long and brutal, and I know I should shower, change clothes, and maybe regroup with my brothers. Yet something about Seraphina's quiet presence in this garden holds me there. I can't recall the last time she wasn't snapping at me.

I step beside her, studying the array of blossoms. Their petals glow under the estate's exterior lights. She notices my proximity but doesn't move away. That's progress, I suppose. My chest tightens with a confusing mix of relief and desire, recalling what I discovered about her innocence. If she knew how much it affected me—that knowledge of her being a virgin—she might use it against me or throw it in my face. I keep it buried, a secret plan to wait until she's ready to give herself willingly. Because, make no mistake, I intend to claim every inch of her, but on my terms and hers.

She finishes watering, then sets the can on a low stone ledge. "I'm done." Her voice is small, tired.

I clear my throat. "You should go inside. It's late."

She nods, not protesting for once. As we walk back, the distance between us is barely an arm's length, but it might as well be a canyon. I want to extend a hand, but I resist. She'd probably recoil.

We reach a side entrance, and she opens the door, stepping in. I follow with tension prickling at the base of my neck. She stops in the corridor, turning to face me. "Look... about dinner last night—"

A pang of guilt shoots through me, recalling how I slung her over my shoulder. "It was necessary."

Her eyes blaze for a second. "Necessary to degrade me in front of your family?"



I suppress a wince. “You refused to come down. I had no choice. My brothers needed to meet you. They won’t respect a wife who hides away.”

She lifts her chin. “They wouldn’t respect a woman, period, from what I’ve seen.”

I open my mouth to argue but realize she’s not wrong, at least about some of them. “They respect strength. And you showed plenty by talking back to me. They noticed.”

She snorts. “Glad to know my attitude is an asset to someone.” The comment drips sarcasm, but it lacks the lethal edge I’ve grown accustomed to. It feels more like a momentary truce.

Neither of us speaks for a beat. Her gaze flicks to the red stains on my shirt again, and for an instant, I see the worry in her eyes. She wants to ask again. I can almost hear the question forming on her lips. But she doesn’t voice it. Instead, she exhales and looks away.

“I’m heading to shower.”

She brushes a strand of hair off her forehead. “Yeah. Okay.”

I nod and step around her, heading toward the stairs. My pulse thuds at the back of my skull as an odd sense of regret nags at me. I suspect she might have more to say, but she’s letting it go, probably because she doesn’t trust me any more than I trust her.

As I climb the steps, I replay the day’s events in my mind: the torture session, the meager scraps of info about Davide, and the man’s death before I could squeeze out any real information that might lead us to the true mastermind behind Pavel’s murder. Then I recall the sight of Seraphina kneeling in the garden, quietly caring for flowers that belong to a household she claims to despise. The dissonance unsettles me.

She hates me, hates our arrangement, yet she waters flowers in my garden.

At the top of the stairs, I glance back to see if she followed, but she's gone, probably off to her room. For a fleeting moment, I wonder if she's replaying last night's heat in her head as much as I am. The memory of her gasping on my fingers, soaking them, her body so tight—it sends a rush of desire through me. But I lock it down. I vow not to touch her again until she's ready. It might take weeks or months or never.

But it doesn't matter. Not even in the slightest. I should focus on bigger threats like Davide and the Rossis, not on seducing my unwilling wife.

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:00 pm*

I jolt awake when my phone buzzes on the nightstand, nearly sending my heart into my throat. My first thought is that it's Grigor, maybe demanding I present myself somewhere to put on a wifey-performance or else he'll come and drag me there again. But the second I pick up the phone, I see my father's name glaring at me. A chill spreads through my limbs, and I'd love nothing more than to fling this device across the room.

Seraphina. I'm waiting. Where's the intel ?

A single, curt line of text that reeks of arrogance. It hasn't even occurred to the man to check on his newlywed daughter's well-being or to ask how her honeymoon has been. Not that I was granted one of those. No, the meaning is clear: I owe him secrets about the Barkovs, about Grigor, or he'll make good on his threat to use Cecily in some twisted arrangement the way he used me.

I stare at the screen, blinking through the sleepy haze. What does he expect me to do? March up to Grigor and ask him to reveal his darkest business dealings? I've seen only glimpses of what he does in a single day—returning home with blood on his shirt, vanishing for hours to handle Bratva matters—but I have no clue how to spin that into a decent report for Father. My husband has no reason to trust me yet, and building that kind of rapport, especially with someone I despise so much, takes time. But I agreed to my father's demands to protect Cecily. If I want to look out for my sister, I have to find a way to get the old bastard something.

The phone buzzes again with another message: Remember our deal, or your sister pays.

A spike of anger flares in my chest, mingling with guilt and worry. My father knows exactly how to twist my arm. Cecily is the only reason I haven't told him to shove his demands somewhere vile. If I don't deliver some shred of intel soon, he'll make her life hell.

I shove the blankets aside and pace the bedroom floor, trying to think this through. I'm stuck between two men, neither of whom I trust completely. My father, who sold me off like livestock, and my husband, who's done nothing but prove how dominating he can be—though, ironically, he's also shown glimpses of restraint. That night in his bed, I expected him to take everything. But he stopped. It left me rattled and more confused than ever.

Still, Father's message pounds at my brain: I'm waiting. A wave of desperation rolls over me. He's not going to let this rest, and I have no illusions about how ruthless he can be when he wants something. If he suspects I'm stalling, he won't hesitate to threaten Cecily more directly.

The only way to gain real information is to earn Grigor's trust. Or at least get closer to him. And if I've learned anything since we wed, it's that Grigor Barkov's confidence comes from the reactions he can illicit from people. Like that night—when his fingers drove me insane and left me trembling and wanting. That memory sends heat blooming in my core. I loathe how easily he stripped away my defenses, how a part of me craves feeling his hands on me again.

I swallow hard, wrestling with the idea that's forming in my mind. If I'm going to get him to open up, I might need to stroke his ego a bit. Tempt him. Let him believe I'm finally ready to submit or at least share his bed willingly. The thought knots my stomach with a whole host of emotions I don't have time to unpack right now.

I glance at my phone one last time before tossing it on the dresser. Fine. If seduction is what it takes, then I'll do it. But I'll do it on my terms. It's not about pleasing him;

it's about keeping my sister safe from my father's manipulations.

The hallway is quiet when I step out of my room. I've taken off my pajamas and changed into a slip of black lace that barely covers my body. That ought to get Grigor's attention. Anxiety churns in my gut. This is insane. I'm a virgin, for crying out loud. Not some expert in seducing men. The only time Grigor and I shared any intimacy was that night when desire overrode my anger. Now I'm trying to harness that, hoping to coax him into letting down his guard.

I near the door where I know he sleeps. Since our wedding, he hasn't demanded I share his bed. I took over his master suite, and he's been relegated to a guest room. We've been stuck in this standoff, neither of us willing to close the distance. Tonight, I plan to break that, whether it ends with me out in the hallway, humiliated, or with him speaking to me like I'm not just a burden for a change.

A guard stationed near the end of the corridor glances my way. I force a scowl, daring him to comment on my attire. He looks away fast. Good. One less person to annoy me. When I reach Grigor's door, I pause for a moment, trying to breathe through my heart rattling in my chest. Part of me wants to flee back to my room and curl up under the sheets. But my father's threat pushes me forward.

I twist the knob. It's unlocked. After slipping inside, I shut it quietly. The room is dark, with only the moonlight from outside providing any light. I let my eyes adjust and take in the sight of Grigor sprawled on his bed with his sheets barely covering his lower half. His broad shoulders and chest are on display, and I glimpse the defined ridges of muscle leading down his abdomen. He must be naked beneath the sheets. A flush of heat tinges my skin, and my nerves spike again. The memory of his touch, his mouth on mine, rushes back. Despite my plan, I feel a stab of genuine desire flutter through me.

He's fast asleep, judging by his steady breathing. A gun rests on the nightstand—no

surprise there. He always keeps a weapon within reach. I swallow as adrenaline zips through my veins. He's not someone to approach lightly while unconscious, especially given the world he lives in. But I've come this far, and turning back now means giving up on my best chance at gleaning information and ensuring Cecily's safety.

Stepping closer, I peel the lace slip up a bit, letting it show more of my legs, as though I need more exposure. Honestly, this already feels like too much. My cheeks burn, but I remind myself it's just a tactic. This is for Cecily, I tell myself, ignoring the guilt at how I'm using this to manipulate Grigor.

I round the edge of the bed, trailing my eyes over his sculpted body. My heart does a flip when I see the outline of his arousal beneath the sheets, thick and unapologetically male. He's erect even while sleeping. My core clenches at the sight. Damn it. This was supposed to be a simple, detached move, but my body betrays me by growing warm with anticipation. I push the feeling down or try to.

When I reach the side of the bed, I pause, uncertain how to proceed. Should I climb on top of him? Whisper his name? Taking a breath, I ease onto the mattress, careful not to jar him awake. My fingers reach out, longing to stroke the hard planes of his chest, but an irrational fear grips me. Of what, I'm not sure, so I chalk it up to inexperience.

I steel my nerves and let my fingertips hover over his skin. Before I can make contact, his eyes snap open, dark and alert. In a flash, he moves. One arm shoots out, capturing my wrist in a bruising grip. Then, before I can blink, he's on his feet, pinning me back against the wall. My head hits the plaster, and my breath whooshes out of me.

A metallic click registers in my frantic mind as he presses the cold muzzle of a gun to my temple. My pulse hammers. I freeze, and terror pierces me like an icy spear.

“Who the—” he growls. Then his gaze locks onto my face, and I see the instant he realizes it’s me. He lowers the gun with a shaky hand and asks, “Seraphina?”

I suck in a breath. My heart is racing so fast I can barely speak. “Grigor—I—”

He exhales and tosses the pistol onto the bed, where it plops against the sheets. “Damn it,” he mutters, stepping back but still keeping one hand on my shoulder as though he’s not sure whether I’ll flee. His eyes drag over my barely clad body, but he squeezes his eyes shut and shakes his head. “What do you think you’re doing, creeping up on me like that?”

“I needed—I wanted—” Words stick in my throat. The plan was to be seductive, to slip under the covers and offer him my body. But the cold reality of his gun pressed to my head leaves me reeling.

And that’s not the only thing that has me flustered. He’s naked, and my eyes can’t help darting down, and sure enough, he’s still half-erect. The sight makes a fresh wave of desire course through me, but it’s overlaid with the panicked realization that he nearly killed me on reflex.

“Are you insane?” he demands. “Sneaking in here in the middle of the night? Do you have a death wish?”

“I knocked,” I lie. “You didn’t answer. I thought... maybe I could...” My cheeks flame with embarrassment, and my words stumble to a halt. I’m not about to tell him I came to seduce him for information, so I stay silent, letting him fill in the blanks however he likes.

His grip relaxes on my shoulder, though his expression remains stormy. “I almost shot you. Don’t ever do that again.”

“I’m sorry,” I mumble, because I genuinely am. That was reckless. No matter my motivations, I know how jumpy men in this world can be. I should’ve anticipated his reaction. My father’s threats wouldn’t matter if I ended up dead at my husband’s hand.

He heaves a ragged breath and drops his head. His gaze roams over my lace slip again, lingering at the swell of my breasts where my nipples threaten to spill out. He swallows hard, and I don’t miss the hunger appearing in his eyes. My own pulse reacts, and an unwelcome flush creeps across my skin.

For a moment, we stand locked in that charged silence, with the gun lying on the bed just inches away. My plan seems ridiculous now. I want to run, but there’s a strange magnetism to him, standing before me in the nude. My heart rate refuses to slow down.

“Grigor?” His name comes out small and unsure.

His eyes flit to mine. They’re filled with raw desire. “Yes?”

I bite my lip, debating. If I’m going to pull this off, I can’t leave now.

My next words are barely a whisper, yet they carry so much weight. “Touch me.”

His brows furrow, and he looks like he’s about to argue. I can almost hear him ask me why, after all our tension, would I allow him near me like this. But the longer we stare at each other, the less he fights it.

“Please,” I add.

He lets out a shuddering breath and closes the little bit of distance between us.



He's taller than me, and when his face is inches from mine, he bends, pressing his lips against my neck. His hot mouth sends a thrill of need through me. My skin breaks out in goosebumps, and his teeth nip at the sensitive skin behind my ear. I can't hold back a gasp, and a rush of damp heat pools between my legs.

"Like this?"

I can only manage a nod. He continues, and his mouth works its way down to my collarbone, sending shockwaves throughout my body. He pulls the straps of my slip down, letting the material pool around my waist. His large, calloused hands skim over my shoulders and breasts, and my nipples pebble beneath his touch.

"Goddamn," he breathes.

I let out a whimper, not trusting myself to speak. I hate the effect he has on me, but the heat of his touch and the deep timbre of his voice are doing things to my body. His length presses into my abdomen, and I can't resist looking down at him. A drop of pre-cum beads at the tip, and an overwhelming need to touch him overrides my better judgment.

I slide a tentative hand between us, and when I wrap my fingers around his shaft, he groans. The sound makes my knees weak, and a fresh wave of wetness gathers between my thighs. I've never touched a man before, but the instinct takes over, and I pump my fist, stroking. He's smooth and hard, and the knowledge that I can affect him this way is a heady feeling.

His mouth finds mine, and his tongue explores my lips. I part them, and he plunges in, devouring me. I've never been kissed like this, with such desperation and hunger, and the raw need makes me dizzy. My whole body is aching and yearning for more. I'm throbbing with desire, and I can't remember why I didn't want him to touch me again.

His hands travel to my hips, and he lifts me up with ease. My legs wrap around his waist, and he carries me over to the bed, laying me down. I'm trapped beneath him, and a sliver of fear runs through me. This is unfamiliar territory, but a bigger part of me wants him, wants more of his hands and mouth and everything.

He leans down and kisses me again, slow and deep, and his tongue strokes against mine. His cock is straining against my inner thigh, and my hips arch up, seeking friction. His hand slips between us, and when he finds my soaked slit, his fingers circle my clit. The pressure is exquisite, and my legs fall open, begging for more.

He chuckles, low and gravelly, and the sound goes straight to my core. "You like that, Krasivaya?"

I'm panting now, and my brain can't form a response. Instead, I grind my hips against his hand, urging him on. He doesn't need more convincing, and he slips a finger inside, stretching me as he lowers his mouth to my nipple. When he sucks the sensitive peak, I let out a cry of pleasure. My pussy clenches around his digit, and he adds another, pumping in and out.

He kisses his way down my body, and when his mouth reaches my sex, his tongue swirls over my clit. My hands fist in the sheets, and my head is spinning. I can't get enough air, and the pleasure is so intense, it's almost painful. He keeps licking and sucking, and his fingers continue working in and out of me. His fingers curl inside me, finding that perfect spot, and I can't even recognize the voice coming out of me, begging him not to stop.

The pressure builds, and I feel like I'm teetering on the edge of a cliff, ready to fall. I'm desperate for release, and I'm so close, but I don't want to fall over yet. I'm desperate for his cock, desperate to feel him inside me.

I tug at his shoulders, pulling him up, and he obliges. His lips are glistening with my

juices, and the sight is erotic. I don't hesitate, kissing him hard and tasting myself on his mouth. He positions himself between my legs, and his length rubs against my slick folds.

"Do you want this?"

I'm already nodding before he's even finished asking.

"Say it," he demands. "I want to hear you say it."

"I want you."

"Good girl." He gives a gentle nudge forward, and the head of his cock breaches my entrance.

I inhale sharply, and a mixture of pain and pleasure spreads through me. He pushes in slowly, stretching me, and his eyes lock onto mine. There's an intensity there, something deeper than just lust, but it's gone too quickly. My thoughts scatter, and all I can focus on is the feeling of him filling me, his cock sliding deeper and deeper.

When he's fully sheathed, he pauses, letting me adjust. The pain is fading, and a delicious fullness takes its place. I move against him, urging him on, and he begins to thrust, long and deep.

"God, Seraphina."

My name on his lips sounds foreign. Hearing him say it so reverently makes my heart skip.

His movements pick up speed, and his cock drives into me. I wrap my legs around him, taking him deeper, and my hips arch to meet him. It feels incredible, and I'm

lost in the sensation of his body joined with mine. He's everywhere, surrounding me, and his scent envelopes me.

He lowers his head and kisses me again, and his tongue plunders my mouth, matching the rhythm of his cock inside me. My skin is hot, and my pussy clenches around him. My breasts are crushed against his chest, and his stubble is rough against my cheek. I never knew pleasure like this existed.

His breathing grows ragged, and he pumps faster. I'm climbing toward that peak again, and I know he's getting close, too.

His thumb finds my clit, and the added pressure is too much. I let go, and my orgasm crashes over me. Pleasure rolls through me, and I cry out his name, digging my nails into his back. He gives a few more thrusts, and then he's coming, too, filling me with his seed.

He buries his face in my neck, grunting and panting, and I'm still seeing stars. We're both slick with sweat, and his body is heavy on mine, but I don't care. All the tension is gone, and there's nothing but euphoria and a deep sense of satisfaction.

After a moment, he rolls off me, and the sudden absence of his weight is jarring. He pulls me into his side, and his arm wraps around me. The gesture is unexpectedly tender, and my body stiffens. This isn't how I imagined it would be, cuddling and falling asleep together. It feels too intimate.

He nuzzles his face in my hair. "You're mine now," he whispers.

I blink, uncertain what to make of the statement. It should probably bother me, but instead, a surge of possessiveness wells up inside me. A tiny, delusional part of me wants him all to myself.

But I know that's impossible. Even if this had nothing to do with my father and the Bratva, we're still two different people, bound by a marriage neither of us wanted.

I'm not his. Not really. And he isn't mine. When the sun comes up, the reality of that will set in again. But for now, I let myself enjoy the comfort of his body.

My thoughts turn to Cecily and my father. Maybe Grigor will be more willing to talk now that we've crossed this line. I can only hope so, because the consequences of failure aren't something I'm willing to consider.

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:00 pm*

I wake up feeling like I could devour half the kitchen. My stomach rumbles in a way that startles me out of the last dregs of sleep, and I stretch beneath the covers, wondering where Grigor is. The space beside me is empty, and the sheets are cool to the touch. Something about that emptiness tugs at my thoughts, reminding me of last night. Heat flutters through me at the memory of how his body felt against mine, but I'm quick to shake it off.

Catching feelings for my husband is a terrible idea, given the circumstances.

I slide out of bed, and my bare feet sink into the plush rug. One of his shirts drapes across the armchair in the corner, and I tug it on rather than trekking down the hall for my own clothes. The fabric is too big, and it hangs almost to my knees. As I inhale the faint trace of his scent clinging to it, an odd comfort that makes me roll my eyes at myself.

Trying to ignore the flush on my cheeks, I pad over to his dresser. It's left half-open, maybe in a hurry. Curiosity gnaws at me, and I find myself peering inside. Most of it is a jumble of folded clothes, but near the back, I catch a glimpse of a small photo with worn edges. I slip it out carefully, blinking at the image of a woman with bright eyes and a dazzling smile.

Jealousy prickles at me before I can tamp it down. She's gorgeous, with dark hair that falls in loose waves around her shoulders. I stare at her features, trying to figure out who she might be. Maybe she's the reason Grigor didn't push me further that first night. Maybe he's already in love. A sour taste fills my mouth at the thought.

"What am I doing?" I mutter to myself. After sliding the photo back where I found it,

I close the drawer. I don't want to feel this way—like I'm already competing with someone who might hold his heart.

I push the feeling down and decide to head downstairs. My hunger returns with a vengeance, and if Grigor's busy elsewhere, I can make something for myself. I smooth the shirt, ignoring that it rides up enough to reveal my thighs. If anyone stares, too bad. I'm the lady of the house, for better or worse.

The hallway is quiet. I make my way to the kitchen, inhaling the scent of coffee and something cooking. That alone triggers another wave of hunger, and I quicken my pace, only to stop short at the threshold. Grigor is standing by the stove, bare-chested, wearing only a pair of lounge pants with a spatula in hand as he stirs something in a pan.

He turns when he hears me, lifting his eyebrows. "Morning."

I swallow, caught off-guard by the domestic scene. "Hi," I mumble. My gaze shifts to the pan, then to the countertop where a cutting board is covered with chopped vegetables. "You're... cooking."

A hint of a smile tugs at his mouth. "You say that like it's the most shocking thing you've seen."

I can't help a small huff of laughter. "I guess I didn't expect it." I wander closer, drawn by the aroma. Whatever he's making smells divine.

He gestures at the table. "Sit. This will be ready soon."

I glance at the utensils and plates he's set out. The tension from last night lingers in the air between us, but I'm too hungry to argue. I slip into one of the chairs, noticing how he eyes me in his shirt. The look he gives me sends a warm flush across my skin,

reminding me of exactly what happened not too long ago.

My gaze drifts to the window, letting me compose myself. “You’re up early,” I remark. “Could’ve woken me.”

He shrugs before turning back to the stove. “Didn’t want to.”

I’m not sure how to interpret that, so I keep quiet. A minute later, he brings over two plates of scrambled eggs mixed with vegetables, plus a side of crispy potatoes. My mouth waters at the sight. He sets them down, grabs a pot of coffee, and pours me a mug without a word.

I curl my fingers around the warm ceramic, momentarily unsettled by the normalcy of it all. “Thanks,” I offer, trying not to sound flustered. The moment feels intimate, in a subtle way that ties my tongue.

He sits across from me and digs into his own plate. The flavors burst on my tongue—seasonings, herbs, the fresh crunch of peppers. I can’t stifle the moan that slips out. “It’s good,” I mumble around another mouthful.

“You sound surprised.”

“Maybe I am,” I admit. “The only meals we’ve shared together so far were prepared by your private chef. Don’t get cocky, though. One decent meal won’t erase the fact that you nearly shot me last night.”

He rubs a hand over his face. “I told you, you shouldn’t have snuck up on me. Especially in that manner.”

Annoyance stirs in my gut, but I push it aside. “Fair point,” I concede. “Still, I’m grateful you didn’t pull the trigger.”



A shadow passes across his features, but he shrugs it off. “I’d rather not kill my wife,” he says, so matter-of-fact it sends a shiver down my spine.

I change the subject before we can spiral into hostility. “Earlier, I was in your room looking for a shirt. I found... a photo.”

He tenses, and his gaze goes cold. “You were snooping?”

“Not snooping,” I protest. “I just saw it in the drawer. Who is she?” The question emerges with more bitterness than I intended, but I can’t help myself.

“Why do you care?”

I resist the urge to snap back. Instead, I soften my tone. “Because I saw how carefully it was tucked away. She seems important.”

He’s silent for a long moment, keeping his eyes fixed on a point behind me. Something tells me I touched a nerve. Finally, he exhales. “Her name was Anya. She was my sister.”

“Oh,” I recall how jealous I felt seeing that picture, how I assumed it was some girlfriend he was pining over. The shame of that assumption burns.

“She was murdered,” he continues. “Years ago. My parents passed away soon after. I blame the grief.”

I watch the flicker of pain in his eyes. Something twists inside my chest. “I’m sorry,” I manage. “I didn’t know.”

He pushes the eggs around on his plate without meeting my gaze. “She was the only girl in our family. The rest of us made it out of adolescence alive, but Anya...” He

trails off, swallowing hard. “She was sweet. Too good for our world.”

My own heart twinges at the thought of losing Cecily. The mere possibility of her being harmed is what drove me into this predicament, to begin with. “I can’t imagine,” I whisper. “If anything like that happened to my sister...” The words catch in my throat, and I press my lips together.

For a moment, we share a silence weighted with grief—his for a sister lost, mine for a sister I fear might be in danger if I don’t appease Father. It’s the first time I feel a genuine sense of connection to Grigor, something beyond attraction or anger. A bond formed by understanding what it means to love a sibling fiercely.

He finally glances up. “Your sister’s name is Cecily, right?”

I nod. My hunger wanes as worry flutters inside me. “Yes. She’s younger by a few years. She’s... too kind and obedient for her own good.”

He offers a small, sad smile. “That was Anya, too.”

A beat passes. I realize the significance of his opening up, even this little bit. I catch myself feeling an urge to comfort him, to place my hand over his. But the memory of last night—how we ended up entwined—still dizzies me. And then I recall the reason behind my seduction. Guilt curdles in my stomach. Is it manipulative to show sympathy now, or is it genuine? I can’t even tell.

Trying to gather myself, I pick up my mug and down a gulp of coffee that scalds my tongue. “I’m sorry I brought it up. I didn’t mean to pry.”

He shakes his head, pushing his half-eaten plate aside. “You didn’t know.”

He studies me a moment longer, then stands to gather the dishes. I scramble to my

feet. “I can help with—”

“Leave it. The staff will handle this.”

I nod and hug his shirt closer to my body. “Thank you for breakfast.” The gratitude sounds awkward, but it’s real. I never expected him to cook for me. It’s a departure from the commanding figure I’m used to.

He gives a curt nod. “I have to head out. Business.”

Unease stirs in my chest, thinking of how that business probably involves violence. He doesn’t elaborate, and I’m not sure I want him to. “Be careful,” I say, surprising myself.

“I always am.” He brushes past me, collecting his jacket from a hook near the door. “Stay here. Don’t wander off,” he adds. Then he’s gone, and his footsteps echo in the hallway. Moments later, I hear the door shut behind him.

I release a breath I didn’t realize I was holding. My emotions churn; a blend of pity for his loss, guilt for my father’s demands, and an odd warmth at the memory of him making me breakfast. This marriage is a tangled mess, and I can’t see a clear path forward.

I ignore his order about leaving it for staff and tidy up the plates myself before I wander into the living area. Grigor’s head housekeeper, Galina, appears with a polite smile. “More coffee, Mrs. Barkov?”

I hesitate, then nod, grateful for the distraction. She returns with a fresh mug, and I wrap my hands around it, seeking comfort. “Thank you.”

She glances at me carefully. “Is everything alright, Ma’am? You seem... thoughtful

this morning.”

The question rattles me. She’s just a housekeeper, but I suspect she sees more than she lets on. The help is usually the first to learn any secrets since they have their fingers in every part of the household.

“I’m okay,” I respond, though I’m not entirely sure if it’s true. Then I force a small smile. “Just adjusting. That’s all.”

“If you need anything, please let me know.” She steps back, wiping her hands on her apron. “Mr. Barkov mentioned you might want to redecorate some areas soon, once you’ve settled.”

Redecorate. The idea of putting my personal stamp on this house is bizarre. I barely feel like I belong here. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

Galina begins to tidy the cushions on the sofa, so I take my coffee to the far window, where I look out at the garden where I found solace last night. Maybe I’ll make my way out there again today.

My phone vibrates in my pocket, and I stiffen. Another text from my father, no doubt.

Pulling it out, I see the dreaded name on the screen. Tension knots in my shoulders. I glance at Galina, who’s still preoccupied with her tasks. Quickly, I unlock the phone. The message glares at me:

What is taking so long? I need answers. Don’t forget our deal.

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:00 pm*

I'm done waiting. My chair scrapes across the floor as I stand, clutching the battered scrap of paper Dmitri just handed me. It's a clue, the first one we've had in weeks. Dmitri's men intercepted it from a Rossi courier they cornered near the docks—a lucky break in our otherwise stagnant search. A single thread that might lead us to the coward who arranged Pavel's murder.

My blood boils at the memory of Pavel's body sprawled in that alley. My men and I have spent every waking hour searching for answers, but the Rossis know how to hide their tracks. Now, though, we've got something—an address and a time.

Nikolai stands off to the side with his arms folded tight across his chest. "You sure this isn't a dead end? We've burned through leads before that turned out to be nothing."

"I'm not letting this slip by," I snap, resisting the urge to slam a fist on the table. "We can't keep treading water while that bastard Davide roams free. If this clue has even the faintest chance of giving us answers, I'm taking it."

"I get that. But if it's a setup—"

"Then I'll handle it," I interrupt, pinning him with a hard stare. "We're not amateurs here."

Aleksei, who's been silent in the corner, lifts his gaze. The overhead light glints on his watch, a reminder of how much time we've wasted on worthless leads. "No, we're not amateurs," he agrees. "But we can't ignore the possibility that Davide's using this address to lure us out. The Rossis would love to pick off a few of our men."

Maksim snorts from his seat as he takes a swig from his flask. “Better they try and fail, right? Because they will fail. They always do.”

Dmitri eyes him with a flicker of annoyance. “Keep your wits. I’d rather we not walk into a bloodbath with you drunk.”

Akim, who has been pacing like a restless hound, adds, “A bloodbath might be what we need to send a message. You think the Rossis are going to roll over just because we got guns? No. We storm their hideout, find Davide, and put an end to his meddling once and for all.”

My patience frays. “Enough.” My gaze travels over each brother. Aleksei, calm but wary. Nikolai, doubtful but grudgingly supportive. Dmitri, the brains who’d prefer more intel before charging in. Maksim, the wildcard. And Akim, itching for a fight. “We do this right. We go in, confirm if Davide’s there, and if it’s him... we finish him.”

Aleksei nods. “Time?”

Dmitri gestures to the slip of paper. “Midnight, old shipping yard on the east side of the city. We’ve got a few hours to get in position.”

“Fine,” I say, shoving the paper into my pocket. “Everyone gears up. I want eyes on that yard at least an hour early. If there’s movement, we’ll know.”

Nikolai grimaces. “If this is truly Davide, we might finally get the name of whoever hired him to target Pavel. That alone is worth the risk.”

Pavel’s loss left a hole in our family. He wasn’t just an ally—he was practically a brother by loyalty and bloodshed. The idea that Davide still breathes while Pavel’s in the ground makes my chest tight with rage. “We leave in two hours,” I announce,

biting out the words. “Get your teams ready.”

They file out, each with a different expression reflecting how they feel about this lead. I stand there a moment, inhaling slowly, forcing my clenched fists to relax. Tonight, we either find justice for Pavel or we confirm yet another worthless trail. Either way, I’m done sitting idle.

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Two hours later, we’re approaching the shipping yard in four vehicles with tinted windows hiding our faces. The yard stretches near the waterfront, with rusted cranes and rows of abandoned cargo containers standing around. Dmitri parks in the rear to scan the area with night-vision scopes. Our men disperse quietly, forming a perimeter. Maksim and Akim stay close to me, while Aleksei positions himself on higher ground with Nikolai to watch for an ambush.

I grip my pistol and whisper into the radio, “Status?”

Aleksei’s reply crackles back. “No suspicious movement yet. It’s quiet.”

Maksim pops a piece of gum in his mouth. “Too quiet.”

I ignore the cliché, though it does rankle my nerves. We creep between shipping containers. The stench of salt and rotting metal stings my nostrils. Dmitri signals that the warehouse in question is just ahead. A battered sign reading “G12” hangs off the corrugated metal walls.

Nikolai’s voice crackles over the comm. “Seeing a couple figures. East entrance, near a stack of crates.”

I glance at Akim, who nods, itching to storm forward. “Steady,” I order. “We confirm

if Davide's among them first." My breath slips out in a low hiss as I peer around a corner, vantage perfect to spy on two men. One is short and stocky, the other tall with broad shoulders. Hard to see faces in the darkness.

Aleksei's tone cuts through the radio. "Movement on the roof. Possibly a sniper."

Ice darts through me. The Rossis might very well be waiting for us to show. My teeth grit, but I wave Dmitri to circle around and flush out the rooftop gunner, if possible. The rest of us hold our positions.

Suddenly, headlights wash over the yard, illuminating the men by the crates. I duck behind a container, cursing the flash that killed my night vision. A black SUV rumbles into view, stopping near the warehouse door. Someone steps out. He's wearing a dark jacket, and though I can't see his face, my gut says this is our man.

Akim lifts his phone to snap a quick photo, no doubt hoping to match the silhouette with Davide's known features later. Then the tall figure speaks to the two men, gesturing animatedly.

Nikolai's voice is urgent in my earpiece. "We've got at least three men in the warehouse. They're armed. I see rifles."

Aleksei murmurs, "Sniper's still on the roof. Dmitri can't get close without a firefight."

A chill seeps along my spine as I realize we're likely outnumbered, but I refuse to retreat. "We didn't come here for nothing," I hiss. "We take out that sniper first, then push in. Nikolai, can you distract him?"

"On it," Nikolai replies. A moment later, a faint pop echoes—he's fired a suppressed shot. The sniper on the roof jerks, flailing. Then Dmitri lunges from the darkness,



wrestling the weapon away. The scuffle is brief, and soon, Dmitri's voice comes back, short and triumphant. "Rooftop clear."

The men by the crates whirl around, realizing something's off. One shouts an alarm, fumbling for his gun. "They know we're here," I announce. "Move in!"

Gunfire erupts, loud enough to pound in my skull. Maksim roars a war cry as he returns fire with calm precision. Akim sprints forward, weaving between containers. I cover him with shots barking from my pistol, forcing the two men behind the crates to duck. They unleash a volley of bullets in response that ping off metal, one ricocheting near my feet.

Aleksei calls over the comm, "The tall one is running west!"

"After him!" I command.

Akim dashes around the side, determined to intercept. The two men near the crates attempt to hold us off, but they're outmatched. Maksim lands a shot in one, sending him staggering. The other tries to flee but runs straight into Dmitri's line of fire.

"Two down," Dmitri barks.

I pivot, searching for the tall figure who might be Davide. I round a corner, nearly tripping over a fallen shipping pallet, and see him sprinting for the black SUV. Akim emerges from behind a container, tackling him in a flying leap. They hit the concrete with a sickening thud.

"Got him!" Akim shouts, trying to wrestle the man into submission. But he's strong and cunning. He twists free and smashes his elbow into Akim's jaw. Akim reels, giving the suspect a split second to scramble away.

“Don’t let him escape!” I shout.

Another round of gunfire blasts from somewhere behind me—maybe a hidden Rossi ally. Nikolai curses over the radio, calling for backup. I grit my teeth, ignoring the clamor and focusing on the suspect.

He leaps into the SUV and slams the door. I sprint closer despite the bullets whizzing past. The engine revs and the vehicle peels out in a squeal of tires. Without hesitation, I raise my gun and squeeze off a few rounds, but it’s no use. The SUV disappears into the shadows at the far end of the yard.

“Damn it!” I slam my fist against a shipping crate, frustration boiling over. We were so close. If that was Davide, we lost him—again.

Aleksei’s voice crackles: “We need to clear out. Sirens are inbound.”

I scan the area. The men we downed are either dead or incapacitated. One moans in pain near a forklift, clutching a bullet wound in his thigh. Maksim strides up and kicks the enemy’s gun away.

I’m stalking in their direction when something catches my eye—a phone lying near one of the fallen attackers. I pick it up. A cheap burner phone with a cracked screen. This might be something. “Dmitri! See what you can recover from this.”

He hurries over and plucks the device from my hand. “I’ll do what I can. Might help us track who they’ve been calling.”

We regroup, battered but alive, as the wail of distant sirens grows louder.

“Grab your wounded, if any,” I order. “Dmitri, handle that phone. Maksim, help me with the bodies.”

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By the time I finally step into my home that evening, exhaustion claws at my bones. We spent hours cleaning up our tracks to ensure the cops couldn't trace the mess back to us. Despite the near miss, the burner phone in Dmitri's possession might yield the clue we need. The Rossis remain a step ahead, but I refuse to stay in second place.

A few guards linger near the entrance, nodding respectfully as I pass. I wave them off and head toward the living room. I find Seraphina there, perched on the sofa with her legs tucked beneath her. She's reading something, but her eyes snap up the moment I appear.

At first glance, she looks composed. Then I spot the tension in her shoulders, the way her foot taps against the cushion. She's definitely on edge.

"You're awake," I note as I drop into the armchair across from her.

She closes her book and sets it aside. "Wasn't sure you were going to make it back tonight."

I shrug. "I told you I'd come back."

She frowns as she runs her eyes over my blood-stained clothes. "Did anything... happen tonight?"

She's prying, and I'm not in the mood to share details about the ambush. "What makes you ask?"

She shifts, chewing on her lower lip. "You look... worn out."

I can't deny that. "Long day. Let's leave it at that." A silence settles, uncomfortable. I

let out a measured breath. “Is there something you need?”

She straightens her posture and stretches an arm over the back of the couch. “I want to see my father.”

The words jolt me. I never got the impression that the two of them were very close. In fact, I’ve been given every reason to believe that she’d never want to see him again after the wedding. “Why?”

She draws in a slow breath. “I haven’t seen him in weeks, not since the wedding, and... I just want to talk to him.”

Her father is the same man who arranged our marriage as part of some twisted alliance. I still don’t trust him, even if he is technically family. “You realize he’d sell you out in a heartbeat if it benefited him, right? He’s already done it once.”

A flicker of pain darts across her face. “I know exactly what he’s capable of. But I still need to see him.”

I study her, noticing how her hands clench and unclench in her lap. “Alright. On two conditions. One: you take bodyguards. And two: you let them stay close enough to intervene if your father tries anything.”

“I’d rather have some privacy when I speak to my father, Grigor.”

“Then you can talk in a place that’s easy to surveil from outside.”

She exhales, and her shoulders slump. “Fine. I’ll take your damned guards. Satisfied?”

“When?”

“Tomorrow,” she answers. “Early.”

“Then tomorrow morning it is. Anton will go with you.” I push myself to my feet and every muscle protests. “If we’re done negotiating, I need some rest.”

She doesn’t stop me as I head for the stairs. Halfway up, I pause to pull out my phone and shoot a text to Anton: Seraphina wants to see her father. You go with her in the morning. Report everything.

The instant reply pings back: Understood.

I stash my phone back in my pocket and resume walking. I hate secrets, but trusting Seraphina fully is impossible when she’s so tied to a man like Evan Thorne. If she’s colluding with him... I push the thought away.

She’s my wife now, and I have to at least entertain the possibility that she can be trusted, even if her father can’t. Either way, I won’t leave her unprotected or unwatched.

## Page 13

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:00 pm*

I arrive at my father's estate with the two bodyguards Grigor insisted I bring. Their presence weighs on me like an invisible chain, reminding me of the new reality I can't escape. The drive here felt endless, and I spent the entire time going through every possibility of how this meeting might go.

What if my father sees that I'm growing closer to Grigor? What if he demands more information than I'm willing—or able—to give? My stomach twists at the thought of what he might do if he isn't satisfied.

The guards park the car and follow me as I step onto the familiar stone walkway. I fight a jolt of memories and I recall how many times I walked this path as a child, longing for something warmer and kinder from the man who lives here. For a time, I had that consolation in my mother. She always had a way of chasing away the harshness of my father's world. But when she passed away, far too soon, that comfort went with her, leaving only the cold presence of the man who raised me. The ache of that loss still stirs when I come here, though I've long since buried it under layers of steel.

My main bodyguard, Anton, trails two steps behind me, scanning the grounds. The other one, Val, stays near the car. My father's men watch from a distance, but they track my every move. The tension around this place feels suffocating. I square my shoulders and press the doorbell, ignoring the quiver in my gut. I must look confident, or my father will smell weakness.

A house attendant opens the door, offering a stiff nod. "Miss Seraphina," he greets me, gesturing for me to come inside. "They're expecting you. Shall I escort your companions to the sitting room?"

“They’ll wait outside,” I declare. The attendant looks uncertain, then steps aside to allow Anton and Val to remain in the entry hall. My father won’t be pleased, but he knows better than to provoke Grigor’s men outright. I glance at Anton, giving him a small nod so he knows I haven’t changed my mind about the arrangement. With that, I step past the threshold and head into the vast foyer.

This used to be my home, a place that should’ve felt safe. Instead, I recall countless times standing in this very spot, bracing myself for my father’s wrath. The portraits of my ancestors glare down from the walls, as if they too disapprove of my every choice.

Cecily appears at the far end of the foyer, and her face lights up when she spots me. She hurries over, arms open, and wraps me in a fierce hug. I close my eyes and let her familiar warmth seep into my bones for a moment.

“You came! I was counting the days.”

I manage a slight laugh, although nerves still gnaw at me. “Wouldn’t miss a chance to see you. How’ve you been?”

She loops her arm around mine and steers me toward the drawing room. “I’m alright, though it’s been dull without you. Father’s in one of his moods. You know how he gets.”

I nod, heart racing. “I figured.”

She stops just short of the drawing room doors, turning to give me an appraising look. “You look different, though I can’t put my finger on it. Happier, maybe?”

My cheeks warm, and I glance away. “Don’t be silly. I’m just... adjusting to the new life.”

Cecily's eyes sparkle. "New life, meaning marriage to the big, scary man you swore you'd never tolerate? That new life?"

"Don't start," I warn, though her teasing tone tugs a reluctant smile from me. "He's not that big or scary." I pause. "Well, maybe a little. But he's not a monster."

She gasps softly, pressing a hand to her heart in mock shock. "You're defending him. That's new. Are you—"

I cut her off with a scowl. "I'm not defending him. I'm just stating facts." My voice falters, and I can practically feel the heat in my face. "He can be decent... sometimes. That doesn't mean I like the man or anything."

She giggles and leans closer as though sharing a secret. "Maybe you don't like him, but you sure don't hate him either."

I roll my eyes, but my blush deepens. "Cecily, drop it. This is the last thing I need to discuss right now."

She nods, though her smirk remains. "Fine, I'll let it go. For now. But I'm glad you're not miserable."

I exhale as I thread my fingers together. "Thanks." My gaze drifts to the closed doors ahead. "Is he in there?"

Cecily's features tense. "He's waiting for you, yes. Be careful, okay?" She reaches up and brushes a stray curl from my forehead. "If he gets too nasty, call for me. I'll barge in and rescue you."

I give her a faint smile. "I can handle him," I insist, though my heart pounds. "Go on, do something fun while I get this over with."



She sighs, then steps back and motions for me to enter. I draw in a slow breath, pushing the door open. My father's office is just as I remember—heavy drapes, thick carpeting, and a saturating sense of oppressive tension. He sits behind his massive desk, flipping through papers. He doesn't look up.

“You're late.” His tone is clipped, devoid of warmth. Not that I expected any.

I move toward the desk. “I got held up. If you have a problem with my timing, take it up with the traffic.”

He lifts a brow at my insolence. “Bold, aren't we? Marriage giving you false confidence?” He stands and circles the desk. “Or maybe Grigor's letting you play princess in his grand estate?”

I bite down on my tongue. I won't let him see how his jabs affect me. “I'm here because you asked for information. Though there's not much to share.”

His eyes narrow, and I notice the faint lines around his mouth, deeper than before. “You've been living under his roof for weeks. Surely, you've seen or heard something that can help me. Don't play dumb.”

“He doesn't share details of his dealings. He keeps things compartmentalized. I can't just pry open his secrets.”

He snorts. “If you can't manage to charm a man who clearly wants you in his bed, then what use are you?” He steps closer, dropping his voice to a menacing hush. “Or have you decided you enjoy his touch too much to risk betraying him?”

The question stings more than it should. I swallow as I'm forced to face the possibility that my father can see how my feelings have shifted, even if only slightly. But I'm not about to admit as much. “I told you, I have nothing. That's not because

I'm picking sides."

He chuckles, a mocking sound that makes my spine stiffen. "Picking sides. As if you have that luxury. You're mine, Seraphina. You'll do as I say unless you want Cecily subjected to a similar arrangement. Maybe I'll marry her off to someone even more ruthless than Grigor."

Rage flashes through me, and I clench my fists. "Don't you dare drag Cecily into this. She's innocent."

He shrugs. "She's also valuable. If you don't get me what I need, I'll have no reason to keep her shielded. And you'll be to blame."

"You're a monster."

He smiles thinly. "I do what's necessary."

For a moment, words fail me. All I can think about is Cecily's trusting face. The last thing I want is for her to become a pawn in this twisted game. I force myself to breathe, to keep my voice steady. "I'm doing my best, but Grigor is cautious. It's going to take time."

His expression darkens, and he closes the distance between us in three measured steps. "You don't have time," he growls, jabbing a finger at my chest. "You think I don't hear rumors? Word is Grigor's sniffing around for who killed that ally of his, the one whose murder triggered this entire fiasco. If he sniffs out that you're my little spy, guess who'll pay the price."

A cold shiver courses through me. "I'll handle it."

He scoffs before glancing at his watch. "Handle it faster."

“I can’t force him to trust me overnight,” I argue. “If you want something substantial, let me work without these impossible deadlines.”

His mouth twists. “Impossible, you say? Then maybe I should remind you of what’s truly impossible—protecting your precious sister once I make it clear she’s for sale.”

My heart plummets. “Don’t. Please.”

He smirks. “Then give me something. Or is Grigor more important than Cecily now? Are you that taken with him that you’d jeopardize your own flesh and blood?”

“That’s not it!” I explode. “I’d die for Cecily. But I can’t deliver secrets I don’t have. And he doesn’t sit around monologuing about Bratva plans. He isn’t as arrogant as you—”

Before I finish, he lifts a hand and strikes me across the cheek, and the crack of flesh on flesh reverberates in my head. I reel backward with one hand flying to my stinging face. My eyes burn, but I refuse to cry. I refuse to let him see that weakness.

“Don’t raise your voice at me,” he warns, rage dripping from each word. “You’re nothing but a means to an end, a bargaining chip I played to get close to the Barkovs. If you think that husband of yours loves you, you’re a fool.”

My throat tightens as I recall every moment of softness Grigor has shown me—few as they are—and wonder if it’s all in my head. “I never said he loves me,” I whisper, hating how small my voice sounds.

My father leans in, and his hot breath throbs on my cheek. “He’ll turn on you the instant he learns you’re feeding me intel. Men like him don’t forgive betrayal. They wipe it out.”

Fear rises like bile, and I can't help picturing Grigor's face the other night when he held a gun to my head. Would he shoot me if he found out? My father sees the flicker of dread in my eyes and bares his teeth in a nasty smile.

"Let me paint a picture for you: the day he discovers you're my dirty, little spy, he'll wrap those big hands around your throat and squeeze until there's no life left in you. Or maybe he'll put a bullet between your eyes. Doesn't matter which. He'll never forgive you."

I force myself to stand straighter. "You're delusional if you think I care that much."

"Am I?" he counters. "You're trembling at the thought of him finding out. That's enough proof. Now get out of my sight. Bring me something real next time, or I'll make sure Cecily pays in your place."

My stomach feels hollow. I want to lash out, scream at him, but the memory of his hand striking my face holds me back. The possibility that he might hurt Cecily, or that he might blow my cover, forces me to nod. I turn on my heel and walk away, refusing to glance back. My father's men step aside as I pass through the door wearing pitying looks when they get a look at my face, which I'm sure is crimson. I ignore them all and hurry down the corridor.

Cecily emerges from somewhere down the hall, eyes wide as she takes in my expression. "Sera? What happened?"

I lift a trembling hand and press it to my cheek. "Nothing." The lie is obvious. My cheeks burn with humiliation. "He's in a foul mood, that's all."

Her gaze flicks behind me, then she reaches for my arm. "Let me see—did he—"

"I'm fine," I insist. My voice shakes, but I shrug her off. "Cecily, please, I just... I

need to go. I can't stay here."

She glances toward the drawing room with tears gathering in her eyes. "Why won't he just leave us alone?"

Because he's a cruel man with endless schemes , I think, but I don't say it. Instead, I shake my head and step past her. "Take care of yourself. I'll see you soon."

Cecily nods, but her bottom lip trembles. "I'll walk you out."

We reach the foyer, where Anton and Val wait. Their shoulders tense when they see my swollen cheek, but they say nothing, just step to flank me. My father's men watch warily as if expecting a brawl. I keep my eyes down as shame crawls under my skin. This is the man I was raised by, the one who forced me to marry for his own benefit. And here I am, battered inside and out, still trying to appease him in hopes of protecting Cecily.

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:00 pm*

I'm not a man prone to shock, but the moment Anton calls and tells me Seraphina's father struck her, everything in me snaps. I can't stay still. I don't bother telling anyone where I'm going; I just grab my coat, bark at my driver to warm up the car, and slam the door on my way out.

If Evan Thorne thinks he can put his hands on my wife for any reason at all, he's about to learn a very harsh lesson.

I stare out the window as we drive, though I'm not focusing on any scenery. My mind churns with the memory of her expression earlier in the day. She gave me no indication that something was off, even though, in hindsight, there was something off about her. She tried to hide it. I told myself I'd wait for her to open up on her own terms. But now I see that trust or not, I should've pried. That woman is my wife, and no one puts a mark on her without paying dearly.

We arrive at Evan Thorne's mansion, and my driver glances at me in the rearview mirror with concern in his eyes, but he keeps his mouth shut. Good. I throw the door open the instant we come to a stop, ignoring the startled guards by the entrance as I march forward.

"Mr. Barkov," one guard stammers, moving to block me.

I push him aside without slowing. "Out of my way. I have business with your boss."

"He's not expecting—"

"He'll see me, or I'll rip this place apart." My tone leaves no room for argument, and

the guard steps back.

The front door swings open before I reach it, revealing a house attendant wearing a forced, polite mask. I shove past him into the foyer, scanning the lavish interior. My heart hammers, spiked by fury more potent than any gunfight.

“Where is he?” I ask nobody in particular.

One of Evan’s men gestures down a hall, shifting on his feet like he’s not sure if he should fight me or obey. I walk until I reach a door left ajar, and I push it open.

Evan Thorne stands with his back to me, and he’s speaking to two men in suits. The second I appear, his men start reaching inside their coat pockets, no doubt for a weapon. I lift a hand in a silent warning.

“Unless you want my men on your doorstep riddling this place with bullet holes, I guess you two get out.” Neither of them moves. “Now,” I repeat, letting my voice carry the threat.

Evan finally glances at his men. “Leave us,” he says, feigning composure.

They look between us, but he waves them away. They step out, closing the door. We’re alone.

“Grigor Barkov,” Evan says, forcing a cool smile. “To what do I owe this unannounced visit?”

I advance on him until we’re inches apart. “You hit your daughter.”

His expression shutters. “That’s between me and Seraphina.”

My hand shoots out, grabbing the collar of his expensive jacket. He snarls, trying to break free, but I'm stronger. "Seraphina is my wife. If you think you can treat her like some object you can beat, think again."

He opens his mouth to protest, but I twist his collar tighter, cutting off his words. "Let me go," he squeaks out.

"You don't give me orders, Evan. You lost that right when you forced her into this marriage. And now you've lost any pretense of fatherhood by raising your hand against her."

Anger flares in his eyes, and I loosen my hold just enough to allow him to speak. "She's my daughter. I'll deal with her as I see fit."

I sneer. "Wrong answer."

I slam him against the desk and grab a letter opener lying there. He eyes it, but before he can react, I plunge the slender blade straight through his flesh, pinning him to the wooden surface. He cries out, and his face twists in agony.

"You insane—" he gasps, trying to pull free.

I press down on the hilt. "You want to call me insane? Fine. I'll be whatever you say, so long as you understand one thing: if you ever lay a finger on Seraphina again, I'll cut off that hand. Then I'll move on to your other parts until there's nothing left. Got it?"

He sputters in pain, and sweat beads on his forehead. "You bastard!"

"Says the man who struck his own daughter." My anger boils my blood, but I force it to remain controlled. I twist the blade, and he chokes on a scream. "Now we're clear,



aren't we?"

His eyes roll with agony, and he manages a jerky nod. "Yes," he spits. "Get this thing out of me."

I consider leaving him, pulling my gun out right here and ending his miserable existence, but I remind myself I'm not here for a murder spree. I need him living, so Seraphina doesn't carry that guilt. Slowly, I pull the blade free, watching blood ooze across the polished desk. He clutches his impaled hand, breath rasping.

"Next time," I warn, "it won't be so clean."

"You think you can waltz in here, stab me, and walk away? I'll have your head."

I lean forward, letting him see the promise in my eyes. "Try. See how far you get. My men are right behind me."

He grits his teeth. "Get out."

I fling the bloodied letter opener aside and back away. He gasps in pain as he presses a piece of cloth to his hand. The sight of his blood does nothing to ease my fury. "Remember this," I say, stepping toward the door. "You treat her with respect, or you'll pay worse than this."

I stride out of the mansion with adrenaline pumping, ignoring the flecks of blood on my coat sleeve. The moment I reach my car, I yank the door open and sink into the seat.

My driver glances in the rearview mirror. "Everything alright, Boss?"

"Drive," I order. "We're done here."

As we pull away, I let out a slow breath, trying to calm the storm inside me. No one hurts my wife. No one. I realize I'm gripping the seat so hard my knuckles ache. For a fleeting moment, I consider telling her exactly what I did to her father, but I have no desire to see her pity for the man who wounded her.

When I arrive home, I step inside and shrug off my coat. As I pass a hallway mirror, I notice spots of blood near my cuff, a dark reminder of my confrontation. I tug the sleeve lower, not wanting the staff to gossip. If Seraphina spots it, I'm not sure how she'll react.

I find her in the living room and she looks up when I enter, moving her eyes over me like she's gauging my mood. Her face is so calm, not a hint that anything is amiss. That bruise must be hidden by makeup.

"You're back," she notes.

I nod and drop into a chair across from her. "Yes."

She waits as if expecting me to say something else. When I don't, she adds, "Busy day?"

I run a hand over my hair. "Something like that." Part of me wants to demand she tell me about her father, to confirm what Anton reported. But she acts like there's nothing to discuss. Maybe she's burying it. Maybe she's testing whether I already know. Either way, I decide to hold my silence for now.

"How was your father?" I ask carefully, curious if she'll lie.

She shrugs. "About as fun as usual."

A surge of frustration tugs at me. She's not giving details, which means she's hiding

them. “Did he say anything about... your living arrangements? Our marriage?”

She picks at a nonexistent thread on her sleeve. “He asked questions, but I told him nothing of real value.”

I maintain a neutral expression. “Good.”

She exhales and looks at me directly for the first time since I walked in. “What about you? Bratva business, I assume?”

I arch a brow.

“Call it curiosity,” she explains. “You’ve been out a lot, doing who-knows-what. I’m stuck here not knowing if you’re off in some shootout or meeting.”

My suspicion pricks. She’s asking for details about my dealings, is she? Could be harmless concern coming from a wife, or something else entirely. I recall my father-in-law’s manipulations and remind myself to stay on guard.

Her lips thin. “You really like to keep things close to the chest, huh?”

“It’s safer for you not to know certain things.”

“I see.”

I wait, but she doesn’t press further. She eventually excuses herself, heading upstairs, maybe to gather her thoughts or hide whatever turmoil she’s experiencing.

When I hear her footsteps fade, I stand and follow quietly. I notice her phone is still on the coffee table. Without a second thought, I pick it up. I know this is a breach of trust, but I don’t trust that man. I’d rather have her furious at me than risk everything

for that bastard who calls himself her father.

Upstairs, I duck into my office and place her phone on my desk. With a few quick taps, I install a small tracker program. It's basic but enough to log calls, keep tabs on messages, and track her location. My gut churns with guilt, but I remind myself it's necessary. She might resent me for it, but the threat looming over us is too large to ignore. If she's talking to Evan, I want to know.

I wipe my fingerprints from the screen—unnecessary, maybe, but old habits die hard. Then I slip her phone into my jacket, planning to return it without her noticing. I hate that it's come to this, but I can't let her father's schemes unravel everything. I promised myself I'd keep her safe, even if that means protecting her from her own misguided loyalty.

I find her in the hallway, rummaging through a small linen closet. She startles when I appear. "What are you—?"

"Looking for you," I lie smoothly, pulling her phone out. "You left this downstairs."

She accepts it without so much as glancing at the screen. "Thanks."

We head down to the dining room, where I order a quick meal from the staff. Halfway through the meal, my phone buzzes with a message from Akim, flagged urgent.

We cracked the burner phone. Last number dialed was Evan Thorne. But it's suspicious. The call happened minutes before we hit the yard. Looks like it was dialed on purpose to set him up .

I text back: Explain 'on purpose.'

A moment later, he replies: No record of an actual conversation. Just a quick dial, then an immediate hang-up. The phone was set to store the number under a code name. Looks staged.

My pulse ticks faster. So someone used that phone to implicate Evan or to create a trail leading us to him. That might mean Evan's innocent of direct involvement in that particular plan. Or maybe he's being framed for reasons unknown.

Pavel's memory flickers through my mind. He died without answers, and I swore to find them. Now I'm juggling the question of who's behind that phone, plus the danger swirling around Seraphina's father.

I force a steady breath, closing my eyes briefly. The day has been a whirlwind: confronting Evan, drawing blood in defense of a wife who won't even admit she needs protection, and then discovering new complications in the search for Pavel's killers.

We'll dig deeper into that staged phone call and trace every possibility. Meanwhile, I'll watch Seraphina more closely. She might resent my caution, but I can't let her father's cruelty or some cunning puppet master rip her from me. If that means being ruthless in my own house, so be it.

## Page 15

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:00 pm*

I'm balancing a breakfast tray on my lap, trying to force down a piece of toast, when my phone rings. The jarring ringtone makes my heart jolt, and I fumble to answer. I see Cecily's name on the screen, and a ripple of dread travels through me. After the way I left things the other day, my gut says something's wrong.

"Cecily?" I answer, pressing the phone to my ear.

She sounds breathless. "What the hell was your husband thinking?"

I sit up straight. "What are you talking about?"

"Oh, like you don't know." Her tone sends me reeling. Cecily never raises her voice. Never.

I set my plate aside. "Cecily, what happened? You need to give me context, or—"

She snorts a harsh, humorless sound. When she speaks, her voice trembles with anger. Maybe fear, too. "You really have no idea?"

My blood chills. "Cecily—"

"Promise you won't freak out."

"Just tell me."

Her words spill out in a rush: "Grigor showed up at our house. He... stabbed Father's hand to his desk. It was... I've never seen anything so awful. There was blood,

yelling, everything.”

“He... stabbed him? When?”

“Yesterday afternoon. Right after you left. Father was raging after the fight you two had. Then Grigor arrived, pushed past the guards, and marched straight in. I... Sera, it was intense.”

My pulse pounds. I struggle to process the image: Grigor storming into that office, using violence to avenge me. Nausea churns in my gut, partly horror at the brutality, partly relief that Father deserved some comeuppance for hurting me. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” she replies quickly. “Father’s not. He’s furious and moaning about revenge, but he’s got a bandaged hand now. At least it’s not life-threatening. Grigor threatened to kill him if he ever lays a hand on you again.”

My breath hitches. I went to great lengths to hide the bruise from Grigor. I’ve never worn so much makeup in my life. He must have found out through one of the bodyguards. A wave of panic hits me. If he discovered my father struck me, maybe he also discovered everything else, including my spying. I close my eyes as a cold sweat gathers on my brow.

“Sera?” Cecily prompts. “You still there?”

“Yeah,” I force out. “I... I’m here.”

“Are you safe? Grigor didn’t punish you for keeping it secret, did he?”

I press a trembling hand to my forehead. “No, he hasn’t even mentioned it. He came home last night acting normal, like nothing unusual happened. I had no idea he went

to see Father. Cecily, did Father tell him... anything else while he was over there?"

She's silent for a moment. As far as I know, my sister has no idea about the bargain our father and I made, and I'd rather keep it that way. "Father was too busy cursing about his hand to mention anything else. He just kept calling Grigor a maniac."

I swallow hard. "Okay." Relief washes over me, tangling with guilt. The man just risked a war with my father to defend me, and I'm still planning to betray him for Cecily's sake. The duality of it all hurts.

"Sera, he stood up for you. Isn't that... I don't know, kind of sweet, in a twisted way?"

"Maybe. But it's also terrifying. I'm sorry it happened while you were around."

"It's not your fault. Just be careful. Father's full of rage now. I don't know what he'll do next."

"I will." The weight of everything settles like a stone in my belly. "Thanks for letting me know."

We end the call, and my hands tremble as I set the phone aside. Grigor attacked my father in retaliation for him hitting me, which means Grigor must care—or at least feel possessive enough to avenge me. And he doesn't know the truth yet about me feeding my father scraps of information. I shut my eyes, torn between gratitude and dread. Every day I hold on to this secret is another day I risk him discovering my betrayal.

A tentative knock sounds on the door. I glance up as Galina peeks in. "Mrs. Barkov, your husband wants to see if you're ready for the event tonight. He mentioned leaving in an hour."



“Event?” I echo. Then I recall something about a dinner party. He mentioned it briefly a few days ago, but so much happened I forgot. After what he did for me, attending without making a fuss is the least I can do. “Tell him I’ll be ready.”

She nods and withdraws, and I stare at my reflection in the dresser mirror. My cheek is healing, with only a faint discoloration left. Grigor saw nothing last night, or if he did, he pretended otherwise. I steel myself, forcing a calm facade, vowing to act normal around him. If he realizes how rattled I am by what he did to my father, he might ask questions I can’t answer.

I dress carefully, choosing a sleek, midnight-blue gown that clings to my curves without being overly revealing. The fabric shimmers faintly under the light, the high slit adding just enough allure while the fitted bodice keeps the look elegant. It’s the kind of dress that demands attention without trying too hard, exactly what tonight requires and what Grigor deserves.

My reflection stares back with an anxious twist to the lips. I touch the faint bruise on my cheek, thinking of Father’s slap and Grigor’s savage revenge. A swirl of emotion floods me: fear of my father, admiration for Grigor, guilt for keeping secrets. I push it all down as I smooth my dress. Tonight, I’ll be the perfect Bratva wife in public, if that’s what he needs.

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“Seraphina,” Grigor says when I step out of the bedroom. He’s waiting in the corridor, wearing a tailored suit. He looks me over and grants me an approving nod. “You look good.”

I offer a polite smile, ignoring the flutter in my chest. “Thanks. You’re not so bad yourself.”

He holds out an arm, silently inviting me to walk with him. I link mine through his and let him guide me downstairs and into the waiting car. The driver pulls away, leaving the estate behind. I glance at Grigor's hands, recalling how one of them pinned my father to that desk and drove a blade through skin and bone. A chill prickles my spine, but I keep my face neutral.

We ride in silence for a few minutes before he eventually says, "This dinner party is hosted by one of our allies. I want you by my side. Any questions?"

I wet my lips. "Am I allowed to ask about them? Or is that off-limits?"

"It's not off-limits, but it's also not crucial. They're well-connected, mostly old-money types who want to keep good terms with the Bratva. You'll likely meet a variety of people with big egos. You may have met them before with your father."

The venue is grand, with towering archways and gilded details that scream old money. The kind of place that expects you to look the part and act like you belong, even if the people inside are anything but noble. Grigor leads me inside with his hand resting lightly on the small of my back, a silent claim for anyone who might be watching. It's a weight I feel keenly, especially as the room falls quiet when we enter.

Whispers ripple through the crowd as we move. Grigor's presence commands attention without him doing anything more than existing. I keep my head high and my expression neutral, just as I've learned to do over the years. But there's a massive difference this time. Tonight, I'm not Evan Thorne's over-protected daughter—I'm Grigor Barkov's wife. That distinction feels both liberating and damning.

"Grigor!" A high, lilting voice slices through the muted chatter.

I glance toward the source, and my stomach tightens. A blonde woman in a revealing red dress strides toward us. She's beautiful in a way that's almost too polished, like a

porcelain doll. Her lips curve into a smile that doesn't reach her eyes, and the way she moves is as deliberate as a predator stalking prey.

"Emma," Grigor greets her, though his voice is devoid of any warmth.

I blink at the name. Emma. His ex. He mentioned her once, briefly in passing, but I didn't expect to meet her. Not like this. My hands instinctively brush the fabric of my gown, a nervous tic I hope looks casual.

"And this must be the new Mrs. Barkov," Emma says, her gaze flicking to me. Her smile becomes more pointed, and I can feel her judgment before she even speaks again. "How lovely to meet you."

Her tone drips with condescension, and I have to fight the urge to step back under her scrutiny. Instead, I extend my hand with a calm I don't quite feel. "Seraphina," I reply. "It's nice to meet you, too."

She shakes my hand but is quick to recoil, like she's afraid to touch me for too long. "I've heard so much about you," she purrs as her eyes dart back to Grigor. "Though I must admit, I'm surprised. She's... different from your usual type."

The comment lands as I'm sure it intends, but I refuse to flinch. I don't look at Grigor out of fear of what his expression might reveal, but I can feel his tension beside me. "Different can be good," I offer, matching her false smile with one of my own. "Grigor certainly seems to think so."

Emma's jaw goes tight for a fraction of a second before she laughs, a lilting sound that grates on my nerves. "Of course," she replies, stepping closer to Grigor. Too close. Her hand brushes his arm, and a burning heat sears up the back of my neck. "You've always had an eye for surprises, haven't you?"

Grigor pulls away from her attempt at familiarity. “Emma, don’t you have other guests to attend to? Your parents are expecting you to mingle, I’m sure.”

Her smile falters, but she recovers quickly. “Of course. Duty calls.” She casts me one last lingering glance before adding, “Enjoy the evening, Seraphina. And welcome to the family.”

She disappears into the crowd, and I exhale slowly as the tension in my chest relaxes a bit. I glance up at Grigor, who watches her retreat with little interest. “She’s charming,” I mutter.

“She’s irrelevant,” he replies as though he can read my mind. “Don’t waste your energy on her.”

I nod, though the encounter burrows itself in the back of my mind as the evening continues. Grigor introduces me to various guests—men with firm handshakes and harder eyes, women draped in diamonds and fur who greet me with fake smiles and probing questions. I play my part, offering polite answers and leaning into Grigor’s presence when the scrutiny feels too much. It’s exhausting, but I manage.

Excusing myself to the restroom feels like a reprieve, and I meander through the crowd to find one. I’m halfway there when someone catches my wrist. The touch is firm, not painful, but it startles me enough to pull back instinctively.

“Seraphina?”

I turn and freeze. Standing before me is a man I haven’t seen in years, but one I recognize immediately. Dark hair, pointed jawline, and green eyes that once looked at me like I hung the moon. Marco Romano. The son of one of my father’s old friends. We grew up together before he moved to Sicily, and there was a time—brief and distant—when I thought I might have feelings for him.

“Marco,” I greet him, forcing a smile. “It’s been a while.”

He grins, and his teeth are still much too white, too perfect. “More than a while. You’ve grown up.”

“And you’ve moved up,” I reply, gesturing to his expensive suit. “Didn’t expect to see you here.”

“I could say the same.” His eyes roam over me in a way that at one point in time would’ve been endearing. “Though I heard about your... arrangement.”

“Marriage,” I correct. “Not an arrangement.”

“Of course,” he corrects, the grin never leaving his face. “How’s the Bratva treating you? Your husband must be keeping you... occupied.”

I pull my wrist free and step back. “Marco, if you’ll excuse me, I need to—”

“Don’t rush off,” he interrupts, stepping closer. His hand lands on my arm, and I stiffen. “We’re old friends, Sera. No need to be so formal.”

“We were children,” I reply. “That doesn’t make us friends now.”

His grin falls, and something darker flashes in his eyes. “So cold,” he murmurs, his voice dropping. “What happened to the girl who used to follow me around, batting those pretty lashes?”

“She grew up. And she doesn’t have time for games.”

Before he can reply, I glance over his shoulder and catch sight of Grigor. He’s standing near the edge of the room with a rigid posture and his jaw clenched. His

brown eyes are fixed on me and Marco, and the fury radiating from his direction is palpable even from a distance.

Marco follows my line of sight and chuckles. “Ah, I see. The husband doesn’t like to share.”

I tear my eyes away from Grigor, meeting Marco’s smirk with a cold glare. “He doesn’t have to.”

Marco laughs again, but I’m already stepping past him. Or trying to, anyway. He doesn’t let me get far before he pulls on my arm again.

The weight of Grigor’s stare lingers on my back, and I know, without a doubt, that things are about to get really messy, really fast.

## Page 16

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:00 pm*

The stem of the wineglass between my fingers feels far too fragile. I tap my finger against it once, twice, considering all the ways I could make that bastard across the room pay for daring to touch Seraphina. Every move he makes—leaning closer, brushing her arm with his hand—grates on me like shards of broken glass.

I don't know who he is, but the way Seraphina is smiling at him is enough to make my blood burn. Okay, so the smile isn't the problem. It's the way he seems to think he's entitled to her attention.

My grip tightens on the glass as my thoughts spiral. A knife to his ribs? No, too public. A swift punch to his nose? Tempting. But not nearly brutal enough.

For the first time in years, I feel something I can only describe as jealousy. It's foreign, unwelcome, but undeniable. Jealousy isn't an emotion I've allowed myself before. I don't share, and I don't envy. And yet, watching Seraphina stand there with this man who clearly wants her—my wife—makes me want to burn the world down.

“Grigor,” a familiar voice purrs beside me.

I don't need to look to know it's Emma. She presses herself closer, too close, and her perfectly manicured nails ghost over my arm.

“You're far too tense for a party,” she complains. “Let me guess. You're stewing because of her.”

Her. Seraphina. My wife.

I turn my head just enough to meet Emma's too-bright smile. Her bright red lipstick has been perfectly applied, and her lips are plump and parted, as though inviting a kiss. I feel nothing but disdain.

"Watch your mouth, Emma," I warn.

She scoffs, pretending to pout. "You used to like my mouth."

"Not anymore."

She laughs, low and patronizing. "I don't see why you're so hung up on her. She's not that pretty, and her family is a mess. What are you doing with a girl like that, anyway? She's hardly wife material. You could have anyone. Why not someone who actually fits your style? Someone who wouldn't leave you brooding from across the room while she entertains other men."

Something snaps. I turn to face her, inching closer, dropping my voice so only she can hear me. "Speak about my wife like that again, and I'll rip your tongue out myself. Are we clear?"

Emma's eyes widen before she masks the reaction with a sly smirk. "Always so dramatic." She steps back, lifting her hands in mock surrender. "Fine. Have it your way, Grigor. But don't say I didn't warn you. A girl like that will never keep you satisfied."

I watch her slink away, swishing her hips in a way that's designed to catch the attention of anyone looking. I couldn't care less about her theatrics. My focus is locked on Seraphina and the bastard who has no business standing so close to her.

The tension ratchets higher when he lifts a hand and brushes her hair back, grazing his fingers across her cheek as he does. That's it.



I drain the last of the wine, set the glass down on a nearby table, and start moving. If he wants a show, then he's going to get one.

Seraphina sees me first. She sucks in an audible gasp, and she reaches out for me the second I'm close enough like she's trying to restrain me without making it obvious. The man turns when he notices her shift in focus, and his smug grin falters the moment he catches sight of me.

"Grigor," Seraphina greets with a little too much excitement in her tone.

I stop beside her and slide my arm around her waist, pulling her against me. The touch is possessive, and I feel her tense for a moment before she relaxes, fitting her body against mine like it belongs there. Good. It does.

"And who's this?" I ask, nodding toward the creep.

"Marco," he offers as his smile slides back into place. "An old family friend."

"Friend?" I repeat.

"We grew up together," Seraphina explains.

"Well, we did a little more than that, didn't we?" Marco teases with a chuckle that makes me want to punch him in the throat. If I do a good enough job on that windpipe, he'll never laugh again. "It's been years since I've seen her. Just catching up."

"You've caught up enough," I declare.

Marco blinks and shuffles back a step. "Of course. I didn't mean to—"

I cut him off with a pointed look. “You didn’t mean to what?”

He stammers, stepping back some more as he raises his hands. “No offense intended, Barkov.”

“Good.”

He lingers for a moment like he’s considering pushing his luck, but one more glance at me seems to kill the idea. With a stiff nod, he mutters something about mingling and disappears into the crowd.

The second he’s out of sight, Seraphina twists to face me. Her lips twitch, and before I can say anything, she laughs.

“What?” I demand.

“You’re jealous.”

I don’t deny it. “Maybe.”

“You don’t even know who he is.”

“Doesn’t matter. He touched you. That’s enough.”

“Grigor, he’s nobody. Just someone I used to know.”

“Not anymore,” I reply firmly.

She shakes her head, still smiling. “You’re ridiculous.”

“Maybe,” I admit. “But you’re mine, Seraphina. No one else gets to forget that.”

Her smile fades, and it's replaced by something quieter, more serious. She opens her mouth like she wants to say something, but I take her hand instead and pull her toward the hallway leading to the restrooms.

"Where are we going?" she asks, though she doesn't resist.

"You'll see."

She follows me right through the bathroom doors, and the walls mute the noise of the party. Before she can ask again, I lock the door and press her against the marble counter, bracketing her waist with my hands. Her breath catches, and her hands instinctively come to rest on my chest.

"Grigor," she begins, though there's no protest in her tone.

I lower my head until my mouth is inches from hers. "Say it again."

Her brows knit together. "Say what?"

"My name," I reply.

"Grigor," she whispers, and that's all it takes.

I capture her mouth with mine. The kiss is hard, almost punishing, but she doesn't pull back. Her hands slide up to my shoulders, gripping the fabric of my jacket as though she's afraid to let go.

I kiss her like I want to erase the memory of Marco's hand on her, like I want to remind her of exactly where she belongs. With me. Only me.

Her body is pliant, and she melts against me, parting her lips to welcome my tongue

as it sweeps in. My hands roam over her waist, her hips, pulling her closer until there's no space between us.

When we finally break apart, her lips are swollen, and her cheeks flushed. She looks up at me, somehow both dazed and defiant.

"Jealousy suits you," she teases, though her voice is breathless.

I smirk and brush my thumb over her cheek. "You think so?"

"Maybe."

I lean in, grazing my mouth against the shell of her ear. "Keep testing me, Seraphina. See what happens."

She shudders but says, "Maybe I will."

I straighten, and the challenge in her eyes only fuels the flame of desire burning inside me. Fuck. The party will have to wait. I have more pressing matters to attend to. Right here, right now, and there's no chance in hell I'll be waiting until we get home.

I lift her onto the counter and claim her lips again. The kiss is just as brutal, but I don't stop. Not when she moans and digs her fingers into my shirt. Not when her legs wrap around my waist.

My hands explore every curve, and I slip them beneath the fabric of her dress. Her skin is smooth, and I drag my fingers along the inside of her thigh, enjoying the way she squirms when I trace the lacy edge of her panties.

She gasps and pulls her mouth away. "Grigor, we can't—not here."

“Yes,” I growl. “We can.”

“People are—”

“Don’t worry about them.” I kiss her neck, biting the skin hard enough to leave a mark. “I don’t give a fuck about them. Right now, you’re mine, Seraphina. Only mine. And I’m going to make you come until you can’t think straight.”

Her eyes are half-lidded when she meets my gaze, and her lips are parted like the words are caught on her tongue. I kiss her again, swallowing any objections, and she gives in. Her fingers unbutton my jacket, and her hands snake beneath the fabric, tracing the contours of my chest and abs.

She’s hungry, and the feeling is mutual. There’s no point pretending otherwise.

My hand moves up, brushing her inner thigh again. This time, she doesn’t argue. She spreads her legs a little wider, giving me better access.

With her dress hitched around her hips, I can see her clearly. Lace panties that are soaked through. Long legs I’d like to wrap around my head.

Fuck, this woman.

I slip my finger beneath the thin fabric, teasing her clit and drawing a needy whimper from her lips. She’s wet, ready, and my cock throbs, already painfully hard.

“More,” she whispers.

“Ask nicely.”

“More,” she repeats, her tone bordering on a whine.

“Not what I’m looking for.”

“Fuck,” she mutters.

I pinch her clit, and she jerks. “Try again.”

She swallows. “Please, Grigor. More.”

“That’s better.”

I thrust a finger inside her, and her head falls back. She bites her lip to muffle her moan.

“Don’t be quiet,” I demand. “I want everyone out there to hear you. I want them to know what’s happening. That I’m making you come right now. In the middle of this party. That you’re mine, and I can have you whenever the fuck I want.”

She moans as her hips roll against my hand.

“Good girl,” I purr.

I add another finger and hook them, reaching deeper and finding the spot that makes her gasp. Her back arches and her legs tighten around my waist.

The sounds she makes are intoxicating. I don’t give a fuck if the whole goddamn city hears. They need to know that she’s mine.

When her fingers slide down my chest to find my belt buckle, I can’t think straight. All the blood in my body is rushing south, and I’m desperate to get my pants off. To free my cock and fuck her until she can’t remember anything but my name.

I help her with the zipper, and a moment later, her fingers are around my length. I groan, and my eyes nearly roll back at the feel of her delicate touch. She strokes me, and my control slips.

My free hand slides up her back, grabbing a handful of her hair and tugging. Her head tips back, and her lips part, allowing my tongue to sweep inside. The kiss is a mess of teeth and tongue, and I don't give a damn.

She strokes faster, and I pump my fingers inside her in time. It's frantic, desperate, and my orgasm is already building, burning low in my gut.

Fuck, I need her. Now.

I pull my fingers out and push her hand away. Before she can react, I grab her hips and drag her to the edge of the counter, where I rip her panties off entirely and line myself up.

"Grigor, I—oh, fuck," she cries as I thrust inside her.

"That's it," I murmur, dropping my forehead to her shoulder. "Moan for me. Scream my name."

Her arms wrap around my neck, and her legs tighten, pulling me deeper. She's so fucking wet. So tight.

I'm lost. Completely gone.

I thrust again and again, faster and faster. I fuck her like the world is burning down, and we only have this moment left. Like it's the end of everything, and this is all that matters.

I lift her hips, tilting her a little more. The new angle lets me reach even deeper, and her nails scrape against the back of my neck as she writhes against me.

“Don’t stop,” she begs. “Grigor, please, don’t—don’t stop.”

“Never,” I promise, my voice rough.

Her moans grow louder, and her breathing is erratic. She’s close, and so am I.

My pace increases, and I feel the pressure build until it’s almost painful. My release is right there, but I don’t let myself fall over the edge until she comes.

It only takes a few more strokes, and then she’s falling apart. Her pussy squeezes around me, and she cries out with her thighs trembling. The sound is the last straw. My own release tears through me, and I slam my mouth against hers, drowning out the roar in my throat.

I keep moving until every last drop is inside her. We’re both panting, sweaty, and spent. When I pull back, I take a moment to admire the flush on her cheeks and the way her dress is ruffled and pushed aside, revealing the curve of her breasts. She looks thoroughly fucked. Mission accomplished.

I lean my forehead against hers, catching my breath. The room feels heavy with the aftermath of what we just did, but there’s a certain clarity coursing through me now. I slide my hands down to her thighs, holding her in place as her legs remain locked around me.

“Don’t ever let another man touch you. If anyone tries, I swear to God, I’ll kill them.”

“Grigor...”



“I mean it, Seraphina.” I pull back enough to make eye contact. “No one touches what’s mine. Not Marco. Not anyone. If they so much as try, I won’t stop until they’re a memory. Understand?”

She swallows hard, and her lips part as though she’s searching for the right response. Then she nods slowly, and her hands slide down to rest on my forearms. “Alright. I understand.”

“Good.” I press a lingering kiss to the corner of her mouth, savoring the way her body feels against mine.

After a beat, she finally asks, “What about Emma?”

“What about her?”

She lifts one shoulder in a small shrug “Is she... Was she your lover?”

The question surprises me. For a moment, I’m tempted to laugh at how absurd it is, but I hold back. She’s serious. “Do you think she is?”

Seraphina lowers her gaze, and her fingers play with the lapel of my jacket. “I don’t know. She seemed pretty comfortable hanging all over you.”

“Emma’s nothing. She used to be someone I entertained. A distraction when I had nothing better to focus on. But now?” I tilt her chin up with my thumb, forcing her to look at me. “There’s only one woman in the world who matters to me.”

She blinks, as though unsure how to respond. I don’t give her the chance to argue or doubt me. “I’ve never lied to you, and I won’t start now. Emma’s nothing to me, Seraphina. You’re the only woman I give a flying fuck about.”

She searches my face like she's trying to figure out if I'm telling the truth, and when she finds no trace of doubt, she offers a small, tentative smile.

"I don't know what to say to that," she admits.

"You don't have to say anything." I press my lips to hers again, this time slower, gentler, letting the heat simmer instead of burn.

As I help her off the counter and smooth the fabric of her dress, a strange thought occurs to me. This moment—standing in the bathroom, fixing our clothes, coming down from the high of our sex—is the closest thing to domestic bliss I can imagine.

Maybe the old men in the mafia were onto something when they said women could change a man. Perhaps they had a point, after all.

## Page 17

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:00 pm*

My phone won't stop buzzing, and it's triggering every alarm in my body. I'm halfway through sorting the morning mail when I grab the device and glance at the screen. Father. The title alone launches a wave of dread. It's been two weeks since the dinner party. Grigor left on a business trip a couple of days ago, and I convinced myself I could breathe easy with him gone—less chance of him discovering my secrets, right? But now, seeing Father's name blazing across the display, I realize how naive I am.

I tap the phone to my ear. "Yes?"

"We need to speak."

My pulse throbs in my throat. "If it's about some new scheme, I don't have time."

He scoffs. "I'm calling for your benefit as much as mine. This concerns your sister. You remember her, don't you?"

I bite the inside of my cheek. "Don't start with me."

"Meet me," he orders. "The empty warehouse near the docks. Thirty minutes."

"Warehouse near the docks?" My chest constricts. He's used that place for shady dealings more than once. "Why can't we meet somewhere... less murderous?"

"Are you refusing me?" He sounds almost amused. "You know exactly what's at stake."

“I can’t just slip out unnoticed. There are guards all over the place.”

“Figure it out,” he says with a sneer. Then the line goes dead.

I stare at the phone, feeling a storm of panic. My father never contacts me unless he needs something. The last time we spoke, he was angry enough to strike me. Then Grigor retaliated by stabbing his hand for hurting me. Now I’m forced to face Father’s wrath alone, with Grigor halfway across the country handling Bratva business.

I tuck the phone away and glance around the living room. Anton is stationed outside the room, as always. He’s been instructed to keep an eye on me while Grigor is gone. He’s thorough, rarely leaving me out of sight. I’ll have to be creative if I want to escape. My gaze lingers on the back entrance—maybe I can climb over the garden wall. It’s ridiculous and risky, but Father’s implication about Cecily leaves me no choice.

I hurry upstairs and toss on a hoodie and sneakers. The estate is quiet at this hour, with most of the staff occupied with chores. I pray no one notices me slipping through the back door. The second I step outside, the breeze hits me. I force a breath, trying to calm my pounding heart. If Anton realizes I’m missing, he’ll call Grigor or chase me down. But looking out for Cecily overshadows every other risk.

I creep around the side of the house, pressing myself against the outer wall. The garden gate stands ahead. I flip the latch, praying it doesn’t squeak. It gives, and I squeeze through before shutting it softly behind me. Once outside, I dart along the hedge until I reach the main road. If I can hail a taxi or find a rideshare within the next few minutes, I might make it in time. My phone’s location services are off thanks to a crash course in covering my tracks. I quickly request a car from an app, ignoring the guilt gnawing at me for lying to my husband’s staff. I have to keep Cecily safe.

A car appears within two minutes, and I hop in. The driver, an older man with graying hair, offers a polite greeting. I respond with a distracted nod and give him the address near the docks.

When we arrive at the rundown warehouse, I pay the driver and step out onto the cracked pavement. No crowd, no guards. Just a vast metal structure with rusted siding. A single car is parked near the entrance—my father's sleek sedan.

Inside, the overhead lights buzz and flicker on occasion. The space smells of oil and must. My father stands near a row of pallets with his hands shoved in his coat pockets, and his gaze fixes on me like I'm a prize he's waited months to collect. I keep my distance, stopping a good ten feet away.

"Two minutes late," he notes, glancing at his watch. "You've lost your touch, Seraphina."

"What do you want? What was so urgent I had to rush over here?"

"To apologize." He rakes a hand through his hair while I blink at him. There's no way I heard him right. "I know how difficult I've been, and I should never have laid a hand on you. That was out of line. But you see... I'm in a tight spot, Seraphina."

It feels like an anvil has dropped into my stomach. My father doesn't apologize, and he definitely doesn't admit weakness.

I steel myself, not wanting to appear caught off guard. He doesn't need the upper hand. "How tight?"

"I owe a considerable sum to the Irish. They're calling it in, and I don't have the funds. The only currency they'll accept instead is information—dirt on the Barkovs. They threatened to snatch Cecily if I fail to deliver."

I swallow past the knot in my throat. “So you thought blackmailing me was the best solution? You want me to betray Grigor’s trust just so you can pay off the Irish?”

He bristles and throws up his hand. “You see what he did to me? Or are you blind? The man is a monster, Seraphina. And worse yet, he’s in alliance with them. They stand together, and he won’t break that alliance for a mere woman.”

“Mere woman,” I echo bitterly.

“You think I enjoy seeing your sister living under constant threat? My family is on the brink of ruin, and you’re in a position to help.”

I’m quiet, torn between disgust and pity. This is the same father who forced me into marriage, the same father who slapped me for disobedience. Yet I hear the strain in his voice.

I clench my teeth. “What do you want?”

“Details. Grigor’s schedule, his routines, any weaknesses or vulnerable points that might interest the Irish. They need leverage to keep him in check if he ever tries to double-cross them.”

“I don’t understand. If Grigor is working with the Irish Mob, why would they want information on him?”

“You know as well as I do that this line of business is treacherous. Alliances are fleeting. Men like the Barkovs and the Irish are ruthless and ambitious. Sooner or later, they’ll turn on each other. They want the upper hand, and if they can get it, they won’t hesitate. It’s a matter of time.”

My heartbeat thunders in my ears. “So that’s the plan? Hand them everything about

Grigor so they can control him? And if I do this, Cecily is safe?"

He nods, though he keeps his gaze averted. "Yes, for the moment. If the Irish have enough power over Barkov, they'll leave your sister alone."

I glance at the cavernous walls around me, feeling trapped. Father's logic is twisted, but if he's telling the truth about Cecily being in danger, can I ignore that? I think of Grigor's last phone call, how he asked me about my day, how his voice sounded rough with leftover affection from our last night together. He has no clue I'm standing here, about to hand over everything he's built.

"I can't do this," I whisper, my voice wavering.

"You will," Father counters coldly. "Unless you want Cecily gone. They're not bluffing, Seraphina. They'll snatch her off the streets the second I fail them."

Guilt claws at my insides. My loyalty to Grigor battles with my love for Cecily. He's done so much for me, protected me from Father's rage, and made me feel safe in a life that's anything but. And now I'm about to deliver him to the enemy.

"Fine," I mutter. "But if I do this, you make sure Grigor isn't harmed."

"Why do you care so much if he's harmed? He's a killer, Seraphina. He'll toss you aside if you become inconvenient."

"That's none of your concern," I snap. "Promise me or the deal is off."

He scoffs and turns away before pacing a short line on the concrete floor. "Always so stubborn. If he's caught in the crossfire of politics, that's out of my hands."

"Try," I insist. "Do your best to ensure he doesn't end up dead because of my

betrayal.”

He waves a dismissive hand. “Don’t talk like it’s love, Seraphina. This is survival, pure and simple. You’re picking your sister over that savage. That’s all.”

Tears prick the corners of my eyes, but I blink them away. “I hate you for this.”

“Hate me all you want. Hate never killed a man, but the Irish will if you fail. So pray this is enough to keep Cecily safe.”

A suffocating silence envelops us. My stomach lurches with guilt. I picture Grigor’s face—stern, brooding, and sometimes surprisingly gentle. He’d be furious if he saw me here. He might never forgive me.

“Goodbye, Father,” I murmur, turning on my heel.

He doesn’t say a word as I open the warehouse door and step into the evening light. My chest feels hollow, and my legs feel unsteady. I manage to call a taxi to get back, but I can’t stop replaying the conversation in my head.

The driver leaves me at a side street, and I walk the final block to Grigor’s estate, crossing the garden gate with my heart pounding. Any minute, Anton might appear, furious that I slipped away. Or worse, Grigor could have returned early, discovered my absence, and demanded answers.

But the backyard is empty with no sign of pursuit. Maybe I got lucky. I skirt around to the back door and let myself in quietly. The house is still with the staff presumably finishing their routines. My phone buzzes in my pocket, and I jump, afraid it’s Father again or, God forbid, Grigor. But it’s just a news alert. I silence it, not trusting myself to read anything right now.



I climb the stairs, each step heavier than the last. Guilt gnaws at me like a persistent rodent. He must not be harmed. That was my one plea. But Father's twisted grin suggests he might not honor it. If the Irish are determined to control Grigor, they might do more than posture—they might aim to remove him entirely.

When I make it to my room, my reflection in the mirror catches my eye. I see a woman with dark circles under her eyes and guilt etched into every line of her face. I betrayed him. The thought is relentless, pulsing in my head. After everything Grigor did—after he broke into my father's mansion, after he risked a confrontation with him to protect me—I repaid him by agreeing to sell him out to the Irish.

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:00 pm*

I want to break something. The urge rushes through me the instant I see the updated tracker log on Seraphina's phone. The faint blinking icon marks a location she visited two nights ago—some rundown spot near the docks. I zoom in on the map for the hundredth time, tightening my grip around the device. She slipped out while I was away and ignored every safety measure I put in place.

“Grigor,” Dmitri calls from the doorway. “We found more data. Looks like she stayed there for about thirty minutes.”

I set the phone aside and turn to face my brothers. Dmitri stands beside Aleksei and Maksim. They're waiting for my reaction, trying to gauge whether I'll fly into a rage or handle this calmly. I can't promise which one I'll go with.

“Give me the details,” I say, pushing my anger down so I can think.

Dmitri clears his throat. “She used a rideshare to get to the docks and back. We pulled the receipt from her phone. The times match the tracker data. She talked to someone—likely her father, given the location. It's one of his favorite meeting spots. We also found a few outgoing messages on her device, but they've been deleted. She tried covering her tracks.”

My jaw clenches. I glance at Aleksei, who crosses his arms. “We all suspected Seraphina was hiding something. Now we have proof.”

A flicker of betrayal flares in my gut, though I keep my face impassive. “She's my wife,” I remind them. “Don't jump to conclusions.”

Maksim huffs a mirthless laugh. “We’re not jumping. We’re pointing out that she’s disobeyed you and might be passing intel to Thorne.”

I glare at him. “That’s enough.” My tone leaves no room for argument. He falls silent, but I sense the doubt radiating off him.

Aleksei meets my gaze. “We’re on your side, Grigor, but you can’t ignore this. She’s meeting Thorne in secret. That alone is suspicious.”

I run a hand over my face, exhaling roughly. My mind whirls with possibilities. I just don’t understand it. He’s the man who forced her into marriage, threatened her, and struck her. Yet she still protects him. It’s maddening.

I jerk my chin at Dmitri. “Thanks for the data. Forward everything to my phone. I’ll handle it from here.”

A beat of silence hangs before Aleksei nods. “We’ll let you deal with her for now, but if she’s a threat to the family—”

I cut him off. “I’ll handle it,” I repeat, not bothering to hide the edge in my tone. “No one lays a finger on her.”

A flicker of frustration crosses Aleksei’s face, but he backs down. Dmitri and Maksim exchange looks, but they follow Aleksei out. The door closes, and I stand in the hush of my office, staring at the phone logs again.

She lied to me. I gave her this home, my protection, and she lied. My anger crashes against the memory of her blue eyes, the way she melts under my touch, the softness she shows in rare unguarded moments. Why would she risk everything for him ?

I can’t stand waiting. My flight home is already booked. I was supposed to wrap up

business in two days. That's too long. I make a call, shifting the schedule. By the time I'm finished, I have a seat on a private jet in six hours, which should land me home tonight.

Let's see how she explains this.

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The house is silent when I return. It's nearly midnight by the time I push through the main entrance. Anton greets me with a nod, but I wave him off. "Where's Seraphina?"

He clears his throat. "Upstairs, I believe. She turned in early."

I stride past. Tension coils in my gut, mixing anger with something akin to hurt. This must be how betrayal feels. Something I never wanted to experience from the woman I chose to protect. I make my way upstairs, ignoring the staff's wary looks.

Her bedroom door is closed, with the faint lamplight visible under the frame. I brace myself, then twist the knob. The door opens quietly. She's seated on the bed with a book in her hands, though her gaze snaps up the second I enter. Surprise ripples across her face, followed by a hint of worry she tries to hide.

"Grigor," she exclaims, setting the book aside. "You're home early."

I step into the room, not bothering to shut the door behind me. "I am."

An uneasy pause. Her eyes dart to the clock on the nightstand. "You didn't call."

I shrug. "Didn't feel like giving you a heads-up."

Her posture stiffens. “Everything alright?”

“Not particularly.” I watch her carefully. Her hands fidget in her lap, a sure sign she’s nervous. Good. She should be. “Heard you took a little trip while I was gone.”

She blinks. “A trip? I don’t know what you mean.”

“Don’t lie to me, Seraphina. I have your phone logs. You went to the docks, met with someone. And I suspect that someone was your father.”

Her face pales, but she keeps her chin lifted. “I—I just needed some fresh air. My father happened to be there. It wasn’t planned.”

“Bullshit.” I close the distance between us, standing by the edge of the bed. “You planned it carefully, sneaking out, disabling location services as best you could. Except I have a tracker installed.”

She sets her jaw, and defiance sparks in her eyes. “Alright, fine. Yes, I saw him. It’s my father. I don’t need your permission to talk to him.”

My fury spikes. “He’s not a safe man. You know that. Yet you defied me anyway.”

She rises from the bed, crossing her arms. “He’s my family, Grigor. No matter what history you have with him. You have no right to stop me from seeing him.”

My hands curl into fists at my sides. “I have every right when it comes to your safety. He’s proven he’ll hurt you if it suits him, and he’s up to his neck in shady dealings. You might be too blind to see it, but I’m not.”

“Blind?” she scoffs. “I’m not blind. I’m just not ready to abandon my sister. If my father needs something, maybe it’ll save her.”

The mention of Cecily tugs at some protective urge in me, but I refuse to let that soften my stance. “You didn’t even consider telling me. Instead, you snuck around like a guilty child.”

Her shoulders slump a fraction, though she keeps her voice firm. “Because I knew you wouldn’t allow it.”

“You’re damn right I wouldn’t.” My anger simmers, but the hurt overshadowing it is worse. I run a hand through my hair, pacing a short line. “From now on, the house is on maximum security. You’re not leaving without my permission or an armed escort. Am I clear?”

She bristles. “And if I do?”

I lock eyes with her. “I’ll kill whoever you’re meeting.”

Her breath catches. “You can’t be serious.”

“I’m entirely serious,” I growl. “No more secrets. No more going behind my back. If you do, I’ll assume whoever you’re meeting is an enemy, and I won’t show mercy.”

“Why are you so convinced they’re enemies? You barely trust me, let alone my father, and you—”

“I don’t trust your father an inch, especially after everything pointing to him as a potential traitor. And you—” I exhale, forcing my voice not to tremble. “You still protect him. That’s why I’m forced to do this.”

Her eyes glisten with unshed tears. “What if I can’t choose between you and my family?”

“Then I’ll choose for you,” I snap. “I won’t lose you to his manipulations.”

She shoves me away as anger breaks through her sorrow. “You’re so arrogant. It’s always your way or no way. Have you considered that he might be desperate, that Cecily’s life might be in danger?”

“Your father’s desperation usually leads him to sacrifice others for his gain, if I recall. If Cecily’s truly at risk, we can handle it together—without you sneaking around.”

She looks like she wants to argue, but the weight of my words seems to land. She remains silent, trembling with frustration. I rake my gaze over her, half expecting her to lash out again. Instead, her shoulders slump.

“Fine,” she mutters. “If that’s what you want, I’ll stay locked in this fortress of yours.”

“It’s not just what I want, it’s what needs to happen. I’m done giving you chances only to have you spit in my face.” My tone stays cold, but a pang of regret twists in my gut. I never wanted to speak to her like this, but she left me little choice.

“I never asked you to protect me in such an extreme way.”

“No, you didn’t,” I concede.

Before she can respond, my phone buzzes. An unfamiliar number glows on the screen, making me frown. I glance at her once more, then step away to answer.

“Barkov,” I say curtly.

A wheezing voice crackles through the line. “Boss, it’s Fyodor.”

I grit my teeth, recalling the insubordinate fool who challenged my authority. The last time I saw this idiot, I shot him in the leg. “What do you want?”

“I think I found something.”

“Speak.”

Fyodor’s ragged breath grates in my ear. “I’ve got a lead, Boss. The kind you’ll want to hear in person.”

“What kind of lead?” I glance toward Seraphina, who stands stiffly by the bed with her arms still crossed. She’s watching me, but she’s being careful not to show an ounce of emotion.

“I found something that connects Evan Thorne to Pavel’s murder.”

“Go on.”

“There’s a trail—sloppy in places, like someone wanted it found. I’ve got the details, but I can’t share over the phone.”

Of course not. Fyodor isn’t an idiot, despite his many other faults. “Where?”

“An abandoned café near Yurov Street. Tomorrow night, midnight. If I’m right about this, there are more eyes on us than we thought. We need to be discreet.”

His words carry a warning not to underestimate what’s happening in the shadows. “Midnight, Yurov Street,” I repeat. “If you’re wasting my time—”

“I’m not,” he interrupts. “You’ll see for yourself. Just... come prepared.”



The call cuts off before I can respond. I lower the phone slowly, with my mind racing through the implications of what Fyodor just said. This could ignite a war.

I turn back to Seraphina, who hasn't moved an inch.

“Business?”

“Yes,” I reply, sliding the phone into my pocket. “Something that requires my immediate attention.”

She nods, but the distance between us feels heavier than before. I step closer, lowering my voice. “You’re not to leave this house without my permission. Understood?”

Her lips press into a thin line, but she doesn't argue. “Understood.”

Good. I hold her gaze for a moment longer before turning and leaving the room. If Fyodor's information holds up, it might finally bring me closer to the truth about Pavel's killer.

But something tells me it isn't going to be that simple.

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:00 pm*

When a door slams downstairs, my heart kicks in my chest. Something about that slam rattles me, but not as much as the thought of what Grigor might be walking into. I'm still furious that he installed a tracker on my phone, that he didn't trust me enough to ask me outright about my movements. Okay, I guess he did and I lied, but still. That anger doesn't override the worry no matter how much I know it should. He might have violated my privacy, but I still don't want him to get hurt.

Grigor's footsteps shuffle through the entry hall. He's always on the move, but tonight feels different. A tightness lodges in my gut. I recall the phone call he received yesterday in the middle of our fight, how he grew distant afterward and responded to my questions with brusque half-answers. That's always how he answers, but the abruptness felt more pronounced this time.

My grip tightens on the banister. Something's wrong. I can't shake the feeling that he's running headlong into danger. If it's connected to the phone call, it might involve the trap I suspect is being set for him. The thought makes my stomach churn with guilt. I've known for days that my father and his allies have been working angles, and I've kept quiet, hoping it wouldn't escalate. I've been trying my best to piece things together the last few hours, to try to wrap my mind around what could be happening that's so urgent.

I replay my last conversation with my father, just hours before Grigor returned home. It was mostly thinly veiled threats and cryptic remarks, but one thing stands out. He mentioned that someone had been tracking Grigor's movements, saying. At the time, I didn't think it was that unusual. In this world, you always keep tabs on anyone you deem a threat, and Grigor is a powerful man. But now...

I told myself it wouldn't hurt to pass it along to my father. I found some silly information about security details and meeting places. It wasn't critical, I thought, just a small concession to keep Cecily safe. But what if that was exactly the information the Irish needed to set a trap?

A cold sweat breaks out as realization dawns. I helped them lay the groundwork. And now, Grigor is about to walk right into it. He's about to charge into a setup. And it's my fault.

I race down the stairs, nearly colliding with a table in the foyer. My breath comes short as I spot Grigor by the front door, yanking on his coat. He glances up and sees me, but his expression stays rigid.

"I'm leaving," he says tersely, checking his watch.

"Wait," I blurt, stepping forward. "You can't go. Not yet."

He arches a brow, clearly in no mood for discussion. "This is business."

"I know, but Grigor... I think it might be a trap. That phone call from Fyodor... You can't just walk into it."

His jaw flexes, a sign of annoyance. "So you've decided to share your suspicions now?"

I swallow and resist the urge to look at the ground. He's right. I should've told him earlier. But I was paralyzed by fear, worried that he'd blame me for my father's plotting. "I was afraid you'd accuse me of being in on it." Okay, that part is true at least, even if I technically am in on it.

"So instead you stayed silent, letting me risk my neck? That's how little you trust

me?”

“It’s not about trust,” I fire back, though even as I say it, I realize how empty that sounds. Everything is about trust in this world. “I... I didn’t want you to get caught up in my father’s mess. But it’s real, Grigor. The Irish are pulling strings, and Fyodor might be part of a plan to take you out.”

His shoulders tense. “Take me out, or set me up?”

“Both, possibly. My father owes them a debt. They want leverage on you. If Fyodor claims to have found the killer, it could be a perfect lure to corner you or to shift blame onto someone else like my father in a way that benefits the Irish. I’m not sure which angle they’re working, but I know it’s dangerous.”

He exhales, setting his hand on the doorknob as though itching to leave anyway. “You think I don’t know that? I saw through Fyodor’s story the moment he called. He’s never been reliable.”

I blink, surprised. “You... You knew?”

His mouth sets in a grim line. “I suspected. Now, thanks to your last-minute confession, I have confirmation. Why, Seraphina? Why were you helping your father? After everything he’s done to you, why choose him over me? Your husband?”

This time, his question isn’t demanding, not angry, just... genuine. For the first time, he’s asking, not accusing. And somehow, that makes the answer harder to say.

“It’s Cecily,” I manage through a tight throat. “He’s using her to control me. He said if I didn’t cooperate... if I didn’t give him what he needed, he’d hurt her. Marry her off to someone worse than you—or worse, let the Irish take her to make a point.”

I pause, watching his expression harden. I know he lost his sister to this world. She was murdered before she had a chance to escape it. The memory of that loss must be going through his mind right now, and I find myself praying he'll understand. That he'll see why I had no choice, even if it doesn't excuse what I've done.

"You think cooperating with him will protect her?" he asks after a moment. "That man only looks out for himself."

Tears sting my eyes, but I force them back. "What was I supposed to do, Grigor? I couldn't risk her being dragged into this. She's innocent."

"And you thought betraying me would solve that?" His voice stays calm, but there's a rough edge underneath it. "You thought your father could be trusted to keep his word?"

I wrap my arms around myself, suddenly feeling exposed. "I didn't know what else to do. He's my father. She's my sister. I—"

"You're torn," he finishes, cutting me off but not unkindly. "You've been backed into a corner, and you don't trust me enough to believe I could help."

I look away as the guilt prickles at my skin. He's right. I didn't trust him—not the way I should've. I thought I could manage this on my own, that protecting Cecily meant keeping him out of it. But now, standing here with the truth between us, I realize how badly I miscalculated.

My voice feels small when I speak. "You said you knew this was a trap. Does that mean... You're not going to walk right into it?"

He studies me for a moment, probably wondering if he can trust me to answer honestly or if I'm just going to feed his answer back to my father. "I'm still going,"

he finally answers, “but on my terms. If this is a trap, I’ll be the one springing it.”

I press a hand to my chest. “I can’t let you do that alone. Let me help.”

“Absolutely not. You’ll stay here, under guard, like we agreed.”

“Grigor, I can’t stand by if they’re trying to kill you. Let me come along. Maybe I can glean something from them, or distract them.”

“No.” His tone is final. “I don’t trust your father, or the Irish, or Fyodor. And I sure as hell won’t risk you being caught in the middle.”

Tears threaten to well again, but I blink them back. “You’re risking yourself.”

He brushes my cheek with a gentleness at odds with his stormy mood. “That’s my job. Protecting you is also my job. Stay here. That’s an order.”

I want to argue, to beg him not to go, but I sense the futility. He’s made up his mind. “Fine. But promise me you won’t get yourself killed.”

A wry smile ghosts across his lips. “I’m not so easy to kill.”

He leans in to press a kiss on my forehead. The unexpected tenderness nearly undoes me. “I’ll be back,” he whispers before stepping away.

I watch him stride down the steps, calling for a car. His men snap to attention at his command, as they always do. If he’s heading into a viper’s den, even with a plan, anything can happen. But there’s nothing I can do except wait.

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I pace the living room after he leaves, with the clock ticking loudly in my head. The staff tries to offer me dinner, tea, anything to calm me. I can't even think about eating. Each moment drags as I imagine every terrible scenario. My father's threats, Fyodor's cunning, the Irish mob's ruthlessness—none of it bodes well.

Guilt coils through me. I was so fixated on saving Cecily that I didn't consider the cost to Grigor. And now, if something goes wrong tonight, it'll be on my conscience forever.

I force myself to sit on the sofa, counting my breaths. A swirl of nausea passes over me, and I fight the urge to retch. Stress, I tell myself. It has to be stress. I bury my face in my hands, wishing I could vanish into the cushions.

Time inches forward. Eventually, the exhaustion of worry pushes me to my room. I close the door and lean against it. My mind drifts to the calendar pinned to the wall, the one with scribbled notes about gatherings and deadlines.

I recall a note about my sister's birthday, and next to it, an asterisk marking the date of my last cycle, and my stomach drops. It's been... well, more than six weeks. Actually, closer to two months. The thought crossed my mind the other day, but I told myself I must be off by a week or two.

The anxiety spikes again, accompanied by another wave of nausea. My heart races. Could I be pregnant? The possibility sinks its claws into me, terrifying and strangely mesmerizing at the same time.

I lock myself in the bathroom and rummage through drawers for the box I stashed away months ago. My hand finally closes around it, pulling it out into the flickering overhead light. A pregnancy test. I never thought I'd need it since my marriage to Grigor was forced. Our passion was an unexpected outcome of circumstances. This test was stuffed into a gift bag given to me by a distant aunt on my wedding day. I

scoffed at the time, but now...

Well, thank you, Aunt Linda.

I set the test on the sink and read the instructions carefully, ignoring the trembling in my fingers. I follow each step meticulously as my mind tangles with questions I'm not ready to answer.

Moments later, I place the test on a flat surface and step away, trying to keep calm. Every second feels like an eternity. I recall how I used to soothe Cecily when she was anxious, reminding her to breathe, to focus on something tangible. Now, I'm the one needing that reassurance, and there's no one here to give it.

I squeeze my eyes shut, counting off the required time. The sense of dread grows. What if it's positive? What if it's negative? Both outcomes terrify me in different ways.

When I finally force myself to look, the result is clear. Positive.

My breath hitches. I stare at the test with my heart pounding so loudly I can hear it in my ears. A baby. Grigor's child. The father of this innocent life might be walking into mortal peril as I stand here, discovering this news alone.

I slump against the bathroom wall as tears prickle at my eyes. A thousand thoughts race through my mind. I've always been maternal. Cecily was practically my responsibility from the time we were kids, with Father too busy scheming. Caring for a sibling is one thing, though. Having a child is a completely different reality.

What about Grigor? He's never once mentioned wanting children. He lives in a violent world, one he navigates without a second thought. Does a child fit in that life? And how can I bring a baby into this war-torn existence, where men like my father



and the Irish mob would use any weakness to strike?

My breath comes shorter, and panic claws at my chest. Grigor might see this child as a burden, or worse, a vulnerability. An asset or a liability. He's always so strategic about everything. But recently, he's shown me glimpses of something else, something more tender. Could he welcome a baby? Could he be the protective father figure I suspect he might be?

Doubt crushes me. I've lied to him, withheld crucial information. I've all but handed him to my father's schemes. Why would he trust me enough to build a life with me and a child, especially now? The thought that he might reject me, or this baby, stings like salt in a wound.

I press a hand to my abdomen, and tears slip down my cheeks. I feel a swelling of protectiveness already, a fledgling connection to this tiny life inside me. Despite the heartbreak and fear, part of me wants this child. I want a chance at a family that isn't built on lies and violence. But is that even possible with Grigor and me?

A sob tumbles out of my mouth, muffled by my hand. This might be the worst possible timing. My father is practically my husband's mortal enemy. My father's debt to the Irish looms, Grigor is embroiled in constant conflict, and I'm stuck in the crossfire with no clue how to protect myself—or this unborn child.

I imagine telling Grigor, seeing the look of shock or betrayal on his face. Or maybe he'd display that same eerie calm that warns of a storm. I picture him placing his hand on my stomach, a fleeting moment of warmth in this cold, dangerous life we share. And then I imagine him turning away, deciding it's too much risk.

A wave of nausea hits me again, forcing me to kneel by the toilet. Tears drip onto the tile as I fight the urge to vomit. My mind whirls with the knowledge that I'm carrying a life that could become a target the minute anyone finds out.

I realize I can't tell a soul. Not yet. Not until I figure out what this means for me, for my marriage, for the precarious state of affairs around us. If Father learns about this pregnancy, he'd see me as an even bigger bargaining chip. The Irish might exploit it if they suspect Grigor has a new weakness. Grigor himself... I can't predict his reaction.

I stand slowly, wiping my face. My reflection in the bathroom mirror reveals reddened eyes and trembling lips. I look like someone I scarcely recognize. Someone cornered with no exit plan.

I fold the test in some tissue and hide it in the bottom of the trash can, then wash my hands, scrubbing until they ache. My thoughts roil with possibilities, none of them offering comfort.

Eventually, I return to my bedroom, locking the door behind me. I climb onto the bed, sitting cross-legged, cradling my midsection as if I can shield the tiny life inside. My breath quivers. Grigor is out there, facing enemies on all sides, and I'm here, discovering I'm pregnant with his child.

I close my eyes, wanting to vanish under the blankets. But I can't. My father's manipulations, the Irish threat, Grigor's precarious alliances—they're all converging into a crisis I can't pretend isn't there. And now, there's a child in the mix.

Sorrow hits me again, and I bury my face in my hands. I recall the day I tried to nurse Cecily's fever, how I stayed by her side, singing lullabies. I remember the countless nights I spent cooking her meals when Father was away. I took on a guardian role with her. Can I do that for my own child while living in a world that thrives on bloodshed?

I sense the weight of my phone in my pocket, the device that's tracked me and betrayed me at the same time. A war rages inside me: should I call Grigor, beg him to

come home, confess everything? Or do I stay silent, let him handle the trap he's walking into, and see if we can survive this crisis before I drop another bombshell in his lap?

I press my trembling lips together. No. Telling him now, while he's on a mission, could distract him dangerously. If he's stepping into an ambush, any slip of focus might cost him his life. I won't do that to him.

So I wait. I wrap my arms around myself, and I stare at the door as though expecting him to burst through any second, wearing that weary smirk, telling me he outsmarted them all. Then I could run to him, confess my news, and maybe, just maybe, we could figure this out together.

But reality douses that hope. The harsh truth is that I lied to him for weeks. I aided my father's side. I kept secrets that might have jeopardized his safety. He forgave me, or at least put aside his anger for the moment, but trust is fragile. Will he think this child is another manipulation? A ploy to keep him bound to me?

I shake my head and push the vicious thought aside. This child is real, and it deserves a chance. I can't let cynicism taint that.

Time crawls by as I remain perched on the bed with tears drying on my cheeks. I debate calling Cecily, but I can't risk Father intercepting the call and discovering my pregnancy.

Eventually, I lie down, cradling my stomach. The hush of the room feels oppressive. I close my eyes, whispering a silent plea that Grigor returns safely. Because whether I trust him or not, whether he wants this baby or not, I can't face this alone.

He's the father of my child, and something in my heart insists that must count for more than the violence overshadowing our lives.

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:00 pm*

I shove open the cafe's door and look around the vacant interior. The worn tables and chairs look like they've been gathering dust for years. An unpleasant mix of stale coffee and mildew coats my nostrils, but I tune it out and step forward. My men are waiting outside; this meeting is personal. If Fyodor is telling the truth, I need him to feel confident enough to speak. If he's lying, I plan to handle that on my own.

He's seated in a corner booth with a hood pulled low over his face. He glances up when I enter, and from the look of his gait when he stands, that wound from when I shot him is still bothering him. Good.

"Fyodor, you better not be wasting my time."

He winces as he slides back into the booth. "Sit, Boss," he manages. "Let's talk."

I choose the seat across from him, resting my hands on the table in plain sight. "Make it quick."

"Remember how you shot me?"

I arch a brow, unamused. "I recall it vividly."

He offers a bitter laugh. "Figured. That bullet's still lodged somewhere in my leg, and the docs say it's not worth digging out. Suppose you left me a permanent reminder."

"If that's all you came to say, I'm leaving," I growl, half-rising.

"No, wait." He holds up a trembling hand. "I have news about Pavel's murder. You

want the truth, right?”

“Speak.”

Fyodor licks his cracked lips. “You’ve been trying to pin down whether Evan Thorne was set up or if he’s really behind Pavel’s murder.”

“That’s right. And what have you got for me, Fyodor? Because if you’ve dragged me out here for nothing...”

“No, it’s not nothing,” he interrupts. “The thing is, it’s not a setup. Evan’s been involved, more than you ever suspected. And I... I’ve been helping him.”

I blink, sure I heard him wrong. “You’ve been what?” My voice is a low growl, disbelief threading through anger. “You... You have been helping Evan Thorne?”

He straightens his spine and looks at me with a smug pursing of his lips. “We set the wheels in motion long before Pavel died. I reported your movements. He had enough ammo to sabotage your deals, pick off your allies, and sow mistrust among your circle. Guess you never suspected a foot soldier like me could do so much damage behind your back.”

I draw in a deep breath, trying like hell to keep my cool. If I’m going to get as much useful information as possible, I’ve got to keep my head. “Start at the beginning. How did you link up with Thorne?”

“I got fed up,” he responds simply. “I’ve been with the Barkov family for years, following orders. But I was always treated like a dog. No respect, no chance to move up. Then Thorne approached me, offering me money and a chance to prove myself. I gave him scraps of intel at first, stuff about your shipments, your expansions. He used that to sabotage some of your business from behind the scenes.”

My teeth clench on their own. “We did lose a few minor deals. I suspected a rat but never pinpointed who.”

He shrugs, pained. “I was careful. Then Pavel got suspicious, started digging too deep. So Evan arranged the perfect solution—take out Pavel, pin it on the Rossis, or on whoever else, as long as it turned your attention away from him. We set it up to look like a sloppy murder by unknown rivals. You bought it for a while, but not forever.”

A surge of raw fury slams through my chest. “Pavel was family. You murdered him for money?”

Fyodor lifts his chin. “I didn’t pull the trigger personally. But I led him to the alley and gave the hitters his exact location and timing. That’s all Thorne needed.”

My vision darkens. “You scum. You cost me one of my most loyal allies.”

“It wasn’t personal. I had to prove my worth to Thorne. He demanded a big sacrifice to show I was serious.”

“Then you made a fatal mistake,” I hiss, rising to my feet. “You lured me here to feed me what? Another lie?”

He shakes his head, swallowing hard. “No. I was supposed to lure you here and kill you. That’s what I told Evan I would do, anyway.” I slam my hand on the table and he flinches. “But! But, that’s not why I really wanted you here. I need to ask for protection. Evan’s demands keep getting bigger. He turned on me, threatened to turn me in if I didn’t produce more intel. If I help you, maybe you’ll let me walk away alive.”

A harsh laugh bursts from my throat. “You think you deserve mercy after betraying

us and killing Pavel?”

He pales, but a hint of desperation shows in his eyes. “I’m valuable! I know Thorne’s next moves. He’s planning a major strike to destabilize your empire. All I want is safe passage out of the city once I help you stop him.”

I circle the table, towering over him. “You want to help me kill your partner in betrayal?”

Fyodor bobs his head. “Yes. He’s crossing the line, Boss. If he topples your family, he’ll eliminate me too once I outlive my usefulness. This is the only chance I have left.”

Rage coils in my gut, but a sliver of strategic thinking edges in. If he truly has inside knowledge, it could be crucial. But can I trust him? He’s a coward, a turncoat. The kind of rat who will say anything to save his skin.

His gaze flits to the door. “So, do we have a deal?”

For a moment, I pretend to consider. Then I snatch his collar and haul him to his feet. The table screeches against the floor, toppling the empty sugar jar and a chipped mug. He yelps as I shove him face-first into the wooden surface.

“G-Grigor!” he sputters, coughing against the splintered tabletop.

“You want a deal after betraying my family?” My voice reverberates off the walls. “I’ll show you how I negotiate with traitors.”

He thrashes, but I tighten my hold, twisting his arm behind his back. A strangled cry rips from his throat. “Stop!”

“Did Pavel cry out like this when you set him up?” I growl, pulling him upright by his hair. “Did you relish the payoff while he bled out in that alley?”

He trembles, and his eyes bulge with fear. “I... I was just following orders from Thorne. He’s the real mastermind. You have to believe me!”

I drag him toward the door, ignoring his frantic pleas. Outside, my men stand guard by the car. I thrust Fyodor at two of them, who grab him by the arms. “Get him in the trunk. We’re taking him to the warehouse.”

One of my men nods, and Fyodor’s protests turn into screams as they shove him into the trunk and slam it shut. I slip into the driver’s seat of my own car with adrenaline scorching through me. If he thinks I’m going to let him slither away with a simple confession, he’s dead wrong.

In about thirty minutes, we arrive at a warehouse on the outskirts of the city. The overhead lamp gives off just enough glow to see the row of metal tools along one wall. My men drag Fyodor to a steel chair in the center of the space. He fights back, but his battered body can’t match their strength.

I watch impassively as they bind his wrists and ankles with zip ties. He pants, trying to catch his breath. Blood drips from a cut on his lip.

“Stand back,” I tell my men. “This part is mine.”

They nod and retreat to the edges of the room. Fyodor’s eyes dart around as his panic mounts. “Boss, please. Let’s talk. We can handle this civilly.”

“Civilly?” I echo. “You put a bullet in Pavel, or arranged it. Then you sold out your entire Bratva family to Thorne for pocket change. Now you want civility?”



His face pales. “I made mistakes, but I can fix them. I can give you everything on Thorne’s next move. We can stop him together, show the Irish who’s boss.”

“You think I need you to show me anything?” I crouch down, staring into his face. “You said you have direct knowledge of Evan’s involvement. Start talking. The more you give me, the longer you live.”

“He... He’s planning to strike at your distribution centers. The Irish want a foothold in your territory. Evan’s providing them inside intel, resources, plus a scapegoat—your family. They’re forging evidence that you’re behind a series of hits on local politicians, stirring up a war in the city. Once the authorities zero in on you, the Irish swoop in to pick up the pieces.”

Dread pulses in my chest, but I bury it. “How do you fit into this?”

“I was the messenger,” he stammers. “I relayed info from your men, your schedules, your expansions. They used that to sabotage deals, frame certain actions. Evan wants you out of the picture, permanently. He’s always hated the Barkovs—you, Aleksei, all of you—for the way you treated him. Said you never showed him respect.”

My mind races, recalling how we used to deal with Thorne. We cut ties for a reason, but I never thought the resentment ran so deep. “He wants revenge. Is that it?”

Fyodor nods vigorously. “He believes you overshadowed his ambitions and took resources he felt belonged to him. The debt to the Irish is just one part. He’s colluding with them for personal vendettas, too. He’s certain he can destroy you from within.”

Evan Thorne, once a reluctant ally, devolved into a bitter enemy out for blood. My entire family stands in his crosshairs. “And you willingly joined him?”

He grits his teeth, and tears form in his eyes. “I was desperate. Tired of being treated

like dirt.”

“Pavel never treated you like dirt,” I remind him. “He welcomed you. We all did, to a point. But your greed took precedence.”

He lowers his head. “I know. I’m sorry, Boss.”

I press my lips together, stepping to the small table where an assortment of tools lines the surface. My men stand silent, aware that I need no help for this. I pick up a wrench and test its weight in my hand. Fyodor’s breathing hitches.

“You betray your family, kill my ally, then run to me for mercy because Thorne turned out to be the nastier dog? You have some nerve.”

He squirms and begs, “I can still be useful! Let me prove it. Let me help you lure Thorne in. We can set a trap, bigger than what he planned for you.”

His desperation is palpable, but I’m not swayed. “I’m done with your bargains. Start talking about the details of the distribution center attack, or you’ll be praying for a quick death.”

He whimpers, nodding frantically. “Alright, alright. The Irish plan to ambush your supply trucks next week. They have men stationed at the old shipping yard near the canal. Thorne gave them the exact route, times, everything. They’ll pose as your guys and intercept. Also, they’ve bribed a police lieutenant to look the other way.”

I scowl as my mind parses the new intel. If he’s telling the truth, I can reroute or fortify that shipment. “Keep going.”

“Evan wants to make sure you’re tied up in other conflicts, so they’re spreading rumors that you’ve been taking out minor gang leaders. They’re forging documents,

emails—all pointing to you. Once the cops see that, they'll swarm your territories. Meanwhile, the Irish slip into your territory, seizing your assets. It's a pincer move."

My blood boils. "What about the murder of Pavel? How does that tie in?"

"That was the first real blow to break your unity. Thorne knew losing him would throw you off balance and keep you chasing ghosts. Then he'd inch closer to dismantling you from behind the scenes. It almost worked, until you got suspicious."

I stare at him, hatred pulsing. "You destroyed a good man's life for that snake."

He lowers his head, mumbling, "I regret it."

I snap my fingers at two men. "Bring the table here."

They comply and drag a small metal table next to Fyodor's chair. I pick up a short blade, letting the threat of it linger. "You regret it now that you're caught. That's not the same as remorse."

He trembles. "I—I can still give you more details about the police ties. Maybe names, the lieutenant's location."

"Spit it out," I order.

He rattles off a name: Donovan, a dirty cop. Then an address for some hush meeting spot. Each word comes out in gasping breaths as if it pains him. My rage bubbles higher. He's listing everything, no honor among traitors. I wait until he finishes.

"You done?" I ask quietly.

He nods, and tears streak his cheeks. "That's all. You know everything I do."

I weigh the truth of his statements, deciding they ring consistent with the fragments we already uncovered. “So it was never a setup to frame Evan, was it? You and Thorne truly murdered Pavel, hoping we’d chase someone else?”

He swallows and nods. “Yes, Boss.”

I exhale as the final puzzle piece drops into place. Pavel died at the hands of a man he considered a comrade, orchestrated by a snake we once called an ally. My knuckles tighten around the blade. “You disgust me.”

“Please,” he rasps. “Don’t kill me. I gave you everything.”

I tilt my head, feigning consideration. “You gave me your confession, yes. But that doesn’t change the fact you killed a brother. That crime can’t go unpunished.”

He jerks against his bonds. “No, please, Boss—”

I move swiftly, pressing the blade to his throat. He freezes, and his eyes go huge with terror. “This is for Pavel,” I whisper, pressing harder until he chokes out a final gurgle. Blood seeps across his collar as the life drains from his eyes.

A hush falls over the warehouse, broken only by the rasp of Fyodor’s last breath. I step back, watching him slump in the chair with his arms still bound. My men remain quiet, respecting the gravity of the moment.

A wave of grim satisfaction courses through me—an avenger’s victory, but an empty one. Pavel is still gone. This only ensures that one traitor won’t walk free.

I wipe the blade on Fyodor’s shirt before tucking it away. “Clean this up,” I instruct the men. “Make sure there’s no trace.”

They nod and step forward to handle the corpse. I stand aside, rolling my shoulders to release the tension. My mind races with what I've learned. Evan is no victim, no scapegoat. He's orchestrating a full-blown coup against the Barkovs. And now I have enough intel to dismantle his plan.

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:00 pm*

My hands won't stop trembling. I stand in the corridor, staring at the closed door to Grigor's office, fighting off waves of nausea that have nothing to do with the positive pregnancy test I took a day ago and everything to do with how I'm afraid he'll react to it. The memory of those two lines on the stick collides with every thought I have about lying to him, about risking his life, about my father plotting in the background. A baby. I'm carrying his child, and I'm terrified of what that means in a world like ours.

I bite down on my lip, trying to breathe. Telling Grigor now seems impossible. He's furious with me for helping Father. Furious with Father for trying to kill him. Furious with the entire situation. If I reveal I'm pregnant, will he suspect me of more manipulations? Will he see it as just another tactic to keep him from finishing off my father? My stomach gurgles again, and I rub my abdomen to calm the churning.

A gentle knock echoes down the corridor. Bianca stands at the far end, and when I look up, she moves toward me slowly, as if not wanting to startle me.

"You look like you've seen a ghost," she notes.

I force a weak smile. "I'm fine. Just... tired."

Bianca's gaze drifts over me with the sort of scrutiny that suggests she knows I'm lying. She cocks her head. "Is that so? I came by to check on you. Aleksei mentioned Grigor was in a mood last night. I assumed it might have something to do with your father." She pauses, waiting for me to confirm or deny. When I say nothing, she continues. "You're pale. Have you eaten?"

My first instinct is to brush her off, but the worry in her eyes disarms me. “I’m just... unsettled. Father’s up to something again. And Grigor’s not exactly thrilled with me.”

She steps closer and places a gentle hand on my arm. “We can talk in private if you want. Aleksei is in there with Grigor now, discussing the next steps for the family. I have some time.”

I draw in a long breath. Part of me wants to unload everything—my pregnancy, my fear, my guilt—but the other part warns me not to. Bianca is kind, but Aleksei is Grigor’s brother. If she tells her husband I’m pregnant before I can do so myself, it might complicate everything. And Grigor is so angry I can’t be sure how he’ll react.

Still, something in my chest unknots at the idea of unloading some of this. I realize I’m desperate for someone to confide in, to share even a slice of my burden. I nod before I lead her down the hall to a small sitting room. Once inside, we settle into two armchairs facing each other.

She studies me with gentle patience. “Go on,” she urges with an incline of her head.

I inhale, trying to organize my thoughts. “I’ve just... been dealing with a lot. My father was behind that attempt on Grigor’s life, or at least part of it, and I...” The words lodge in my throat. “I helped him. Not intentionally to kill Grigor, but I gave him information, thinking it would keep my sister safe. Now, Grigor found out. He’s furious, and he’s threatening to kill my father if he tries anything else.”

Bianca’s eyes widen, though she doesn’t look shocked, more... sad. “I’d heard your father was meddling, but I didn’t realize you’d been forced to cooperate.”

My mouth goes dry at the memory of Father’s threat, how he held Cecily’s fate over my head. “He used Cecily as leverage. I had no choice.” My voice trembles. “But that’s not the worst of it. Grigor has every right to want him dead.”

She leans forward. “What’s the worst of it? Are you worried about your father’s life, or Grigor’s wrath?”

I swallow. The full truth about my pregnancy claws at my throat, demanding to be acknowledged. But I hold back, focusing on the immediate issue. “Both. I don’t want him to kill my father, but... I don’t think I can stop him.”

Bianca considers this, then sets a hand over mine. “You’re in a hard spot, but lying to Grigor will only dig you deeper. Trust him, or at least trust that he’ll listen to reason. He loves you, in his own way.”

My lips sputter in something between a laugh and a scoff. “You must be joking.”

She offers a small, knowing smile. “He’s different around you. There’s a tenderness there, under all that rage. I’ve seen it. And it’s not something I’ve seen him give to anyone else.”

I drop my gaze, remembering how he stormed into my father’s estate to avenge me. But he also installed a tracker on my phone and refused to let me see Father again. If that’s his version of love, it’s more suffocating than endearing.

“I don’t know how to handle this,” I admit.

Bianca reaches out and gives my hand a supportive squeeze. “Don’t keep things to yourself. That’ll only make things worse. Tell him your side, show him you’re willing to be honest. That’s the best advice I can give.”

The urge to reveal the pregnancy rears its head again. Maybe if I tell her, she can help me navigate Grigor’s reaction. But before I can speak, footsteps shuffle outside the sitting room. A knock follows, and a guard pokes his head in. “Bianca, Aleksei is ready to leave.”



Her eyes flick to me before she stands and pats my arm. “We’ll talk more later. Remember what I said.”

I nod, watching her go. Once alone, I slump in the armchair and press a hand to my still-flat stomach. My heart pounds with the decision I know I have to make soon—whether to tell Grigor about the pregnancy before he possibly kills my father or goes to war with the Irish. It feels like an impossible choice, one that will haunt me either way. I force myself up and head to the hallway. I need to face him eventually.

I find him in the main office, speaking in hushed tones with his other brothers. They look up when I enter, and the conversation halts.

Dimitri nods in greeting, then glances at Grigor. “We’ll let you handle this,” he says, walking past me. The others follow, though every single one of them tosses me a guarded look. The door closes behind them, leaving me and Grigor alone.

For a moment, we stand in silence. The tension between us is as thick as it’s ever been, and that’s saying something considering how delightful our wedding was. I shift my weight from foot to foot, trying to steady my nerves.

“Everything go alright?”

He settles into the chair behind the large desk and leans back with a sigh. “I got what I needed from Fyodor. Confirmed all I suspected. Your father is behind more than we realized.”

My pulse spikes, and I ask, “You’re sure? Are you absolutely certain?”

“Why do you keep doubting that your father is responsible for half the trouble in this city?”

I take a step closer. “I’m not naive, Grigor. I know what kind of man my father is. Still, he is my father. I can’t just watch you kill him.”

He exhales, rubbing his temple. “I can’t promise I won’t. You know that.”

“Why are you so certain murder is the only way?”

“He tried to murder me first,” Grigor snaps. “He orchestrated Pavel’s death, conspired with the Irish, and unleashed sabotage on my territory. At what point does he no longer deserve your pity?”

My voice cracks. “I’m not saying pity him. I’m saying... spare him. If there’s another way, anything that doesn’t involve you putting a bullet in his head, let’s try it. He’s family.”

His face flushes bright red, and I take an instinctive step back. “You ask me to ignore all he’s done. He’s caused real damage, cost me a loyal man, nearly destroyed the trust among my brothers. That doesn’t end with a handshake.”

“Look, I get it, okay? But I’m caught between you two. He’s threatened Cecily, manipulated me, but he’s still my father, Grigor. If you kill him, do you understand how that would break me?”

He grips the arms of the chair. “Did it break you when he tried to kill me? Did he care how that might affect you?”

I’m trembling. The urge to protect my father clashes with my loyalty to Grigor, and it’s nearly enough to bring me to my knees. “He’s misguided, cruel, but... he’s family.”

He stands abruptly before stalking around the desk. I step back some more, but he

catches my arm. “Stop living in denial. Your father is an enemy. He’s forced your hand, threatened your sister, almost cost me my life. What if next time he aims at you? Will you still plead for mercy on his behalf?”

Tears blur my vision. “I can’t just let you do this.”

He leans in, dropping his dropping. “You don’t get a vote, Seraphina. I’ll do what I have to do to keep my territory in one piece. End of discussion.”

Frustration boils over, and I smack at his chest, trying to wrench myself free. “You’re so quick to resort to bloodshed. Don’t you realize everything will spiral out of control if you kill my father? The Irish will escalate, Cecily might be in more danger, and our—” I cut myself off, chest heaving.

“Our what?” he demands, ignoring the wetness on my cheeks.

“I’m pregnant, Grigor.” The words are out before I can pull them back. “And if you kill my father, our child will never meet its grandfather. Is that what you want?”

His grip on my arm slackens, and his eyes go wide with shock. My heart feels like it’s about to explode. I watch a whole host of emotions cross his face as he tries to process what I said, and a hush engulfs the room.

This isn’t how I intended to tell him, but it’s too late to take it back now.

## Page 22

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:00 pm*

“You’re pregnant?” The world around me spins, and I have to brace myself on the edge of the desk to keep from collapsing.

Seraphina bites her lip and swipes at her tear-stained cheeks. Her chest heaves, and she can hardly look at me. For a split second, I wonder if I misheard, if my mind is playing tricks. But she nods, and I realize she’s dead serious.

She folds her arms protectively over her abdomen. “I just found out a few days ago. I know the timing couldn’t be worse, and it probably sounds like...” She trails off, but I catch her drift. It sounds like a manipulation. But even after everything, I can’t imagine her using a child as a ploy.

My stomach turns. A child. My child.

Part of me wants to rage and demand how she could let this happen when our world is a constant threat. Another part, maybe the stronger part, can’t ignore the rush of protectiveness flooding my veins. I push a hand through my hair, trying to steady my thoughts.

“I assumed you were on something,” I tell her, my tone oddly subdued. “I never imagined this could happen so soon, not when we—”

“I was,” she interrupts. “I must’ve missed a dose or something. Things have been a little hectic, you know.”

I inhale, struggling for composure. My resolve to tear her father apart weakens with every passing second, replaced by the realization that I’m going to be a father. I think

back to how I confronted her father, how I threatened to spill his blood for betraying me. Now, the idea of plunging our unborn child into that horror rips at my conscience. “And you found out a few days ago?”

She nods, and her gaze drifts to the floor. “I didn’t know how to tell you. You’re already angry at me for helping him, for lying. I was afraid you’d think I did this on purpose.”

“That’s not... No, I don’t think that.” I swallow, and words tangle on my tongue. “But you’ve got to realize how big this is. It changes a lot of things.”

“Does that... Does that mean you won’t kill my father?”

I stiffen, recalling the vow I nearly made to put a bullet between that man’s eyes. My anger reignites, but then I think of her standing here, trembling with news of our child, and it cuts through the vexation. With a sigh, I force myself to speak calmly. “As long as he keeps his distance. He stays out of our way, he stops meddling, and he never hurts you or our baby... I won’t kill him.”

Relief slackens her face, and she slumps as though a weight lifts from her shoulders. “Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me yet. He’s on thin ice, Seraphina. If he does anything else to threaten us, I can’t promise to spare him again.”

“I understand,” she whispers as her eyes glisten with tears she’s trying not to shed.

Without even thinking, I reach for her hand. “We should verify everything with a doctor. Make sure everything is okay.”

She looks startled by my suggestion. “We? You want to come with me?”

“This child is mine too, and I intend to be there for whatever happens next.”

“Alright,” she agrees, nodding slowly. “I have an appointment set for next week.”

I almost insist on going right now, but we’re well past office hours. Instead, I take a deep breath and force myself to relax. My body aches, and the adrenaline of the last few days seeps away, leaving exhaustion behind. But I can see she’s as exhausted as I am, if not more. Her eyes droop, and dark circles mar the pale skin beneath them. She hasn’t slept much, if at all.

I squeeze her hand and step back, trying to find the right words. It’s a strange feeling, being unsure what to say. After all, we’re not exactly the lovey-dovey sort. “Let’s go to bed.”

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We arrive at the doctor’s office under the watchful eyes of two of my most trusted men, including Anton. Seraphina insists they wait outside while we handle this privately, and I yield. This place feels so cold and sanitized. I never pictured myself here like this, guiding my wife to an exam room to confirm we created a life together.

A nurse in pastel scrubs leads us to a small room, instructing Seraphina to change into a gown. I stand by the door, uncertain where to place my hands. She disappears behind a curtain, and I hear the rustle of cloth as she changes. My mind flashes through every scenario—what if something’s wrong with the baby? What if her father tries to use this as leverage? I wouldn’t put it past the asshole.

My teeth grind at the thought. No one touches her. No one touches our child. If Evan so much as breathes a threat, I’ll do whatever’s necessary.

The door opens again, and the nurse returns with a cart of equipment. She sets up a

monitor and asks me to step aside so she can start the procedure. I comply, watching Seraphina settle onto the exam table with a sheet draped over her lower half.

The nurse applies some gel across Seraphina's abdomen and explains the process. I listen intently, more anxious than I've ever been, which is saying something for a man who's seen his share of violence. The machine emits a low hum, and an image appears on the screen.

Seraphina's eyes lock onto that screen, unblinking. The nurse points to a small little object shaped like a lima bean. "There. That's your baby's heartbeat."

My own heart stalls. A flutter of movement pulses on the grainy screen, so small it hardly seems real. Seraphina's face crumples with emotion—relief, awe, maybe fear. I step closer, swallowing the lump in my throat. That little lima bean is ours. Something we made in the midst of betrayal and chaos.

The doctor joins us a bit later and confirms everything appears healthy for how far along she is. She rattles off some guidelines—prenatal vitamins, a balanced diet, avoiding stress. I almost laugh at that last part, given our lives. But I store the advice away, determined to figure out how to shield her from the storms that plague our world.

When it's over, the nurse leaves us with a small printout of the ultrasound. Seraphina clutches it like it's the most precious thing in existence. I stand by her side, uncertain how to articulate the level of protectiveness and vulnerability swamping me.

She glances up with tears brimming in her eyes. "Everything's okay."

"So it seems." My gaze roams over the printout, a blurry snapshot of something that will anchor us together for the rest of our lives—or shatter us if we're not careful.

Returning home, I hardly have time to process the relief before my brothers corner me. News travels quickly in this household. They at least wait until we step inside to greet us in the foyer with a barrage of questions and congratulations.

Aleksei slaps a hand on my shoulder, making me tense. “You’re really joining the dad club now?”

“I guess so,” I answer, though a part of me warms at his enthusiasm. He’s balancing his own brood of triplets. If anyone knows how to handle fatherhood in this insane world, it’s him.

“Congratulations, brother,” Dmitri tells me.

Akim comments, “So we’ll have another Barkov running around soon. Is the city ready for that?”

Maksim, who is across the room, leaning against the wall with his usual aloof stance, smirks. “We’ll need to baby-proof your entire mansion, you realize that, right? Kid’s gonna be climbing everywhere in a year or two.”

Nikolai approaches Seraphina directly. “Are you feeling alright? Do you need anything?”

She looks startled by his kindness but shakes her head. “I’m okay. The doctor said everything’s fine.”

A ripple of relief moves through the group, and Aleksei claps his hands together. “We should celebrate.” He casts a sidelong glance at Seraphina. “I know it’s probably not the best time, but a small toast, maybe?”

My jaw clenches involuntarily, recalling the reason we can’t just relax: Evan Thorne,



the Irish threat, and the tension with Seraphina's father. But I don't want to deny my brothers' show of support. "Fine," I relent. "A short toast."

They cheer and lead us into one of the larger sitting rooms. A few minutes later, a tray of glasses appears, courtesy of my vigilant housekeeper, Galina. I watch Seraphina from the corner of my eye. She's still pale and obviously overwhelmed, though she attempts a smile when Bianca appears to congratulate her in a quiet, heartfelt hug. Bianca shoots me a pointed look, as if reminding me to handle Seraphina's emotions with care.

Aleksei pours some sparkling cider for Seraphina, while the rest of us take wine or whiskey. I lift my glass, trying to ignore the knot in my stomach. "To the new addition," I say tersely. "May they bring something good into this family for once."

It's a weak toast, but it'll have to do. My brothers laugh, clinking glasses.

Maksim downs his drink in one swallow. "I'm sure you'll manage fatherhood, Grigor. Just don't expect me to babysit."

"God forbid," Dmitri mutters, rolling his eyes. "You'd teach the kid to gamble before they could walk."

This moment, here with my family, should feel triumphant, but I catch Seraphina's gaze drifting to me with worry in her eyes. She knows as well as I do that nothing about our life is simple. This baby is healthy, but the world we're bringing them into is anything but secure.

My vow not to kill her father stands, but we're hardly out of danger. The Irish are planning something—I feel it in every fiber of my being. And Father Thorne, with his old grudges and cunning ways, might still try to undermine us. This calm we've found is temporary, a lull before the inevitable storm.

Tomorrow, I'll meet with the brothers again away from my wife to finalize new security protocols for Seraphina and coordinate protective details for the shipments. We'll adapt to keep her and our baby safe. But for now, in this moment with my family, I allow myself to hope we can make this fragile peace between the two of us last a little longer. She needs me to be steady, so that is exactly what I will be.

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:00 pm*

I freeze outside my father's study, trying to gather the bravery to step inside. My pulse races at the thought of what I'm about to do. Telling him I'm pregnant with Grigor's baby feels surreal, like I've stepped into someone else's life. Part of me wants to turn and run, but I can't ignore the nagging wish that he might still care—just a little—about me or the grandchild he never asked for.

Summoning my courage, I push open the heavy door. He's behind his desk, leaning forward over a stack of papers. The moment I enter, he glances up, frowning at the intrusion.

"What are you doing here?"

I swallow hard before stepping farther in. "I wanted to talk."

His fingers drum on the desk. "Make it quick. I have business to attend to."

The chill in his tone reminds me how precarious our relationship has become. But I press on, determined. "Father, I... I came to tell you something important. It's about me and Grigor."

He stiffens at the mention of Grigor's name. "Still defending that man, are you?"

"I'm not here defending him," I counter, controlling my voice. "It's about—I'm pregnant. With his child."

He stares, and for a fleeting second, I can see the shock in his eyes. But then his features tighten into a look of disgust. "You have the nerve to come here, to my

house, and say this as if it changes anything? Don't expect me to be happy."

A knot forms in my stomach. "This is your grandchild," I remind him, forcing the words out. "I thought you'd at least—you might want to know."

His laugh is low and bitter. "Grandchild. Hah. A traitor's offspring, more like it."

Pain twists through me at his dismissive words. "I'm not a traitor. You used me to gather intel on Grigor. You threatened to hurt Cecily. Don't pretend this is all on me."

He waves a hand as if to brush aside my argument. "You got close to him anyway, didn't you? You followed him like a lost puppy. And now you come here with your sob story about a baby. Why should I care? You betrayed me. You chose Grigor. You chose the Barkovs over your own blood."

"That's not fair," I whisper. "I tried to protect you, to keep you from being killed. I told Grigor not to lay a finger on you, and he agreed so long as you stay away."

He snorts. "I see. So you're still siding with him."

"I'm not siding with anyone," I snap. "I'm trying to prevent more violence. If you'd just talk to him, maybe you two could find common ground. He's not a monster all the time. He only wants you to stop your war with him. He'd even help you if you'd let him."

"Help me?" My father's voice drips with scorn. "What do you think I am, some lost child needing assistance? I'm not interested in handouts from that man or any of his family."

I clutch the back of a nearby chair, trying to steady myself. "Why are you so obsessed with taking them down? What do you get from it besides more bloodshed?"

His eyes blaze. “They destroyed my alliances, undermined my business, cost me precious deals. They never respected me as an equal. I owe them for that.”

My shoulders slump. “Your pride is going to kill you, Father. This baby—your grandchild—it’s innocent in all this. Won’t you at least consider—”

“Stop,” he growls, standing so swiftly his chair topples back. “Don’t lecture me about innocence. You’re the one who got into bed with that Bratva beast. You’re no daughter of mine.”

My heart feels like it’s being squeezed in a vise. “What?”

He points a trembling finger at the door. “Leave. If you care so much about that man and his spawn, don’t come back here. You made your choice.”

Tears burn my eyes. I fight the urge to argue, to plead, but I see the finality in his gaze. “Father, please—”

“Get out,” he snarls. “Before I call my men and have you thrown out.”

Stunned into silence, I nod and back toward the door. Part of me wants to shout that he’ll regret this, that he’s throwing away his chance to know his own flesh and blood, but the words die on my lips.

By the time I reach the hallway, tears are slipping down my cheeks. A guard stands there with his eyes averted, likely having overheard every angry word. He doesn’t meet my gaze as I pass.

Once I’m outside, a wave of anguish floods me. My father has disowned me completely. He doesn’t care about my child, about me, about anything but his grudge. I force myself to leave his estate, half-expecting him to fire a shot at my back. But no

one stops me. No one says a word.

By the time I get home, I'm drained. My face is blotchy from crying, and all I want is to hide in my room. But the moment I step into the foyer, Galina informs me that Grigor is waiting for me in the living room. She gives me a small, sympathetic smile, like she already guesses I've had a hard time.

I find Grigor standing near the fireplace, staring into the flames. He turns when he hears me approach. "You're back. How did it go?"

I press my lips together, debating what to say. Finally, I shrug. "He disowned me. Called me a traitor. He doesn't care about the baby."

Anger crosses Grigor's face. "He said that?"

"Yes," I confirm as tears threaten again. "He told me to leave. Said I'm not his daughter anymore."

Something in Grigor's posture softens. He crosses the room, placing a cautious hand on my arm. "I'm sorry. Despite everything, you hoped he'd care, right?"

"He's still my father, even if he hates me."

"It doesn't matter. He won't hurt you, or this child."

I attempt a weak smile, though my heart aches. "I know. You've already promised not to kill him as long as he stays away, so... I guess that's all we can do."

He looks at me for a moment, conflict churning behind his eyes. Then he glances around, as if making sure no one else is listening. "Come with me," he says suddenly, guiding me down the hall.

We reach a side door leading to the garage, where a sleek black car is waiting. My brows knit. “What’s going on?”

He opens the passenger door and steps back. “Get in. I’m taking you out.”

I stare at him, confused. “Now? I’m a mess. I’m not—”

“I said get in, Seraphina. Indulge me.”

Part of me wants to protest, but I don’t have the energy. Maybe a change of scenery is exactly what I need. I slip into the car, and he closes the door behind me. When he climbs behind the wheel, he casts me a sidelong glance with the hint of a grin twitching at his lips. It’s so unlike the usual stern scowl that I can’t help but wonder what he has planned.

Thirty minutes later, we arrive at an upscale restaurant in one of the nicer parts of the city. Everything about it screams luxury—the curved valet ramp, the glittering chandeliers visible through the tall windows, and the doorman who greets us with a polished smile. Grigor hands over the car keys, ignoring the curious look the valet shoots him.

I tug self-consciously at my clothes, wishing I’d dressed better. But Grigor just offers me his arm and leads me inside like we do this all the time. The hostess recognizes him instantly, and she stammers about a private table. He nods, and within minutes, we’re seated in an elegant booth, half-shielded from the rest of the diners.

A polite waiter hands us menus before rattling off specials. I catch only half of it. My mind is still reeling from the day’s events. My father’s rejection, the baby, everything swirling through my head. Grigor studies the menu, then glances at me.

“See anything you like?”

“I don’t know,” I mumble. “I’m not that hungry.”

He sets the menu aside. “You need to eat. The doctor said a balanced diet, right? Order something decent.”

I bristle at the reminder, but it’s softened by the humor in his expression. “Fine.” I scan the menu again and pick a dish that sounds halfway appetizing. Honey-glazed salmon with some fresh greens on the side.

Once our orders are in, Grigor leans back, observing me. “How are you feeling?”

“How do you think I feel?” I snap, a bit sharper than intended. “My father just disowned me, and I’m pregnant with a baby I didn’t plan, living in a mafia war zone. Not exactly the dream scenario.”

He half-smiles, though there’s empathy in his eyes. “Fair enough. I was just checking.”

I sigh, dropping my shoulders. “Sorry. I’m just... It’s been a day.”

He nods and drums his fingers on the table. Then he surprises me by reaching across to take my hand. “I’m trying here, Seraphina. I’m not exactly the romantic type, but I figured I could take you out, maybe distract you from... everything.”

A tiny warmth blossoms in my chest. “You’re not the romantic type at all, but this is... nice. Thank you.”

He lifts a brow. “Don’t spread it around. I have a reputation to maintain.”

I can’t help the small laugh that slips out. “Noted.”



The waiter returns, pouring water and presenting a basket of fresh bread. Grigor thanks him with a curt nod, then focuses on me again. We fall into an unexpected banter, first about the food, then about random details. He tries to tell me about a time Maksim nearly burned down the garage, and I nearly spit out my water laughing. He asks about my childhood with Cecily, and though painful memories stir, I find myself smiling at some of the lighter recollections.

When the main courses arrive, I realize I'm actually hungry. The food is exquisite—perfectly seasoned fish, tender vegetables. I catch Grigor watching me as I take a few bites.

“You don’t always have to stare,” I tease, lifting a forkful to my mouth. “It’s a bit unnerving.”

“Apologies,” he says, not sounding sorry at all. “Hard to resist when you finally look content.”

I roll my eyes but feel a flutter of pleasure at the comment. For the first time in ages, I relax enough to enjoy a decent meal in his company. The conversation shifts, and we skirt around heavier topics, focusing instead on small glimpses of normalcy. We speak about favorite foods, odd childhood habits, and the music we used to listen to.

His face lights up when he describes his mother’s cooking, how she used to make a stew that could cure any illness. I can’t stop smiling as he recounts a story about Dmitri trying to replicate it and failing miserably. It’s startling to see this side of him—less guarded, more willing to share. I find myself leaning closer, laughing softly at each anecdote.

And then it hits me: I’m enjoying this. I’m enjoying him. The man who threatened me, installed a tracker on my phone, and nearly killed my father. Yet here he is, making me laugh, ensuring I eat, ensuring I’m comfortable. My heart clenches with

the realization that somewhere along this tumultuous path, I've fallen in love with Grigor Barkov.

The thought both terrifies and exhilarates me. I watch him sip his drink, and I catch the way his gaze flits to my stomach briefly. He promised to spare my father for the sake of this baby, for the sake of me. My father's disowned me, but maybe... maybe I can create a new family with Grigor, a stable one, in spite of the danger surrounding us.

By the time we finish dessert—a decadent chocolate creation that he insisted I try—my cheeks hurt from smiling. He pays the bill without fuss, then offers his arm, guiding me out. As I clutch his arm, a gentle sense of security washes over me.

“That was... surprisingly wonderful,” I admit, leaning my head against his shoulder for a moment as we walk to the car.

“I try. You deserve a good evening every now and then.”

Emotion wells up in my chest. “Thank you, Grigor. Really. I needed this.”

He nods and stops by the car. Before opening the door, he turns to me, catching my chin with his index finger. “We'll figure it out, Seraphina. I promise you. Father or not, the Irish or not, we'll protect this child.”

My eyes mist with tears again, but this time they're happier tears. “Thank you,” I whisper, leaning in. He surprises me by meeting me halfway and pressing his lips to mine. It's a gentle kiss, filled with promise, and it makes my toes curl with anticipation.

As he breaks the kiss, he tucks a strand of hair behind my ear, smiling. There will be plenty more battles and difficult moments, but for now, the air feels less tense, our

relationship more solidified.

For the first time, I truly feel like part of the Barkov family.

Grigor opens the door and helps me inside before circling to the driver's side. The car glides away from the restaurant with the city lights flashing past as we head home. I let my mind wander to a future where this baby grows up safe, maybe in a world where I'm free from my father's manipulations and Grigor is free from constant battles.

My phone buzzes in my purse, snapping me from my reverie. I fish it out and glance at the caller ID. Cecily. She rarely calls this late unless something's wrong. I answer quickly. "Cecily? Are you okay?"

Her voice spills through the line in frantic, jumbled fragments. I can barely make out words: "Seraphina—they—I'm—Father—please—help—" The rest disintegrates into sobs and panicked breathing. My heart rate skyrockets.

"Cecily!" I say sharply, trying to keep my voice steady. "What's happening? Where are you?"

But all I hear is more incoherent crying, a crash in the background, and muffled shouting. My blood runs cold. Grigor must sense my alarm because he casts me a sidelong look as he drives. "What's wrong?"

"It's Cecily," I manage, pressing the phone closer to my ear. "She's... Something's wrong."

"What do you hear?"

"Cecily!" I call again, louder this time. "I can't understand you. Tell me where you

are!”

Her sobs continue, and then the call abruptly ends, leaving me holding the silent phone. My stomach twists in terror. I meet Grigor’s eyes with dread clawing at my insides.

He glances between me and the road. “What happened?”

“I don’t know,” I whisper, voice shaking. “She’s in trouble.”

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*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:00 pm*

A scream unlike any I've ever heard rips through the car's interior as Seraphina slams her phone onto the console. "He hurt Cecily."

My pulse surges at her words. "Your father?" I ask, though I already know the answer.

She nods and takes in a ragged breath.

I grit my teeth and stomp on the accelerator. "We're heading there now. I'll send a text to my brothers, let them know to meet us at your father's."

A wave of trembling passes through her body. "He told me once he wouldn't harm Cecily if I did what he asked. I can't believe I fell for his lies."

I tighten my grip on the steering wheel. "We'll deal with your father and his men, whatever it takes."

She sucks in another shaky breath, nodding. "You think we can get Cecily out before he tries something worse?"

"That's the plan," I assure her, forcing a note of confidence I'm not entirely sure I feel.

My phone buzzes with a text from Dmitri, confirming he's gathering the rest of our men but might arrive a few minutes behind us. My gut warns me that a few minutes could be an eternity in the wrong situation.

“Whatever happens, thank you for doing this,” Seraphina tells me between snuffles.

“I’m doing it for you,” I reply. “And for Cecily, who’s innocent in all this.”

I just hope we’re not too late.

A few minutes later, we reach the iron gates of her father’s estate. They stand open, without a guard in sight. An uneasy feeling coils in my stomach. I kill the engine and search the mansion’s facade for movement. All is still, but that doesn’t fool me. If this is a trap, it’s already set.

I exit the car, gun drawn, glancing back to ensure Seraphina stays close. Her expression is bleak but determined. She clutches a small pistol she’s pulled out of her purse, though her hands tremble. I rest a hand on her shoulder. “Stay behind me. If things go wrong, find cover.”

“I just want Cecily. I can’t lose her.”

“You won’t,” I vow.

The front door stands ajar, reminiscent of an invitation. I push it open and step into the mansion’s foyer with silent steps. The gloom presses in around us with a single chandelier overhead providing a faint glow. I note the lack of staff, the lack of any normal signs of activity. My instincts scream that something is off.

“Cecily!” Seraphina calls, her voice echoing through the halls. “Cecily, where are you?”

No answer.

I point toward a corridor leading to the right. “We’ll check each room. Keep your

eyes open.”

She falls in step beside me, and we move carefully through the hallways. My mind flashes with images of the last time I confronted her father here, when I pierced his hand with the letter opener and relished in the way he howled. Now, I suspect he’s intent on returning the favor.

We round a corner into a large sitting room. The furniture is arranged in neat rows, and the windows are draped with heavy curtains. It’s empty, silent. I let out a slow breath, looking around for any sign of movement.

Suddenly, footsteps resound behind us. I spin, raising my pistol, but I’m too late. Men converge from doorways on either side with their weapons aimed. One barks a command: “Drop them!”

Seraphina gasps, and her father steps out from behind a tall bookcase with a nasty smirk twisting his features. “And here I was wondering if you’d show up at all.”

I clench my jaw. “Where’s Cecily?”

He gestures lazily with his hand. “Safe enough. For now.”

Seraphina looks at him, and desperation mingles with anger on her face. “Where is she? I want to see her!”

Her father offers a low chuckle. “Impatient, aren’t we? Don’t worry, she’s just behind that door.” He nods toward a closed door at the far end of the room. “But you won’t get to her that easily.”

I glare at the men around us, each armed with guns or knives, outnumbering us by a wide margin. My phone buzzes in my pocket. Probably Dmitri or one of my brothers,

but I can't reach it now. I curse under my breath, realizing we arrived too soon.

We should've waited for them to get here before coming inside.

"Drop your weapon," Evan orders, taking a step closer. His eyes shift to Seraphina's gun. "Both of you."

I cast a quick glance at Seraphina, then, reluctantly, I ease my pistol to the floor. She follows suit, letting her smaller handgun clatter beside mine. One of the men rushes in to kick the weapons away. Two of them seize my arms, and another grabs Seraphina's wrists.

"Get your hands off her," I growl, struggling, but they're well-coordinated, and they force my arms behind my back. A fist connects with my stomach, knocking the breath out of me.

"I've waited a long time for this, Barkov," Evan comments. "You walked into my home, thinking you'd save the day. How does it feel to be on the losing side?"

Seraphina strains against the guard holding her. "He's done nothing to you. Let Cecily go!"

He ignores her plea, focusing on me. "You took everything from me, do you realize that? The respect I once had in the Bratva, the deals I tried to secure. I was overshadowed, ridiculed, and left with scraps while you and your brothers grew more powerful. And when I tried to push back, your allies shut me out entirely."

The corner of my mouth curls despite the pain in my gut. "So you're blaming me for your failures? You could've worked with us, but you chose to cross us."

"Work with you?" he asks through a laugh. "You never saw me as an equal partner.



None of your family did. I was your convenient pawn at best, left behind whenever it suited your purpose. Now, I have the upper hand.”

Seraphina’s voice shakes as she interjects, “That’s not true. If you’d just talked to Grigor, or to Aleksei—some kind of arrangement—”

“Arrangement?” he scoffs. “I tried. I spent years navigating that wretched circle, offering deals, and forging alliances, only to be humiliated time and again. I realized the only way to beat the Barkovs was by hitting them where it hurt.”

A surge of rage boils inside. “So you used your daughter. You threatened her sister. That’s your idea of beating us?”

He shrugs. “It worked, didn’t it?”

Before I can retort, one of his men smashes the butt of a gun against my temple. My vision swims, and I collapse to my knees with pain shooting through my skull. I catch Seraphina’s cry of alarm. Another blow lands on my ribs, stealing my breath. I try to defend myself, but my arms are pinned. They rain hits on me, again and again, until black spots dance in my field of vision.

“Stop!” Seraphina screams. “You’ll kill him!”

Her father motions for them to halt. I’m left gasping on all fours, blood dripping from a cut above my eye. The men yank me upright, forcing me to stand. Dizziness threatens to topple me. I taste blood on my lips.

Seraphina’s father exhales and places himself between us. “I’m not done with him yet. Not until I teach him the lesson he’s so long avoided.”

“You’re insane,” Seraphina screeches. “Let Cecily go, or I swear—”

He turns on her. “You swear what? You’ve already betrayed me once, Seraphina. I gave you a life. I provided you a chance to lead this family to victory, but you chose this monster’s side. You gave him a child. You destroyed our family name.”

Her tears flow freely. “You’re the one who destroyed everything! You forced me to marry him, and then you lied about everything. This was never about anything but your grudge, your pride. There probably wasn’t even a threat from the Irish, was there? You fabricated it all!”

He nods slowly, like he’s confirming her words. “You finally see it, daughter. The so-called threat was my invention. But it got you to comply, didn’t it? That is, until you decided to bend over for the Barkovs!”

“I sided with them because you threatened Cecily!” she shoots back.

“And look how well that worked,” he says with a hollow grin. “You waltzed right in, and Barkov here came along like a fool.” He signals to his men again. “Teach him more respect.”

They drag me forward, hurling another series of punches. My world blurs and my bones protest under the assault. My body screams in agony. Still, I fight, managing to land a kick on one guard’s knee and sending him tumbling. It’s not enough. Another jumps in, ramming a knee into my side. My head smashes into the wall. Darkness threatens, but I cling to consciousness, if only to keep from leaving Seraphina alone with this madman.

“Enough!” Seraphina’s voice is raw. She wrenches against the guard’s grip with tears streaming down her face. “Please... you can’t do this.”

Her father calls off his men again, crossing the distance to where I slump against the wall. He grips my collar and drags my battered form upright so I face him. “You

worthless upstart. You think you can keep me down? I've spent years preparing for this. Every ally you lost, every deal that vanished, I had a hand in it."

I spit blood at his feet. "You talk big, but my brothers will be here soon. You can't hold them all off. Let Cecily go."

A twisted smile curls his lips. "I'm counting on them showing up, Barkov. It'll be the perfect stage to rid myself of all the Barkovs in one fell swoop."

He releases me, and I crash to the floor, struggling to breathe. Seraphina sobs, trying to reach me, but the guard pins her arms, forcing her away. She looks frantically from me to her father. "Stop this, please. Father, you're hurting everyone. Just let us go."

He moves to a door and yanks it open. Cecily stumbles out with her wrists bound and a bruise on her temple. She sees Seraphina and rushes forward, only for a guard to yank her back.

"Seraphina!" she cries.

"Cecily! Are you okay?"

Cecily looks at her father, face stricken. "He... He's lost his mind, Seraphina. He—"

Her father snorts and grabs Cecily by the hair. She yelps. "Quiet," he snarls. Then he lifts his glare to Seraphina. "Now you face the consequences of choosing Barkov."

Seraphina shakes her head with wide, desperate eyes. "I'll do anything. Just let them go."

A harsh chuckle escapes him. "Anything, you say? Then choose. Your sister or your husband. One of them goes free. The other stays to pay the price for the Barkovs'

arrogance.”

Seraphina’s face goes deathly pale. “What?”

“You heard me. Pick the one who lives. The other I’ll either kill or keep locked away until I decide they’re no longer useful.”

“Father!” Cecily wails. “You can’t do this!”

He ignores her. “Well, Seraphina? Since you love to play mediator, now’s your chance. Who matters more... The man you betrayed me for, or the sister you swore to protect?”

Seraphina’s breath catches. Her eyes dart between me, bruised and bloodied on the floor, and Cecily, who is trembling in her father’s grip. Agony shreds her features, and she looks like she might collapse under the weight of the ultimatum.

“Leave her out of this,” I growl, forcing myself upright to lean against the wall for support. “This is between you and me.”

Her father smirks. “Funny, that’s exactly how I see it, too. But she’s the one who walked in here, certain she could save everyone.” He turns back to Seraphina. “Well, dear daughter. Tick tock.”

Seraphina shudders, tears coursing down her face. “I can’t... I can’t do this.”

“That’s not an answer. If you don’t choose, they both die. It’s that simple.”

A strangled sob escapes her, and she slumps to her knees. Cecily cries out, pleading with her father to stop. My head spins, and my vision wavers. My only hope is that Dmitri and the others are almost here. If they burst in now, maybe we can turn the

tables. But each passing second feels like an eternity, and Seraphina is moments away from a choice that could break her.

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:00 pm*

I stand in what was once my family home with my knees wobbling and my father's ultimatum still ringing in my ears. He demands that I choose between saving Grigor or saving Cecily, and the weight of that threat steals my breath. My eyes move between them. Grigor is barely conscious and bleeding from his temple, and Cecily's face is streaked with tears.

"I won't choose," I whisper, forcing each syllable from my constricted throat. "You can't make me."

My father's lips twist. "I've gone too far to turn back now, Seraphina. It's your fault—every piece of it." He motions to the men around us, half a dozen sets of eyes aimed in our direction. "If you'd just stayed loyal, obeyed my instructions, none of this would've happened."

"You're the one who lied!" My voice cracks, raw with grief and fury. "You told me Cecily was in danger because of some outside threat, but it was you all along!"

He tightens his hold on Cecily, who whimpers. "You had your part to play, and you failed me. I gave you everything, and you turned on me for that Bratva scum. This is the cost."

Grigor coughs and drags himself upright with a grimace. He focuses on me, ignoring the blood trailing down his face. "Don't give him what he wants. We can fight our way out."

My father's men come to attention at the mention of resistance. Guns stay leveled, ready to fire if we dare defy them. I clench my fists, struggling to steady my

breathing. “I’m not giving you anything,” I bite out.

“Then watch them both die,” he replies. His voice holds no hint of compassion. He’s abandoned every shred of fatherly feeling—if he ever possessed it at all.

Cecily trembles in his grip, trying to speak, but he clamps a hand over her mouth. She looks at me with pleading eyes, urging me to do something, anything, to save her. My father is a wall of rage, beyond reason.

Slowly, I lift my gaze to Grigor. “I’m so sorry,” I whisper. It feels meaningless in the face of this horror, but it’s the only truth I have left. My regret for all the ways I’ve misled him, all the times I placed him in jeopardy by funneling information to my father. My heart aches with the knowledge that he could pay the price for my father’s obsession. Tears burn my cheeks, and I see the shape of his battered face and the swell of his cheek, the gash above his eyebrow. He’s taken every blow meant for me. My father’s men stripped me of my weapon, leaving me helpless. But I can’t just stand here and watch him be executed. I can’t lose Cecily either. I love them both too much.

My father cuts in, “Enough. If you won’t choose, then I’ll handle it myself.” With a snap of his fingers, two men move toward Grigor, guns raised, while two more hold Cecily. Another stands guard over me with his weapon pointed at my chest.

Grigor looks over his shoulder at the men bearing down on him before he looks back at me with a silent farewell in his eyes. A chill slams into my core.

“No!” I exclaim. The guard near me presses the barrel of his rifle closer, forcing me to halt. Think, Seraphina. Don’t freeze up.

“You think you can persuade me with tears?” my father mocks. “It’s too late. You ruined everything: my alliances, my honor, the future I built for this family.”

“You built nothing but lies,” I spit. “You used me as your pawn, and now you dare blame me?”

He doesn’t bother with a reply, just motions to one of his men. The man steps up to Grigor and raises the butt of his gun. My chest constricts. If he lands another blow on Grigor’s head, it might kill him.

My father is too caught up in his vendetta, too lost in his fury to see reason, but maybe I can disrupt his plan, create an opening for Grigor—and maybe for Cecily. If I can distract him, if I can get my hands on a weapon...

I glance at Grigor, and I try to convey everything I haven’t had the courage to say through my eyes. I love you. I’m sorry . And he gives the barest nod, as if urging me on. My heart hammers as adrenaline courses through every vein. I recall that moment in the car, how he told me everything would be fine, how I just needed to trust him. Right now, I have to trust myself.

“You keep saying I ruined things,” I begin, “that I destroyed your ambitions. But you’re the one who refused any compromise. You think the Barkovs never respected you? You never gave them a chance. You set out to undermine them from the start.”

He narrows his eyes at me. “Watch your mouth. You’ll regret defying me again.”

“Or what? You’ll shoot me? Is that what you want, to kill your own daughter?”

“If that’s what it takes.”

I stifle a sob. I must keep him talking, keep him focused on me. A few men shift behind him. They glance at one another, possibly uneasy about him threatening to kill his own child. Maybe that’s a crack I can exploit.



“You’re too blinded by anger to see a better path,” I tell him, stepping carefully forward. The guard near me tenses, but I keep my hands visible, not threatening. “Mother would be horrified by what you’re doing.”

“Don’t you dare mention her,” he snarls. “She would understand. She stood by me when no one else did.”

“And now you stand here alone, with no one left but men bound to you by your money, not out of loyalty.” I stare at him, letting tears slip freely. “You’re about to murder one daughter while using the other as a hostage. Is that what Mother would’ve wanted?”

His eyes flicker, wounded for a breath, but then fury returns. “You don’t know a thing about her, about what she wanted. You were always too young and too naive.”

Grigor tries to speak, but a guard grips his shoulder and jabs a pistol into his ribs. He coughs, subdued for the moment. My father, though, seems rattled by my confrontation. That might be the only advantage I have. I inhale deeply as I gauge how close I can get to him without setting anyone into motion. My father stands a few steps away, holding Cecily by the arm. She’s shaking, with her eyes darting between me and Grigor.

Then I see the gun at my father’s waist, tucked into a holster. He hasn’t drawn it yet. Probably doesn’t see the need since so many of his men are armed. If I can get close enough...

“Don’t do this, Father. You’ve gone too far. Please, let Cecily go. Let us all go.”

“You never learn,” he replies. “I told you, I won’t let the Barkovs keep trampling over me. Now that I have you and that parasite in your womb, I finally have leverage.”

“Leverage for what?” I choke out. “To start a war, you can’t win?”

He scoffs. “I have enough alliances still willing to stand by me if I can remove the Barkovs from power. Think about how valuable it is to hold the second-in-command of the Barkov Bratva hostage. Or better yet, kill him and send a message to Aleksei and the rest.”

Cecily trembles in his grip. “Father, please... You’ll only make them come after you.”

My father snorts. “Let them try.”

I close another step. “If you kill Grigor, you’ll be putting a target on your back forever. Is that really what you want?”

He scowls. “I’d rather die than live under the Barkovs’ shadow.”

I see his finger twitch near his sidearm. There’s no time. I swallow my fear and lunge forward, grabbing for his gun. He reacts with lightning speed, blocking my hand. He releases my sister, and we struggle, arms locked in a violent dance. My heart thunders. He growls, shoving me away. I lose my balance and hit the floor, feeling a jolt of pain along my spine.

Grigor roars my name just as my father aims his weapon at me. The shot is about to go off, and everything funnels into that horrifying instant.

Then Grigor slams into him, tackling him sideways. They crash into a table, sending splinters and an abandoned vase scattering. My father elbows Grigor hard in the ribs, and Grigor staggers, but he doesn’t let go. A brutal fistfight ensues, and the room fills with the sound of flesh hitting flesh and my father grunting in fury while Grigor fights like a man possessed. His men circle around them, trying to find a way to

separate them.

Meanwhile, the front doors burst open, and I see Aleksei, Dmitri, Maksim, Nikolai, and Akim rushing in with weapons at the ready. Their men fan out, taking shots at my father's guards. My ears ring from gunshots. I drag myself to a corner, trying to keep my head low as bullets whiz overhead.

This is a war zone. The siblings fight side by side, picking off the guards who outnumbered us moments ago. The tide might turn in our favor if they can corner my father, but he's slippery.

My father pulls another hidden gun from his ankle and aims at Grigor's midsection. My breath catches, certain he's about to fire. Then Aleksei's voice booms from across the room. "Drop it, Thorne!"

My father roars something incoherent, switching tactics. He scrambles to his feet and shoves Cecily at me, only to yank her back again when Grigor tries to exploit the opening. In that single second of confusion, men from both sides exchange more gunfire, leaving some of my father's men wounded or disarmed. The rest scatter, retreating with curses on their lips. The Barkov brothers press forward, but my father acts quickly, hooking an arm around Cecily's neck, gun pressing against her temple.

"Back off!" he shouts, stepping away from Grigor's furious lunge. "Any closer and I'll kill her."

We freeze. Grigor's chest heaves, covered in bruises and blood. Aleksei and the others aim their weapons, but nobody can risk a shot. The dread in my stomach deepens. Cecily's wide, terrified eyes seek mine. My father shuffles toward the exit, dragging her with him.

"Let her go!" I shout. "You have me, Grigor, everyone here. Why do you need her?"

He smirks, not slowing his backward movement. “You wouldn’t dare let them shoot while I have your precious innocent sister, would you? That’s the problem with you, Seraphina. You get too attached. Me? I care about winning.”

He edges out the doorway with the muzzle pressed to Cecily’s head. One of Grigor’s men tries to intercept, but my father fires a warning shot that sends the man ducking. Heart pounding, I watch helplessly as he slips through the threshold, disappearing into the night with Cecily’s muffled scream echoing behind him.

A profound silence descends, broken only by the groans of the wounded. I stumble forward, wanting to chase after him, but Grigor grips my arm. “Don’t,” he warns.

“Cecily,” I manage. “I can’t... We can’t leave her. He’ll hurt her.”

He cradles my face in his hands, forcing me to make eye contact. “We’ll get her back,” he vows. “I promise you, Seraphina. This isn’t over.”

Tears spill down my cheeks as I cling to him, words failing me. My father just outmaneuvered us all. He forced us into this firefight, escaped with Cecily as his shield, and left chaos in his wake. Even with Grigor’s brothers and their men, we lost her.

I choke out, “He’s taking her who knows where. He’ll use her. He’ll... Oh God.”

Grigor pulls me against him, stroking my hair. “Easy. Breathe. I told you, we’ll find her. That bastard won’t keep her forever. He’s cornered. He had to run. We’ll track him down.”

My heart stutters, but I cling to that thread of hope. “Please. We have to—We have to go after him.”

“We will,” he assures me. “But first, we need to regroup, secure your safety. Then we hunt him. I swear I won’t rest until she’s back with you. You have to trust me, Krasivaya . I love you, and I will never abandon you. Never. No matter what happens, that won’t change. Okay?”

The words flow into the cracks of my heart, soothing the ache. He loves me. Grigor loves me. It’s the truth that’s been there all along, even in the darkest moments, when I feared what would become of us. His arms surround me, holding me tight. And for a moment, in the midst of the blood and ruin, I believe him. I believe in his promises.

Because if anyone can save Cecily, it’s him.

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:00 pm*

One week. That's how long it's been since the night everything spun out of control—since Thorne escaped with Cecily as his shield and vanished into the shadows.

In that time, my brothers and I have torn through our ranks, rooting out the snakes who sold us out and worked with Evan. We've interrogated, tracked leads, and threatened any source who might have known Thorne's hideouts. But there is still no sign of Cecily.

The weight of that failure gnaws at me. Each day, I watch Seraphina force a smile in public, then crumble behind closed doors, trying not to let her despair swallow her whole. She never says it, but I see the guilt in her eyes, as if she blames herself for her father's madness. I hate it. I hate that he's got that kind of hold on her, even from a distance.

Tonight, though, I'm trying something different. No more scouring seedy warehouses or shaking down low-life informants—my men can handle that for a few hours. Instead, I told Seraphina to dress comfortably, to trust me. She looked puzzled but obliged. Now, we're driving along a winding coastal road. The headlights illuminate the asphalt in front of us, and stars glimmer overhead. Beside me, her hands rest on her lap, clasped together.

"We're almost there," I say quietly, turning onto a small side road.

She peeks out the window. "Where are we going?"

"Somewhere we can breathe, even for a little while," I reply.

She doesn't argue. Maybe she's too drained to question me. When we round the last bend, the sea comes into view—dark waters stretching to the horizon. I park on a gravel patch and shut off the engine. She inhales and looks out at the waves. I exit the car first, then circle around to open her door.

She steps out, noting the way her gaze lingers on the shimmer reflecting from the moon. The hush of the ocean meets us, broken only by the rhythmic flow of waves rolling ashore. The wind brushes her hair across her face. I gently tuck a loose strand behind her ear, and she grants me a small, unsure smile.

“Why here?” she asks.

“Because we need a moment.” I gesture for her to follow me down a short footpath that leads to the sand. “A moment away from everything else.”

She looks at me curiously. “You're the last person I expected to seek quiet at a time like this.”

I shrug. “I've learned a lot lately—like sometimes, you have to protect more than your territory. You have to protect what keeps you sane, or you lose yourself.”

Her eyes lower, and she nods. We walk across the sand until we're near the water's edge. The breeze carries the scent of salt, and the night sky twinkles overhead. I remove my shoes and roll up my pant legs. She hesitates, then does the same, stepping forward so the water laps at her toes.

“This is... nice,” she admits, crossing her arms as if unsure whether to relax.

I step beside her, watching the surf. “I know it can't fix everything. But you deserve a moment of peace, especially after what you've been through.”

“I don’t feel like I deserve anything, not after the mess my father caused—and I helped him, even if I didn’t fully realize it.”

“We established that he lied to you, manipulated you. You were trying to save your sister. Everyone sees that now.”

“That doesn’t bring Cecily back. I’m so worried about her, Grigor. A whole week and no trace.”

I press my hand to her shoulder, urging her to sit on the sand. She lowers herself, hugging her knees. I settle next to her, ignoring the chill that seeps into my legs from the damp ground.

She rests her chin on her arms. “How can you be so calm? You’ve scoured every possible lead. You must be as frustrated as I am. Just for different reasons.”

I stare at the horizon. “I’m not calm, believe me. But I can’t afford to show fear or frustration. My men look to me for confidence. You look to me for hope.”

“Do you really think we’ll find her?”

“I know we will. I have a plan. Thorne thinks he’s hidden well, but we’ve severed his connections one by one. My men are tightening the net around him. It won’t be long.”

She looks at me, searching my face for reassurance. “You promise?”

“I promise,” I insist, letting my hand slip from her shoulder to her back, rubbing gently. “I won’t rest until she’s home. That’s a vow.”

A watery smile quirks her lips. “Thank you. For everything.”



We fall quiet for a while, listening to the waves. Then, I decide to bring up something else that's been on my mind. I clear my throat. "Have you thought about what you want to do... after we get Cecily back, after things settle?"

She looks puzzled. "You mean about the baby?" Her hand moves instinctively to her abdomen.

"That too," I answer, "but I mean your own goals. You told me once you wanted a career, a real job, far from the violence of this life. But we never got around to discussing it."

She chews on her lower lip before she says, "I used to dream of running my own business. Some kind of boutique or maybe a small consultancy. I studied business in college, after all. I'd like the flexibility, especially with the baby on the way."

"That's good. You should do that."

She arches a brow. "You'd support me? Even though I might be stepping away from your world and focusing on something else?"

"I don't expect you to be embroiled in Bratva dealings. You're my wife, but you're also your own person. If you want to run a business, do it. I'll do everything in my power to help."

A spark of hope lights her eyes. "Really?"

"Of course. This life we lead... It's harsh. You shouldn't have to be locked in it if you don't want to. And for our child's sake, having a more normal environment might be good."

"I was worried you'd expect me to play some mafia queen role or that you'd dismiss

my ambitions.”

I shake my head. “Never. You’re carrying my child. I want you to have a future you feel good about.”

A warm breeze sweeps by, stirring the edges of her hair around her face. She leans into me, resting her head on my shoulder. My heart hammers a bit at the closeness.

“I love you,” she says softly, pressing her cheek against my shoulder. “It’s strange how it happened, how we went from mutual resentment to this, but I do.”

I slide my arm around her waist, pulling her a little closer. “I love you too. It’s strange for me, maybe more than it is for you. I never thought I’d find someone I’d... let in. This life is so full of traitors and liars. It’s difficult to trust anyone enough to let them near your heart. But I can’t imagine losing you now.”

A shy smile curves her lips. “I can’t believe I almost didn’t let myself fall for you. But everything that’s happened, I guess it forced us to be honest.”

I nod and kiss the top of her head. “Honest. Yeah.” We linger on that word for a moment, letting it settle. A week ago, I was pounding on doors, thirsting for blood, and now I’m holding this woman close on a quiet beach, promising her a different kind of future.

She tilts her face up, and the expression she wears is open and vulnerable. The tension of the day recedes behind longing and trust. “Kiss me,” she whispers.

I cup her cheek gently. Our lips meet, and a gentle warmth pulses through me. No violence, no worry, just her. The taste of her tears mixes with the tenderness of the moment, and I lose myself in the feel of her mouth.

A sigh escapes her as she curls her free arm around my neck, deepening the kiss. Everything else fades to the back of my mind. All that matters is this moment, on this stretch of sand, under a canopy of stars, with Seraphina safe in my arms.

I hold her there, breathing in her presence, anchoring myself to her. Tomorrow, we'll strategize again. We'll rally the men, comb the city for Cecily, and corner Thorne wherever he's hiding. But right now, I let the waves wash away the nightmares, if only for a moment.

She slides her fingers through my hair, gripping the short strands as she hauls herself up. Then her legs are straddling me, and the warmth of her center presses against my groin. Our lips part, and a gasp of pleasure fills the air.

She kisses my neck, nipping my ear. Her body is a warm, inviting weight, and I let my hands roam over her curves, cupping her ass, stroking her thighs. She moans, and the sound shoots straight to my cock. My hunger rises, but this time, it isn't driven by anger like every other time we've been here. It's pure need.

Her hips grind against me, and I push back, wanting more. I tug at the hem of her shirt, dragging the fabric up so I can caress the bare skin beneath. The moon bathes her in silvery light, and her eyes glow. Her breasts strain against the bra she's wearing, and her nipples are hard. I cup her chest and squeeze.

She pushes my jacket off, then undoes my tie before tossing it somewhere up on the beach. She's moving fast, unbuttoning my shirt, tugging the fabric open so her fingers can skim over the lines of muscle and bone. I pull her mouth down to mine, kissing her deeply. She rocks against me, and I can feel the heat of her sex through her jeans and my slacks.

When she unhooks her bra, I break the kiss and move down, capturing her nipple with my teeth and biting gently. She whimpers and grips the back of my head,

keeping me close. My tongue swirls around her, and my hand finds her other breast, pinching the stiff peak.

Then her hands are moving to my pants, and I raise my hips so she can tug the garment down. The cool air hits my erection, and I groan, reaching for her waist. She pulls off her own clothes, and now there's nothing between us.

I lie back, and she leans down, kissing her way along my jaw and down my throat. She pauses to bite the hollow of my neck, and I grip her tighter, loving the way her body presses against me. Her breasts are heavy in my hands, her skin soft and warm. Her breath rushes past my ear, and a shiver rolls through me.

I turn us, flipping her so she's lying on the sand, and I'm hovering over her. Our mouths come together, and I swallow the little gasps that escape her.

"Grigor," she murmurs, stroking the hard muscles of my arms and shoulders. "Please."

"Tell me what you want," I growl.

"You." Her fingers trail over my hip and circle my cock. I grit my teeth, savoring the sensation. Then she guides me closer, lifting her hips. I press my forehead against hers, staring into her eyes as I push inside. She moans, and her eyelashes flutter.

I'm lost in her gaze, in the feel of her. We move together in a steady rhythm, and the world shrinks to a single point—the space where we're joined. Her legs hook around me, pulling me deeper, and I groan, thrusting hard. Her fingernails rake down my back, and her head tips back, baring her throat. I suck at the tender flesh, and her cry of pleasure fills the air.

Everything is hot and urgent. My muscles burn, but I don't slow. Her thighs clench,

and her back arches, pushing her breasts up. I claim one, taking her nipple into my mouth again, teasing her.

She's panting now, and her eyes are shut. The sight of her lost in the sensations drives me wild. I fuck her hard, needing to claim every inch of her, to make her mine, over and over. I want her to never doubt that we belong to each other.

The waves crash harder around us, and she moans, digging her heels into the small of my back. My heart thunders, and my cock throbs. She's so beautiful, and it feels like heaven being inside her.

"Fuck," she cries. "Fuck, yes. Don't stop."

I don't plan to. I move faster, driving deep. She's tightening around me, her body writhing, her voice ragged with bliss. And I'm coming apart, unable to hold back. The pleasure is building, and there's no stopping it.

We move faster, clinging to each other, desperate. Desperate to forget the danger, the violence, the fear. Desperate to remember that no matter what happens, we have each other. We have tonight.

The waves crash, and she cries out, shaking. Her core contracts, milking me, and the pressure explodes. I roar as the pleasure takes me, and I bury myself in her. She wraps her arms around my neck and kisses me, moaning as her body spasms.

We're both breathless and exhausted, but when I pull her against me, she tucks her head into the crook of my shoulder and sighs contentedly. We stay like that, her wrapped in my arms, as the sea and the sky swirl around us, a cocoon of safety and comfort.

Tomorrow, I'll go back to hunting. I'll fight, kill, and threaten—until Cecily is safe.

And then, I'll make sure Evan Thorne gets what's coming to him. No more hiding, no more tricks, no more bullshit. He'll pay for what he's done, and I'll revel in his screams.

But tonight, in this moment, none of that exists. All that matters is Seraphina and the baby growing inside her.

Tomorrow, we'll save her sister. But for now, the waves and the darkness protect us.

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:00 pm*

Applause roars through the ballroom as my name is announced. For a moment, I feel frozen in place, staring at the glittering award in my hands. “Best New Hotel—World Travel Awards,” the announcer says again when he hands me my trophy, as if I didn’t hear it clearly the first time. It feels surreal.

I turn my head toward the audience, and there they are—my entire world sitting in the third row. Grigor’s massive frame is unmistakable as he cheers, clapping harder than anyone else in the room. Beside him, our four-year-old son, Luka, is perched on his father’s lap. He’s clapping too, although his small hands move more out of mimicry than understanding.

Grigor’s eyes lock with mine, and his face lights up with a smile that’s so rare yet so utterly him. Pride radiates from him like heat, and I can’t stop myself from smiling back, tears threatening to spill.

“Thank you,” I say into the microphone, steadying my voice despite the swell of emotions. “This award isn’t just a recognition of hard work but a testament to the people who believed in me. To my incredible staff who pour their hearts into making our guests feel at home, thank you. And to my family—my husband and my son—you’re the reason this dream came true.”

Approval ripples through the room, but my eyes remain fixed on Grigor. His applause slows, but he doesn’t stop. He mouths something I can’t quite hear over the noise. It’s probably something smug like, “I told you so.” And for once, he’d be right.

A few years ago, the idea of opening a hotel felt like a dream too far out of reach. I’d studied business, sure, but my confidence was shaky, especially after years of being

caught between family feuds and survival. But Grigor wouldn't let me give up on the idea. He pushed, nudged, and occasionally downright demanded I follow through. I remember how he stood behind me at every meeting with architects and planners, how he vetted staff alongside me, offering a rare but genuine word of encouragement when I doubted myself.

Now, here I am, holding an award that proves all those sleepless nights and nerve-racking decisions were worth it. The hotel has flourished beyond my wildest dreams, becoming a beacon of luxury and comfort in a city that, for so long, only represented danger. Guests rave about the personalized touches, the serene design, and the impeccable service. Every detail is a reflection of what I'd hoped to create—a haven in a world that often feels too heavy.

And Grigor? He'd never admit it aloud, but I know he loves how proud I've become of it. Every time a review comes in, or a guest leaves glowing feedback, he's there to remind me, in his own brusque way, that I'm capable of more than I ever gave myself credit for.

The ceremony continues, but my mind stays on the two of them. Luka has somehow wriggled free and is now bouncing on Grigor's knee, clutching the small toy truck he refused to leave home without. Grigor catches him mid-wiggle and settles him back down, whispering something that earns a giggle. My heart swells at the sight.

By the time the evening wraps up, Luka is fast asleep in Grigor's arms. His soft snores are audible even over the chatter of lingering guests. We make our way to the car in comfortable silence, and our little boy keeps his tiny head nestled against Grigor's shoulder.

"He didn't last long," I remark as I slip into the passenger seat.

Grigor buckles Luka into his car seat and smirks as he climbs into the driver's side. "He tried. He kept asking me why so many people were clapping for you. Said he



wanted to clap louder.”

I laugh quietly, glancing back at our son. His mop of dark hair is messy, and his face is peaceful in sleep. “He’s like you. Can’t sit still for too long.”

Grigor chuckles. “He’s better looking, though.”

The drive home is quiet, and the rhythm of the car lulls me into a serene calm. The events of the night replay in my mind—the applause, the congratulatory handshakes, the feeling of standing on that stage. It’s hard to reconcile the woman who accepted that award with the one I used to be. The scared, uncertain woman who once believed her life would always be tethered to fear and manipulation.

Grigor parks in front of our house and carries Luka inside while I hold the door open. Once Luka is tucked into bed, Grigor returns to the living room, where I’m sitting on the sofa with my shoes kicked off and my award resting on the coffee table.

He lowers himself beside me and pulls me against his side. His arm wraps around my shoulders and he says, “You were incredible tonight.”

“So were you,” I reply, tilting my head to look up at him. “You were cheering louder than anyone else.”

“I’m proud of you,” he says simply, brushing a strand of hair from my face. “I always knew you could do this.”

I shake my head. “I didn’t. Not until you pushed me to believe in myself.”

“That’s what I’m here for.” He leans down to press a kiss to my temple. “To remind you how amazing you are.”

I laugh softly and rest my hand on his chest. “You’re a little biased.”

“Maybe.” His lips quirk in a smirk. “But I’m also right.”

We sit in companionable silence for a while as the weight of the evening settles into something warm and comfortable. I take a deep breath, feeling the words I’ve been holding in for weeks bubble to the surface.

“Grigor,” I begin quietly, adjusting to face him. He turns his attention fully to me. “There’s something I need to tell you.”

His brow furrows, but he nods for me to continue. “What is it?”

I reach for his hand, threading my fingers through his. “I’m pregnant.”

His lips part, and then a slow, disbelieving grin spreads across his face.

“Pregnant,” he repeats, as if testing the word on his tongue. “Are you serious?”

I nod, biting my lip as tears prick my eyes. “I found out a couple of weeks ago. I wasn’t sure when to tell you, but tonight felt... right.”

He stares at me for a moment longer before pulling me into a tight embrace. “You’re amazing,” he murmurs against my hair. “Absolutely amazing.”

I laugh, burying my face in his chest. “You’re not upset?”

“Upset?” He pulls back just enough to look at me. “Why would I be upset? This is the best news I’ve heard all year.”

A tear slips down my cheek, and he catches it with his thumb. “You’re happy?” I ask, needing to hear it again.

He cups my face. “I’m more than happy, Seraphina. I’m honored. And I swear to you,

I'll protect you and our kids with everything I have. You'll never have to doubt that."

Emotion swells in my chest, and I lean into his touch. "I know you will."

His lips meet mine, and the kiss is soft and full of promises. The weight of the past week fades into the background as we hold each other close with the future stretching out before us like the endless waves of the ocean.

This is our life now—imperfect, full of challenges, but undeniably ours.

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THE END