



# Bratva Hostage (Barkov Bratva Brothers #3)

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**Category:** Urban

**Description:** He locks me in his house, forces me to marry him, and impregnates me.

I don't need him to save me, but he says it's for my own good.

I'm his hostage, trapped in the confines of his house.

I'm his forced bride, my belly growing with his baby.

I'm not a docile damsel. I'm strong and independent.

But he makes me a pawn in his Bratva games.

He makes me a caged animal in his mind control scheme.

I'm nothing but a prisoner, a Bratva bride without power.

But the worst of it all is that my body is betraying me.

It wants to be powerless, so that he can control it.

It wants to be toyed with, so that it belongs to him.

He took my freedom and opened my bruised heart.

Can he be the Bratva daddy I crave?

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):** 30

## Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:33 pm*

My back hurts from sleeping on a battered sofa, but I've had worse accommodations this past month.

My father, Evan Thorne, drags me from one hiding place to another, claiming it's for my protection, even though I know better.

This is about his vendetta against the Barkov family, not about my safety.

Every time I open my eyes in a new location, I feel more like a possession than a daughter.

I'm not sure what this structure used to be.

The floor is warped, and the walls are covered in stains.

There's a pungent odor that makes my nose burn, and the few windows are blocked off by plywood.

My father's men patrol outside, making it impossible for me to slip away.

I've tried escaping twice. The second time earned me a bruise on my hip when a bodyguard threw me down.

My father claimed it was my own fault for trying to run.

He expects me to wait around like a tame pet.

It's worked, to some extent. I've learned to keep still and quiet, to act compliant so no one suspects I'm gathering fragments of information. If I'm to survive—and possibly free myself—I need every advantage.

I think of Seraphina, my older sister, who ended up married to Grigor Barkov for my sake. If she sacrificed her freedom to shield me from Father, then I owe it to her to stay strong. I might be stuck under his authority now, but I refuse to let him break me.

Footsteps echo from a dark corridor, and when I look up, a guard appears. "Your father wants to see you."

I rise slowly and follow. After a month of captivity, I've grown used to these abrupt summons. Usually, he demands that I sit quietly while he outlines his next move against the Barkovs or scolds me for any sign of rebellion.

We reach a cramped area that might have once been an office but now contains only a table and two mismatched chairs.

A small lamp on the tabletop sends faint illumination in a cone, but the rest of the place is cloaked in murk.

He doesn't look up until the guard steps outside, leaving me alone with him.

He flips a page and sets it aside, and he scowls when he finally meets my eyes. "We can't stay here much longer."

I'm not surprised. Every time he thinks the Barkovs might close in, he panics and relocates to another hole in the ground.

"Where are we going this time?" I ask, trying to sound neutral.

“You know I’m not telling you that. Get ready. If I see even a hint of insolence, I’ll lock you in the trunk like cargo. We leave in fifteen minutes.”

Without a word, I turn toward the corridor.

As I walk, I pass a side window boarded with two thick planks, a reminder that Father leaves no path open for me to vanish.

His men cluster near a battered van, loading crates.

My father has allies scattered across the region, fueling his aim to undermine the Barkov empire.

Lately, I’ve overheard him mention an upcoming shipping route he wants to sabotage, but the specifics are limited.

I return to the sofa and pick up my small duffel. My bag holds a few clothing items we’ve picked up along the way. The guard from earlier is stationed close by. He says nothing, he just glances in my direction whenever I move.

When the guard signals, I follow him outside. Father lingers near an old SUV with tinted windows. Four men circle the vehicle and scan the surroundings before they open the doors.

He waves me over. “In the back,” he orders. “No talking.”

When I climb onto the back seat, I keep my duffel on my lap. Father sits up front beside a driver I’ve only seen once before. Another vehicle idles behind us, presumably holding more of his men. Two months ago, I couldn’t have imagined traveling in these conditions. Now, it’s my normal routine.

We lurch onto a cracked road. I remain quiet as I tune into my father's conversation. He speaks to the driver about timing and possible watchers. The driver states they've changed course twice to ensure no one is tailing us. Father snorts at that suggestion, then tosses a glare over his shoulder.

My thoughts drift to Seraphina again. I imagine her standing in the Barkov mansion, insisting they search for me. She wouldn't rest until she knew my fate. That hope keeps me from falling into total despair.

Time grinds on. We pass crumbling buildings and vehicles left to rot in empty parking lots.

We pull off the main highway onto a rural route, and about half an hour later, we stop at a decaying property marked by rusted gates.

Father steps out and eyes the perimeter.

Men from the second vehicle emerge to open the gates, revealing a single-story dwelling with boarded windows.

"Bring her," Father tells one of the guards, jerking his chin at me.

I exit the SUV, duffel in hand. The breeze cuts against my cheeks. Soldiers circle the place, checking for signs of intruders. Father, phone in hand, confers with a tall man who seems to handle logistics.

I'm directed inside. A corridor leads to several small rooms, all empty except for discarded furniture.

The guard picks one near the back and gestures for me to enter.

It has a torn cot, a bucket in the corner, and a battered nightstand.

I swallow my revulsion at the thought of having to use that bucket if we stay overnight.

This is my new prison, at least until Father becomes suspicious of the next rumored threat.

He appears at the doorway minutes later. “Get comfortable. We may remain here for a few days. My men will keep watch, and if you try anything, I’ll have them restrain you.”

Anger burns in my chest. “I’m not the one causing trouble. You are.”

A flash of annoyance crosses his face. “You should be thankful you’re alive, Cecily. If the Barkovs get hold of you, they might not treat you as kindly as I do.”

“Kindly?” I nearly choke on the word. “You’re using me as a hostage. How is that kind?”

He stares, then softens his tone a fraction. “This is bigger than your feelings. If you cooperate, I’ll make sure you survive. If you defy me, I can’t guarantee what happens.”

He leaves before I can reply, locking the door from the outside. I wait until his footsteps fade, then sink onto the cot. My head pounds with frustration. Is there any chance Seraphina knows where I am?

At least I know she’s resourceful. If she has any inkling of my whereabouts, she’ll push the Barkovs to rescue me.

She was always protective, scolding anyone who messed with me.

Now, she's tied to a man known for crushing enemies.

Part of me wonders if she's found a measure of peace in that marriage, or if she's enduring it purely for my sake.

I used to resent her for seeming distant, but now I realize how much weight she carried for both of us.

Grigor and his brothers are ruthless enough to challenge Father.

Of course, if he suspects they're coming, he'll tear me away to yet another hole.

My father is cunning, but so are Grigor and his brothers.

The moment they pinpoint him, a war is inevitable.

Father must realize that too. Perhaps that's why he's so restless, always searching for a better hiding place.

Eventually, my eyes grow heavy. The stress has worn me down. I rest on the cot, tucking my arms under my head. My dreams are jumbled: memories of Seraphina braiding my hair when I was younger, Father shouting in the distance, the Barkov name echoing like a threat I can't outrun.

I wake to find the place silent, except for a faint thud in the hallway.

My guess is that guards are shifting positions or unloading supplies.

I sit up, massaging the crick in my neck.

A wave of emptiness settles over me. Days blur together in these hideouts.

It's always the same pattern of waiting, traveling, waiting again.

Time edges onward. A guard drops off a small plate of canned food.

It's salty, but it keeps the hunger pangs away.

I force it down, telling myself I need strength to endure.

After eating, I pace around, listening for any clue about my father's next meeting.

Nothing. The men outside speak too quietly to catch anything of use.

Eventually, I settle on the edge of the cot and fidget with a loose thread in my shirt.

My father said we'd be staying here for a few days, and I wonder if he truly believes this location is secure.

He must, or he wouldn't take the risk of letting his men unpack the car.

He's always on edge, always suspecting that the Barkov family might arrive at any moment.

A commotion in the corridor makes me look up.

Two guards exchange curt words about a delivery.

I catch only fragments: something about extra ammunition, maybe a crate that needs to be unloaded.



I doubt it's good news for me. More supplies just give Father another reason to dig in.

He might even plan a direct strike against the Barkovs from here.

I haven't gathered enough details to confirm, but I wouldn't put it past him.

The door creaks open, and Father appears without knocking. "You look restless," he observes. "Not planning anything foolish, I hope."

I straighten my spine. "I'm not the fool here."

He sighs. "You never did know when to hold your tongue." He steps further into the room and crosses his arms. "We have more men arriving tonight. I suggest you stay out of their way."

"More men?" My stomach tightens. "Why?"

"Don't pretend you care about my business. But if you must know, I'm reinforcing our position. We'll stay put for a while. If the Barkovs think they can corner me, they're wrong."

I bite back a retort. Challenging him openly won't change anything, and it might provoke another lecture or worse. Instead, I keep my tone neutral. "What do you want from me?"

"Cooperation. And silence. You may hate me, but we're still family." He turns to leave, pausing to glance back. "Don't get ideas about sending messages or sneaking out. My guards won't let you take two steps beyond that door."

The instant he's gone, I exhale through clenched teeth as fury thrums in my veins. Family? He threw that word around even when he bartered Seraphina away to the

Barkovs, and now he's doing the same by holding me captive. If this is family, I'd rather not claim him at all.

I move to the window and nudge the plywood a fraction, hoping to see something of the outside.

All I see is darkness and a swath of dead grass.

No sign of deliverance. Still, I refuse to despair.

Seraphina once managed to forge a path through his traps.

She won't stand idly by while I'm stuck in this dead-end situation.

A rap on the door startles me. It's the same guard who brought my meal. "You good?" he asks. It feels like a pointless question, but I nod anyway. He disappears into the hallway, leaving me alone again with my tangled thoughts.

I settle onto the cot, pressing my fists to my temples.

I can't allow Father's threats to consume me.

If I'm not careful, resentment and hopelessness will bury every ounce of courage I have left.

Instead, I hold onto the hope that Seraphina is out there, working behind the scenes.

She may be forced to play by Barkov rules, but she's never lacked determination.

Somehow, I'll endure. Even if Father locks every door, even if he rallies an army, he won't break my resolve. And if the Barkovs arrive in force—or if Seraphina manages

to pry me out of here herself—I'll be ready. I just have to hang on a little longer.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:33 pm*

Evan Thorne's name has been circling my desk for four months, and every new report feels like a personal affront.

I hover over the worn folder spread out in front of me, rereading details on his activities.

He's clever, I'll grant him that, but he's also stupid enough to draw unwanted attention.

We just haven't been quick enough to corner the old bastard. Today, that changes.

I reach for the top page and skim the latest intelligence.

He's been moving from one hiding spot to another, dragging his daughter, Cecily, along.

If it weren't for my sister-in-law, Seraphina, I might have let him self-destruct on his own. But Seraphina cares deeply about her younger sister. We are family now, which means I can't allow that concern to go unanswered.

A knock on the door interrupts me. My brother Maksim enters, carrying a slim file. He places it on my table and fixes me with a direct look.

"New developments?" I ask.

"We suspect Thorne has hired extra muscle. One of our informants caught wind of a deal he made to acquire more guns."

“Perfect.” I tap the open folder with two fingers. “He’s arming himself for something bigger, and we can’t let him gain the upper hand. We need to secure Cecily before he turns her into a bargaining chip.”

Maksim gives a grim smile. “We both know he already has.” He thumbs the edge of the file. “Seraphina is anxious. She asked me for an update just this morning.”

“That’s why we’re launching the extraction now. No more delays. Is Aleksei ready?”

Maksim inclines his head. “He’s coordinating the team. Akim is prepping transport. Nikolai is tying up loose ends from the last run.”

“Good. Thorne’s threats have spread far enough. Time we show him what happens when he targets our family.”

Maksim and I stride out of the small office.

We pass a row of men stationed by the hallway walls.

Each belongs to our specialized group within the Barkov Bratva, trained for swift operations.

My father once called us the blade of the family, though I keep that memory locked away.

My father is gone, and now the Barkov legacy rests with Aleksei, Grigor, Nikolai, Akim, Maksim, and me.

We enter a large storeroom where Aleksei paces around a small table strewn with blueprints. He looks up at us when we approach.

“How’s your patience?” he asks, voice dry.

“Worn out.” I point to the largest blueprint. “That’s our primary lead on Thorne’s location?”

Aleksei nods. “We narrowed it down to a property near the eastern perimeter. Our men spotted extra patrols in that sector.” He slides a photograph across the table.

“Abandoned warehouse, battered trucks out front. Word is Thorne’s men have been loading them with small arms. They’re probably inside. ”

The building resembles a decaying fortress with walls riddled with grime and corners blocked by junk. “Entrance points?”

“One main gate, plus a side door that looks welded shut from the outside. We’ll have to approach from the front or create our own breach.”

Maksim folds his arms. “We have the manpower to do either.”

Aleksei presses his palm flat on the blueprint. “We do, but we’ll need to avoid heavy casualties. We must retrieve Cecily safely.”

“That’s the priority,” I agree.

Aleksei’s phone buzzes, and he answers, listens briefly, then hangs up. “They’re ready.”

I give a curt nod. “Let’s get this done.”

We file out of the storeroom and into a waiting line of black SUVs.

The men load up quickly. I take the front passenger seat in the lead vehicle, while Maksim sits in the back.

Aleksei and a second squad follow behind.

We pull away from our safehouse, merging onto a worn stretch of road.

The destination is about forty minutes away, although that can change if we encounter any obstacles.

Thorne likely has at least ten to fifteen men. Armed. Desperate. They'll fight to keep Cecily hidden, especially if they fear losing their leverage. I plan to show no mercy to anyone who stands between me and that girl's freedom.

Maksim's phone chirps. He answers, then says, "Akim says the perimeter scouts confirm unusual activity. Thorne's men have doubled the watch. They're nervous."

I snort. "They should be." Then I twist around to look at him. "Once we confirm Cecily's location, you secure the exit, yes?"

"I'll cover the retreat. We want Thorne to realize how outmatched he is."

Our caravan speeds through side roads, passing silent blocks and rust-eaten fences.

When we near the target zone, Aleksei's SUV moves to flank our position.

I roll down the window and look for any sign of watchers.

I see an old billboard, a collapsed building, and faint silhouettes near chain-link barriers. That has to be Thorne's sentry crew.

I gesture for the driver to park behind a damaged wall. We kill the engine, and Aleksei's vehicle pulls up close. We exit and gather behind rubble.

Aleksei speaks in a low voice. "We have three visible guards by the front gate, but there could be more inside."

"We should send a small diversion to draw them out. Once they engage, the main squad will push through."

"I'll handle the outside watchers with a handful of men," Maksim offers. "Dimitri, you lead the entry team."

Aleksei turns to me. "Use the confusion to find Cecily. We'll pin Thorne if possible, but don't risk losing her."

I unclip my holster and check my pistol. "Understood. Let's move."

Maksim signals five men to follow him around the perimeter.

I pick four to join me at the front gate.

Aleksei remains at the fallback point with the rest, ready to converge once the gate is clear.

I crouch behind a rusted barrel, heart steady.

A younger version of me might have relished this, but now I feel only resolve.

The Barkov family has lost enough. We won't lose anyone else.

Maksim's voice crackles through my earpiece. "Going in."



I glance at my men. “On my count.”

A distant shout pierces the air, followed by gunfire that shatters the stillness.

Thorne’s sentries scramble to see the attackers.

That’s our cue. I rise from cover and dash toward the gate.

Two of my men flank me, weapons drawn. The first guard spins around, and I pull the trigger, aiming for his torso.

He drops with a grunt, leaving the path open for us to push the gate aside.

We slip through a gap in the fence. Another guard leaps from behind a broken crate, firing blindly. Bullets spark off twisted metal. I roll behind a stack of pallets, then lean out and return fire. He stumbles, clutching his side. One of my men finishes him off with two quick shots.

“Push forward!” I bark.

When we reach the doors, they’re barricaded from the inside. One of my men, Viktor, pulls a small breaching device from his pack. He attaches it near the hinges, and we step back. A muffled blast slams the doors outward, leaving a gap large enough to slip through.

“Go,” I command, gesturing for the men to move ahead. I follow closely behind. Inside, the hallway reeks of mildew and sweat. Overturned crates line the walls, and heavy footfalls echo from deeper in the building.

Shots ring out from behind a corner. We press against the wall just as another volley rips the air.

Viktor curses under his breath. I signal for two men to lay down cover fire, then duck around the corner.

A lone enemy stands there, rifle trembling in his grip, eyes wide at the sight of us. I shoot first. He collapses.

“Keep moving,” I snap. “Cecily must be deeper in. Maksim said Thorne’s men escorted a captive to an inner room.”

We hurry past a storage bay filled with rusting shelves. Broken glass litters the floor, crunching underfoot. Each step draws us closer to the heart of Thorne’s hideout. My earpiece crackles. Maksim’s voice: “Perimeter is secure. We’re coming in. Watch your flank.”

“Roger.” I wave my team forward. “Aleksei, how are we looking?”

His voice cuts in. “No sign of Thorne himself yet, but we’ve pinned three of his men. Finish inside. We’ll guard your rear.”

We advance down a second corridor that branches left and right. “We’ll check the next corridor. If that’s empty, we circle back to the other side. She has to be in one of these rooms.”

Gunfire erupts down the right hallway, and a pained cry follows.

My heart lurches. That could be Cecily in danger, or it could be Thorne’s men staging a last stand.

I signal the group to press on. We reach a locked door.

Voices drift from inside. One is definitely male. That could be Thorne or a lieutenant.

One of my men sets a charge on the lock, and a small explosion rattles the door.

I storm inside, pistol at the ready. Two men stand behind a desk, rifles raised.

I shoot the first one in the shoulder, sending him crashing into the wall.

The second returns fire, forcing me behind a filing cabinet.

My team fans out, pinning him from two angles.

Bullets tear into crates and metal surfaces.

Then, the gunman staggers from a shot to the leg, dropping his rifle with a clatter.

“Where’s Cecily Thorne?” I demand. He clutches his thigh and spits at the ground, refusing to speak, so I press my pistol to his forehead. “Answer.”

He glowers but clenches his jaw, glaring like he’d rather die than give in.

A scuffle behind me draws my attention. Viktor has the second man pinned, the one I clipped in the shoulder. Blood smears his shirt. Viktor growls, “Talk. Now.”

The wounded man whimpers. “Basement... She’s in the basement.”

“Which door?”

“Next hallway, last door on the left,” he gasps. “Stairs going down.”

I nod to Viktor. He knocks the man out cold with a crack to the back of the skull, then ties his hands. The other gunman slumps, likely unconscious from blood loss. Good enough. I have my target.

“Basement,” I say to the men. “Let’s go.”

We double back to the corridor, collecting the two who’d guarded our flank.

We spot a large metal door at the end, exactly as described.

Locked, of course. One of my men plants a small pry bar.

I assist, yanking the handle until it snaps.

The door creaks open, revealing a narrow stairwell.

The air is stale, reeking of old dampness.

We descend quietly, rifles raised. Halfway down, we hear footsteps overhead—Aleksei’s group entering the building. Good timing. At the bottom of the stairs, a single guard sits on an overturned crate, chewing gum. He sees us too late. I fire once. He tumbles over, completely limp.

We hurry past him toward a row of doors. My earpiece crackles again, this time with Aleksei’s voice: “We have Thorne cornered on the main floor, in an office. I’m giving him a chance to surrender.”

“Keep me updated,” I reply. “We’re about to secure Cecily.”

I test the door. Locked. I step aside and let Viktor’s partner attach a small charge.

The door blows inward. A startled yelp comes from inside.

I step through the smoke and see Cecily Thorne in the corner with her arms raised in defense and her body pressed against the wall.

Not cowering—bracing. Ready to take a hit if it comes.

I recognize her from the pictures Seraphina showed me, but she isn't what I expected.

Medium-length, honey-brown hair that hangs loose and tangled around her shoulders, with strands clinging to her skin.

Her hazel eyes catch the little bit of light down here, shifting between green and gold as she moves her head.

She's smaller than Seraphina—petite but not delicate—built with a kind of wiry strength that doesn't break under pressure.

She's been here too long.

Bruises mark her wrists. There's a split at the corner of her mouth, and dried blood stains her skin. Her clothes, an oversized shirt and jeans that don't fit quite right, hang loosely. Signs of weight loss over months of running and captivity.

She should look fragile. She doesn't.

Even now, with nothing but bare walls at her back and no clear way out, there's fire in her stare. A woman raised in violence, who knows exactly how dangerous men like me can be. And yet, she meets my gaze without a hint of fear.

Something coils in my chest, but I shake it loose and lower my pistol. "Cecily, we're here to get you out."

She blinks rapidly, as though uncertain whether to trust me.

"It's Dimitri Barkov," I clarify. "Seraphina's brother-in-law."

At that, her eyes widen. She rises on shaky legs. “You found me?”

“We did.” I beckon her forward. “Can you walk?”

She swallows. “Yes... I think so.” She edges closer. I notice more bruises on her wrists. That only increases my resolve to see Thorne pay for this.

One of my men checks the hallway. “All clear,” he informs us.

I set a steady hand on Cecily’s elbow. “Stay behind us. We’re leaving.

She nods. “Where’s my father?”

“Upstairs. My brothers have him cornered.” I pause, searching her face. “Don’t worry. You’re our priority.”

We guide Cecily out of the basement, stepping past the guard I shot. She doesn’t flinch at the sight. Doesn’t slow down. The girl has been in the thick of this world long enough to know what survival looks like.

Upstairs, more of our men sweep the halls. Aleksei steps out from a side room, and I note the irritation carved deep into every line on his face.

“Thorne slipped through a hidden exit,” he grumbles. “Breach in the wall. Must’ve had it set up for a quick escape.”

I let out a sharp exhale. Not unexpected for a worm like him, but still infuriating. “Doesn’t matter. We have her.”

She stands between me and Viktor, and Aleksei meets her eyes. “You’ll be safe now.”

She doesn't look convinced. "Safe," she snickers.

"Your father's on the run again," I point out. "Without you. No leverage. He'll be desperate."

Her posture loosens a bit, but she nods. She understands what that means.

"He won't stop," she fills in the gaps. "Not until I'm back under his control."

She's right. Evan Thorne doesn't let go of what's his, not unless he's forced to. If I let her walk out of here now, she won't get far before he finds her again.

I can't allow that.

I glance at Aleksei, and in one look, we settle the matter. This isn't just about Cecily anymore. Keeping her close is the only way to neutralize Thorne's power. She's the last chain he has to this war. We take her out of play, and his grip weakens.

I look back at her now. "We'll protect you."

"Oh, really?" she scoffs. "And how do you plan to do that?"

"You're coming with me," I declare.

A beat of silence. Then she lifts her chin and opens her mouth to say something. No doubt to refuse and make this difficult, if the look on her face is any indication. But I don't give her time to argue. I turn and nod toward the door. "Let's go."

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:33 pm*

I jolt awake, disoriented by the lavish bed and velvet linens wrapped around me.

This isn't one of my father's grimy hideouts, where worn sofas double as mattresses and guards hover outside every door.

It takes me a minute, but once the memory returns, my heart plummets into my stomach.

Dimitri Barkov and his men stormed the warehouse.

Gunshots. Shouts. Then the moment he told me in that icy voice, I was coming with him.

I sit up and rest my back against a tufted headboard.

Everything in this room screams wealth: gilded frames on the walls, an ornate chest of drawers, and a thick rug underfoot to complete the opulent picture.

I've spent so long on the move, never comfortable, never safe, and certainly never surrounded by anything this pristine, and it makes me want to tear the room apart to find its hidden rot.

There must be rot. Nothing so beautiful can be genuine.

A rap on the door startles me, making me flinch. "Who is it?"

No immediate reply. Then a muffled voice says, "Breakfast is here. May I enter?"



I consider refusing, but my growling stomach betrays me. “Fine.”

A bodyguard enters, holding a tray with a covered plate and a glass. He places it on a small table and then steps back. “Is there anything else you need?”

My feet sink into the rug as I move to the table. “Where am I?”

“The Barkov estate.”

“Where’s Dimitri?”

“In a meeting.”

“Then tell him I want to see my sister. Now.”

The man gives a stiff nod and steps out, leaving me alone with the tray. I lift the lid and find eggs, toast, and fruit—simple enough to look safe. It smells tempting, but I only nibble a corner of the toast. It’s all I can stomach right now.

I cross to the window, where thick drapes block any clear view of the grounds. When I slide the fabric aside, I see an expanse of green, neatly trimmed hedges, and a tall fence in the distance—a fortress disguised as a mansion—luxury and danger, side by side.

I remember the moment Dimitri’s men led me out of the warehouse.

How Dimitri kept his hand on my arm, guiding me to a black SUV as if I had no say in the matter.

He’s tall, with lean muscle and effortless control, built for action, not excess.

With a broad chest and defined arms, he possesses a kind of strength that doesn't need to be flaunted to be felt.

His dark brown hair is cropped short, framing a face that looks like it was carved from stone—strong jaw, hard mouth, and pale gray eyes that miss nothing.

He moves with a sense of purpose. He has a destination. Me.

My heart races just thinking about him. The man is dangerous.

Every fiber in me knows that. It was obvious in the way he handled his pistol.

And the fact that he's one of the most good-looking men I've ever seen doesn't matter.

Not a bit. He's not the type of man a woman should notice, not unless she's prepared to face the consequences.

He never offered an apology for the violence, never said a word about my father's men left bleeding on the floor. In his world, that was routine.

A slow anger builds in my chest. My father's thirst for destruction and the Barkovs' savage response are two sides of the same twisted coin, and I'm caught in the middle. Before I can determine my next move, the door opens again. This time, it's Dimitri.

I glare at him. "Where's Seraphina? I assumed when you took me here, I'd get to see her."

"She's secure."

I stand now and stomp closer to him. "I want to see her."

“Not possible.”

“That’s not your call to make.”

“You’re right. It’s Aleksei’s, and he’s made it. Your father is at large, and I have no doubt his men will track you here. Seraphina is in a safehouse with Grigor watching over her. I won’t compromise that location by letting you wander wherever you please.”

My next breath comes out more like a growl than an exhale. “You’re just as controlling as he is. All this talk about ‘safety’ is merely another chain.”

“I’m nothing like your father. He used you like a chess piece. I’m trying to protect you.”

“Protect me?” I screech as I point at the door. “Then let me go. You said you rescued me from him, so I should be free.”

“If I let you walk out, Thorne will scoop you up again. You know it.”

He’s right, but I refuse to concede. “Maybe you want me here to hold over his head.”

“Do you honestly believe your sister would tolerate that? She asked us to find you because she wants you safe.”

“Safe from him or safe for you?” My voice rises, and I jab my finger into his chest. “I’ve seen how you operate. You’re not some benevolent savior.”

The man doesn’t even blink at me as I poke him a third time. He just watches me as though my tantrum is a mildly interesting television program. Jesus. Doesn’t anything rattle him?

He takes my wrist, stopping the next jab.

The grip isn't painful. I could pull free if I tried.

He doesn't even tighten his fingers, but the sheer strength behind the hand makes the point.

If he wants, he could snap the bone. I feel his rough skin, the power there.

It's not like the violence my father's thugs displayed, but it's no less deadly.

"Someone will come by to take you on a brief tour of the estate," he explains. "I assume you'd rather not be cooped up here all day."

He waits, but when I don't respond, he leaves without another word. My anger makes my cheeks burn. That man's arrogance makes me want to throw something, and I'm not the hot-headed type.

I stride over to the door and test the handle.

Locked from the outside. Naturally. I clench my teeth and pace the room.

Is this really any different from my father's hideouts?

New prison, same bars. I'm not so naive as to believe the Barkovs do anything out of pure goodwill.

Not even if my sister is technically one of them now.

The hours seem to crawl by, but eventually, there's another knock, and after a click, a different man steps in. He's older than Dimitri, with graying hair. "I'm Mr. Watley,

the Barkovs' butler. If you'd be so kind as to follow me, I've been asked to show you around, Miss Thorne."

I follow him out, if for no other reason than that I'm going stir-crazy in this room.

The estate is exactly what I expected—too polished, too perfect.

Everything is curated, from the art on the walls to the perfectly arranged furniture.

The design is meant to impress and intimidate, and it succeeds.

The guards stand at doorways and along the perimeter. Their presence is as much a part of the décor as the chandeliers hanging from the ceiling. Some wear suits, while others are dressed casually, but they all share the same demeanor—watchful, armed, and ready.

This is not a home. It is a fortress.

The older man leads me past a dining hall with an impossibly long table, a sitting room with a marble fireplace, and a library filled with books I doubt most of these men have ever touched. Everything is immaculate, without a speck of dust or a cushion out of place.

"This way." Watley gestures toward another corridor.

I keep moving, memorizing every exit and possible escape route. Cameras sit at key points, barely noticeable but there. The windows are large, but the thick curtains suggest they are meant for show, not function. I can already tell they won't open easily.

I file away every detail because, at some point, I will need them.

At the far end of the hall, we stop at a set of double doors. He nods toward them. “This leads to the gardens. You may walk the grounds during daylight, but security will be present at all times.”

In other words, I am allowed outside, but I will never be alone.

I push open the doors and step out onto the porch.

The estate’s grounds are just as fussy as the view from my room suggested.

The lawns are trimmed to perfection, and the hedges have been shaped down to the last detail.

Stone paths curve through flower beds that look like something out of a magazine.

If I were anywhere else, I might have admired it.

A few guards stand near the gate, and when I move, their focus shifts toward me. One stands by the main path, and another loiters near the tall iron fence. Their stance may be casual, but it is not careless.

I stroll toward a stone bench near a fountain, and as I do, I take my time. If they plan to watch me, then I will let them. I refuse to pace the bars of this cage like a restless prisoner. This place was designed to keep people in just as much as it was meant to keep threats out.

Movement near the entrance of the house draws my attention, and when I glance up, I see Dimitri standing on the steps, just watching me.

I force myself to look away first. I refuse to let him think he affects me, even though awareness prickles at the back of my neck like an unwelcome guest. I hate the way he

carries himself, how his presence shifts the entire energy of a space.

I hate the way he looks at me, as if he has already decided I belong here.

I take a slow breath, steadying myself, and rise from the bench. That is enough exploring for now.

As I walk back toward the house, I keep my chin high and my expression blank, and Dimitri's gaze follows me the entire way inside.

The older man leads me back to my room, and after he nods once, he disappears down the hall. The walls feel closer now. The locked doors, the guards, the invisible barriers—everything presses in at once until I'm gasping for air.

I need to get out of here.

Not just for me. For Seraphina.

I don't believe for a second that she's safe just because the Barkovs say she is. She's in a safehouse, which means she's still a target. And I don't trust these men to protect her.

My frustration builds until I have to stop moving.

I press my hands against my temples, trying to keep my thoughts from spiraling.

Before I can regain control, a knock sounds at the door.

I whirl around, and it opens just enough for Watley to step inside.

He carries something small in his hand, and as he approaches, he holds it out.

“A call for you, Miss Thorne.”

I stare at the phone, and when I realize what he’s saying, my heart hammers against my ribcage. “From who?”

“Your sister. Mr. Barkov asked that I connect you with her for a moment.”

A part of me wonders about Dimitri’s sudden generosity, but the desire to hear Seraphina’s voice drowns out any doubts. I snatch the phone from his hand, and when I see Seraphina’s name on the screen, my breath catches in my throat.

“Seraphina.”

“Oh my god.” Her voice is saturated with relief. “Cecily. Are you okay? Are you hurt?”

I let out a shaky breath. “I’m fine.” My fingers tighten around the phone. “Where are you? Tell me where you are, and I’ll come to you.”

“Cecily...you can’t.”

My stomach knots so tight I think I might double over. “What do you mean I can’t?”

“It’s too dangerous,” she explains. “Dimitri told me you’re at the estate, and that’s the safest place for you right now.”

“Dimitri told you?” Heat flashes through me. “And we’re just supposed to listen to him?”

“Yes.” She exhales, and the sound grates against my nerves. “Cecily, I know you don’t trust them, but you should. Grigor—”



“I don’t give a damn about Grigor.” My voice rises, and my legs refuse to stay still. I pace faster. “I care about you . You’re my sister, and they’re keeping us apart. How am I supposed to trust them when they won’t even let me see you?”

“They’re doing it to protect us.”

I let out a bitter laugh. “You sound just like them.”

She falls silent for a long moment before she says, “I know you’re angry. But listen to me, okay? They could’ve left you with our father. But they didn’t. You’re alive right now because of them.”

I squeeze my eyes shut. “And you’re okay with that? You’re okay being part of their world?”

“Of course I am,” she replies. “Grigor is my husband, and I love him. If that means remaining in this...mafia nonsense, then fine. Besides, I don’t have a choice if I want to stay safe from our father. Neither do you.”

The truth of that slams into me so hard I have to reach out and steady myself on a dresser. Still, I’m not ready to resign myself to a life constrained to a Barkov. “I’m getting out of here, Seraphina. I’ll find a way.”

“No, you won’t.” A plea slips into her words. “Not because they won’t let you, but because you know you’re safer there. Please, just...try, for now. Try to trust them.”

I end the call before she can say anything else.

I cannot listen to my sister defend the men who have trapped me in this estate, the ones who act like they get to dictate my future. I slam the phone onto the nightstand and press the heels of my hands against my eyes.

Try to trust them?

Not a chance.

The phone buzzes again, and when I see Seraphina's name, my fingers curl into a fist. I let it ring until it stops.

The longer I sit here, the more aware I become of the details around me. The wardrobe is filled with clothes that fit perfectly. The food they brought this morning was fresh, even though I refused to eat it. When I walked through the estate, no one barked orders at me.

Everything is designed to make me comfortable.

It doesn't work.

I cannot pretend this is a kinder prison, even if the cell is more luxurious. And no matter what my sister says, I cannot stay here and let the Barkovs control me.

The moment an opportunity arises, I will get out of here.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:33 pm*

I stand on the balcony and inspect every corner of the courtyard for the third time in the past hour.

The men are in position, and the security cameras feed constant updates to the guards inside.

None of this feels sufficient. Evan Thorne has a way of slipping through defenses, and I refuse to give him the chance to harm anyone here.

I step inside, and I find Maksim by the marble staircase, where he discusses the new patrol schedule with two of our men. I clear my throat, and they stop talking.

“Have the north and west walls been reinforced?”

He nods. “Extra men are on rotation. No one enters or leaves without clearance.”

“Good. Send me the final roster by tonight.” I send a quick glance at the men, give them a look they know well enough by now, and they disperse.

I’m about to return to the balcony when I spot movement at the far end of the hallway. Cecily stands there, studying the exit door that leads to the rear gardens. Her gaze is fixed on the handle as though she’s trying to judge if she can get past the men stationed outside.

I approach quietly, and she whirls around when she senses me.

“Trying to find a weak point?”

She lifts her chin in that same defiant way I've come to expect from her, and her honey-colored ponytail slips over her shoulder. "None of your business."

I stuff my hands into my pockets and take one step closer. "I believe it is my business if you plan to walk out of my home and straight into danger after I gave your sister my word I'd look out for you."

She scoffs. "You think I'm safer here, locked up like a prisoner?"

I clench my jaw. "You're not locked up. You have the freedom to move around the estate."

"That's not freedom. That's a gilded cage."

She tries to brush past me, and I shift to block her path. The look on her face is positively murderous, and those hazel eyes blaze.

"If you walk outside, you could end up in your father's hands again. He won't show you mercy."

She stares at me, and her outrage seems to soften for one moment. Then she exhales hard. "I've been forced to witness his violence, and now I'm forced to witness yours. It's all the same."

I grit my teeth because I don't have a simple rebuttal. She's right. Her father and I are part of the same world, even if we're on opposite sides of it. "I'm not him."

She lowers her line of sight to the floor, and I notice the faint tremor in her shoulders. "Then stop trying to control me."

Something about the sadness in her voice fills me with the strangest urge to comfort

her, and the need unsettles me. I'm not the sort of man who soothes. I'm the one who makes sure problems are dealt with.

I want to explain that I'm doing this for her protection, but that phrase has lost its meaning for her. Instead, I cross my arms over my chest to keep myself from reaching out for her and say, "Step away from the door. If you want to go outside, I'll find you an escort."

She presses her lips into a thin line, but she steps back. Then, she makes her way down the hall and disappears around the corner.

I force myself to refocus on the security measures.

I speak with two guards, adjusting their shifts and reminding them to keep their eyes open for any suspicious activity.

The entire time, my mind drifts to Cecily.

Part of me wants to applaud her bravery, but another part of me worries about how much she's already endured.

She may be the daughter of an enemy, but I can respect her strength. As beautiful as she is, and as stubborn as she can be, it is her resilience that impresses me. My imagination conjures up a different scenario where I might have met her. If she weren't Thorne's daughter.

The thought is ridiculous, but then I start to wonder what her skin would feel like under my fingertips. Would her hair smell as sweet as it looks?

I shake my head, forcing those images away. This is not the time. My focus should be on protecting the estate. On protecting her. Not on silly little fantasies about what it

might feel like to take her in my arms.

Late that evening, I patrol the second-floor hallway to check that every guard is in place.

As I pass one of the large windows, I notice Cecily standing outside on the terrace.

She tilts her head toward the sky, and her posture conveys a kind of quiet resolve.

I know I should walk away. She deserves peace after everything she's already been through. But I just can't turn away.

I remain by the window and observe how her hands grip the railing. What would those delicate fingers feel like trailing along my chest, exploring my skin, and dipping lower?

I have a weakness for women who fight back.

I always have. But the desire in my chest feels deeper than that, and a part of me knows this is not just a passing fascination.

I don't want to admit that I find her presence compelling in a way that makes no sense, but as I stand here, the truth is undeniable.

Whatever this is, I need to snap the fuck out of it.

She's here because Seraphina asked us to keep her safe.

That's the only reason I should care. My sister-in-law, Grigor's wife, has earned that loyalty from us.

I repeat that to myself, but it doesn't change the pressure I feel in my chest when the moonlight hits her alabaster skin and steals my breath from my lungs.

I squeeze my eyes shut and whip my head from side to side before I find the strength to turn away from the window. Just as I do, the phone at my hip vibrates, and when I check it, I see Seraphina's name. I step into an empty study and answer.

"How is she doing?" she asks before I even say hello.

"She's alive. She's angry. She wants out."

Seraphina sounds weary. "I know. The poor thing. She's been on the run with our father for so long. She thinks everyone has an agenda."

I lean against the desk, and I release a long breath. "I found her earlier looking for a weak spot. I think she's trying to find a way to run."

Seraphina sighs. "Please be patient with her. She's never been allowed true autonomy, and she doesn't know how to handle this situation."

I glance toward the window, where I can still make out a silhouette on the terrace. "I'm trying," I reply, and I press my thumb against my brow. "But your father is still out there. If she leaves the estate, I can't guarantee her safety."

"I know. Please, just...keep an eye on her. Don't let her go."

"We'll protect her. I promise."

She ends the call, and I remain in the empty study for a long moment.

Cecily wants her freedom, but all I can offer is a locked gate and armed guards.

She wants out of this world of violence and gore, that much is clear, She ends the call, and I remain in the empty study for a long moment.

Cecily wants her freedom, but all I can offer is a locked gate and armed guards.

She wants out of this world of violence and gore, that much is clear, which means any future with me is off the table.

A future?

What am I thinking?

She's not interested in me, and I don't need complications in my life. The fact that I'm even having these thoughts is enough to make me question my own sanity.

Still, I cannot deny the way my heart beats a little faster when her defiance makes her hazel eyes flash or how my blood rushes south whenever she glares at me.

I have a reputation for being cold and unyielding. I've worked hard to ensure people fear me, and now, I find myself drawn to a woman who is not afraid of anything.

This isn't good.

Not at all.



## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:33 pm*

If this is for my own good, why do I feel like a prisoner?

Two of Dimitri's men stand by a tall window near the end of the hall.

They nod politely, but I don't slow down.

I have a plan, or at least the start of one.

I'm going to demand answers, and I'm going to do it in front of his brothers.

I want them all to hear my side, and I'm not leaving until I get what I want.

I turn left, pass a heavy door with an electronic lock, and continue through a wide foyer.

There are more guards here than usual, probably because all of the Barkov men are here at once, and they all pay close attention to me.

None of them reach for a weapon. They don't need to.

They know I'm not armed, and they probably think I'm too small to be a threat.

That mindset only pisses me off more. I'm tired of being underestimated.

I pause at the threshold of Dimitri's office, where I can hear them all inside talking, and I gather what's left of my courage. Then I push the door wide open and stride into the room.

A massive table takes up most of the space, and it's covered with maps, papers, and the remains of what looks like a late lunch. Five men look up: Dimitri, Maksim, Aleksei, Akim, and Nikolai. Grigor must be at the safehouse with Seraphina. Good. At least she's protected.

Dimitri stands at the head of the table, commanding attention without speaking a word.

From everything I've heard, Aleksei, as the oldest, is the head of this family, but right now, Dimitri looks every bit in charge.

He straightens his spine as his focus zeroes in on me, and I have to remind myself to keep breathing.

Jesus, why does he have to be so good-looking?

His hair is a little darker than his brothers', and it looks like he hasn't shaved in a few days. His black suit holds tight to his powerful frame, and the white dress shirt is unbuttoned at the collar, revealing a hint of muscle.

I plant my feet. "I need to talk to you."

"We're in the middle of something." He gestures toward his brothers, but I don't move.

"Then consider this an interruption."

Maksim lets out a low sound that might be amusement. "She's got spunk, huh?"

Aleksei rubs his jaw. "You have no idea."

I ignore them and focus on Dimitri. “I want to know what your plan is for me.”

“Cecily, if you would just—”

“Now, Dimitri. I want to know now. You’ve kept me in the dark long enough.”

A moment of silence passes, and the way Dimitri’s looking at me, I’m almost afraid he’s going to come across the table.

But then he nods to his brothers, and one by one, they file out of the room.

Maksim is last to exit, and when he does, he throws me a grin over his shoulder. When the door closes, we’re alone.

My heartbeat roars in my ears, but I keep my head high. “Well?” I demand. “Are you going to keep me here forever? I have a right to know what’s going on.”

“We’ve been over this.”

“I’m not a piece of property. You don’t get to store me away and hope he never shows up.”

His eyebrows draw together. “I gave my word to Seraphina that you’d be protected.”

“That’s not an answer,” I snap. “What’s your endgame? Am I a hostage? A convenient pawn? Is there some arrangement where you trade me for something you want?”

He shakes his head. “That’s not how this works.”

“Enlighten me, then.” I set my hands on the table and lean forward. “Because all I see

is a group of men locking me in a mansion under the guise of safety. You won't let me leave. You won't let me see my sister. You won't even let me decide if I want your help or not."

He takes a measured breath and pushes the papers aside. "You can move freely around the estate. You can eat whatever you want and do as you please, within reason. That's not exactly a prison. Believe me, I'd know."

I feel a stab of rage. "A gilded cage is still a cage, Dimitri."

"Would you rather I leave you to be found by Thorne's men?"

My mouth falls open, and I smack the table. "Don't you dare pretend this is some grand favor you're doing me. My father's a monster, yes, but you're cut from the same cloth. The only difference is that you're on the winning side right now."

He rounds the table and stalks toward me, eyes never leaving mine. "You don't know me at all."

My pulse spikes, and I refuse to step back. He stops a few inches away, close enough that I catch a hint of his aftershave. Sandalwood and musk, the scent of power and control.

"Then tell me. Tell me something I don't know about you. Because I'm tired of living under your roof without understanding why this is my only option."

He lifts his chin, and the muscle in his jaw twitches. "I'm a man who keeps his promises. That's all you need to know."

"That's not good enough."

I don't know what makes me do it, but I close the distance between us.

The edge of the table presses against my hip, and I brace my hands on it to avoid losing my balance.

He's taller and broader, and an undeniable heat radiates from him.

Anger churns inside me, but there's something else, too.

Something that makes my heart race and sends a flood of warmth between my legs.

What is wrong with me?

This is the man keeping me captive, and here I am, practically panting for him.

But god, he is beautiful.

"You lock me away, treat me like I have no mind of my own, and then act offended when I question it."

"You have no idea the lengths we've gone to in order to keep you safe. None."

"Then show me. Show me why I should believe you."

His nostrils flare, and without warning, he grabs my wrist and moves so fast that I find myself pressed against the wall before I can even blink. My head spins from the suddenness of it, and a burst of adrenaline rushes through my veins.

He plants one hand near my shoulder and keeps hold of my wrist with the other. I feel the tension in his grip, strong enough to hold me but not enough to truly hurt. My heart rams against my ribs, and I wonder what I've just awakened in him.

His voice drops to a hiss. “I could break you, Cecily. Do you understand that?”

A jolt of fear pulses through me, but it’s tangled with an unexpected thrill. “Then do it. Prove you’re just another thug who wants to bend me to his will.”

He breathes deeply, and for a second, I think he might. Instead, his hand on my wrist loosens, and he shakes his head. “That’s not who I am.”

I stare at his mouth. My anger, combined with something reckless, coils tight in my stomach. His breath slides over my cheek, raising goosebumps over every inch of my limbs. My heart thuds, and the next thing I know, I rise onto my toes and press my lips to his.

The moment I do, everything around me seems to melt into a buzz of sensation. I taste the salt of his skin and feel the warmth of his body. My fingers tangle in the material of his shirt. He remains rigid for a split second, and then his fingers slide down my torso and tighten around my waist.

It’s not gentle. It’s desperate and rough, like he’s punishing me for daring to do this. I have to brace my other hand against his chest to keep from falling over. His tongue slides over mine, and I shiver. He nips my lower lip, and the sharp little bite makes me whimper.

Heat explodes between us, and the room starts to spin. This isn’t a kiss. This is a claim, a mark of possession.

He shifts and pulls me even closer. His free hand drops to my lower back, and his thumb brushes over the strip of exposed skin above my jeans. His touch sends a shudder down my spine, and the pressure in my chest makes me light-headed.

In that instant, a mass of confusion and desire winds through me. I hate him for

keeping me here, but I need something to break through the rage. This feels like a spark in the middle of a storm, and I latch onto it for dear life.

A heartbeat later, he wrenches away from me. His chest heaves, and I see the conflict written all over his features. My pulse races so hard that I can't form a coherent thought.

He takes a shaky step back before he declares, "That was a mistake."

I press my lips together, trying to calm the tremor in my hands. "You're damn right it was."

"Don't do that again, Cecily. I mean it."

I want to lash out, to demand that he not act like I started this alone, but my own mind reels. I did start it, didn't I? I kissed him. I made the first move. Heat floods my face, and I don't trust myself to speak without shouting.

He exhales, closing his eyes for a brief moment, then strides toward the door. "Stay away from my meetings," he says over his shoulder. "Go anywhere else in this house if you want. But not there."

Then he's gone.

I stand there, pinned by a wave of conflicting emotions. The space where his body was a moment ago feels far too empty. I hate that I notice. I hate that I crave another taste of that dangerous rush. I hate him for leaving me like this, confused and wanting.

When I finally manage to move, my knees feel weak.

I find a chair and sink into it, pressing my hands to my temples.

Anger, shame, and lingering desire tangle within my thoughts.

This is the last thing I need. I'm already trapped and desperate.

The idea of being attracted to the man who's effectively holding me captive is too twisted to fathom.

Why did I kiss him?

Why did he kiss me back, even if it was just for a moment?

Why do I still feel his grip on my waist, searing my skin through my clothes?

I slam the door behind me when I reach my room. I tear off my shoes and fling them into a corner. The mirror catches my eye, and I see my reflection: flushed cheeks, eyes too bright, mouth swollen from the force of that kiss.

"I hate him," I whisper, though I'm not entirely sure who I'm trying to convince. My skin tingles from the memory of his touch. I curse under my breath and turn away from the mirror.



## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:33 pm*

That evening, after pacing my room for what feels like hours, I decide I can't take any more of my own thoughts.

I grab the secure phone Watley gave me this morning to play games on and dial Seraphina, the only number besides Dimitri's cleared to go through.

My emotions are frayed, and I need to hear my sister's voice. She picks up on the second ring.

"Cecily?"

I drop onto the edge of the bed with the phone clutched against my ear. "Seraphina."

She sounds relieved. "I've been worried. Are you okay?"

I let out a dry laugh. "Define okay."

She sighs. "I know you hate being there, but you are safe."

"Safe is subjective," I mutter, twisting a loose thread on the blanket. "I feel trapped. Dimitri treats me like I'm a child who needs constant supervision."

"Grigor told me you interrupted a meeting today. Nikolai told him."

"I did," I admit. "I deserve to know what they plan for me. My future isn't theirs to decide."

“They’re trying to protect you from our father. You know what he’s like better than anyone, Cecily.”

“Of course I know what he’s like. That doesn’t mean I want Dimitri to act like he has all the answers.”

“He’s not your enemy.”

I snort. “Are you serious?”

“I’m very serious. He’s a difficult man, but he isn’t cruel without reason.”

My temper ignites, and I stand abruptly, striding across the room. “I can’t believe you’re defending him. You’re making him sound like some misunderstood hero. He’s part of the same world as Father, Seraphina.”

“That world isn’t black and white. I’ve learned that the hard way.”

“You’ve learned to side with the Barkovs. That’s all.”

“You’re being unfair.”

“No, I’m not,” I snap, raking a hand through my hair. “He pinned me to the wall today. He made it very clear that if I don’t comply, I’m at his mercy.”

She sucks in a breath. “Are you hurt?”

I pause, remembering that fleeting moment when Dimitri’s mouth was on mine. “No,” I admit. “Not physically.”

She exhales. “Then what happened?”

I clamp my eyes shut. There's no way I'm telling her about the kiss. "He's controlling, possessive, impossible to reason with."

"I know he can be overbearing, but he's never acted without cause. If he's taking these steps, it's because he believes you're in danger."

I stop pacing and throw my hands in the air. "Oh, come on!"

"I'm telling you what I see. Dimitri might be rough around the edges, but he's doing this to keep you alive."

"I'm tired of being controlled. You, of all people, should understand."

"I do understand," she replies. "But you're refusing to see reason. Dimitri isn't the villain you think he is."

"He's not some savior, either."

"No, he's not," she concedes. "But he isn't our father, Cecily. Stop painting them with the same brush."

"That's easy for you to say. You're in love with a Barkov. You chose this, Seraphina. I didn't."

She goes quiet, and I know I've struck a nerve. I drop onto the bed again, pressing my free hand to my forehead. That's not exactly what happened, and we both know it.

When she speaks again, her voice is measured.

"You have every right to be upset, but you're refusing to see that Dimitri's intentions aren't malicious."

The only reason you're there and not is that if Father does come looking for you, and he will, you're better protected there with the extra security and guards. "

I bite the inside of my cheek. "I don't want to hear this."

"Cecily, I'm on your side," she insists.

I let out a humorless laugh. "I can't tell."

Her tone turns pleading again. "Give it time. Let Dimitri protect you until Father is dealt with. Then, if you want to leave, no one will stop you. You can come here, and we can be together."

I chew on my lip, half convinced she's spewing lines Dimitri fed her. "You say that, but you're not the one locked in a fancy prison. You're not the one who has to watch your every move."

"Cecily, please. Dimitri isn't the villain here."

"Goodbye, Seraphina."

She tries to say my name, but I've already ended the call. I toss the phone onto the pillow, and it bounces once before landing in a heap of blankets.

I can't stand that my sister defends him, that she won't see how trapped I feel. Worse, I can't stand that a small part of me wonders if she's right. Maybe he isn't the monster I want him to be. Maybe I'm lashing out because I can't admit I want something from him I don't fully understand.

I close my eyes and clench my fists until my nails dig into my palms. If I let myself get lost in these questions, I'll never find solid ground again.

All I know is that I'm furious at everyone—my father for causing this mess, Dimitri for thinking he has the right to control me, and my sister for defending him.

Seraphina is the one person who should be one hundred percent on my side, and she's not. That stings more than anything else.

I bury my face in my knees and close my eyes. Maybe tomorrow, I'll have the energy to figure out my next move. For now, I just want the world to stop spinning, and I want this fire inside me to subside.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:33 pm*

I can't get the memory of her mouth on mine out of my head. Every time I close my eyes, I feel the press of her lips and the unexpected rush that burned through me. It's wrong, and I know it's wrong, but it won't leave me alone.

I stand in the hallway outside the main control room, where half a dozen of my men are monitoring surveillance feeds.

My phone buzzes with new updates on Thorne's whereabouts, and I force myself to pay attention.

Evan Thorne is still at large. He's got resources, contacts, and a vendetta that won't die.

Yet all I can think about is one stolen kiss with his daughter that happened in a moment of pure frustration.

I step into the control room, greeting the men with a brief nod. Multiple screens show different areas of the Barkov estate. Guards patrol the corridors, courtyards, and gated walls. Everything is calm for now. The men look in my direction, waiting for instructions.

"Aleksei gave you the new rotation?" I ask one of them.

He nods. "Yes, Sir. We'll keep watch through the night."

I look at the monitors for another moment, looking for anything unusual. Each camera angle is clear. No sign of intrusion. I should feel relieved, but an uneasy

feeling worms its way in. Maybe it's just the tension in my head that won't go away.

I move to the corner of the room, checking my phone. Maksim wants to meet in the study, and he wants me there soon. I step out, telling the men to call me if anything changes.

When I get there, Maksim leans against the desk. Nikolai sits in a chair, scrolling through messages on his phone. Akim stands by the window, and Aleksei is nowhere in sight.

"Finally," Maksim grumbles. "We have a lead on a courier who might know where Thorne is hiding. He's due to make a run tomorrow night."

I take a seat in an armchair. "Which sector?"

"West side of the old district." Maksim glances at Nikolai. "You want to handle it?"

Nikolai shrugs. "Sure. If he's got any intel, I'll find out."

Akim chimes in. "I'll send two men with you. Minimal show of force."

I nod. "Keep it quiet. We don't want Thorne slipping away because we scared one of his contacts into hiding."

Nikolai sets his phone aside. "Understood."

Maksim studies me with one brow lifted, and I try not to squirm under the scrutiny. "You look distracted."

I fix him with a level stare. "I'm focused on finding Thorne."

He exhales and pushes off the desk. “That’s not what I’m talking about.”

Akim slides his hands into his pockets. “You’ve been wound up ever since you brought that girl here.”

“You mean Cecily,” I offer.

Maksim nods. “She’s the daughter of our enemy, yet you’re letting her roam the estate. You keep an eye on her, but you’re not acting like she’s dangerous.”

“She’s under our protection because Seraphina, who is also the daughter of our enemy, asked us.”

Nikolai taps the edge of his phone. “Do you think Thorne let her get caught on purpose?”

“That’s ridiculous.”

“Is it?” Maksim questions. “You know Thorne will do anything to gain an advantage. Maybe letting his daughter walk into our hands is part of his plan. Hell, he married one of them off to us for intel, remember?”

I scoff. “As if I could forget.”

“You’re the one who’s been dealing with her,” Maksim points out. “Has she asked about the estate’s defenses or questioned the layout? Does she linger near cameras, guard stations, anything like that?”

I flash back to her wandering the corridors, searching for exits and probing any weakness I left exposed. She’s trying to escape, not gather intelligence for her father. Yet, the thought ignites a flicker of doubt.



“She’s not a spy,” I declare, though part of me wonders if I should be more cautious. “She wants to get out, not feed information to Thorne.”

Maksim’s expression reveals he’s not convinced. “All I’m saying is keep your eyes open. If she’s more than a pawn, we should be ready.”

I rub the back of my neck. “Fine. I’ll keep it in mind. But I’m telling you, she’s no plant. She’s too angry, too stubborn, too...real.”

Maksim and Nikolai exchange a glance, but neither argues further. Akim stands by the window, fiddling with the blinds. After a brief pause, Nikolai stands, says he needs to prepare for tomorrow’s lead, and leaves with Akim. Maksim follows soon after.

I stay behind, sinking deeper into my thoughts. My phone buzzes with a message from Aleksei, telling me about another detail that needs checking. I handle that quickly, but my focus strays back to Cecily. The memory of that kiss edges in again, filling me with heat and annoyance all at once.

She’s got me off balance, and I hate being off balance.

I decide to head to my bedroom for a while, away from prying eyes.

I walk the corridor, passing staff and guards.

When I reach my door, I step inside and sit behind my desk.

A stack of folders awaits me, each one containing background on Thorne’s known associates.

I open the top file and skim it, but my attention drifts.

Thoughts of Cecily continue to push forward in my mind.

Why can't I shake her? I swore to be a man of discipline, the kind who puts duty first, always. This attraction is unwelcome, but my body doesn't care. Whenever I see her, I think about that mouth, that spark, the way she defied me with a kiss.

I close the folder and lean back in my chair, letting out a slow breath. If Maksim suspects she's a spy, I need to be careful. But my gut tells me he's wrong. She's driven by genuine emotion, not strategy. She might be cunning in her own way, but it's aimed at escape, not infiltration.

Still, I can't dismiss the possibility entirely. Thorne is manipulative. He could have planted fear in her, forcing her to do something out of desperation. I remind myself to stay vigilant.

The day slips by with no new leads on Thorne.

By early evening, I head downstairs to check the security feed again.

I enter the control room, confirm with the men that everything's secure, and walk out to the hall.

That's when I spot Cecily. She stands near a tall bookshelf, running her fingers over the spines of old volumes.

My pulse skyrockets despite my best efforts.

She seems to sense me behind her and turns around, steeling into something guarded. "Have you found my father yet?"

"Not yet. We're working on it."

“Are you sure you’re ‘working on it,’ or is that just an excuse to keep me here?”

I bite back a retort. She’s good at provoking me. “I have men investigating leads.”

She looks down at the floor and then meets my gaze again. “You make it sound like I should be grateful.”

“Do you want me to say sorry for protecting you?”

She scoffs. “No, I want you to say there’s an end in sight. I want you to treat me like a person who can make her own choices.”

I catch myself before I respond, taking a moment to think. When Seraphina asked us to rescue her sister, I expected someone battered by her father’s cruelty, someone who would cling to any safety offered. Instead, she stands here, defying me with every breath.

Most women in the Bratva obey without question.

They understand that we rule, and they are expected to abide by our decisions.

Seraphina is an exception, but she has been through her share of trials.

Cecily, however, is a wild card, unpredictable and unwilling to bend.

She’s nothing like I thought she would be, and it’s driving me insane.

“I’m doing what I think is right. You may not like it, but it’s the only way to ensure Thorne doesn’t use you against us.”

“Maybe he already has. Maybe he let me get taken. Ever thought about that?”

A pang of worry stabs through me at the memory of Maksim's suggestion. "I considered it," I admit. "But I don't believe you're working for him."

She frowns. "Why not?"

I choose my words carefully. "You don't seem interested in anything except leaving. A spy would ask more questions and gather additional information. You're too angry to focus on infiltration."

"So you trust me?"

"I trust your motives," I reply. "Doesn't mean I trust your decisions."

"I'm not a child."

I lift my shoulders in a simple shrug. "Then stop acting like one."

A flash of rage crosses her face, painting her cheeks bright red. "Why do you treat me like I'm this fragile thing one minute, then pin me to a wall the next?"

"What happened was—"

"A mistake?" she supplies.

"I told you, you're here because of Seraphina. That's all. We want Thorne neutralized, and we want you safe."

She exhales, and her eyes move to the floor. "Fine." Before she steps away, she speaks without looking at me. "I hate that I don't know who to trust anymore. Even my own sister seems to be against me."

My stomach twists at the pain in her voice. “You can trust me.”

She continues down the corridor without replying. I stand there, torn between wanting to chase after her and reminding myself that she’s not mine to chase. She’s a mission, a responsibility, an obligation to my family. Nothing more.

Nothing more.

Later that night, I’m back in the study, re-checking intelligence reports on Thorne.

Akim provided some updates from an informant who believes Thorne is hiding near the docks.

The information isn’t confirmed, but I note it for future reference.

My phone buzzes with a message from Maksim, telling me the courier meeting is set for tomorrow.

Everything is under control, yet I feel on edge.

I toss the folder onto the desk, pressing my fingers to my temples. My mind drifts to the conversation with Cecily. She asked me why I treat her as if she’s fragile one minute and then trap her the next. I didn’t have a good answer.

I walk to the window and stare out at the grounds. Guards stand at their posts, watchful and steady. Thorne is still out there, plotting. I can’t lose sight of that, no matter how much her kiss haunts me.

She’s a distraction I don’t want—a complication that ties my thoughts in knots.

I remember her expression from earlier, the flash of pain that crossed her face when

she confessed she doesn't know who to trust. Part of me wanted to ease her fears, to reassure her.

Another part of me wanted to stay as far away as possible.

She's off-limits. She's Thorne's daughter, and I have no business wanting her.

Yet I do.

I grit my teeth at the admission. My father always told me that desire is a weakness if you can't control it. Right now, I'm not controlling it at all.

A knock on the door drags me from my thoughts. "Enter."

The door opens, and Cecily steps inside. She avoids my eyes at first. Something about her stance suggests she's not here to fight.

"I wanted to ask about the docking reports," she says, gesturing to the papers scattered on the desk. "One of the guards told me Thorne might be near the water. Is that true?"

I rest a hand on the desk, measuring my response. She's never taken an interest in our operations before, aside from pushing for her own release. "We're following leads. Nothing is confirmed."

She moves closer, and I fight the urge to step back. "Do you think he's planning to attack the estate?" she asks quietly.

I exhale as I observe her face for any hint that she's trying to get more information than she's entitled to. "He might. He knows you're here, and he wants to break the Barkovs in any way he can."

“So he’d come for me, using the estate as a battleground?”

“Possibly. We won’t let that happen.”

She looks down at the files silently for a moment. Then she looks up at me with those hazel eyes, and I have to hold my breath. “Is it just business for you? Protecting me, fighting him, all of it?”

“It’s more than business,” I admit. “He hurt my family. He put you and Seraphina in danger. This is personal.”

She nods. “I thought so.”

She glances at the desk as she taps her fingers against the back of a chair. I watch her, and a strange warmth settles in my chest. This isn’t the fiery confrontation from earlier. It’s almost...calm. An uneasy calm, but calm nonetheless.

“Thank you for telling me. I’m...trying to understand what’s going on.”

“I can appreciate that.”

“I’m still angry,” she clarifies, though there’s a hint of apology in her tone. “Angry about all of this, about not having a choice.”

I rub the back of my neck. “I know.”

She lifts her eyes to mine again, and for an instant, we’re not captor and captive, not exactly. We’re two people caught in a complicated web, each trying to figure out how to survive.

“Sometimes, I think I hate you. Other times, I’m not so sure.”

“You’re not the only one confused.”

She exhales, gives me a slight nod, and then steps back. “I should go.”

I fight the urge to stop her. “Rest. We’ll know more about Thorne soon.”

She slips out the door, and the quiet in the room feels louder than before. My chest constricts with the knowledge that I’m more drawn to her than I want to admit.

She was supposed to be an asset to protect, a promise to keep.

She was never supposed to be the one person who challenges me in ways I don’t have answers for.

When my father was alive, he warned me about emotional entanglements in this life, especially with someone who stands on the edge of our war.

But here I am, letting her push every boundary I set.

I stare at the closed door and wonder if I’m making the biggest mistake of my life by allowing her to get this close. Then I gather the files, turn off the lamp on the desk, and tell myself I’ll find a way to keep my head clear.

I have to.

Yet the memory of her lips remains.



## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:33 pm*

I keep telling myself there's a way out if I can just pay attention.

I wake early and wander through the halls, trying to appear bored or restless, all while making mental notes of who stands where and when. The Barkovs might be powerful, but even the most vigilant guards have a routine.

My day of espionage begins at breakfast. I've noticed some prefer to eat in shifts; others inhale coffee while on the job.

A handful smoke on the terrace after they finish.

I notice one man—Leon they call him—is late to his post almost every day, which creates a ten-minute gap in coverage at the west exit.

Dimitri would be furious if he realized, but that might be something I can use.

Each day, I add new details to my mental notebook—when certain guards get tired or bored, how often they rotate.

I pretend to stroll by a window, but I watch how they patrol the courtyard.

They never stray from the designated paths.

Sometimes they stop to chat, maybe for a minute, but that's enough for me to slip out if I find the right time.

I file that away, building a plan from the scraps of their habits.

After a full week of this, I know the basics of their schedule.

I learn their names and start reading their expressions.

Nikolai's men stand with better posture; they're younger guys who look hungry for action.

Maksim's men appear older and more experienced, but they still get complacent, especially after lunch.

Aleksei's men are easy to distinguish because they're so formal.

They rarely speak to me, and they focus on their jobs with an almost obsessive sense of duty.

Akim's men rotate through the perimeter, leaving small holes in coverage each time they swap.

I test a small theory by sneaking into a back corridor near the staff kitchen.

A single guard stands watch, but he leaves for two minutes every afternoon to retrieve a meal tray.

Those two minutes could be gold. I time him carefully, counting the seconds in my head.

Next time, I might slip out through a rear door.

Yet there's a second guard who sometimes loiters nearby, so I'll need to figure out his routine too.

I'm determined to find any opening I can. Dimitri thinks he can hold me here indefinitely, but I'm not going to let his brood of loyal soldiers cage me forever. I will get to my sister, damn it.

On the third day of my new fact-finding mission, I follow one of the maids, Irina, as she carries fresh linens to the guest rooms. She's an older lady with kind eyes who greets me whenever she passes. I linger behind her, pretending to admire the décor.

I spot a small door at the end of the hallway, one I had never noticed before since there are usually men posted up there. Irina moves that way and pushes it open with her hip. She steps inside, and I catch a glimpse of a narrow staircase behind her. She disappears, and the door closes shut.

After checking that the coast is clear, I walk over and examine the door. It looks like a utility entrance, but it doesn't match the standard layout of the estate. Maybe it's an older part of the mansion. I pull gently on the handle. Locked. That's interesting.

For the next few days, I watch Irina's routine.

She uses that door every morning and afternoon.

Sometimes, she carries laundry. Other times, it's cleaning supplies.

Each time, she disappears for a few minutes before returning with an empty bin or new items. No one else seems to use it. That only heightens my curiosity.

I corner her in the hall one afternoon, offering a polite smile. "Irina, right?"

She looks up, seeming surprised I know her name. "Yes, Miss Thorne. Can I help you with something?"

I glance at her cart. “I was wondering where that staircase leads. The one behind the small door in the east wing?”

“That’s a staff passage. It’s a narrow stairwell connecting the main floors to some old storage rooms.”

I do my best to feign casual interest. “Why is it locked?”

“Maintenance reasons.” She shrugs and avoids making eye contact. “It’s an older part of the estate. Not many people use it these days.”

I sense she’s not telling the entire truth. “Do you have the key?”

She grips the handle of her cart. “I do, but I’m afraid I can’t hand it out, Miss Thorne. It’s not my call. Mr. Dimitri might not want you exploring that area.”

“Right. I understand.”

She mumbles a polite goodbye and continues down the hall.

I stand there, pondering. That hidden passage could be an ideal route if it leads somewhere near the outer walls.

I just need a way to get in, maybe snag Irina’s key when she isn’t looking.

I’ll have to be cautious; if Dimitri learns I’m snooping around staff passages, he’ll tighten security.

That night, I sneak out of my room after midnight, wearing soft slippers to dampen my footsteps. Most of the guards in this wing tend to cluster near the main stairwell. I can slip through the side halls without drawing much attention if I time it right.

I make my way to the door Irina uses and press my ear against the wood. Silence. No footsteps, no voices. A thrill zips through me. I try the handle anyway, just in case. Locked. As expected.

I glance down the corridor, wondering if I can pick the lock.

I've never done anything like that before, but maybe I can figure it out.

If I get a closer look at the mechanism, I might find a hairpin or small tool.

I'd need time to practice, though. For now, I back away and note that the door sits in a recessed section of the wall, hidden from direct line of sight.

That's good. If I'm quiet, no one will catch me crouching there with a lockpick.

Then, I move on, creeping through the lesser-used parts of the estate. It's a maze of hallways and closed doors. I can see why Dimitri feels confident keeping me here. The building is massive, and the guards know it better than I do. But I'm a fast learner.

When I push open a door that leads to a small landing, I hear a faint whir of electrical equipment in a closet. That must be where the routers are all set up. I climb a narrow flight of steps to a short hallway. Another locked door greets me, so I turn around and head back.

On my return trip, I spot a light in a side corridor. Doors line the hallway, each with a small plaque. I suspect these might be personal rooms for some of the Barkov men. A dull thud, like fists striking something solid, reaches my ears. I follow the sound.

At the end of the hall, I find a set of double doors that are slightly ajar. Inside, a single fixture illuminates the room, and a quick look around makes it clear it's a

training area. Mats cover the floor, and equipment lines the walls. The dull thud is Dimitri slamming his fists into a heavy bag.

I freeze, torn between fleeing and staying. If he catches me, he'll question why I'm roaming at this hour. But the sight of him, shirtless and sweating, makes my legs refuse to move.

He pivots to strike the bag with a kick, and the muscles in his torso ripple. Beads of moisture trail down his abdomen, tracing the grooves of his six-pack. He grunts and attacks again. Every punch makes him flex. I watch, enraptured, and a strange heat spreads through me.

Good God, he's gorgeous.

His hair hangs in sweaty clumps. His body radiates power. And the sight of him, focused and lethal, makes my breath catch. I should walk away, but I can't.

I hang back in the shadows, peering through the gap in the doors. Dimitri's face is set in concentration. His fists connect again, and the bag swings from the chain above. He moves with a fluid power that's almost mesmerizing.

I swallow against the sudden dryness in my mouth and step back, pressing myself against the wall so I'm not visible. The bag thumps again, and I can't resist peeking around the corner. He's lost in his own world, focusing on the next punch, the next strike.

A stray thought creeps in, reminding me of that kiss.

I can almost recall the taste of him on my lips, the heat of his body.

Watching him now, shirtless, sweat glistening on defined abs and broad shoulders, I

feel a stirring of something I despise myself for feeling.

He's my captor, the man who insists I stay locked in this fortress, yet here I am, enraptured by the sight of him.

I study the tattoos on his arms. Some are Cyrillic words; others I can't decipher.

I wonder how many of those marks carry stories of violence or loyalty.

Every inch of his body looks carved by years of discipline and control.

My cheeks burn at the realization that I'm standing here, practically drooling over the enemy.

He lets out a low grunt and swings again, ending with a final strike that sends the bag lurching.

Then he steps back and rolls his shoulders and stretches his neck.

I watch him grab a towel from the bench before wiping his face and torso.

He looks different without that tailored suit—less polished, more dangerous.

The rigid lines of his body reflect a life spent perfecting the art of force.

I don't want to be drawn to him, but I can't deny the pull. Maybe it's the sense of unpredictability, or maybe I'm just starved for any human connection that isn't condescending or manipulative.

Jesus, I need to leave before I make a fool of myself.

I inch away from the doorway, planning to backtrack through the hall. That's when Dimitri swings around. His gaze sweeps the room, searching. I flatten my body against the wall, praying I'm hidden. If he looks this way, I'll have no excuse. I clamp a hand over my mouth to stifle any sound.

He watches for a moment, inspecting the space.

The entire corridor feels too still. I fear he can hear my heartbeat.

Finally, he turns back to the bench, toweling off his arms. Relief washes over me, but I don't move yet.

I wait until he goes back to the bag to adjust its chain, then I step carefully away.

Every step feels like stepping on broken glass.

I keep my eyes trained on the floor, making sure I don't bump into anything that could give me away.

When I reach the corner, I risk one more glance.

He's refocusing on the bag, and then he lands a careful punch.

I take my chance and slip down the hallway.

I follow my original path, reversing each turn until I reach a corridor I recognize.

The staff quarters are two flights up, which means my own room is three flights in the opposite direction.

I spend the next several minutes avoiding patrolling guards.



Each time I spot one, I duck behind a door or slip into a dark corner. My heart never calms.

Eventually, I reach my room. My breathing comes in shallow bursts as I close the door behind me. I lean against it, letting my nerves settle. The whole exploration weighs on my mind. I discovered a hidden passage that might lead to an exit, but it's locked tight.

I drop onto my bed, curling my legs beneath me. A flood of emotions overtakes me—determination to escape, guilt over feeling any sort of attraction to the man who's holding me here, and a growing awareness that he's not as one-dimensional as I want him to be.

But none of that changes my plan. I still need to escape.

I don't care how shirtless, sweaty, or unexpectedly human Dimitri appears; he's keeping me from my freedom.

For now, I'll focus on that locked passage and maybe pick up some lockpicking tips from discreet internet sources on the phone Watley gave me.

My father's men taught me a few questionable skills when I was younger, so I might be able to figure this out.

Tomorrow, I'll see if I can get a closer look at that door and maybe snag Irina's key. I'll need to pick the right moment to avoid suspicion. The men are watchful, especially Dimitri, but their routines are starting to feel predictable.

If I can't pry that door open, I'll find another route. One way or another, I'll free myself from this place. I don't belong to Dimitri Barkov, no matter how much my body seems to disagree with that fact.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:33 pm*

I'm halfway through reviewing last night's security footage when my phone vibrates for the tenth time this hour, and every muscle in my body tightens with annoyance.

Cecily's endless defiance is wearing on my nerves, and I can't focus on anything else.

I glance at the screen, see Maksim's name, and consider ignoring it.

Then I throw the file onto the desk and pick up the call.

"What?" I snap as I pinch the bridge of my nose.

"Good morning to you, too," Maksim drawls. "Are you in a foul mood because your little captive won't toe the line? Or is something else eating at you?"

"Did you have a reason to call, or are you just here to irritate me?"

He chuckles. "Grigor wants an update on the Thorne situation. He asked me, but I think you should be the one to go see him. He doesn't trust secondhand information when it comes to Seraphina's family."

I grunt. "Fine. I'll head over to the safehouse."

Maksim pauses before adding, "Word is Cecily's been roaming places she shouldn't. Are you keeping tabs on her?"

"She's under control," I lie, ignoring the nagging feeling in my gut.

“Sure,” Maksim replies, clearly unimpressed. “Let Grigor know if you’ve reconsidered my suggestion.”

“Your suggestion to treat Cecily like a potential spy? I told you, that’s ridiculous.”

“You can keep saying that, but it doesn’t mean the rest of us are convinced.”

He ends the call before I can fire back.

I scowl at the phone, then shut the security laptop.

On the screen, a paused frame shows Cecily strolling down a corridor, eyes darting around in a way that makes me wonder if Maksim’s paranoia isn’t entirely misplaced.

I don’t believe she’s working for her father, but I can’t deny she’s been testing our defenses.

Still, it feels like her motivation is escape, not sabotage.

I leave the office and head out to the main foyer. Several men lounge near the entrance, talking in low voices. They snap to attention when they spot me. I gesture for one of them to come over.

“I’m going to the safehouse. Send a car behind me to make sure I’m not followed. If Cecily asks where I am, tell her I’ll be back soon.”

The guard nods, and I continue outside, where my car waits.

The driver sees me and opens the door without a word.

As we pull away from the Barkov estate, I glance at the gates through the rear

window.

Cecily is probably scheming. She hasn't made a single attempt at being subtle.

The woman has an unrelenting drive, and that kind of energy doesn't disappear easily.

Her latest scheme is likely more of the same.

She probably thinks she can evade all the guards and make a break for the front gate, but we both know that isn't possible.

I shake my head and concentrate on the drive.

The safehouse is hidden away in a quiet residential area.

It's a nondescript two-story building with plain curtains and an old fence.

No one would suspect it belongs to the Barkov family.

We park in the back, out of sight. I step out, nod to a guard, and enter through a side door.

Inside, two more men greet me before they lead me to a small living room where Grigor lounges on a worn armchair. He's dressed casually in a dark sweater and jeans, but he looks every bit the lethal man I know him to be. Seraphina offers me a thin smile when she sees me.

"Dimitri," Grigor greets, rising to clasp my hand. "You look like you haven't slept."

"I've been busy," I reply, returning his grip. I glance at Seraphina, who studies me

with quiet concern. “How are you two holding up?”

Grigor shrugs. “We’re managing. Seraphina’s worried about Cecily, obviously.” He gestures for me to sit, then takes his seat again. “So give it to us straight. Where do we stand with Thorne?”

I sink onto the edge of a small couch. “He’s still in hiding. We have leads but nothing concrete. Maksim and the others are running down every scrap of intel.”

“Have you found any clue that he’s coming for Cecily?” Seraphina asks.

“Your father is still determined to get her back,” I admit. “There hasn’t been a direct threat in the past few days, but we can’t take chances. She’s making it difficult by refusing to cooperate.”

Seraphina chuckles softly, as if she wouldn’t expect anything less. “Difficult how?”

“She wants out. She tries to find holes in our security. I’m not sure if she’s just looking for a way to escape or if she’s testing us.”

“Why would she be testing you unless—” Grigor stops himself, then grimaces. “Maksim put that idea in your head, didn’t he? That she might be working for Thorne.”

“He raised the possibility. I don’t believe it, but it’s stirring doubt among the rest of my brothers. Cecily’s father is ruthless enough to use her as a pawn. Still, I’ve seen her desperation. I think she’s just trying to get away, not gather intel.”

“She’s always been strong-willed,” Seraphina comments. “Father never broke her spirit, no matter how hard he tried.”

“She’s definitely strong-willed,” I agree with a soft laugh.

“How do we convince the others that she isn’t a threat?” Grigor asks.

“That’s the question,” I reply as I tap my fingers against my knee. “If she keeps pushing the boundaries, Maksim and Nikolai will remain suspicious. Aleksei is on the fence, but he’s leaning toward caution. No one wants to let their guard down and risk being blindsided by Thorne.”

“So what do we do?” Seraphina questions.

Before I can answer, one of Grigor’s men steps into the room. One look at him, and I’m instantly at attention. Something is wrong. “We have news from the estate. It seems Thorne’s men made a move just after Mr. Barkov left the mansion.”

My heart kicks up. “Cecily—?”

The guard holds up a hand. “She’s fine. They never got close. Our people intercepted them near the perimeter. Four men, heavily armed. We took them down, but one escaped. The rest are either dead or in custody.”

I let out a low breath, but Seraphina pales. I’m on my meet, already reaching for my phone. “I need to check in with Maksim or Aleksei. Do we know if Thorne was nearby?”

“Unclear,” the guard replies. “Could’ve been a test run, or they planned to create a diversion and grab Cecily in the confusion.”

Seraphina presses a hand to her chest. “He won’t stop until he has her back.”

Grigor moves to her side and places a reassuring palm on her shoulder. I’m already

dialing Aleksei. It rings twice before he answers.

“I assume you heard,” he says in answer.

“I did. Cecily’s safe?”

“She’s safe,” he confirms. “Rattled, but she’s unharmed. We lost one guard to a bullet wound, but he’s stable for now. Somehow, they knew none of us were home. They wouldn’t have struck otherwise, I suspect. I came straight here after I heard.”

“Where is she?”

“In her room, under watch. She’s not happy about it, but I won’t risk her wandering off. Thorne’s men could have more allies nearby.”

I rake a hand through my hair. “I’ll head back immediately.”

“We need to make a decision, Dimitri. Thorne won’t give up. He’ll keep trying, and every attempt puts us all at risk.”

I close my eyes for a moment, bracing for what he’s about to say. “I know.”

Grigor goes stiff; he’s clearly following my side of the conversation. I hang up and turn to him. “They’re going to push for a more permanent solution.”

Seraphina’s gaze moves between us. “What does that mean?”

I swallow, then force the words out. “I think it’s time we discussed an arranged marriage for Cecily. If she’s a Barkov, Thorne can’t move against her without declaring open war. He’d be outmatched.”

Seraphina's jaw drops, and she sucks in a gasp. "You're serious?"

"Dead serious," I answer. "It may be the only way to ensure your father steps back."

"That might work politically, but what makes you think my sister would go along with that?"

"We're not talking about her feelings. We're discussing strategy."

"She'll hate this. When Father bartered me away to Grigor, she was devastated. Now you're asking me to get on board with putting her through the same thing?"

I can't deny the parallels, so I don't even try. "It's not ideal, but it could save her life. Thorne uses fear as a weapon. If Cecily is under our name, he'll have no choice but to stand down or face all of us."

Seraphina crosses her arms. "You know how she'll react. She'll fight you every step of the way."

"I'm aware."

"And I suppose you'd be the blushing room in this arrangement?"

"You think I enjoy forcing this on her? I don't. But we're running out of options. She won't stay put, and Thorne is escalating his attacks."

Grigor steps between us. "Calm down, both of you. We need to figure out how to handle this without making Cecily feel like a pawn again."

I release a frustrated breath. "I'll talk to her. I'm not going to drag her to the altar at gunpoint. I'll explain the situation, try to make her see there's no better solution."



“Cecily can be reasoned with if she trusts the person talking to her,” Seraphina comments. “Do you really think she trusts you?”

The question sits heavily in my chest. I told her she could trust me, but I’m not naive enough to believe she’d simply take me at my word. “I don’t know. Probably not right now.”

“Then you have your work cut out for you,” Grigor says. “If she feels cornered, she might do something rash.”

The forced marriage may be strategic, but it adds a dangerous layer to my already complicated feelings.

The memory of that kiss still taunts me, and now I might have to stand in front of my family and claim her as my wife for purely political reasons.

The thought sends an uncomfortable heat racing through my veins.

Seraphina lays a hand on my forearm. “I’m not thrilled about this.

But if it’s the only way to keep Cecily out of Father’s hands, I won’t stand in the way.

I just hope you realize how traumatic this will be for her.

She’s already had her life hijacked by Father.

Now the Barkovs are going to do the same? ”

I turn away to gather my thoughts. “I’ll do my best to handle it gently.”

“Go talk to our brothers, make your plan. Then, talk to Cecily. If you force this, she’ll

never forgive you.”

Seraphina touches my shoulder. “And please, keep me in the loop. I don’t want her blindsided.”

“I should get back.”

We exchange farewells, and I exit the safehouse. My driver waits in the car, and I climb into the back seat, shutting the door with a force that betrays my frustration. This entire situation feels like a slow burn, threatening to explode if we make one wrong move.

As we drive, I stare out the window, though I’m not really seeing anything. My mind replays the guard’s message about the attempted abduction. Thorne’s men came close, or at least tried to. They’re getting bolder. If we don’t do something definitive, Cecily’s life remains in constant danger.

And now I’m supposed to solve this by proposing marriage.

The idea leaves a bitter taste in my mouth.

Marriage should be a partnership, a union of some kind, not a protective contract to keep her father at bay.

Yet I can’t deny the logic: once she’s part of our family, Thorne can’t simply snatch her without sparking a war he can’t hope to win.

I close my eyes and massage the tense muscles in my neck. The problem is that my feelings for Cecily—whatever they are—complicate everything. She hates me, and I don’t blame her. But a selfish part of me wants her to look at me with something other than disgust.

I don't want this to be a loveless, passionless marriage.

But what are the chances Cecily would ever care for a man like me?

It doesn't matter. My desires don't get a say. This is bigger than both of us. The Barkov name is on the line. And I refuse to let a Thorne take our legacy down.

## Page 10

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:33 pm*

A crash echoes from somewhere down the hallway, followed by raised voices that send my heart racing.

I slip through my door to investigate, and to my shock, there isn't a guard on watch.

The tension in this estate has been building for days, but something about these shouts makes me think it has reached a boiling point.

Two guards sprint past me. One of them barks into a phone, "Dimitri has him detained." That alone tells me something serious has happened.

Ever since my father orchestrated the failed attack, security has doubled, and everyone jumps at the slightest sign of trouble, but this is serious if Dimitri is involved.

I follow the guards from a distance, stopping when I notice a group of men gathered in front of a storage room. They're armed, tense, and ready to fire at any moment. I catch snippets of their conversation—"Leon," "traitor," "tipped off Thorne."

Leon. He's the guard I've been keeping an eye on because he's always late to his shift.

My suspicions were minimal, but apparently, the Barkovs have discovered something far worse.

I slow my steps as I try to hear more. One of the men turns and sees me, but before he can protest, Dimitri's voice rings out from inside the storage room.

“Let her through,” he orders. “This concerns her, too.”

The men reluctantly part to reveal a cramped interior space.

I step inside, and my stomach churns at the sight of Leon on his knees with his hands tied behind his back.

He’s bruised, and there’s blood trickling from a split lip.

His eyes dart around before resting on me for a moment.

They’re filled with terror, and it sends a chill racing down my spine.

Dimitri stands in front of him while Aleksei and a few other Barkov brothers form a half-circle around them. Leon is panting, and sweat is beading on his forehead.

Aleksei glances in my direction. “Keep back,” he warns, though his tone is more concerned than hostile.

I ignore him. My gaze connects with Dimitri’s, who says, “You gave Thorne our schedule. You told him when I’d be off the property. One of our guards almost died, and you nearly handed Cecily back to that maniac.”

At first, I think he’s talking to me. All the blood in my body drains to my toes, and I start to shake my head, but Leon responds before I can.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he rasps.

Maksim brandishes a phone in his face. “We have the logs. You called a burner number, and we traced the call to Thorne’s group. You were paid to sabotage our security.”

Leon tries to shrink away, but Dimitri yanks him closer by the collar. “They threatened me,” he insists. “I didn’t have a choice.”

Dimitri’s fist clenches around the fabric. “You risked Cecily’s life.”

Leon’s gaze flits to me, and he gives me a spiteful sneer. “For all I know, she was in on it, too. Thorne’s her father.”

My stomach churns at how easily he tries to shift blame, and my blood rushes back to my cheeks in red-hot anger. Dimitri snaps his fingers, and two guards seize Leon by the arms. Leon grunts, wincing.

“You sold us out,” Dimitri says. “We hired you. Put a roof over your head and money in your pockets, and you went to bed with the enemy.”

“I can still be useful,” he pleads. “I know more about Thorne’s network. I can tell you how he plans to strike next.”

“Why would we trust anything you say?” Maksim questions.

“Look, I messed up. I only told Thorne your schedule so he could grab the girl when you weren’t around. He offered me money—enough for me to disappear afterward.”

Rage creeps up my throat. If Leon’s betrayal had succeeded, I’d be back under my father’s control right now. Dimitri glances at me, as if checking that I’m still standing, then he turns his attention back to Leon.

“You put everyone here at risk,” Aleksei comments. “Dimitri lost a good man in that attack. We can’t let that slide.”

Leon’s lower lip trembles, and his voice becomes frantic. “Wait, let me prove I can

help. Thorne has men scattered around town, just waiting for the girl to step outside. I know where a few of them are hiding. Just give me a chance to fix this.”

“Give me one good reason I shouldn’t kill you right now,” Dimitri growls.

Leon flinches at the lethal promise in Dimitri’s tone. “Because Thorne’s preparing another strike! I swear, I’ll give you everything you need to know. You can stop him before he tries again.”

Maksim shifts his weight from foot to foot. “He’s lying. He’d say anything to save his neck.”

Aleksei exchanges a look with Dimitri, and I sense a silent agreement pass between them. They’ve decided Leon’s fate, and my heart thuds as I realize how final this moment is.

Leon trembles and shouts, “Please! Let me go, and I’ll vanish. You’ll never see me again. Or lock me up—whatever you want. Just don’t kill me.”

Dimitri looks past him toward the guards. “Search him. See if he’s carrying anything else connected to Thorne.”

They rifle through Leon’s pockets, and one of them retrieves a wad of cash that’s far too big for a standard guard’s pay. Dimitri snatches it, flips through the bills, and tosses them to the ground. “Thorne pays well, doesn’t he?”

Leon’s face pales. “I—it’s not what it looks like.”

Aleksei snorts. “It’s exactly what it looks like.”

The guards hold Leon tight, and Dimitri lifts his chin. “We can’t let a traitor walk

away, and we can't lock you up forever, either. If we keep you alive, Thorne might use you again."

Leon thrashes. "I'll talk! I'll tell you everything about his next plan!"

Dimitri shakes his head. "We have other ways of finding that out."

A rush of dread slams into me. I want to look away, but I force myself to watch. This is my life now, caught between my father's cruelty and the Barkovs' violence. Leon betrayed both them and me, and there's no coming back from that.

Dimitri reaches for the pistol tucked at his side. His hand remains unnervingly steady as he flicks off the safety with a soft click. Leon's face contorts with panic.

"Please—" Leon starts, but Dimitri fires a single shot that silences him for good.

My hands fly to my mouth as a jolt of adrenaline rips through my system.

Leon's body slumps with his eyes still wide with shock.

It happens so fast, and I'm not prepared for the wave of conflicting emotions that follow.

Horror turns in my stomach, but overshadowing it is a grim relief that one more threat is gone.

Dimitri shoves the gun back into his holster.

The men in the room barely react. They move forward with talking about how to dispose of the body and who should clean the mess.



It's routine. My attention narrows in on Dimitri, who is breathing just a fraction heavier than before.

He glances my way, and there's something pained behind his eyes.

Somehow, it makes me feel better to know he isn't completely unaffected by taking a life.

Perhaps he is still human in there, after all.

Maksim gestures to two guards. "Take care of this. We'll inform the others there's a vacancy to fill."

Aleksei nods at Dimitri. "We can question the contacts we found in Leon's phone. We might confirm Thorne's new plan that way."

Dimitri rubs a hand over his jaw. "Do it. Keep me updated."

They begin clearing the room, leaving Dimitri and me standing in the aftermath.

I stare at Leon's body and the puddle of blood seeping across the floorboards.

My heart feels like it's lodged in my throat.

I grew up around this kind of violence. I should be used to it.

Yet the reality never gets easier, no matter how often I witness it.

When Dimitri steps closer, I take a half-step back, struggling to contain my trembling. He halts when he notices my reaction and holds his hands up. "You shouldn't have had to witness that. I shouldn't have let you in here."

“He betrayed you. He wanted me gone. I guess it makes sense.” My words feel too casual for what I’ve just seen, but I’m reeling. The brutality is stark, yet I can’t bring myself to condemn it fully.

He presses his lips into a thin line. “I do what I must to protect this family. That includes you.”

“I know,” I whisper, remembering how close I came to being taken by my father’s men. Leon gave them the perfect window. Dimitri just removed that danger in the most permanent way possible.

“We’ll tidy up,” Aleksei offers. “Dimitri, maybe you should take Cecily out of here.”

Dimitri nods before he gestures for me to follow him.

My legs feel shaky, but I manage to walk with him out of the storage room, leaving the others behind to handle the grisly chore.

Guards stare at me, some with pity, some with nothing at all in their eyes.

I realize news of Leon’s betrayal must have spread.

Everyone is on edge, waiting for the next blow my father might deliver.

Dimitri leads me into a smaller sitting room, away from prying eyes.

He shuts the door, and the hush that falls is as heavy as everything else I’ve experienced today.

I inhale a slow breath, and he sinks onto a sofa, resting his forearms on his thighs.

My eyes find the faint smudge of blood on his cuff, and the sight makes me want to scrub myself until I can no longer smell death.

“That was...intense,” I manage after a moment.

“It was necessary.”

I can't argue that point. Leon's betrayal put me directly in my father's sights. If he'd succeeded, I'd be gone by now. “He almost got me taken,” I say quietly, as the realization sinks in deeper. “I'd be back under Father's control, or worse.”

“I won't let that happen,” Dimitri declares with so much certainty I almost believe it.

A weird flutter stirs in my stomach. I shouldn't feel safer around a man who just executed one of his own, but I do. He killed Leon for betraying them, yes, but also for putting me in danger. That kind of dedication is both terrifying and oddly reassuring.

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:33 pm*

“Do you...do this often?” I ask. “Killing your own people?”

“We rarely tolerate traitors long enough to give them a second chance. Leon sealed his fate the moment he sold us out. This doesn’t happen every day, but it’s not uncommon in our world.”

I clasp my hands in my lap. “I wish it wasn’t normal. But I can’t pretend you didn’t just save me from a terrible outcome. I grew up hating violence after watching Father hurt so many people. Now here I am, relieved that you shot someone. What does that make me?”

“It makes you a survivor. You understand the stakes.”

I go quiet as I absorb that. He’s right. My father’s cruelty taught me that survival sometimes means accepting ugly truths. The Barkovs aren’t saints, but they want to protect me, and they have the power to do it.

Maybe it’s time I let them.

Dimitri shifts on the sofa. “We’ll need to re-check our security protocols. Leon might’ve revealed more about the estate’s routines than we realize. Thorne could have men stationed nearby.”

“So this won’t end anytime soon?”

“Not until Thorne is neutralized.” His tone leaves no doubt that he fully intends to see that through. He scrubs a hand over his face and adds, “I’m sorry you had to see that

side of me.”

“It’s part of who you are,” I reply, surprising myself with how calm I sound. “I’m not naive enough to think your family rose to power without violence.”

“You don’t hate me for it?”

The question surprises me, and I tilt my head to look at him. Why should Dimitri Barkov care what I think?

“I don’t hate you for defending me. I hate that this is our reality.”

He nods as if he understands that distinction.

“Leon’s betrayal serves as a reminder that Thorne will exploit any weakness he finds.

That’s why I can’t let my guard down around you.

You’re what Thorne wants most. Keeping you safe means dedicating extra manpower, which leaves us vulnerable in other areas. ”

I look away. “So I’m a burden.”

“You’re not a burden. You’re someone we need to protect.”

The compassion in his tone rattles me more than the violence I witnessed.

I draw in a ragged breath, trying not to reveal how much that simple statement affects me.

For years, no one truly protected me. Seraphina tried, but Father always had the upper

hand.

Now, Dimitri stands between me and the men who want to drag me back.

“I didn’t ask for this,” I whisper, more to myself than to him.

“I know. Neither did we.” He rises and comes to a stop near my chair. “But it’s the situation we have. Thorne won’t stop, so we have to be ready for him.”

I tilt my head to look up at him. “And if your readiness involves more bodies on the floor?”

He doesn’t flinch. “Then so be it. I’ll do whatever it takes.”

Silence stretches between us. I can still picture Leon’s final moment, the gunshot echoing in my ears. I try to reconcile that brutality with Dimitri’s unwavering intent to protect me. Somehow, I can’t view him as just another monster.

I stand, still hugging myself. “I should probably go to my room.”

“Alright. Get some rest. I’ll have one of my men stand guard outside. Let me know if you need anything.”

“Okay,” I manage as I step around him. At the doorway, I pause, glancing back. “Thanks...for stopping Leon before he could do more damage.”

He gives a slow nod. “I promise you, Cecily. I won’t let Thorne take you.”

That vow weighs on me in ways I can’t begin to describe.

I slip out of the room and head to the staircase with the lingering aftermath of Leon’s

betrayal churning in my mind.

The Barkovs have shown me violence beyond anything I wanted to witness, but they've also shown me they won't stand by while someone endangers me.

It's a strange sort of balance.

I return to my suite and shut the door behind me. My pulse still races, and I doubt I'll find rest anytime soon, but I sink onto the bed anyway. Today, I learned just how far Dimitri will go to ensure I remain out of my father's reach. It terrifies me, but it also sparks an odd sense of gratitude.

Despite the horror I just witnessed, my father would have done far worse to me, and Leon was helping him. Dimitri made sure that particular threat won't ever rise again. A bitter taste coats my tongue, reminding me that I shouldn't be thankful for such violence.

Yet I am.

I lie down with my eyes fixed on the ceiling, replaying the scene in the storage room.

The shot, the look of finality on Dimitri's face.

The swirl of conflicting emotions—revulsion, relief, fear, admiration.

I'm trapped in a world where men like Dimitri mete out ruthless justice for the sake of family.

And now I'm part of that family's daily reality, whether I like it or not.

And through it all, my confusion about Dimitri only grows.

I'm torn between recoiling from his lethal methods and appreciating how fiercely he defends me.

I close my eyes, hoping that sleep might dull the memory of his gun firing.

Deep down, I sense this is only the beginning.

Violence begets violence in this world, and I have no idea how to free myself from it.

Yet I can't deny that I feel safer when Dimitri stands watch.



## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:33 pm*

I'm done waiting for Thorne to make the next move.

If he comes at us again, he'll find our walls fortified and our men ready to take him out.

This estate is my responsibility, and I refuse to let anyone slip through a second time.

Leon's betrayal still burns, but I won't let it poison our entire operation.

We've purged the weak links and tightened every aspect of our security, yet there's a restless energy simmering around every corner.

I start my morning in the newly reorganized security office, where three of our men hunch over monitors that display live camera feeds. I approach the console as I inspect each screen for signs of suspicious activity.

"Any anomalies overnight?" I ask in a clipped tone and set my coffee mug on a side table.

One guard, a tall man named Mikhail, rifles through a report. "None. We cycled through the new patrol schedule, and the rotations went off without issue. A handful of workers arrived early to restock the kitchen, but they were cleared at the gate."

"Good. I'll be doing an inspection of the perimeter myself this afternoon. Until then, stay alert. Thorne has resources we can't underestimate."

Mikhail nods and returns his focus to the monitors. I stand there for a minute longer,

verifying that each feed covers the estate's vulnerable angles. Everything looks in order, so I pivot and exit into the hallway to see if the new protocols are being followed as diligently as the reports claim.

As I walk, I pass through corridors where guards stand at intervals.

Each one offers a greeting, but I keep my responses brief.

A few cast curious glances my way—no doubt they've heard the rumors swirling about an impending wedding.

Gossip spreads quickly in a place like this, and I can almost sense the questions they long to ask.

I'm not in the mood to satisfy their curiosity.

I'm still working through my own doubts about that plan, even though I know it's the best choice to keep Cecily safe.

I round a corner and stop near the east wing, where the attack nearly succeeded, thanks to Leon's tip-off.

Fresh bullet holes have been repaired, and new locks installed on the doors.

The sight of the patchwork paint triggers a reminder of how close we came to losing everything that night.

If Thorne had succeeded, Cecily would be gone, and who knows if we'd ever find her again.

The very notion stirs anger in my chest—an anger I direct into ensuring such a breach

never happens again.

One of my men, Makar, stands watch near a narrow window that overlooks the courtyard. He straightens when I approach and offers a quick salute. “All quiet so far,” he says.

“Keep it that way,” I reply as I place a hand on the window ledge. “When’s your next rotation?”

“In two hours.” He flips through a clipboard. “I hand over to Vadim at midday. Then I move to the outer gate for the afternoon shift.”

“Have the revised schedules been difficult to memorize?”

He shrugs. “A bit of confusion at first, but everyone understands the stakes. We don’t want a repeat of Leon.”

“Good.” After a final glance around, I continue down the hallway. Each time I see a guard in position, abiding by the new instructions, a thread of tension eases from my shoulders. It’s still early, but the day holds a sense of purpose: we’re tightening the net around Thorne.

Eventually, I reach a smaller parlor that serves as a meeting room for private discussions. Nikolai stands just inside, flipping through a stack of documents. He looks up when I enter, then waves a piece of paper.

“This is a summary of last night’s patrol logs,” he explains. “No signs of infiltration, no suspicious vehicles reported. We’re solid.”

I accept the summary and skim it. “Good. Maksim and Aleksei here yet?”

He jerks a thumb toward the next room. “They’re waiting. Akim, too.”

I set the paper aside and head in that direction.

The next room is cozy, with a circular table in the center.

Maksim leans against a wall, looking bored.

Akim stands near a bookshelf, reading pages in a reference guide about security systems. Aleksei sits at the table, scanning notes with a studious air that marks him as the eldest—and nominal leader—of our family.

“Dimitri,” Aleksei greets me, motioning for me to join them. “Let’s get started.”

I move to the table and pull out a chair. “Are we missing anyone?”

“Grigor sends his regrets,” Aleksei responds. “He’s busy handling some personal matters regarding Seraphina’s safehouse. He’ll check in later.”

Grigor is as involved as the rest of us, though he’s stationed elsewhere with Seraphina. “Understood. Let’s review the status.”

Aleksei stacks a set of folders neatly. “First, perimeter security. The additional cameras and sensors are all operational, correct?”

Maksim responds, “Yes. I took a full tour of the grounds late last night. The men posted at the gates cycled through the new schedule without trouble.”

Akim closes the reference book. “Internal security is also stable. After we weeded out anyone whose loyalty was in question, morale improved. Nobody wants to end up like Leon.”

Silence hangs for a moment. We all recall the sight of Leon's final moments. The betrayal stung, but we handled it decisively. That's how the Barkovs operate.

Aleksei glances at me. "What about Cecily? How is she handling the increased guard presence?"

"She's...frustrated. I've told her the guard placements aren't optional, but she resents it."

Maksim snorts. "Of course she does. She hates feeling caged."

I press my palms flat against the table. "She'll have to endure it. Thorne's not finished with us. One misstep, and she's gone."

Nikolai steps in from the adjoining room and hands Aleksei a folded sheet of paper. "Just got an update from our watchers outside the city. No unusual activity. Thorne's been quiet since his last move."

Aleksei reads it quickly and responds, "Quiet usually means planning. We can't relax."

Thorne's silence is indeed suspicious. His attempts haven't stopped, they've only gone underground. "We need to keep pressing on potential leads. Have we interrogated every informant who might know Thorne's next step?"

"Working on it," Maksim confirms. "We found two men who might have sold him weapons. We'll question them tonight, see if they can point us in the right direction."

Aleksei closes his folder. "Good. Now, for the main point of this meeting: how to prevent future attempts. We can't just play defense forever."

My pulse spikes with the knowledge of what he's implying. The entire reason we're all here is to finalize the steps we've been discussing for days. I exchange a look with Maksim, who raises a brow.

"I'll be frank," Aleksei continues, "we all know the most direct method to protect Cecily. If she's no longer a Thorne, but a Barkov, Thorne loses his primary advantage. He can't abduct his own daughter if she's part of our family, not without declaring open war, and he isn't equipped for that."

Akim places the reference book on the table. "We've debated the pros and cons, but it keeps coming back to the same conclusion. She becomes a Barkov."

Maksim glances my way. "We leave it to Dimitri to confirm."

I swallow the bile that works its way up my throat. We've danced around this topic before, but it's time to commit. "If we do this, we do it soon. I don't want to give Thorne a chance to suspect we're planning anything. Once Cecily is publicly ours, he'll think twice before trying another stunt."

Aleksei nods. "Agreed. How do you plan to handle it with her?"

"I haven't told her yet. I'll approach her once we have everything prepared. She'll fight, obviously. But it's not truly up for debate."

Maksim rubs his chin. "She might run. You know that."

"I'll make sure she can't. We have enough men to watch every exit. If she's foolish enough to attempt an escape, I'll track her down myself."

"Try to be diplomatic," Aleksei suggests. "We need her safe and cooperative, or at least not actively sabotaging our efforts."

I nod, though I can't deny a subtle feeling of guilt. Cecily will resent me more than ever, but I can't see another path. My priority is her safety, not her feelings. "I'll handle it gently, but we can't delay. Every day we wait is another day Thorne can strike."

Akim checks his phone. "Grigor just sent a quick update. Seraphina remains secure, and no sign of Thorne's men near her location. Seems like Thorne still has all his focus on Cecily."

"Then we need to move," I conclude. "Today, I'll finalize the marriage arrangement. Tomorrow, I'll talk to her. If we do it right, we'll cut Thorne's plans off at the knees."

Aleksei stands and gathers his papers. "I'll have the legal side prepared. We'll keep it discreet. We don't need Thorne catching wind until it's too late."

"She's not going to be thrilled," Maksim comments.

I lift my shoulders in the most careless shrug I can muster. She doesn't have to be. She just has to be alive."

Nikolai steps aside, letting Aleksei pass. "We'll be behind you, no matter how this plays out."

I give a curt nod. "Appreciate it."

With that, the meeting concludes. My brothers disperse, each heading off to fulfill their roles. I remain in the room a moment longer, trying to calm the endless thoughts in my head. The plan is set. I've steeled myself for the backlash, but that doesn't make it any easier.

When I leave, I walk directly to my office, keen on tying up the last details.

The corridor is filled with quiet activity—guards patrolling, staff moving carefully, people trying not to draw attention.

I step inside my office and shut the door.

A stack of documents waits on my desk, some concerning family business, others referencing the marriage arrangement.

The edges of the papers feel ominous, a tangible reminder that I'm about to change both Cecily's life and my own.

I drop into my chair and begin rifling through the pages.

Aleksei wants everything ironclad, including an official statement that Cecily marries into the Barkov name to ensure Thorne loses any legal or moral claim.

The Bratva's traditions can be brutal, but they're clear-cut: once she's one of us, Thorne's only recourse is war.

And we stand prepared for that. We're not a scattered outfit that he can pick apart.

We're a united force with deeper roots than Thorne ever had.

Tomorrow, I'll deliver the decision to Cecily. She'll likely explode with anger and might throw something at me, but eventually, she'll realize it's non-negotiable. Cecily becomes a Barkov, and his leverage disappears instantly.



## Page 13

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:33 pm*

I slam the door behind me and press my back against it.

My heart is pounding from the argument I just finished with one of Dimitri's guards.

He tried to block me from walking the main corridor, babbling about "orders" and "security." Every time I attempt to move freely in this mansion, someone reminds me that my life apparently hangs in the balance.

I'm tired of it, but I know complaining to Dimitri yields little.

He just doubles down on his protective stance, claiming this is for my own good.

I drop onto the edge of my bed, gripping the mattress so tightly that my knuckles ache. The guard's voice still echoes in my head. He was only doing what Dimitri told him, but that doesn't alleviate my frustration. This place is a fortress, and I feel like a prized captive.

Ever since Father's men made an attempt on my life—and nearly succeeded—Dimitri turned this estate into a lockdown facility.

I get it. He's worried about spies and traitors.

The fiasco with Leon proved that any of his men could be compromised.

But he's cranked his paranoia up to a level I can barely tolerate.

I stare at the walls, hating how every square inch of this building reminds me I'm

stuck here. My father wanted to keep me under his thumb for years, and I managed to slip away only to end up in another form of captivity. The Barkov name keeps me physically safe, but it also boxes me in.

A knock rattles the door. My shoulders tense. Another guard? Possibly Dimitri himself? I groan, force myself to my feet, and open the door to see Watley standing there, completely unmoved by glaring.

“Dimitri wants to see you in his study,” the man says with a neutral tone. “Now.”

“Fine.”

He steps aside to allow me to pass. I set a brisk pace, ignoring every guard I pass. If I’m going to be summoned like this, I won’t act meek about it. Watley follows me as I move through a stretch of hallway that leads to a wide staircase.

Maybe Dimitri learned something about my father’s next move. Maybe he wants to scold me again for harassing his guards. Maybe he’s just bored and feels like reminding me that he holds the power here. Whatever the reason, I’m in no mood to listen to more condescension.

The butler gestures for me to enter a closed door on the right. Dimitri is standing behind his desk, and his grey eyes narrow on me the instant I walk in. Watley closes the door, leaving us alone.

“You wanted me?” I say, letting my voice carry as much defiance as I can muster.

He nods at the single chair facing the desk. “Sit.”

“I’m fine standing.”

He arches a brow, and for a moment, we lock eyes.

I see a flicker of impatience, but he doesn't push the chair issue.

Instead, he leans forward and rests his palms on the desk.

"I have an announcement to make regarding your situation." He pauses, studying me, and I sense I'm not about to like whatever it is he's about to say.

"I've decided on a course of action that will ensure your safety from Thorne. "

I roll my eyes. "Are you doubling the guard count again? Locking me in my room? Maybe chaining me to a radiator?"

He keeps his expression set in stone. "No. This is more permanent." He straightens, adjusting the collar of his shirt, then takes a measured breath. "We're getting married, Cecily."

For several seconds, I'm sure I didn't hear him correctly. The phrase can't possibly mean what it implies. I blink, stunned. "You're...what?"

He exhales like he's bracing for my reaction. "You and I will formalize our union. Once you're a Barkov in name, your father loses his last leverage. If he tries anything, he'd risk war with my family."

I let out a short, humorless laugh. "Married?" The word feels ridiculous on my tongue. "You think I'm going to marry you? Are you out of your mind?"

"It's the most logical move to protect you. Thorne won't dare abduct the wife of a Barkov. He knows we'd bring the full force of our network against him."

Rage starts to bloom in my chest. “You can’t be serious. Marriage? That’s your big plan?”

His tone remains calm, as if he’s reciting from a prepared script. “Yes. I’ve talked about this with my brothers. It’s the only real solution.”

I take a step back, shaking my head. “You can’t do this. You can’t just decide I’m going to be your wife. That’s insane.” A wave of revulsion and shock surges, twisting my stomach. “I’d rather let my father grab me than marry you.”

“If Thorne grabs you, he wins. He’ll drag you off to wherever he’s hiding and use you as a bargaining chip. You’ll never be free.”

“Better a pawn than shackled to you for life.” The words taste bitter. My mind scrambles for a retort that fully conveys the depth of my fury, but I’m too overwhelmed to be clever.

“I’m not seeking your permission. The marriage is happening.”

“You can’t force me! I’m not some item you can pass around.”

“This isn’t up for debate,” he declares, as he leans forward again. “We’ve tried keeping you safe with extra patrols and locked doors. Thorne’s men keep probing our defenses. Next time, they could succeed, and you’d end up back in Thorne’s control.”

I throw my arms in the air. “So your solution is to treat me exactly like he did? Another cage, another man deciding my future without asking my opinion?” I let out a harsh laugh. “You’re unbelievable.”

He doesn’t move, but the tension rolling off him feels stifling. “You claim to hate living like a prisoner. I’m offering you a different status. As my wife, you’ll have

much more freedom than you do now.”

I grip the back of the chair to stop my hands from shaking. “You want to brand me with your last name so you can patrol me just like you do now. I’ll still have guards on me every second. I’ll still have no freedom.”

He shakes his head. “It’s not about controlling you. It’s about making Thorne back off. I’m offering you protection, not a prison sentence.”

“That’s exactly what a prison sentence is. You telling me what to do, who to be, and how to live.” I can’t stop the words from tumbling out. “You’re as bad as my father.”

He flinches as if I’ve slapped him, opening and closing his mouth a few times before he finally says, “Don’t compare me to him. I’m not beating you. I’m not trading you for money or influence. I’m saving your life.”

I slam my hands on the desk, leaning in. “Don’t twist this. I never asked for your rescue in the first place. You act like you’re doing me a favor, but it’s just another form of control.”

“It’s not optional. The wedding will take place. I’m not here to negotiate terms. This is decided.” He steps around the desk, closing the distance between us. My pulse spikes, but I hold my ground. “You’re welcome to protest. But the ceremony will happen. One way or another.”

I let out a trembling breath, seething. “Then I’ll protest every day for the rest of my life. I’ll never be a willing participant in your plan.”

He pauses, as though weighing his next words. “Once we’re married, I’ll allow you to see Seraphina.”

My rage falters for a split second, and my heart lurches in my chest. “What?”

He speaks more quietly, though his voice retains that firm edge. “I know you want to see your sister. You haven’t been allowed to yet for security reasons. If you become my wife, I’ll arrange a visit.”

A wave of emotion nearly knocks me sideways. I haven’t seen Seraphina since my father took me hostage. We’ve had a few phone calls since I got here, but that’s it. I ache to be with her, to know she’s okay. The longing grips me, but so does my anger at Dimitri for using it as leverage.

“You’re dangling Seraphina in front of me. That’s low, even for you.”

“If you’re part of this family, visiting your sister is less risky. We won’t compromise her or you by reuniting you too soon. Once we’re married, that changes.”

“That changes, because you’ll have me on a leash like a show dog.” I can’t keep the bitterness from seeping into every syllable.

He lowers his head for a moment, then looks at me with steely resolve. “It’s the only concession I’m making. Either accept the marriage or continue living in limbo. You can rail against me all you want, but this decision is final.”

I turn away and pace a few steps to burn off the fury simmering beneath my skin.

My thoughts race back and forth. Part of me wants to scream that I’d rather risk everything than marry him.

Another part remembers that phone call with Seraphina and how desperate she sounded to ensure my safety.

A new wave of guilt washes over me. If marrying Dimitri means I can see my sister, maybe she'd want me to go through with it.

But then I picture myself in a wedding dress, forced to vow loyalty to a man I barely trust. The thought makes my stomach churn.

Dimitri remains silent while I wrestle with my emotions. Finally, I turn, my voice low. "What if I run before the wedding? Do you think you can stop me?"

His reply is immediate. "You won't make it off the property. My men will watch every exit, every door, every path. Even if you slip out, Thorne's men wait beyond the gates. You'd be trapped between us."

"So I'm cornered, is that it? You've removed every possible choice from my life."

"I know it feels that way. But at least I'm keeping you alive. If Thorne gets you, do you honestly believe he'd let you stay free? Or see your sister again? He'd hide you away for his own ends, and nobody would find you."

A cold shiver trickles down my spine. My father is capable of horrors I don't want to imagine. I hate Dimitri for being right. "This is still wrong."

"I won't pretend it's ideal." He presses a hand over his face for a moment, then drops it. "I'm protecting you the only way I know how. Fight it all you want, but you'll see it's necessary."

"I hope you enjoy living with someone who despises you, because that's what you're signing up for."

He steps closer, ignoring my attempt to maintain distance. "Hate me if you have to, as long as it keeps you alive."

I glare up at him. He's so certain, so unyielding, and it ignites every rebellious bone in my body. My voice drops to a low hiss. "Then enjoy your forced marriage, because I won't smile for you. I won't share your bed willingly, and I won't be the docile bride you imagine."

"As if I could ever imagine you a docile," he replies with a low chuckle. "I'll let you calm down. Tomorrow, we finalize the details. Be ready."

I swallow the acidic reply clawing at my throat. He slips out, leaving the door open behind him, as if to taunt me with the knowledge that I can't escape.

I stand there with my heart pounding and tears of rage burning at the corners of my eyes.

The gall of him, ordering me to marry him as if it's the most natural thing in the world.

Maybe in the twisted Bratva realm it is, but to me, it's just another prison.

Another noose around my neck. My father forced Seraphina into a marriage for his gain, and now Dimitri is using me as a pawn in his war with my father.

I can't breathe for the fury choking me.

A snarl rips from my lips as I sweep my arm across the desk, sending papers tumbling to the floor. An inkwell topples, and liquid splatters across the polished surface. The entire act does little to soothe my anger, but I relish the momentary release, the small show of defiance.

I step around the mess, ignoring the scattered papers. Dimitri claimed he was not like my father, but at least my father never pretended it was for my protection. He never



spouted lines about caring for my well-being. He just took what he wanted.

Dimitri's brand of tyranny is different. He frames it as saving my life, and maybe he's not wrong that my father is a bigger threat. But at least with him, I know the enemy I face. Here, I'm wrestling with a complicated mixture of safety and oppression. He's saving me, while also binding me.

I force myself to breathe deeply and count to ten.

Once my shaking subsides, I think about Seraphina.

My sister is out there in a safehouse, possibly as frustrated as I am, though in a different way.

If marrying Dimitri means I can finally see her, hold her, and be certain she's truly alright, how can I outright reject that possibility?

And yet, how can I accept a forced marriage under these circumstances?

Conflicting emotions battle in my mind. I feel tears threatening again, but I blink them away.

I'll never let Dimitri see me cry over this.

I won't give him the satisfaction of knowing he's pushed me into a corner.

I remember the vow I made to myself the day he brought me here: I'd fight for my freedom, no matter how impossible the odds.

If he wants a war of wills, I'll give him one. I may not have an army, but I have my own resilience. I'll bide my time, seeking any opportunity to slip away or sabotage

his plans from the inside. Let him boast that making me his wife solves all his problems. I'll prove him wrong.

I close my eyes for a second, breathing through the onslaught of emotions. Tomorrow, everything shifts. Tomorrow, Dimitri will expect me to yield. I won't. He might drag me into some twisted ceremony, but I'll be plotting every second. That's my promise to myself.

I open my eyes, feeling steadier than before. If a marriage is inevitable, I'll turn it into a battlefield. He'll see just how resilient I am, how impossible it is to tame me. Father tried. Father failed.

Dimitri will fail, too.

## Page 14

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:33 pm*

I hurl a stack of papers against the wall as soon as I'm alone, sending them fluttering across the floor.

My office door is closed, but I half-expect one of my brothers to barge in and question my sanity.

If anyone did, I'd claim this is just another day dealing with Barkov business. That would be a lie.

I should feel detached about this upcoming marriage, the way I usually handle important deals or expansions of our territory.

That's how I've trained myself—no room for emotion, no space for anything that might compromise my focus.

Yet I keep picturing the way Cecily scowled when I told her she'd be my wife.

I keep replaying how she spat her outrage at me, and it's killing me.

I rub my palms over my face and inhale through clenched teeth.

If he were still around, my father would have called this a moment to prove that I'm capable of doing anything for the family.

Duty first. Always. The thought grates on me because I haven't felt entirely dutiful about this choice.

I've felt something else, something I shouldn't crave.

A knock sounds on the door. "Dimitri?" Aleksei's voice. "We need to finalize the steps for tomorrow."

I gather the scattered pages quickly, pretending I haven't just thrown them in frustration. "Come in."

He slips in and eyes the disarray. I don't offer any explanations. He already knows my mood is precarious.

Aleksei sets a folder on the desk. "We have the official documents. The officiant arrives in the morning. Everything's in place."

I flip through the folder and see the contract that merges Cecily's name with mine. "I'll handle the rest," I reply. "She won't be happy."

"As long as she understands how important it is that we lock down this arrangement. Thorne will think twice about going after you if she's under our name."

"I know," I mutter and shut the folder. "I'll talk to her about the final details."

"I'll leave you to it, then. Let me know if you need anything else." He exits, giving me one last searching look before shutting the door.

I pace, trying to figure out the right approach for dealing with Cecily's resistance.

She doesn't see how close we are to an all-out confrontation with Thorne.

We intercepted his last attempt on the estate, but we can't hold out forever if he keeps recruiting men willing to test our defenses.

Neutralizing him is essential, and locking her in as a Barkov is the most direct route to cutting off his leverage.

That's the logical side of this. The rest is a tangle of impulsive hunger that I'm trying to ignore.

I stride to the door and head down the corridor. A guard stationed near her room nods. I knock and enter without waiting for a reply. She's on her feet by the window, her glare aimed straight at me.

"What do you want?" she demands.

I hold up a short list. "You need to decide on a few things for tomorrow." I hate how stiff I sound, but any warmth on my part will seem manipulative, and she's already convinced I'm backing her into a corner.

"The officiant is coming at nine. We have to figure out what you're wearing, who will stand as a witness, that sort of thing. "

She scoffs. "You want me to pick out a dress?"

"There are options in the wardrobe that might fit."

She looks at me like I'm insane. "I'm not playing bride. I'm not rummaging for something pretty. You're forcing me into this, so don't expect me to help with your pageantry."

"It's not pageantry," I reply. "It's an arrangement that keeps you alive."

She snatches the list, skims it, and tosses it aside. "This is ridiculous. I don't care about flowers or any of this nonsense."

“This nonsense is part of a legal ceremony. We do it properly. My brothers will be there, along with a few key associates, so Thorne realizes it’s official.”

“You think he’ll care if I wear a white dress?” Her voice drips with contempt. “He’s going to see this as you taking what belongs to him.”

Her words trigger the possessive streak I’ve been fighting, and I crack my neck as a way to ease out the tension before I blow. She’s seen enough of my violent side. “Then he can watch from afar, or he can make a move and lose. Either way, you won’t be a Thorne. You’ll be one of us.”

She doesn’t hide her shudder. “Hooray.”

“If you need help, the staff is at your disposal. If you ignore these decisions, I’ll have them made for you.”

“Fine,” she snaps. “Let them do it. Let them pick out the most ostentatious dress in your entire closet so everyone knows this is a farce.”

“That’s enough,” I warn. “I’m trying to give you some control here.”

“That’s rich.”

I fight the urge to argue further, deciding it’s best to cut this short. “I’ll check in later. The ceremony is tomorrow at nine. Don’t be late.”

I spin on my heel and walk out, ignoring the urge to slam the door.

My mind reels as I head to the main hall, where Maksim waits with a set of instructions.

He thrusts them into my hand, and I realize this is about a separate mission we have tonight, one that involves rooting out a rival faction that's been poking around our outskirts.

The timing couldn't be worse, but maybe I need the distraction.

"We've located three men from the Kovalev crew who've been muscling in on our distribution lines," he explains. "They're holed up in a vacant property downtown. We'll move in, remove any threat, and if we find someone who knows more, we interrogate them. You leading?"

"Yes," I confirm. "I want this done before midnight."

He nods, and together we walk toward the garage, where a few of our enforcers wait.

They've loaded gear into two black SUVs.

Maksim and I climb into the lead vehicle, and our men follow in the second.

I keep my head focused on what's next. Violence is simpler.

I know how to corner a target, I know how to force answers from them, and I know how to put them down if they stand in my way.

We arrive at the vacant property, a low-slung warehouse with rusted siding.

The place looks deserted, but we've confirmed the Kovalev men are inside.

Maksim and I each lead a group around either side of the building, careful to avoid making too much noise.

When we reach a side door, two of our men rig a small device that breaches the lock in seconds. Then we're in.

A corridor leads into darkness, which is broken only by flickering overhead fixtures.

I signal for the men to split up and search.

Almost immediately, I hear a scuffle behind some crates.

A voice shouts. Gunfire pops in the distance.

My instincts click into place, and I rush forward, rounding the corner.

One of the Kovalev men tries to bring a weapon up, but I'm faster.

I fire three times, dropping him. He sprawls onto the ground, motionless.

Maksim handles a second foe, and the man collapses, and everything quiets. We find a survivor crouched near the back, evidently wounded and trying to hide behind a crate. One of our enforcers yanks him to the center of the corridor, forcing him to kneel.

I approach, scanning the immediate area to ensure no one else remains. The building is silent except for our footsteps. "We secure?" I ask Maksim.

He nods. "No sign of others. Just this one."

I kneel beside the prisoner and snatch the weapon from his shaky grip. "Your name?"

He mumbles something I can't catch. Blood trickles from a graze on his temple. His eyes dart between me and our men. I snap my fingers near his face. "Name."



“Radek,” he manages. “Please... I don’t want any trouble.”

“Bit late for that,” Maksim counters. “Who do you work for?”

“Kovalev,” he croaks.

“Where’s your boss?” I ask. “And why is Kovalev muscling in on our turf?”

Radek’s eyes drift to the crate. He tries to inch away, but two of our men hold him firmly. I gesture for them to pull him back to the center. “Answer,” I command.

He stammers, “K-Kovalev heard you might be distracted with that Thorne business, so he thought we could take advantage.”

“So you’re hoping to pick apart our territory while we chase Thorne around.”

Radek glances at the dead bodies and pales. “We never wanted a full confrontation. We just wanted an opening.”

Maksim snorts. “Where’s Kovalev now?”

“I don’t know,” Radek moans, “He moves constantly.”

I don’t have time for half-truths, so I nod to two of our men, who jerk him to his feet. We drag him deeper into the warehouse, away from the front entrance. In a cramped side room, we set him on a chair and tie his hands behind him.

“What do you know about Thorne’s plans?” I ask him.

Radek twists in the chair, but he’s too secure to move much. “Only rumors. We heard he’s rallying anyone who hates the Barkovs.”

“Where?” I demand.

His mouth falls open, and I sense his fear. Maksim steps forward with an expression that promises pain, and Radek babbles, “People say he’s targeting Redwood Point next month. I swear I don’t have details. That’s what I heard. We just wanted to slip in while your attention was on Thorne.”

I’m aware Redwood Point is a crucial shipping outlet. If Thorne manages to sabotage that location, we’ll lose a major source of leverage. Everything within me heats with anger that he’d try such a bold move.

I give Maksim a tight nod. “He told us what we needed to know.”

Radek’s eyes move from me to Maksim. He senses the finality in the exchange. “Wait—”

One of our men clamps a hand over his mouth just as I turn back toward the door. A gunshot rings out. I don’t look back. This is the method we’ve employed a thousand times: gather what’s useful, neutralize the threat, and move on.

“We burn any evidence that ties this to us,” I explain. “Kovalev might guess who took out his men, but he won’t have proof.”

Maksim waves for two men to handle the cleanup, then we gather in the SUVs and head back to our estate.

On the drive, I stare out the window, thinking through everything.

Redwood Point is our next major front. If Thorne organizes a concentrated attack, the marriage to Cecily won’t be enough to thwart him entirely.

Still, it will remove his motivation to capture her, which might free us up to defend Redwood Point. I hate that I'm combining these two issues—our urgent logistics and my forced wedding—but that's the reality of our situation.

The clock shows late evening by the time we get home.

I lock myself in the office, assembling a final list of phone calls.

Tomorrow, I'll be saying vows I never imagined I'd speak.

The idea unsettles me. I fought to keep the Bratva strong all these years, never letting personal attachments complicate matters.

Yet here I am, forcing a marriage because it's the most efficient way to neutralize Thorne.

I close my eyes for a beat, grappling with a mix of resentment and satisfaction.

I shouldn't want this. I tell myself I don't.

It's just a tactic, another step in a long line of forced decisions.

Still, a possessive thrill coils inside me every time I recall how she looked when I said she'd be my wife.

She was outraged, cornered, furious. Yet in that fury, I spotted something that tugged at my defenses.

She's unlike any woman I've known: defiant even when logic says she should submit.

The logic stands. The family needs this.

Yet there's a side of me that can't deny an eagerness for that moment it becomes official.

As twisted as it might be, I want to see her wearing a ring that marks her as mine.

Even if she fights me every day afterward, it means Thorne can never break her again.

The vow will bind us, no matter how much she resists. If that means I carry her hatred along with that vow, I'll manage. Better her rage than letting Thorne rip her away. Better a forced union than leaving her unprotected.

I rest my hand against the window frame, determined to snuff out any doubt. I'll get through the ceremony, then push forward. Redwood Point is waiting, and Thorne's move is set. We'll crush him on our terms.

## Page 15

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:33 pm*

My hands won't stop trembling, no matter how many times I clench them into fists.

Today is my wedding day, though not by choice.

I stand in an ornate dressing room, facing a mirror that reflects a person I barely recognize.

A tailored gown flows around my ankles, chosen by the staff after I refused to pick one myself.

The style is traditional: lace along the sleeves, a fitted bodice, and too many tiny embellishments.

People kept knocking earlier, offering last-minute touches or final adjustments.

I waved them away and locked the door; I'm desperate for one moment of quiet.

I smooth my palms over the bodice, wishing everything didn't feel so constricting.

The entire mansion has been transformed into a showplace for this ceremony.

There's a grand hallway set up with rows of chairs, an aisle lined with some ridiculous floral arrangement, and an officiant waiting to pronounce me the bride of Dimitri Barkov.

I can't quite wrap my mind around that title.

A Barkov. One of them. The thought boils my blood.

A timid knock interrupts my angry pacing. “Miss Thorne,” a soft-spoken woman calls from outside. “They’re ready for you.”

I swallow a lump in my throat and glance at the mirror again.

My hair is pinned in a style that reveals my face, so there’s no escaping the moment I walk out there.

Let them see the scowl. Let them know I’m doing this under protest. I step into the hall and see two suited guards who nod stiffly but say nothing.

They guide me toward a wide corridor that leads to the main foyer.

Around us, decorations cover every surface.

Gilded columns rise on either side, draped with elaborate swags of fabric that match the flowers in my useless bouquet.

Staff members send sympathetic or curious looks my way.

I’m sure they’re used to lavish events, but I doubt they’re used to a bride who looks like she might take off at any second.

At the entrance to what feels like a makeshift chapel, Maksim stands in place as if he’s waiting to confirm I haven’t run off. He’s wearing a sleek suit that highlights his broad frame. He gives me a short nod and says, “It’s time.”

I take a breath that does nothing to calm me. The corridor stretches before me, decorated to the hilt. An aisle runner is unrolled on the floor, lined with vases

overflowing with flowers. The seats are filled with members of the Barkov Bratva and their associates.

I force my feet to move. Every step feels heavier than the last, and my pulse is thudding in my ears.

The hush in the space grows, though I detect whispers from a few onlookers.

They know what this is—an ironclad statement, a show of power.

Dimitri's territory, Dimitri's men, Dimitri's bride.

I can't even summon the energy to glare at them; I just focus on placing one foot in front of the other.

Then I see him up ahead. Dimitri stands at the end of the aisle, wearing a tailored black suit that fits like a second skin.

He's got that same controlled demeanor I've grown used to.

I can't figure out if he's bored or concentrating.

Either way, there's nothing soft in his gaze.

He's not looking at me with affection. This is about strategy, and we both know it.

My dress swishes around my ankles as I reach him. A hush settles, and the officiant, a dignified-looking older man, opens a small book. I can't make myself focus on the formal words that follow. The officiant drones on about unity, loyalty, and binding vows. I tune it out.

When the officiant instructs us to state our promises, Dimitri speaks first. “I, Dimitri Barkov, take you, Cecily Throne, to uphold our union, protect our interests, and stand together.” The words are carefully chosen to reflect the Bratva’s priorities.

There’s no mention of love, no flowery sentiment.

Just a vow of protection and allegiance.

Then it’s my turn. Every nerve in my body screams that I shouldn’t say a single thing.

But if I fail to speak, I’ll make a scene that might not end well for me.

I refuse to show more vulnerability in front of all these watchers.

I adopt the same mechanical tone. “I, Cecily Thorne, take you, Dimitri Barkov...” My voice hitches on that last name.

“...to honor this arrangement.” I stop there, ignoring the officiant’s attempt to prompt me for more words.

He moves along smoothly. When he asks for rings, Dimitri nods to Maksim, who steps forward and places two simple bands on a small cushion.

Dimitri slips one onto my finger. A flick of silver, and it’s over my knuckle, snug enough to feel like a shackle.

My skin crawls at the finality of it. I place the other ring on Dimitri’s hand, noticing how warm his skin is.

I want to fling the entire cushion across the room, but I force myself to complete the gesture.



The officiant declares us husband and wife, and it feels like the noose has tightened.

A ripple of subdued applause follows. Dimitri leans in and makes the barest contact with my cheek—a perfunctory peck that feels more like a reminder of who owns me now.

Every muscle in my body tenses, but I stay still, letting him make this public show.

My eyes flick to the side, trying to avoid his.

The ceremony concludes with an announcement that we'll hold a brief reception in the main dining hall.

Dimitri offers me his arm. I stare at it for a second, then loop mine through.

We walk up the aisle, past the rows of onlookers.

I overhear hushed commentary: “Smart move,” “Good for the family,” “Thorne’s going to regret crossing them.” All of it fuels my anger.

In the dining hall, a line of servers presents trays of drinks and small bites. A handful of men approach us to congratulate Dimitri on his “wise alliance.” No one looks at me unless it’s to cast a fleeting glance of pity or curiosity.

I manage to slip away from Dimitri’s side for a moment when a cluster of men claim his attention about Redwood Point. It isn’t long before Dimitri finds me. He pulls away from the men he was talking to and crosses the floor to me. The ring on my finger catches my eye again, mocking me.

“Are you going to speak with anyone?” he asks.

“I have nothing to say to them,” I reply. “Unless you’d like me to congratulate them on witnessing my captivity?”

“Lower your voice. We’re drawing enough attention as it is.”

“I really don’t care. You already forced me into a wedding. You think I’m worried about a few stares?”

He exhales then says, “I’ll make a few final rounds. Then we’ll leave.”

“Great,” I mutter. “I can’t wait to see what you have planned for the rest of the night.”

His grey eyes move over my face, but he doesn’t respond. Instead, he gestures for me to follow him to a smaller gathering near the far corner, where Aleksei stands with a few high- ranking men. They nod politely, but I offer only a perfunctory greeting.

Aleksei quickly addresses me. “Congratulations,” he says, though there’s nothing celebratory in his tone. “You’ve strengthened our family, Cecily.”

I grit my teeth. “Lucky me.”

One of the men, presumably an ally from another Bratva cell, steps forward. “This was a bold move,” he says to Dimitri, ignoring me. “Thorne must be beside himself.”

“He’ll learn,” Dimitri replies, eyes locked on the man. “We protect our own.”

I glance away, stifling the urge to roll my eyes.

After a few more minutes of obligatory conversation, Dimitri clears his throat and steers me toward the exit.

We step outside the dining hall, and he guides me through a side corridor, presumably to avoid the main crowd.

I don't object. My skin feels too hot, and I'm suffocating under the weight of all those stares and this stupid dress.

Once we're in a quieter section, I pull my arm free from his hold.

"Don't touch me," I insist.

"We'll retire upstairs for the night. Tomorrow, you can see Seraphina."

The mention of my sister hits a raw nerve.

I've been desperate to see her, to confirm she's truly safe.

Part of the reason I tolerated this entire fiasco was the promise that I could be with her after the ceremony.

"When?" I demand. "Tomorrow morning? Afternoon? Or will you push it back indefinitely?"

"Afternoon," he answers. "We'll arrange proper security."

"Fine. But don't think that makes this marriage any less of a prison."

He inclines his head. "Understood."

I follow him through winding corridors, all of them guarded.

We reach a staircase that leads to a more private wing.

My pulse picks up, anticipating whatever confrontation might happen next.

For all I know, he'll insist on sharing a room from now on, which sounds like something between heaven and hell all at once.

He opens a door—his door, it seems—and gestures for me to enter.

I linger in the hallway for a moment, considering whether I can refuse.

Then I roll my shoulders back and march inside.

The space is large, dominated by a heavy wooden bed with carved posts.

There's a wardrobe, an armchair, and a desk piled with folders I assume contain Bratva business.

A pair of tall windows are covered with thick drapes.

The only personal touch is a small framed photo of Dimitri with his brothers, presumably taken a few years ago.

He closes the door behind us. I tense, ready for a verbal spar or something worse.

He moves to the wardrobe and shrugs off his jacket before draping it on a wooden hanger. He says nothing, as if he wants me to speak first. I stand my ground by the door, refusing to show any hint of nervousness. This man has my head in chaos, and I hate it.

He turns around and locks eyes with me. "You can stay here tonight," he begins, "or I can have a separate room prepared nearby. I'm aware this situation is forced on you, but nothing else will be."

I bark out a humorless laugh. “Didn’t expect you to offer me an out. Are you going soft?”

“It’s not an out. I’m still your husband, and you’re still my wife. I’m simply acknowledging that you’re angry.”

“Angry doesn’t even cover it.”

His gaze slides over my wedding dress, and I see a hint of something there.

Desire, or maybe a sense of possession. It twists inside me, drawing out my own unwanted reaction to his presence.

He’s gorgeous, there’s no denying that. Ruthless in ways that make my heart pound, but undeniably captivating.

I’m furious that my body reacts to him. I want to blame the stress, the high emotions of the day, anything but the truth: I’m drawn to him.

He breaks the silence. “I’ll call a staff member. She can help you change, or show you to a different suite that is close enough to avoid drawing suspicion.”

“Stop,” I blurt. “You just made me your wife. You can’t pretend this doesn’t matter. You can’t push me off to another room like an afterthought.” I barely recognize the venom in my tone.

“I’m trying to be considerate.”

“You dragged me in front of your entire clan and forced me to take a vow. Now you’re acting like a gentleman?” I step within a few feet of him. “Which one is the real Dimitri? The man who kills to protect me or the man who locked me in a cage to

begin with?”

“They’re the same. I do what’s necessary.”

That answer enrages me more than anything else. A part of me wants to scratch him, to pound my fists against that stoic chest until he shows some real emotion.

He strides around the bed, closing the distance in a heartbeat. My pulse skyrockets. Part of me wants him to see how furious I am. Another part, twisted and treacherous, wants to see if he’ll take me in his arms. It’s insane. I hate him. I want him. The push and pull tears me up inside.

He stops close enough that I could reach out and push him away.

But something about his presence keeps me rooted in place.

We lock eyes, and my breathing quickens.

For a moment, I think he’s going to crush his mouth to mine, proving that he owns me now.

Instead, he steps back, controlling whatever impulse just flickered in his eyes.

Silence settles between us, thick and loaded. Then, I release a snarl of frustration. “I can’t do this.”

He dips his head. “I understand.”

I throw my arms in the air. “No, you don’t. I need to get out of here. I can’t breathe with you watching me, acting like you’re trying to be a gentleman when we both know you’re not.”

He doesn't block me. "Then go. Take whatever room you want in this wing. Tomorrow, you see your sister. That's all I can offer."

My composure cracks. A tear slips down my cheek, and I dash it away furiously.

I shake my head. I don't trust myself to say anything coherent.

Right now, I'm a mess of fury, heartbreak, and an undercurrent of attraction that I despise.

I can't let him see how confused I am. "Don't follow me. Don't come knocking."

He nods, stepping aside. I storm toward the door, fumbling with the handle before yanking it open. As I cross the threshold, I pause and glance over my shoulder, determined to have the last word. "This marriage may be legal, but it sure as hell isn't real. Don't forget that."

## Page 16

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:33 pm*

Yesterday was a ceremony, not a celebration.

Cecily spat every vow like a punishment.

I vowed to protect her, though the look in her eyes told me she'd rather spit on my shoes.

Now it's morning, and my chest burns with regret.

I suspect she regrets it, too. We've both made choices neither of us wanted to have to make, and I'm left bracing for whatever blow she deals next.

I exit my bedroom and search the corridor for any sign of her. Only a guard stands by the main stairwell. I try not to bark at him for updates, but I need to know where my wife is. My wife. The word sounds foreign in my head.

Downstairs, the estate is quiet. A few men linger in the entry hall, talking in low voices about Redwood Point—the site we suspect Thorne will target soon.

Nobody acknowledges me beyond the usual respectful nod.

I pass them and duck into the dining area, half hoping Cecily is there.

Empty, aside from a single staff member clearing last night's floral arrangements from the long table.

I recall how my brothers and associates congratulated me in that room after the



ceremony, while Cecily simmered with anger. That memory puts me in a foul mood.

After scanning the ground floor for a minute, I decide to check the wing where her former room is located.

Although I asked her to choose a room closer to me, I suspect she ignored that request. I climb the stairs, pass a pair of guards, and then knock firmly on a door.

There's no answer. I knock again, letting my knuckles hit with more force.

"Who is it?" Her voice leaks through the door. She sounds guarded.

"Dimitri." I expect her to fling the door open and hurl a few insults—instead, the door creaks open a few inches, just enough for me to catch a glimpse of her face.

She looks tired. Shadows circle her eyes, and her hair is still pinned in the remnants of last night's style. A few tendrils have escaped to frame her cheeks.

"What do you want?" she asks in a hoarse voice.

She sounds as if she's been crying. I don't let myself dwell on how uneasy that makes me feel. "I came to see if you need anything. A change of clothes, perhaps breakfast brought up?"

She opens the door a bit more. She's still in the same dress, though the skirt is rumpled, and the lace around her sleeves is crumpled. "I can handle my own clothes. Watley told me where they took them. As for breakfast, no thanks."

I bite back a retort. She stands there like a challenge made flesh, and I can't deny the tightness in my chest every time we speak. "Get some rest," I say, reminding myself to stay calm. "We'll talk later."

She stands motionless for a moment, then closes the door without another word. The click of the latch resonates in my ears. I exhale and fight an urge to punch the wall. This isn't how I pictured the morning after my wedding. Not that I ever pictured a wedding day in the first place.

I head toward my office, determined to bury myself in work.

Redwood Point has become a critical focal point for the Barkov family.

Thorne wants to strike there, hoping to cripple our shipping routes.

We've had scouts investigating every rumor, but the details remain sketchy.

Maksim promised me updates soon. If I have something to do, maybe I can keep my mind off Cecily for a few hours.

Inside the office, I find Aleksei and Maksim bent over a spread of documents. Aleksei peers up. "You're awake early."

I don't bother with pleasantries. "Any news?"

"Some," Maksim answers, tapping a page. "We caught wind of increased chatter near Redwood Point. Thorne might be in talks with other outfits who'd love to see us bleed. Kovalev's name came up again."

I recall our encounter with Kovalev's men. We took them out before they could expand into our territory, but it seems we didn't eliminate the entire threat. "He's stubborn," I say. "But we'll deal with him if he's foolish enough to side with Thorne."

Maksim lifts a shoulder. "It may take more than just brute force. Thorne is forging

alliances, and Redwood Point is a prize greater than any local scuffle. If he gains enough support, we'll face a larger confrontation."

"We dig deeper. We won't let Thorne outmaneuver us."

Aleksei taps a phone on the table. "I have a call with one of our informants in a few hours. If we're lucky, we'll confirm the scale of Thorne's next move."

"Let me know the moment you hear anything. I want Redwood Point locked down. Post men on rotating shifts, coordinate with the local ports, and double-check every entry route."

They both nod. I glance over the scattered papers again, forced to remember that my personal life merges with this business. Cecily's father is at the root of it all. If I don't keep her safe, Thorne will exploit that weakness.

Maksim clears his throat. "How's your wife?"

"Staying in a different room. She's furious."

"Give it time," Aleksei urges.

I rub the back of my neck, annoyed at how powerless I feel. "I'll keep trying. Right now, Redwood Point takes priority."

Maksim clicks his tongue in agreement, and Aleksei returns to sifting through the documents. I murmur something about checking on other aspects of security, then stride out. Focus on the family business, I tell myself. Focus on Redwood Point. But the memory of Cecily's cold stare clings to me.

I catch glimpses of her throughout the day, darting from one hallway to another,

never meeting my gaze.

Each time I see her, the ring on her finger glints like a reminder of what I've done.

I know she wants to see Seraphina, and I promised she could.

But I just don't see how I'm going to fit that in.

My day is spent bouncing between phone calls, strategy sessions, and ensuring that every piece of the Redwood Point puzzle is in place.

By late afternoon, I realize I haven't eaten.

My stomach knots, but it feels more like guilt than hunger.

A plan forms in my mind: I can arrange a quiet dinner for two to see if she'll sit down and talk.

My approach last night was nonexistent—I let her storm off.

Maybe sharing a meal in private will help defuse some of the anger.

I catch our head chef in the kitchen, going over inventory with staff. When I enter, the chef greets me and smooths his apron.

"I need dinner for two," I explain. "Something good, but not excessive. My wife is in no mood for spectacle."

"Any requests?"

"Keep it simple, but make sure it's special enough that she notices I tried." I grimace

at how that sounds. I'm not used to playing the role of a husband who wants to please his bride, but we're here, and I'm grasping at straws.

He smiles politely and promises something elegant.

I thank him and walk away, feeling ridiculous for orchestrating an intimate dinner in the midst of a looming war with Thorne.

My father would have told me to disregard personal matters until Redwood Point is secure.

Then again, my father wasn't the one forced into a marriage; he was the one doing the forcing.

As evening approaches, the staff sets up a small table in the western wing, away from prying eyes.

Candles flicker on the table, next to covered dishes.

A cluster of daisies in a simple vase sits in the center.

I requested no overblown decorations, no banners announcing "congratulations," and definitely no other guests. This meal is for Cecily and me alone.

I check the arrangement once. The staff hurries to finalize details, then recedes.

I stand by the doorway, scanning the corridor for signs of her.

One of the maids returns, telling me Cecily is on her way.

I nod, my heart pounding uncomfortably. She's probably going to throw the daisies at

my head. But I can't give up on this attempt.

I wait. Then footsteps approach, and Cecily steps into view.

She's traded her wedding gown for fitted black pants and a plain blouse that flares at the sleeves.

Her hair is brushed out, falling around her shoulders in a loose style.

She's still wearing the ring, though she fiddles with it as if tempted to toss it away.

"What is this?" she asks.

I motion to the table. "Dinner."

"So I'm forced into an alliance and then bribed with a nice meal after you've broken your promise about me seeing my sister. Quite the compensation package."

"It's not a bribe," I insist. "I just figured we needed to talk without every guard listening."

"Fine." She moves around me and drops into a chair with more drama than necessary. I take the seat opposite her. The candlelight makes her look softer, but I doubt she feels that way.

I nod to the staff, and they silently place two covered dishes in front of us. Then they slip out, leaving us alone. We remove the lids. Chicken in a delicate sauce, a side of roasted vegetables, and a small bowl of fresh fruit. Nothing gaudy. Cecily pokes at the chicken, then glances up.

"Is this supposed to fix anything?"

“No, but maybe it helps us not hate each other while we eat.”

She takes a small bite, and when she doesn't grimace, I take that a small win.

I tap my fork against the plate. “I'm sorry about last night. I know you felt cornered.”

“Felt cornered?” she scoffs. “I am cornered. I'm wearing your name, your ring, and living in your fortress.”

“I gave you options for your living arrangements, and I'm letting you see Seraphina soon. That's not enough?”

“Don't patronize me,” she says, setting her utensils aside. “I never wanted any of this.”

“Neither did I. I'm not proud of forcing you. If there was another path, I'd have taken it.”

“I doubt that. You're used to taking what you want.”

I open my mouth to retort, then clamp it shut. Maybe she's right. I've never questioned my methods this much before. “Look,” I begin, “we can keep tearing each other apart, or we can try to coexist. For what it's worth, I'd rather we not spend our days snapping and glaring.”

She drags the fork across her plate in a slow scrape that sets my teeth on edge. “Coexist. Lovely word choice.”

“It's all I can offer.”

She finishes another bite without replying. I set my utensils aside, waiting. My chest

feels tight, the way it has ever since this whole ordeal started. I almost apologize again, but I stop. Apologies won't change the circumstances.

We're almost done with dinner when my phone rings. I glance at the screen and see Maksim's name. He wouldn't call unless it's urgent.

I answer the call. "Talk to me."

"We got the confirmation. Intel from the interrogation paid off. Thorne's men are making moves on Redwood Point. It's sooner than we anticipated."

"How soon?"

"They're staging within the next forty-eight hours, maybe less. Aleksei wants a meeting right now to plan our approach."

My gaze flicks to Cecily, who's watching me with a mix of confusion and worry. "I'll be there," I say to Maksim, then hang up and stand.

"You're leaving?" Cecily asks.

"Yes. My men and I need to handle something. You stay here. The estate is safer than anywhere else. There's still a chance Thorne might try something, but we'll fortify the gates while I'm gone."

Her posture turns rigid. "So I'm basically locked in again."

"I'd prefer you think of it as protection, but call it what you want." I search her face for some sign of acceptance. All I see is the same anger and maybe with a pinch of concern, though I might just be imagining that.



Maksim's call replays in my mind, reminding me we don't have time.

I glance at the half-eaten meal. "I have to go now, gather the team, finalize the plan." I reach into my pocket, pull out my phone, and check a message from Aleksei that confirms the urgency.

Redwood Point's infiltration could be imminent. This is our chance to stop Thorne cold.

## Page 17

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:33 pm*

I pace the corridor, cursing every minute that drags by without news.

The estate feels too quiet, as if everyone is waiting for the same update I crave.

Dimitri has been gone all evening, and my nerves are frayed.

Every time a guard passes, I ask the same question: “Have you heard anything?” I receive the same reply: “Nothing yet.”

My frustration spikes when hours pass with no word, and I don’t even understand why.

It’s not like I care about Dimitri’s safety.

He’s a brute who forced me into a marriage and took advantage of my love for my sister.

Yet, my heart skips a beat every time I imagine him facing my father and his men.

I don’t know whether Dimitri will come back alive or if he’ll return victorious, but either way, the thought of his absence is more troubling than I want it to be.

So, I wander from one room to another, unable to settle.

A kitchen staff member offers tea, but I barely manage a few sips before abandoning the cup.

The storm in my head grows each time I imagine worst-case scenarios.

Father has proven he's not afraid to push Dimitri into danger.

I wonder if Dimitri's so determined he'll ignore caution and walk right into a trap.

Late evening arrives, and the estate remains silent.

I perch on the edge of a sofa with my hands knotted.

Suddenly, voices sound near the entrance.

I spring up and hurry to the foyer, breath catching when I see him enter.

Dimitri stands surrounded by men, all looking bruised and exhausted.

He meets my eyes across the room. Our eyes meet, and for a beat, I'm unable to move.

His suit jacket is missing. His shirt is splattered with dark stains, and sweat mats his hair against his forehead.

He's upright, though, which means he's walking under his own power.

The tightness in my chest loosens only to be replaced by a fierce rush of relief.

I push through the bystanders, ignoring curious stares.

He looks at me as I approach, and there's weariness etched into every line of his face. "I'm fine," he says before I can demand details. "Don't worry."

“You’re covered in blood.”

“Most of it’s not mine.” He lifts a hand as if to reassure me, then winces at a gash on his arm.

I want to yell at him for scaring me. I want to push him away for forcing me into a vow I hate. Yet all I can do is fling my arms around his shoulders, ignoring the wet stains on his shirt. He tenses for a second, then grips me against him.

A swirl of emotions collides within me: relief that he’s alive, anger at the risk he took, and confusion because I shouldn’t feel any sense of comfort in his presence. But I do.

His men murmur something about debriefing, and the group disappears toward his office. He draws back just enough to see my face. “I told you I’d come back.”

“I was going crazy here. Don’t ever do that again.”

One corner of his mouth lifts. “I had to protect Redwood Point. It’s secure now.”

I clench his shirt. “I don’t care about that. I just—” Words fail me. I tug him closer and press my forehead to his. His warmth seeps into my bones, and I hate how desperately I need it.

It would be so easy to pretend that my fear was purely selfish; that I was afraid of what my father might do while Dimitri was away.

But there’s no denying that I care about him, too.

As much as I loathe his tactics, there’s no denying his courage or his honor.

He didn't have to marry me, yet he did. And even after I threw my fury and hurt in his face, he hasn't given up.

Dimitri's hand cradles the back of my head as his fingers weave through my hair. He takes a deep breath, and I close my eyes. For a moment, I could believe we're two people sharing a tender moment, not a mobster and the woman he's using.

I latch onto that delusion, letting the feeling of his heartbeat drown out all my questions.

I tilt my head, and our lips collide. He tastes of salt and copper, the remnants of a battle I know he's barely had time to wash away.

My heart thuds so hard that everything else fades.

He brushes a hand against my neck, gripping just firmly enough to keep me there.

His tongue parts my lips, and I moan, giving in.

The world fades away. There's nothing but his hands on me and the pounding of my pulse in my ears. He kisses me like he can't stop, as if I'm the only thing anchoring him here. I wrap my arms around his neck, letting him pull me closer against him.

His touch burns through my clothes. Heat floods me, and every rational thought flees. I'm only aware of the sensation of his kiss and the hard angles of his body. I want him closer.

Dimitri's breath hitches, and he breaks away.

We stare at each other, chests heaving. I feel like someone just lit a match in a gasoline-soaked room. I want more. I need him to keep touching me, to finish what

we started. And he must understand because he grabs my hand and leads me upstairs to his bedroom.

When the door closes behind us, he kisses me again. My back hits the wall with such force it rattles the nearby lamp. He pins me there, kissing me like he's trying to consume every ounce of air from my lungs. It's desperate and demanding and makes my legs weak.

I pull his shirt free, and my hands roam. Sculpted muscles greet my palms, and I run my fingers over him, committing the feel to memory.

His lips trail down the curve of my throat. His teeth graze the tender skin, and a shock ripples through me. My hands clutch his shoulders, holding on for dear life. He nips at the spot below my ear, and a moan escapes.

Dimitri steps back, panting. His pupils are blown wide, and his jaw is clenched. Then, with a sudden ferocity, he lifts me and strides toward the bed. The room blurs as he tosses me down. He rips at my shirt, popping buttons until the fabric gives way. My bra is next, and the clasp gives.

I feel exposed, pinned beneath his ravenous gaze. I want him. God, how I want him.

Before I can even breathe, his mouth descends onto my pebbled nipple, sucking. Pleasure explodes through me. I arch up, pressing myself against him as his tongue swirls. I gasp his name. His other hand kneads my breast, and his fingers tease the sensitive bud.

My hand moves on its own, sliding down to the front of his pants. I rub him, feeling the shape of his arousal. He growls and bucks, grinding against my palm. The sound is pure lust.

When he releases my nipple with a pop and moves to the other, I feel dizzy.

His fingers work their way lower, slipping into my panties.

He strokes me, and a shudder wracks my body.

My thighs fall open, inviting him to continue.

He doesn't disappoint. His fingers dip inside me, and the heat is so intense, I can't hold back the whimper.

He groans and sucks harder. He's rough, taking everything he wants, and all I can do is lie there and take it. And god, it's so good.

He unbuckles his belt and pushes his pants down, kicking them away. He stands before me, and the sight makes me dizzy. The light from the window catches the lines of his body, every muscle cast in shadow and light. And then he's on me, his fingers digging into my hips, and his lips devouring mine.

His hand slips between us, and I hear the sound of fabric tearing. In the haze, I'm dimly aware that he's destroyed my pants. They're ripped and falling off me, and he's kissing his way down my stomach. My skin is electrified.

My hips jerk when his lips hit the juncture of my thighs.

He pushes them down, forcing my legs apart.

The first stroke of his tongue against my core is enough to make me cry out.

He growls, low in his chest, and buries his face against me.

His tongue circles my clit, then flicks against it. My hands clench the sheets.

Dimitri lifts his head, and he watches me as he strokes, then presses two fingers inside me.

The stretch is incredible. I gasp, raising my hips, and his fingers push deeper.

His other hand wraps around my thigh, pulling me wide.

His tongue laps at me, circling and teasing, and then his fingers curl.

He knows exactly how to move, and where to press.

My body responds, a wave of heat washing through me.

He sucks my clit, and I feel myself tightening, rising toward the crest of a wave.

Pleasure races through me, and I'm coming.

Dimitri doesn't stop, driving his tongue against me again and again.

Stars burst across my vision, and a sob bursts from me.

He finally draws back, looking pleased. "That was just the beginning."

Then his hands are everywhere. He grips my waist and turns me over.

The sheets rub against my sensitive skin, and his weight settles behind me.

A firm hand wraps around my throat, drawing me upright.



His voice is a dark promise against my ear.

“I’m going to fuck you. I’m going to fill you so deep, you’ll feel it for days. I’m going to take every part of you.”

I nod, not trusting myself to speak. His teeth graze my neck, then he releases me, and I’m pushed back down, ass up, legs spread. He grips my hips and enters in one deep thrust.

There’s no gentleness. He slams into me with his hips slapping against mine. My legs tremble, and I moan. He groans, and the sound reverberates through me. His hands clutch my ass, spreading me open, and he drives forward, burying himself.

I’ve never been fucked like this. He uses me, pounding into me again and again. It’s rough, primal. The bed rocks with his rhythm, and I love every second. Pain sparks, mixing with pleasure. The room tilts.

He reaches forward, cupping a breast. His thumb rubs my nipple, and I shudder. Then he pulls back and slams in. His pace quickens, and he fucks me with such force that the bed frame shakes.

The world narrows to a pinpoint. There’s nothing but Dimitri’s body against mine. Every part of me aches for him. I manage to look back and look at him. A lock of hair has fallen across his forehead. His eyes meet mine, and he thrusts deeper.

I break apart, coming harder than I’ve ever felt. Wave after wave crashes over me. He groans, then spills inside me. For a long moment, we stay there, both of us shaking and panting.

He pulls out and rolls onto his side. The room is still spinning, and I’m too spent to move. I’m aware that my legs are splayed, and the rest of me is sprawled in an

undignified position. But I can't bring myself to care.

"Cecily," Dimitri says, his voice rough.

"Yeah?"

"That was..." He doesn't finish the sentence, but the look in his eyes says it all. He's staring at me as if I'm the most beautiful woman in the world, as if he can't believe I'm here.

I shift, trying to get my bearings, but his hand lands on my shoulder, pushing me back down. "Stay. Please. Just for a few minutes."

He doesn't have to ask. I'm too exhausted to move. My whole body is buzzing, and an odd sense of peace has settled over me. My thoughts are silent. All the rage and resentment I've felt have faded into a state of numbness.

I glance over, watching him. He looks exhausted. Sweat still gleams on his chest. His hair is damp, and his expression is softer than usual. He's gorgeous.

The thought takes me by surprise. I've hated him from the moment we met.

And yet, I've also seen glimpses of kindness, moments when he's proven himself honorable and strong.

Now that the adrenaline is fading, those memories rise in my mind, mingling with the ones that are fresher. I'm not sure what to think.

But he still hasn't made good on his promise to let me see Seraphina.

"Dimitri," I say, and he rolls his head to look at me. "About my sister."

He blinks, and a shadow crosses his face. “Right. I’m going to keep my word. You’ll see her soon.”

“How soon? You said it would be today. I understand something came up, and I’m trying to be patient, but—”

“I know.” He sighs. “Tomorrow. I’ll bring you to see her tomorrow.”

A cautious relief trickles through me. Tomorrow. Finally, I’ll see her again. I can’t wait.

## Page 18

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:33 pm*

Today is the day Cecily sees her sister.

This single trip demands more caution than half the missions I've led.

We're traveling light, no bulletproof convoy or gaudy show of power.

We need minimal fanfare so Thorne's men won't notice Cecily leaving the estate and follow us to Seraphina, thereby putting them both at risk.

"We've mapped the route," Aleksei explains. "I hope you're ready to dodge any watchers who might be lurking."

"I'm ready," I answer as I nod toward the row of vehicles. Two SUVs, a driver and guard in each, plus me and Cecily. "We keep it small. That's the entire point."

He isn't convinced. "Your plan is workable, but if Thorne intercepts..."

"I won't let that happen. Our men are posted along the route, discreet but prepared. If someone tries to follow, we'll know."

"Grigor wants his protocols upheld. Seraphina's safety is a priority for him, and we can't compromise it."

"I'm fully aware. This visit is about bridging a gap, not exposing them."

"Fine. I'll keep an eye on everything from here. Signal me if there's an emergency."

Without another word, Cecily climbs into the rear seat of the lead SUV. I follow and take the spot next to her. Our driver, a young man I trust, glances in the rearview mirror. I give him a nod, and we pull out with the second SUV behind us.

The estate gates open on command to let us slip onto a quiet road. Cecily stares out the window, clearly anxious, judging by her posture.

I clear my throat and tell her, “As promised, we’ll keep a low profile. No big convoys or flags that scream Barkov.”

She gives the barest tilt of her head. “I appreciate that. I don’t want Seraphina’s safehouse to become a target.”

A part of me wants to reassure her further, but I leave it at that.

There’s no way to guarantee anything in this world.

We ride in silence for several minutes, heading west. Occasionally, the driver updates me about a turn or cross street.

I keep an eye on the mirror, watching for suspicious vehicles. So far, no sign of anything unusual.

Eventually, we approach a quiet residential area. It looks ordinary: small houses with gardens and winding lanes that never see heavy traffic. This anonymity is exactly why Grigor chose it for Seraphina. Maksim’s SUV follows us closely, turning whenever we do.

We pull up to a familiar single-story house with a modest porch. Grigor’s guards keep watch. Their presence is subtle—a man cleaning up branches on the side, another leaning by a shed. If you didn’t know better, you’d think it was a casual

suburban scene.

Cecily leans forward in her seat. “This is it?”

“Yes. Seraphina’s inside.”

The SUV stops, and I jump out first to inspect our surroundings.

The second SUV pulls in behind us. Maksim steps out, taps his phone, then signals that everything is clear.

I help Cecily out of the vehicle and guide her toward the gate.

She pulls her arm free but doesn’t snap at me.

We’re both on edge but for different reasons.

We enter the yard. One of Grigor’s men comes up to tell us, “They’re waiting inside.”

“Thanks.” I glance at Cecily, who purses her lips as she eyes the house. It must be surreal seeing her sister’s location guarded by men with guns who aren’t employed by her father.

We reach the front door, which opens to reveal Grigor himself. “Dimitri,” he greets, then turns his attention to Cecily. “Your sister’s in the living room.”

He steps aside, and Cecily barely acknowledges him before rushing past. I follow just in time to catch Seraphina appearing from a side room. Her eyes brighten the instant she sees Cecily. “You made it,” she breathes, moving closer with open arms.

They come together in a tight embrace. Cecily trembles as she buries her face in

Seraphina's shoulder.

Seraphina holds her, and her eyes shut as tears slip free.

This right here is why I insisted on bringing Cecily despite my brothers' objections.

She's endured months of isolation, and seeing her sister's relief hits me harder than I thought it would.

"Thank you for keeping your word," Grigor remarks. "She asked about Cecily daily."

I offer a nod, ignoring the prickle of guilt that I once treated this reunion like a piece of strategy. "How is Seraphina holding up?"

"She's anxious but safer here than anywhere else. Thorne hasn't found us yet, so that's something, I guess."

Maksim steps inside behind us, instinctively eyeing the corners for threats. "Have you heard anything about Thorne's movements?"

"Nothing concrete," Grigor replies. "He's still slippery."

I chew on the inside of my cheek, resisting the urge to bark out a plan.

This visit is about Cecily and Seraphina.

We can't overshadow it with more talk of war.

Instead, I watch Cecily pull back, and my heart stutters at the tears staining her cheeks.

Seraphina dabs them away, managing a small smile.

“How are you?” Seraphina asks. “I worried Father would never stop chasing you.”

Cecily nods. “He tried. Dimitri’s men intervened. It’s...” She falters and glances my way, then refocuses on her sister. “Complicated. But I’m safe.”

Seraphina’s eyes slide to me. “Thank you. I know your marriage with my sister is...unconventional. But if it keeps her out of Father’s clutches, I’m grateful.”

“Unconventional is one word for it,” Cecily mumbles as she wipes her face. She tries for a wry grin but can’t hold it.

My heart wrenches at the sorrow behind those hazel eyes.

She’s been furious for weeks, yet beneath that is an immense capacity for devotion.

Seraphina has told us stories about when they were younger, how Cecily took every blow Thorne aimed her way whenever she could just so Seraphina could avoid it.

And now she’s in a forced marriage to me just so she can spend time with her sister.

My father used to tell me to avoid attachments that could compromise my judgment.

I can’t help wondering if I’m already lost, seeing how fiercely Cecily loves.

Seraphina guides her toward the couch, and they sit side by side. Maksim and Grigor confer near the entry, discussing security rotations. Their voices fade into the background. I remain standing, trying not to intrude on the sisters’ conversation.

“Are you comfortable in the Barkov estate?” Seraphina asks, brushing stray hairs



from Cecily's face.

Cecily shrugs. "As comfortable as one can be with locked gates and armed guards. Dimitri tries not to make it feel like a cell."

Upon hearing my name, my hearing instinctively swivels in their direction. I sense her looking up. She's unsure how to define my role in all this. We've fought, we've clashed, and we've made love. The whole situation is baffling, even for someone like me who has seen it all.

Seraphina sighs. "This entire situation is twisted. I never thought we'd become so entangled with the Barkovs."

Grigor walks over to rest a hand on Seraphina's shoulder. "Well, I for one, wouldn't have it any other way."

"Neither would I," Seraphina confesses before fixing her sister with a stern look. "Still, I promise you, I'm done letting him control my life."

They exchange a determined look. I swallow the lump in my throat, realizing how deeply Thorne's manipulations affect them both. Then, Cecily reaches for Seraphina's hands and whispers, "If anything changes, if you need me, send word. I'll overcome whatever obstacles stand in my way."

My respect for her grows unbidden. Despite her situation, she's hellbent on comforting her sister.

Cecily is resilient and unstoppable when it comes to protecting her sister.

Everything about the look on her face promises pure loyalty.

That quiet sincerity stirs something inside me, something that has been dormant for a long time.

It makes me want to protect her even more.

Time slips away as they talk, flipping between cautious happiness and not-so-happy memories.

Seraphina hangs on every word Cecily shares about the estate, Redwood Point, and how close we came to disaster.

Of course, she leaves out what happened between us when I returned home from that fiasco, but my mind replays those moments in vivid detail.

I can still feel her, still taste her, still remember how good it felt to hold her.

That moment in bed was like nothing else.

I've been with a lot of women, but nothing compared to the rush of being with her.

The way she responded, the way her body molded to mine...

it was like we were made for each other.

But it was also a moment of weakness. Cecily was vulnerable, and I let myself get carried away. What she needs is a friend, not someone who takes advantage.

I can't let it happen again.

Eventually, Grigor checks the clock on the wall. "We can't risk a long visit," he murmurs. "The more time you spend outside your estate, the greater the chance of

discovery.”

Cecily frowns, but she nods. “I understand.”

She and Seraphina exchange another tight hug. I step toward the door to signal Maksim, letting him know it’s time. Seraphina turns my way once more, this time with gratitude plain on her face. “Keep her safe, Dimitri.”

“Always.”

We exit the safehouse under the watchful eyes of Grigor’s men. The yard is clear and the surrounding streets are quiet. Our vehicles wait with their engines idling. Cecily hesitates on the porch for a moment, glancing back at the house. I sense her desire to stay, but she follows me down the steps.

Maksim helps us into the SUVs, then nods at our drivers to begin the trip back. This time, Cecily’s silence feels charged with reflection rather than anger. She stares out the window, occasionally blinking as if holding back emotions.

I rest my forearm on the seat in front of me and ask, “Everything go the way you wanted?”

“Yes. Thank you for making it happen. I know it wasn’t easy.”

“I try to keep my word.”

She nods before returning to the view outside.

We continue traveling the side roads, taking an indirect route to avoid any watchers.

Halfway back, Maksim radios that we have a minor detour due to a stalled vehicle on

one of the streets.

Our driver adjusts and slips through a residential block.

I'm on edge, expecting trouble, but we see nothing.

We arrive at the estate without incident, passing through the gates that seal behind us. The moment we park, Cecily steps out then disappears into the corridor leading to her suite.

"Well, that was a success," Maksim comments.

"Because we kept it minimal."

He exhales in a thoughtful way. "Let's catch up in your office."

I follow him as my mind replays Cecily's face at the safehouse.

That mix of relief and love for her sister.

I never doubted her devotion to Seraphina, but seeing it in person changed something in me.

It was as if I could feel the strength of their bond.

It stirred feelings deep inside, ones I thought had been beaten and burned out of me long ago.

We reach my office, and I close the door. Maksim sits across from me. "I have a few security updates. We're monitoring suspicious chatter, but nothing urgent. Our men are rotating with Aleksei's, so we stay covered."

“Fine.” I lean back. “Anything else?”

“Yeah, one more thing. It’s about Cecily.”

“What about her?”

“I don’t think I need to say this, but... You know who raised her, Dimitri. Thorne is cunning. Teaching his daughter deception would be second nature.”

I bristle. “You still think she’s plotting against us? Even after—”

“Not necessarily,” he interrupts me with a raised hand. “But you need to remember she was brought up in a nest of manipulations. Just because she’s sharing your bed and acting grateful doesn’t mean we can drop our guard.”

“I’ve seen how she cares for her sister. That’s real, not an act.”

He shrugs. “Maybe. But blood ties are powerful. And Thorne has ways to coerce even the most unwilling participants.”

My hands curl into fists, but I manage to keep my voice level. No good will come from losing my temper with my brother, who is only looking out for me. “I don’t believe Cecily’s involved in that. She despises him.”

“I’m just cautioning you. Don’t forget we’ve been betrayed before. If she’s working for Thorne, we won’t see it until it’s too late.”

“She isn’t,” I say it with such conviction that it surprises even me, but my brother just shakes his head.

“Suit yourself. But if you’re wrong, the Barkov name takes the hit. Keep your eyes

open.”

“Thanks for the warning.”

He strides out, and I sit in my chair, drumming my fingers on the desk.

My line of sight falls on a ledger detailing shipments, a notepad full of the next week’s obligations, and the phone that could ring any second with fresh trouble.

None of it holds my focus. Instead, my thoughts spiral around Cecily.

I recall the real emotion on her face when she hugged Seraphina and the quiet gratitude in her voice when she thanked me.

That didn’t look like a woman planning betrayal.

Yet the doubt planted by Maksim lodges in my mind, refusing to budge.

Thorne is devious, there’s no denying that.

Could he have manipulated Cecily into playing the perfect role?

This forced marriage is forging something unexpected. Part of me wants to shield her from every threat, to earn her trust despite how we started. Another part fights to remain detached. Maksim’s warning echoes. If I let my guard down, the entire Barkov empire might pay the price.

I can’t dismiss the threat that Thorne poses. Every day he searches for weaknesses in our armor. If he finds one, he’ll exploit it. If Cecily is that weak link...

I don’t know. I hate doubting her. But what if it’s true?

For the first time, I wonder if the only way to protect my family is to push her away.

The idea sits in my gut like a stone, heavy and immovable.

There's only one problem: I can't bring myself to do it.

I'm done sitting on the sidelines.

The moment we returned from seeing Seraphina, my mind has been moving too fast to rest. Seeing her safe, seeing her free—it lit something inside me. I can't go back to being the woman who lets others decide what happens next. I won't.

I know my father better than anyone here. His lies, his tricks, the way he maneuvers people like chess pieces. It's second nature to him. That means I have something Dimitri and his men don't. A way to anticipate what's coming next.

I spent years trapped under my father's rule, and now I'm trapped under Dimitri's protection. The difference is, Dimitri actually thinks he's doing me a favor. He doesn't realize that keeping me out of the fight won't keep me safe. It'll just make me useless.

I've had enough of being useless.

I find Dimitri in his office, hunched over a stack of documents. He doesn't look up when I enter, but I know he senses my presence. His fingers tap against the desk. I've come to recognize it as his only tell when he's bracing for a fight.

Good. He should be.

"I want in," I declare without any preamble.

His pen pauses mid-scratch. He finally looks up, and his eyes scan my face as if weighing how much trouble this conversation is about to be. "In on what?"



“You know exactly what.” I step closer and plant my hands on the edge of his desk. “I want to be involved. Strategizing, planning, whatever it takes to take down my father. I have insight none of your men do. It’s a waste not to use it.”

“You don’t need to be involved in any of this.”

“That’s not your choice.”

“Yes, it is.” He leans back and steeples his fingers. “This isn’t up for discussion.”

I let out a short laugh, one with no humor. “You don’t get to lock me in a marriage for the sake of your business and then expect me to be an obedient, silent wife. I have just as much at stake as you do.”

“You have more at stake,” he corrects. “Which is why you’re staying out of it.”

“That doesn’t even make sense.”

“It makes perfect sense,” he replies. “You’re a target. Thorne already tried to kill you once. If you think I’m letting you anywhere near the fight, you’re not thinking straight.”

I push off the desk and throw my hands in the air. “You have men out there working to destroy him, but none of them know him like I do. I know his weaknesses. I know how he operates. But you’d rather pretend that’s not valuable?”

“You think I don’t see the value? Of course, I do. But it’s not worth the risk.”

“This isn’t just about me. This is about everyone he’s hurt. The people he’s tortured, controlled, ruined. I can help end him.”

“And if he gets to you first? Then what? He doesn’t kill quickly, Cecily. He takes his time. He enjoys it. I’ve seen his handiwork.”

Inwardly, I flinch, but I don’t let it show. I’ve seen what’s left of the men who cross him, too. “I know exactly what kind of monster he is. That’s why I won’t hide while you handle it.”

His chair scrapes as he stands. The room suddenly feels smaller with him towering over me, but I just square my shoulders. “I handle it because I know what I’m doing.”

“So do I,” I shoot back. “You think growing up with him didn’t teach me anything? I spent years learning how he operates. How he manipulates. How he moves pieces before anyone realizes they’re part of his game. And you’d rather keep me locked away instead of using what I know?”

“You think you’re the first person to come at me asking to be part of this life?”

“I’m not asking to be part of your life, Dimitri. I’m demanding a say in my own.”

He clenches his jaw and exhales through his nose like he’s trying to keep from breaking something.

Then he turns away.

“Meeting’s over,” he declares, as if that’s the end of it.

No. Not this time.

I grab his arm before he can go any farther. He stops instantly, and his muscles ripple under my fingertips. “Don’t dismiss me. I’m your wife, not one of your men.”

“Cecily, you don’t understand what you’re asking.”

“I understand perfectly,” I counter through gritted teeth. “I’m not a liability, Dimitri. I’m a weapon you refuse to use because you’re too stubborn to admit I might be useful.”

“You want to help? Fine. Tell me what you think his next move is.”

I step in front of him, forcing him to face me directly. “My father never attacks head-on. He always lays the groundwork first—plants seeds of doubt and creates rifts where there weren’t any. Then, when people are distracted, he strikes where they least expect it.”

Dimitri listens, but his arms remain crossed, like he’s still looking for a reason to shut me down.

I keep going. “He’s been using Redwood Point as a test. You stopped him this time, but he’ll come at you from another angle. Somewhere unexpected. Somewhere personal.”

His expression doesn’t change, but something comes alive behind his eyes.

I press on. “He’s always believed leverage is more powerful than brute force. He’ll go after the people closest to you, the ones you don’t expect to be vulnerable.” I pause. “Your brothers. Their families. Anyone he can get his hands on.”

Dimitri’s jaw ticks, and I know I’ve hit the nerve I was aiming for.

But instead of answering, he drops his voice and asks, “And what if he comes for you?”

I'd be lying if I said I didn't think about that or that it didn't scare the hell out of me, but it won't stop me. "Then I'll be ready."

His fingers brush my wrist, just enough to send a shiver racing down my spine. "No, you won't."

"You don't get to decide that."

His grip tightens around my hip bone, not enough to hurt but enough to remind me of his strength. "I do when it comes to keeping you alive."

We stand there, locked in a silent war, neither of us willing to break first. Then he lets go and turns away like he's closing a door between us.

"This conversation is over."

The finality in his voice stings more than I want to admit.

But I'm not done. Not even close.

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The next morning, I wake up with the same frustration burning beneath my skin. Dimitri shut me down, but I'm not backing down. If he thinks ignoring me will make me give up, he doesn't know me at all. I'm prepared to storm into his office and keep arguing until he listens.

Instead, he finds me first.

I'm in the dining hall, finishing a cup of coffee, when he enters. He nods at a few of his men before making his way toward me. I brace myself for another fight, for him

to tell me to stay out of his way.

Instead, he pulls out the chair across from me and drops a file onto the table.

“We’re restructuring security rotations for the west gate,” he announces, like this is a normal conversation we have. “What do you think?”

I blink. “What do I think?”

“You heard me.”

I stare at him, waiting for the catch. Dimitri doesn’t just change his mind overnight. He doesn’t suddenly ask for my opinion when he’s spent the last several weeks deciding everything for me.

I slowly reach for the file, flipping it open to scan the details inside. It’s a logistical matter, not particularly sensitive, but still something that most men in this organization wouldn’t consider bringing to me.

I trace a finger over the map of the estate, noting the current guard posts. “You’re leaving the west gate weaker in the afternoons,” I remark as I point to the rotation. “You’ve staggered the shifts too much. If someone wanted to time an approach, that’s where they’d do it.”

Dimitri studies me, then the map. “And what would you suggest?”

I glance up, searching for the trick, but there’s no sign of trickery. He’s serious. He actually wants my input.

I push the file toward him and tap a section near the perimeter wall.

“Instead of staggering shifts at the gate, stagger them here. It creates the illusion of an opening without actually making one. If Thorne or anyone else is watching, they’ll think they see an opportunity, but your men will already be positioned to cut them off before they get close. ”

Dimitri doesn’t answer right away. His eyes move between me and the file, then he nods once. “I’ll have Maksim run that adjustment.”

That’s it. No argument. No dismissal. Just an acknowledgment.

I pick up my coffee again, trying to act unaffected, but my mind is racing. He didn’t just listen—he accepted my suggestion without a fight. It’s a small thing, a minor security thing, but it feels bigger than that.

“Why are you asking me this?”

“Because you’re right. You know how Thorne thinks. I should use that.”

I don’t know how to respond to that. He’s not just letting me have a say; he’s admitting he was wrong to keep me out of it. For a man like Dimitri, that’s almost impossible.

I should feel victorious. Instead, I feel unsettled. Not that I’m going to let him see that.

I nod and push the file back toward him. “Good. Let me know if you need anything else.”

Dimitri smirks like he knows I’m playing it cool. He stands and picks up the file. “I will.”

He strides away, leaving me sitting there with my mind turning. It was just one detail. Nothing big. But it feels like something.

I exhale and look around the room. A few of his men are scattered throughout, sipping coffee and discussing business in deliberately low voices. At first, I don't pay them any mind.

Then, I notice it.

Some of them are watching me.

Not in an obvious way. No marked stares or open hostility. Just quiet observation, an awareness in their posture that wasn't there before.

It takes me a second to understand why.

They saw Dimitri bring me the file. Saw him ask for my opinion in a way he doesn't do with anyone outside his circle. And now they're wondering what it means.

Power plays in this world don't always come with declarations. Sometimes, they're as simple as who gets consulted and who doesn't.

And I just got consulted.

I glance down at my cup and pretend to be exceptionally interested in the brown liquid inside. I know exactly what's happening. I'm being tested.

Some of these men don't trust me. Maybe they think I'll sabotage them. Maybe they think Dimitri is blinded by whatever this thing is between us. Or maybe they just don't like that a Thorne is sitting at their table.

Whatever the reason, I feel the shift in the room, as if a new line has been drawn in the sand. Before, I was Dimitri's prisoner, then his reluctant wife. Now, I'm becoming something else. Something with potential.

Something that matters.

Dimitri's trust—or whatever version of it this is—has just put a target on my back. I should be afraid. Instead, I welcome it.

I sip my coffee and force myself to look unbothered. If they want to test me, they'll have to do better than suspicious side-eyed glances.

From across the room, one of Dimitri's men leans against the counter. He's one of those who had been deep in conversation before Dimitri sat down. Now, he remains still, his eyes shifting between me and the door that Dimitri disappeared through.

I recognize him from the night of our wedding. He was standing close to Maksim when they all watched me walk down the aisle like I was some rare exhibit. I don't know his name, but I know his type. Loyal to Dimitri, but wary of me.

I set my cup down and meet his gaze without even blinking. His lips twitch, as if I've done something amusing. He mutters something to the man beside him, and they both chuckle before going back to their conversation.

They're not underestimating me. They're watching . Measuring. Waiting to see what I'll do with the influence Dimitri just handed me.

I push my chair back and slowly stand. The subtle movement draws attention, but I don't acknowledge it. Instead, I smooth my hands down my dress and walk to the counter, where one of the kitchen staff is finishing up a fresh pot of coffee.



She glances up at me and smiles. “Another cup?”

I nod. “Please.”

She pours it for me, and I take my time adding just the right amount of sugar. I don’t rush. I don’t let my shoulders tense. I feel the stares, but I refuse to react.

Dimitri has no idea what he just did. Or maybe he does. Either way, his men have taken notice. And in this world, attention isn’t always a good thing.

Let them test me. Let them watch. I’ve been underestimated my entire life.

They’ll regret it.

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:33 pm*

Blood and loyalty have always guided my decisions. Emotions don't have a place at the table. But that was before Cecily burst into my life, before she began demanding more than I was ever willing to give.

I should have shut this down already. Every instinct tells me keeping her out of this war is the only way to ensure she survives it. But instincts don't change the reality I'm facing. Cecily isn't backing down. And whether I like it or not, she's right.

That doesn't mean I have to like it.

I glance across the conference table where Cecily sits with her gaze locked on the map sprawled across the surface.

She's been quiet while Maksim and Aleksei go over the latest intel, but I see the way her fingers curl against the table's edge and the way her eyes narrow when certain names are mentioned.

She's thinking, turning over every detail, analyzing.

The same way I do.

Maksim clears his throat. "We've got scattered reports of movement near the dockyards. Thorne's people are making themselves known, but not in any obvious way. They're testing us. Pushing at the edges, looking for cracks."

"Then we seal those cracks," Aleksei declares. "We can't let them think they're making progress."

I nod as I consider the angles. The dockyards are too valuable to leave vulnerable. We need better surveillance and more intelligence. Every move Thorne makes should be one we have already anticipated.

“We need eyes on the ground,” Maksim continues. “We’ve been running surveillance, but it’s not enough. We need someone close to his network, someone who can get in and feed us real-time information.”

Cecily straightens in her chair. “Then I have an idea.”

The words come out steady and confident. I almost smirk at how quickly she’s learned to assert herself in these rooms, but I don’t. Instead, I just sit back and wait. I’ve learned over the last few days that she doesn’t speak up unless she has something to contribute.

Maksim glances at me before looking back at her. “Let’s hear it.”

She leans forward and taps the map, right where the dockyards stretch into the industrial district. “My father isn’t going to make a direct move yet. That’s not his style. He’s sending people in to plant the seeds, to establish leverage before he acts. But there’s a way to get ahead of him.”

She redirects her focus to me, and I feel that familiar pull—like she’s daring me to deny her before she’s even finished talking.

“We should let him think he has the upper hand,” she continues. “Set up an operation that feeds him the intel he wants. Something believable but controlled. A false leak. Let him bite, and when he does, we use the opportunity to track it back to him.”

I stare at her, unwilling to admit how good the idea is. I don’t want to encourage her continued involvement even if she is damn good. The idea of putting my wife in

danger just doesn't sit right with me.

Aleksei rubs his chin. "You're suggesting we set a trap."

"Exactly," Cecily confirms. "But not an obvious one. It has to be layered. He doesn't trust easily, but if he thinks he's getting information from someone weak, someone desperate, he'll take the bait."

Maksim clicks his tongue and chuckles. "It's not a bad idea. But who do you suggest we use as bait?"

"That's the part we have to be careful with. If we make it too obvious, he'll sniff it out. We need someone believable."

My mind is already turning over possibilities, weighing the risks. It's a good plan. A damn good plan. But that's not the problem. The problem is her.

She's sitting here, laying out strategies like she's been doing this her whole life. And maybe, in a way, she has. She grew up under Thorne. She's watched him manipulate people like chess pieces. She knows how to play the game, maybe even better than some of my men.

But that doesn't mean I want her playing it.

"You're not going into the field," I remind her before she can even entertain the thought.

"I wasn't asking to."

That surprises me. I squint my eyes and tilt my head to look at her. "Then what exactly are you asking?"

“To be part of the operation, I know how my father thinks and how he will react to different kinds of bait. I can help organize the setup to make it seem real. You need someone who understands his patterns, his paranoia. That’s me.”

She’s right. Again.

I glance at Maksim, who watches Cecily closely. He’s still wary, but I can tell he sees the logic in what she’s saying. Aleksei, too.

I exhale through my nose as I weigh my options. The answer should be no. Keeping her away from this war should be my priority. But the reality is, she’s already in it.

I set my hands flat on the table. “You’ll be in the operations center. Nowhere else.”

Cecily blinks, clearly surprised I’m not outright refusing her. “And what exactly does that mean?”

“It means you’ll help set up the strategy, oversee the flow of information, and work with Maksim to monitor everything as it plays out. You’ll be involved—but from here.”

She exhales, and for the first time since this conversation started, I see something in her eyes that doesn’t fill me with exhaustion. Not victory. Not defiance. Something closer to understanding.

“Okay,” she concedes. “I can work with that.”

Aleksei watches me, but I can’t tell what he’s thinking. He’s been quiet through most of this, letting Maksim take the lead. But I know him well enough to recognize when something’s bothering him.

I don't acknowledge it. Not yet.

Cecily glances between us, then settles her attention back on the map. "We need to pick the right leak. Something that feels like a mistake but still holds enough value for Father to bite."

Maksim hums in agreement. "We can fabricate a shipment schedule. Make it look like we've got vulnerabilities in our supply chain."

Cecily nods. "That could work. But it has to be fed through the right channels. He doesn't take information from just anyone. He has specific informants. We need to use one of them."

Aleksei crosses his arms. "We have someone in mind. We'll handle that part."

She doesn't push. Smart. She knows how to pick her battles.

"If we're doing this, we need to move fast," Maksim suggests. "Thorne won't sit idle forever."

I stand, signaling the end of the discussion. "We move now. Maksim, start working on the leak. Cecily, you'll coordinate from the operations center."

Cecily watches me for a beat longer, like she's still processing that I gave in, even a little. Then she nods.

"Let's get to work."

Over the next few hours, Cecily absorbs every detail like she was made for this.

She keeps up as Maksim and I go through the steps, pinpointing weak spots and

dissecting the strategy from every angle.

She doesn't just listen—she contributes.

She flips through documents, pulls up files, and pushes back on ideas when they don't line up with how Thorne operates.

The more she speaks, the more I see it. This is instinct. She grew up in a world of deceit and manipulation, and unlike my men, she's survived it firsthand without letting her turn her bitter or vile.

And she's good.

Damn good.

We work deep into the night, hunched over maps and monitors in the operations center. Maksim takes the lead in setting up our bait, while Cecily and I review surveillance patterns and recent intelligence.

She doesn't complain about the hours or the monotony of combing through data.

She reads through reports with a dedication that makes it clear she's committed to seeing this through.

Every so often, she asks a question that makes Maksim pause, and it leads us to reconsider angles we might've overlooked.

When she's like this—completely focused, entirely in her element—it's impossible not to watch her.

“This informant,” she says, pointing to a name on a roster of Thorne's known

contacts. “You said he’s unreliable.”

Maksim leans back, rubbing the back of his neck. “He runs his mouth. Half the time, he’s just trying to get attention. The other half, he’s drunk.”

“That doesn’t mean he’s useless.” Cecily glances at me. “If he’s stupid enough to exaggerate his intel, he’s desperate enough to believe he’s onto something big. He could be the perfect leak.”

She’s not wrong. The best way to feed Thorne bad information is through someone who already struggles to be taken seriously. Someone he’ll want to verify before he acts on because some of the time, he does get it right.

I tip my head at Maksim. “Set up a meeting. Feed him just enough that Thorne gets curious.”

Maksim nods and steps out to make the call. The second he’s gone, Cecily reaches for another file and flips it open. She studies the route we’ve laid out for our fake shipment and traces a path along the map.

“This still feels too clean,” she comments.

I glance at the diagram. “How so?”

“You’ve covered all the obvious approaches, but my father doesn’t go for the obvious. If I were him, I wouldn’t hit the shipment directly.” She taps a location just outside the primary route. “I’d interfere at a secondary point. Force a detour. That’s where he’d strike.”

She’s right again.



I exhale and lean back, observing as she continues going over the data. Each time I push her away, she proves why I shouldn't. She notices things I don't, predicts moves my men wouldn't anticipate.

I should be annoyed by that. Instead, I find it thrilling.

And that's a problem.

I should step back and keep my focus on the mission, not on the way she leans in, the way her fingers move lightly over the pages as she considers possibilities, or the way her eyes flash with excitement every time she pieces something together.

Instead, I just watch her.

Cecily is completely engrossed in what she's doing, but then, as if sensing my stare, she glances up.

Her lips part, and there's an energy in her gaze that wasn't there before.

She's alive in a way I haven't seen yet, like for the first time since she was dragged into my world, she's in control of something.

"This," she says, pressing a finger against the map. "This is where we should focus. We give my father the illusion of control while setting the trap before he even realizes it's been laid."

Maksim returns just in time to hear her last words. He sets his phone down on the table and says, "The contact agreed to meet. We'll feed him the intel tomorrow night."

I nod but don't look away from Cecily. "You want to be involved? Then walk me

through it.”

She doesn’t blink an eye before continuing. “If my father thinks there’s a weak point, he won’t act immediately. He’ll want to confirm the information before he makes a move. That’s our window.”

Maksim makes a sound of approval. “Makes sense. He’s been careful since Redwood Point. Probably hoping we’ll believe it was just Kovalev acting alone. If he sees an opportunity, he’ll send someone else in first. Just like he did with Kovalev.”

“Which is why we need to be ready before that happens,” Cecily continues. “We monitor every person who gets within a mile of that point. We make sure we’re in place before his men even realize what’s happening.”

She reaches for another set of documents and shuffles through them like she knows just what she’s looking for.

She’s good at this—so good that it makes me wonder how much of it is instinct and how much of it is survival.

How many times did she have to predict her father’s next move just to stay ahead of his punishments?

I tell myself it doesn’t matter and that the only thing that matters is the intel she can provide. That’s where my focus should be.

Instead, I focus on her.

She pauses as something catches her attention. Her breath quickens, and her fingers tighten around the edge of a report. Then she looks up with excitement ablaze in her beautiful hazel eyes. “Wait. Look at this.”

I lean in before I even register I'm doing it. When my shoulder I get a whiff of her scent—something soft and warm, like fresh laundry dried in the sun. It shouldn't be such a distraction, but the combination of her proximity and that fucking smell is like a drug.

“What is it?” I manage to ask.

She slides the document toward me and points at a line buried within paragraphs of data. “This. One of my father's associates rented a property two miles from the last safehouse he was using. It's under a different name, I recognize it as one of his aliases.”

Maksim swears under his breath. “That's too much of a coincidence.”

“It's him,” Cecily insists. “Or it's someone close enough to give us what we need.”

I let the moment stretch between us. She's waiting for my response, for me to acknowledge that this is real, that she just found something we wouldn't have seen if she wasn't involved.

I should be thinking about the logistics of what comes next, focusing on how we can use this information to corner Thorne. Yet, all I can think about is the way she's looking at me right now.

Pride.

She's proud of what she just uncovered, and she should be. It's the best lead we've had in weeks. And I should acknowledge that.

But what I want to do is something else entirely.

I pat her on the back like she's one of my men. Something casual, something to show my appreciation without revealing how affected I am by her. "Good work."

It's not enough. Not for her. Not for me.

But it's all I can allow myself right now.

Still, a small smile ghosts over her lips before she turns back to the map. She's still studying the data, still discussing possible next steps, but I can feel that something is changing between us. It is shifting, becoming something neither one of us expected.

I should walk away. Should leave her to keep working. Should make it clear that this—whatever this pull is between us—means nothing.

Instead, I watch her.

And I let myself feel it, just for a moment.

The thrill of the hunt. The promise of the kill. And the rush of finally finding a partner who can keep up.

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*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:33 pm*

I swirl the wine in my glass and try not to fidget.

The dinner isn't formal, but it still feels like a test. I can feel eyes on me, gauging how I fit into this world, whether I belong at this table.

A week ago, I wouldn't have. A week ago, I was a liability.

Now, I'm something else. What that is exactly, I'm still trying to figure out.

Dimitri sits at the head, listening as Maksim goes over the finer details of tonight's success. The operation played out exactly how we planned. Father took the bait. Now, we have eyes on his movements and a trail to follow.

It worked.

I should be reveling in that, but my focus keeps drifting. The way Dimitri's fingers tap idly against the table when he's thinking. The way his throat moves when he takes a sip from his glass. The way his presence pulls me in even when I don't want it to.

Things have changed between us.

I notice it in the way he looks at me. When he saw me as merely a means to an end, his gaze was harsh and judgmental. Now, it's something else.

I can't quite pinpoint it. It's not the heat I saw when he pinned me against the wall or when we had sex. It's not even the hunger I caught glimpses of when he looked at me in the office today. It's not something I can read or interpret, not something I can

define.

But it's something. Something I feel all the way down to my core. I'd call it admiration, but that feels insufficient. Whatever it is, it's there, and it's growing, and it's terrifying.

"Good work tonight," Maksim comments, cutting into my thoughts. "You read Thorne exactly right."

I glance at him, unsure if he means it as a genuine compliment or if he's still weighing whether to trust me. Probably both.

"I told you," I say simply, taking a sip of my wine. "He plays the long game, but he's not patient. If he sees an opportunity, he won't ignore it."

Aleksei nods. "And now we follow him back to wherever he's running his next play."

Dimitri hasn't said much. He's been watching, listening, considering every detail. His silence should feel unnerving, but it doesn't. I understand it. The less you say, the less room there is for mistakes.

He looks at me, and even though he's sitting several feet away, I can feel the warmth of his body. I can't tell if it's coming from him or me or both.

When Maksim and Aleksei shift the conversation to security adjustments, Dimitri picks up his glass and leans toward me. "You barely touched your food."

"Are you actually concerned, or is this just an excuse to lecture me about how I should eat more vegetables because they make me big and strong?"

The corner of his mouth twitches. He almost smiles. Almost.

He looks me over and makes a noise that sounds suspiciously like a scoff. “Hardly. You look like a stiff breeze would blow you over.”

I raise an eyebrow. “If that was meant to be a compliment, you should rethink your strategy.”

“It wasn’t,” he confirms, swirling the whiskey in his glass.

“So you’re saying I look terrible. Good to know.”

Dimitri smirks, taking another sip of his whiskey. “If you’re fishing for compliments, you’re going to be waiting a long time.”

I huff a laugh. “Noted.”

Across the table, Maksim watches us with a knowing look, then nudges Aleksei. “I think we’ve talked enough business for tonight. Don’t you need to get home to the Missus?”

Aleksei glances at his watch. “Yeah, she’ll be waiting. She’s out with her girlfriends for a bit, but we’re supposed to meet up for a movie. And you... I’m sure you’ve got plans, too.”

Maksim rolls his eyes. “Shut up. Get out of here.”

He and Aleksei both stand, pushing their chairs in. Dimitri and I rise with them.

Aleksei pats Dimitri on the shoulder. “Goodnight, Brother. See you tomorrow.”

“Have a good night, boys,” I add.

Maksim tips his head at me and winks. “Night, Cecily. Thanks for your help today. Glad to see you’re fitting in.”

“Well, that makes one of us,” I joke.

They both chuckle and head out, leaving me alone with Dimitri.

They’re leaving to give us space, and we all know it, even if we’re pretending we don’t.

Dimitri doesn’t call them out on it, which surprises me.

He just watches as they exit. When the door closes behind them, the dining room feels different as we take our seats again. Quieter. More intimate.

I tap my fingernail against my wine glass. “They’re not subtle.”

“They don’t know how to be,” he replies.

I let out a breath and adjust myself in my chair. Now that we’re alone, I should find a reason to excuse myself. I should walk away before I do something stupid. Instead, I stay.

Dimitri studies me for a moment before setting his drink down. “Tell me something about yourself.”

I blink. “Something specific, or is this just a general demand for information?”

“It’s not a demand for anything. I’d just like to get to know my wife a little better. Whatever you want to tell me.”



That's not an easy question. It's not that I don't have an answer; it's that I don't know which one to give. He's never asked me anything that wasn't strictly necessary before. He's never acted like he wanted to know me outside of my connection to my father.

But now, the way he's looking at me—there's more to it than that.

I swallow and pick at the edge of the tablecloth. "Um. I guess I'm a big reader. Always have been. When I was a kid, I used to get in trouble for staying up late because I was reading under the covers with a flashlight."

He leans back in his chair, watching me. "Yeah?"

"Back when my mother was alive, before my father became... who he is now, he used to bring me books. Mostly novels, along with history and politics. After she died, he stopped, but I kept reading. I suppose it was the only thing I had left that was really mine. It was the one way I could escape from everything else. And it stuck. I still spend most of my time with a book in hand. Even now, despite being surrounded by people, it feels like something that is just mine."

I swirl the wine in my glass, smiling faintly. "I used to think I'd travel one day. See the places I read about."

Dimitri doesn't speak right away. When he does, his voice is quieter than before. "And now?"

I look down at the deep red liquid in my glass. "Now, I don't think much about the future."

"You should."

I glance up. “Why?”

“Because you’re not your father. You don’t have to be trapped by the life he built.”

I let out a slow breath. “That’s easy for you to say. You were born into power.”

He presses his lips together and averts his eyes. “Power doesn’t mean freedom.”

Something in his voice makes me pause. I don’t know much about what his life was like before he became the man sitting in front of me now.

I’ve heard whispers, of course. Stories of the Barkov brothers and their rise through the Bratva.

But those are just stories. In this life, the truth is often something else entirely.

I study him, admiring the way the candlelight casts shadows over the angles of his face. He doesn’t look at me. He looks like he’s lost in thought. Lost somewhere far away.

I don’t know why, but I reach out and cover his hand with mine.

Dimitri flinches like he’s waking up from a dream. He looks down at my hand resting lightly over his, and for a second, it seems like he wants to pull away. But then, he doesn’t.

For the first time, I can see the cracks in the armor. For the first time, I can glimpse the man underneath.

“What about you?” I ask. “Did you ever want something different?”

“I didn’t have time to want anything else.”

I wait, giving him space to say more if he wants to. I don’t expect him to take it.

But he does.

“My father raised us to be what we are. There was no question, no alternative. When I was young, I thought maybe I’d be different. Maybe I’d get out before it became permanent. But then...” He trails off and drags a hand through his hair. “Then it didn’t matter anymore.”

I don’t push. If I’ve learned anything about Dimitri, it’s that he won’t say more than he wants to. Instead, I say, “Sounds lonely.”

He looks at me. There are layers behind his gaze, something dark and haunted and unspoken. Something that makes me feel like I’m treading on dangerous ground.

He turns his hand over and slides his palm against mine, brushing his thumb over the back of my wrist. A shiver runs up my arm.

I tell myself to pull away, but I can’t. It feels like I’m suspended in time, waiting for the other shoe to drop. Waiting for whatever is happening between us to pass.

It doesn’t.

He traces the curve of my hand, and my skin prickles in its wake. There are a thousand reasons why I shouldn’t let him keep touching me, but my pulse pounds in my ears, and I can’t think past the soft brush of his fingers against my palm.

When his thumb brushes the inside of my wrist, the place where my pulse beats against my skin, he hesitates. I can sense his eyes on me, but I can’t bring myself to

meet his gaze. Not when the air feels like it's on fire, my throat is dry, and my whole body is aching.

The silence is suffocating. It's filled with tension, questions, and a million things that are better left unspoken.

When he finally speaks, his voice is quiet. Low. Dark.

"Your heart is racing."

I swallow. I'm not surprised. Not after the last few days. Not after tonight.

Not after the way he's staring at me, as if he could devour me whole and still not be satisfied.

Dimitri stands slowly, tugging me up with him. He takes a step toward me, and the world seems to fade away until it's just us, alone, a hairsbreadth away from crossing a line.

I'm breathing faster now, and he must be able to feel the tension in my body.

He's so close, and the energy between us is thick, almost tangible.

His fingertips ghost up my arm, leaving goosebumps in their wake.

His stormy grey eyes never leave mine, and when he speaks, his voice is rough and deep. "Is this okay?"

I nod.

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He lifts a hand and brushes my hair back. “Good.”

He leans in and captures my lips. It’s gentle. Barely there. A whisper of a touch. Then he pulls back, his fingers lingering on the nape of my neck.

He doesn’t have to speak. His intentions are clear. This isn’t a demand. It’s an invitation. All I have to do is close the distance.

I do.

Our mouths meet again, and this time, his tongue slips into my mouth, and he tastes like whiskey and heat and lust. His hands find my hips, and he pulls me against him.

The hard ridge of his cock presses into my stomach.

I make a sound that’s part gasp and part moan.

The kiss turns deeper, harder, hungrier, yet somehow still gentle.

His mouth claims mine, his tongue invading and retreating, leaving me breathless.

His fingers tangle in my hair, and his body presses against me until we’re touching from hip to chest. His mouth trails across my jaw, down my neck, leaving a path of kisses and fire.

The last time we were together, it all felt so desperate and animalistic.

Now, it's a different kind of heat, and it's just as dangerous.

I'm losing control. Losing myself in the feeling of his lips on mine and his hands exploring my body and his hard cock pressing against me. My heart is pounding, and my pussy is wet and throbbing, and I can't stop myself from kissing him back.

His hands slide over my waist, down my ass, and stop just below the hem of my dress.

Then he squeezes. I gasp, and the sound is swallowed up by his kiss.

My hands grip the back of his shirt, fisting the fabric.

The heat between us builds, and our bodies move closer, like we're trying to melt into each other. Like we're trying to become one.

His lips find the curve of my ear. "Take it off."

It's not a request. It's a command.

I hesitate, and his hand tightens on my ass. "Take it off."

His voice sends a shiver through me, and my clit throbs. I want him. More than anything, I want him.

I want him to fuck me. To take me. To claim me.

And he knows it.

"Don't make me repeat myself."

There's a warning in his voice. A threat. And it only makes me want him more.

I pull away from him and turn around. I grab the hem and lift the dress over my head, revealing my bare skin to him. I stand there, facing away from him, wearing nothing but a black lace thong and matching bra.

I can feel him looking at me, drinking in the sight of my exposed body. My skin prickles with heat and anticipation. I'm standing here, practically naked, offering myself to him. I've never done anything like this before, and the vulnerability of it fogs my mind.

"Keep going," he urges.

My fingers find the clasp on my bra. It releases, and I let the straps fall down my arms. I hear him suck in a breath. Then, the straps are lifted off my skin, and his lips press against the curve of my shoulder. I shudder, and the bra falls to the floor.

"Good girl," he murmurs, with his mouth still against my skin. "Now the rest."

My panties are the only thing left, and they're soaked through with my arousal. He wants them off, and so do I. But when my hands go to the edge of the waistband, his grip closes over mine.

"Allow me," he growls.

I bite my lip, trying to keep my composure as his hands move over my hips and the fabric begins to slide down. The thong bunches at the tops of my thighs, and his fingertips stroke the sensitive skin.

"You're already so wet."

The words are barely out of his mouth before his fingers dip between my thighs, and a ragged groan escapes his throat. “So wet.”

I can’t respond. I’m too distracted by the feeling of his hand cupping my sex and the tips of his fingers dipping into the slickness of my folds. He spreads the wetness, and a whimper slips from my lips. He chuckles darkly.

“That’s right, Cecily. Let me hear how much you want this.”

His fingers slide over my clit, and the sensation makes my knees buckle. He keeps going, circling and stroking, until my breathing is ragged and my legs are trembling. He presses the tip of his finger into my opening, and the pressure makes me nearly collapse.

“Dimitri...”

“Yes?”

“Please...”

He laughs. “Begging already? I like the sound of that.”

I moan as his finger sinks into me, and his palm grinds against my clit. My hips start moving, matching the rhythm of his hand, and he lets out a growl.

“Fuck, Cecily. Your pussy feels so fucking good. I can’t wait to fuck you.”

The image is enough to make me moan, and the noise only spurs him on. He starts pumping his finger, and the friction is intense. I can feel an orgasm building, and the thought of coming on his hand, just like this, is almost enough to send me over the edge.



But just before I do, he stops.

His fingers slip from my pussy, and the absence of his touch is almost painful. I'm on the edge, and I need to come. Badly. But he's not going to give it to me. Not yet.

Instead, he turns me around to face him and hoists me up, setting me down on the table. The wood is cold and smooth against my bare ass.

"Spread your legs," he commands.

I do, and he positions himself between them. I can feel the hard ridge of his erection, straining against his pants. He grabs my hips and yanks me forward, until I'm on the edge, teetering and exposed.

My hands land on his shoulders for support, and his grey eyes blaze into mine. His hands are moving up and down the outside of my thighs, and I can feel the callouses on his palms. He's so strong. So powerful. And right now, he's focused entirely on me.

"Are you ready?" he asks, his voice low and husky.

Instead of answering, I reach for his belt, tugging the leather strap free.

My fingers work quickly, undoing the buttons and zipper and sliding his pants down his hips.

His boxers follow, and when he literally tears his shirt off, he's standing before me, naked and powerful and hard as a rock.

The tip is glistening with precum, and I have the urge to lean forward and taste it. I'm transfixed.

He strokes the length, and I watch, mesmerized, as his hand moves up and down. Then, his other hand cups my face and tilts my head up.

“Cecily. Look at me.”

I blink, tearing my eyes away from his cock. When I look up, the expression on his face is smoldering.

“I’m going to fuck you. Right here. Right now. And I want to look in your eyes when I do it.”

My heart thunders in my chest, and I swallow hard. “Okay.”

“Do you want that?”

I nod.

His hands settle on my hips, and his cock nudges against the inside of my thigh. He’s so close, and the heat of him is almost unbearable. I ache for him, and he knows it.

“Then tell me,” he whispers.

“I want you,” I breathe.

“Say it again.”

“I want you, Dimitri. I want you to fuck me. Right here. Right now.”

He grins, and his hands move down, grabbing my ass and pulling me forward. I lean back, bracing myself on the table. He lines his cock up with my pussy, and the blunt tip slips over my wetness. All I can think about is him filling me. Stretching me.

Fucking me until I can't think straight.

I wrap my legs around his hips, urging him forward. He chuckles and leans in as his mouth finds the curve of my neck.

“Be patient,” he murmurs, nipping at the sensitive skin.

I squirm against him, desperate for more. My whole body is on fire, and I need him to put it out. I'm ready to beg.

“Please,” I moan. “Please, Dimitri. Please fuck me.”

The words are barely out of my mouth before he pushes forward.

His cock slides into me, inch by inch, until he's fully seated.

I gasp, and his teeth find the lobe of my ear.

He sucks and bites, and his cock pulses inside me.

He pulls back, almost all the way out, then slams back in, filling me completely.

I cry out, and he does it again. And again.

He sets a brutal pace, fucking me hard and deep. His cock stretches me, and the pressure is almost overwhelming. His mouth never leaves my skin, and his fingers dig into my hips. I grip the edge of the table, bracing myself against his thrusts.

My pussy is slick and swollen, and every time his cock sinks into me, it's pure bliss. His breath is hot against my skin, his body is hard and solid, and his hands are everywhere.

He ducks down to gather my nipple in his mouth, sucking and biting, and his thrusts never slow.

“You feel so good,” he growls, and the words vibrate against my breast.

His cock plunges into me, and I’m lost. My eyes roll back, and my body arches against him. He pumps into me, and my whole world is centered on his thick cock buried inside me. The pressure is building, and I’m so close. So fucking close.

“Dimitri,” I moan.

He groans, and his thrusts quicken. His fingers slide down between us, finding my clit, and the sensation is enough to push me over the edge.

My pussy clenches around him, and an orgasm rips through me.

I cry out, and his mouth covers mine, swallowing the sounds of my pleasure.

I ride the wave, letting it carry me. My nails dig into his back, and he doesn’t stop.

He fucks me, relentlessly, and my orgasm continues to shudder through me.

I’m still coming when his own orgasm hits. His thrusts become erratic, and his body tenses. He comes with a grunt, and his cock pulses inside me. He fills me, and I milk every drop.

When it’s over, we’re both panting and spent. Our bodies are pressed together, slick with sweat. I can feel his heart hammering against my chest, and his cock is still buried inside me.

We stay like that for a moment, catching our breath. My fingers stroke the back of his

neck, and he lets out a satisfied sigh.

This isn't what I expected tonight to be like. It's not what I thought I wanted. But in this moment, everything feels perfect.

But panic rises in my chest as reality slowly comes into focus. What we did—what we're doing—it's dangerous. We're not supposed to be here. We're not supposed to want each other. Not like this.

I've seen the way he is with his Bratva brothers, and I've heard the stories about how ruthless and violent he can be. I'm not supposed to see the cracks in the armor or the pain behind the scars.

Yes, we're technically married, but the marriage isn't real. He's not supposed to be a man, or a person, or anything but the monster that took me and claimed me and turned my world upside down.

What are we doing?

What am I doing?

It's one thing to be taken by force, but to willingly sleep with him? To crave his touch, his kiss, his body?

It's wrong. It's twisted. It's dangerous.

"What's wrong?" he asks, reading the conflict written on my face.

Gently, I nudge him back.

Dimitri takes the hint and slips out of me. A trail of cum drips down the inside of my

leg, and I feel a sudden, deep pang of guilt.

I don't want to talk. Not about what just happened. Not about anything. I can't let him get close to me, or me to him.

"I need to use the restroom," I say, pulling away.

Dimitri nods and lets me go.

I hurry down the hall and shut myself inside the bathroom. My reflection in the mirror looks flushed and disheveled, but also happy. Satisfied.

I turn on the water and splash my face. When I look up, the girl in the mirror is a stranger. She looks like she's lost.

That's because you are.

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:33 pm*

I see the car the moment I step outside, parked just beyond the gate like it belongs there. It doesn't. I don't recognize it, and I recognize every vehicle that's meant to be in the area. No one's inside as far as I can tell, but my gut says otherwise.

For a few seconds, I just stand there, fighting the urge to pull my weapon and approach.

Two weeks ago, I would have. I would've forced whoever was lurking inside to step out and answer my questions.

But now, I've got bigger concerns. I've got Cecily.

And the more she grows into her role, the more I realize just how vulnerable I am if Thorne aims to exploit her presence here.

My phone vibrates. I glance at the screen: Maksim texting for an update.

I type a quick note— Strange car out front, no immediate threat —and stuff the phone in my pocket.

Then I force myself to walk inside. If I make a show of aggression, I might tip off whoever's watching that I'm onto them.

Better to let them think I haven't noticed or that I don't care.

At least until I decide how to handle it.

I pass two guards posted by the gate. They dip their heads in greeting, then stare past my shoulder at the car.

I give a slight shake of my head, signaling them to stand down for now.

One of them looks uneasy, but he doesn't question me.

Loyalty. It's why I trust these men. But trust doesn't mean I can relax.

Stepping into the foyer, I let out a breath. The memory of last night won't leave me alone. I can't shake it. Each time I walk into the dining room and look at that table, I end up replaying every moment in excruciating detail. That's new for me, letting a woman's presence consume my thoughts.

She's done that. Taken my carefully structured life and turned it inside out. And I'm falling for her, no matter how much sense it doesn't make. But loving someone in this world means handing any enemy a potential weakness. That terrifies me more than any war we've waged.

I head toward my office, half expecting to find Cecily there.

She's taken to reviewing intel on her own.

The girl is always looking for angles we might've missed.

I push the door open. Empty. Good. That gives me a moment to think.

Or so I tell myself. In truth, I'm avoiding her until I have a plan, a method to ensure she doesn't end up in a sniper's crosshairs.

I sink into the leather chair and rub a hand over my face.



My thoughts refuse to settle. I keep picturing that car outside, imagining the muzzle of a rifle pointed toward any window Cecily might pass.

My chest constricts at the idea of losing her, especially now that she's more than an asset.

She's become the reason I can't sleep without double-checking every lock and every camera feed.

The door creaks open. Maksim steps in and closes it behind him. "You saw it?"

"No plates, dark tint. Could be Thorne. Could be a scout."

"Sure you don't want me to send someone out there?"

"I want them left alone for now. Let's see if they make a move. If we spook them, we lose the advantage."

He arches a brow but doesn't argue. "Fine. You gonna tell Cecily?"

The mention of her name sets my pulse racing. "I'll handle it."

He studies me for a beat longer, then shrugs. "Security's tight all around, but maybe we should reinforce the second floor. That corridor has too many windows."

"Yeah. I'm restricting access to any area with a direct line of sight from outside. Starting tonight."

Maksim snorts softly. "Cecily's not going to like that."

"No, she won't," I admit as I stand. "But it's necessary."

He offers a small nod. Then he leaves, presumably to organize the men.

Once he's gone, I force myself to gather a plan.

Tighter security means confining Cecily to certain parts of the house.

She'll see it as me doubting her abilities.

In a way, maybe I am. Not because she can't handle herself, but because I can't handle the risk of losing her.

I genuinely thought most of this activity would stop if we got married. Instead, it's picked up. It almost seems to have encouraged Thorne even more.

I push away from the desk and walk out. The corridor feels oddly quiet. Maybe she's in the living room, or the library, or the lounge. I set off to find her, mentally rehearsing the conversation we're about to have because I know it's not going to go well.

Sure enough, I spot her in the living room, staring at a monitor that cycles through surveillance feeds. She's changed so much since she arrived, no longer the frightened but snippy captive. Now, she stands like an integral part of our operation. It's been impressive to witness.

I approach and clear my throat to get her attention. She glances over her shoulder and says, "Did you see that car outside?"

I should have realized she'd notice. "Yes. Maksim and I are handling it. I wanted to talk to you about a few changes we're making."

She tilts her head. "What changes?"

“I’m restricting access to certain areas. The second floor near the west side has too many windows, and the east gallery is basically a vantage point for any sniper.”

“You mean restricting me , right? Because your men will still patrol.”

“For your safety.”

She squares her shoulders. “I knew you were paranoid, but this is a bit much, don’t you think?”

“Not after seeing that car. Thorne’s watchers could be out there, scoping angles. If you walk by a window, you become a target.”

“I get the risk, but you’re blowing it out of proportion. You said yourself you want to see what they do before reacting.”

“Still, I can’t risk letting them take a clear shot. Look, we’re winning right now, but Thorne hates losing. We can’t afford complacency.”

“And apparently, we can’t afford to trust me to use common sense. You know I’m not going to dance around windows waving my arms.”

“It’s not about your sense. It’s about controlling the variables.”

She snorts. “So you’re going back to keeping me on a short leash. I get it.”

I groan and pinch the bridge of my nose. I want to explain that this has nothing to do with doubting her and everything to do with my growing terror that I might lose her. But I don’t. I can’t show that vulnerability. Instead, I say, “I’m not discussing this. It’s final.”

Her hazel eyes come alive with that familiar blaze of defiance, and she sputters her lips. “You can’t just make decisions that affect me without asking my opinion.”

I lift a brow. “This is how it works. My house, my rules.”

“We’re married ,” she reminds me. “Which means this is my house too. Besides, I thought we were partners, at least in this fight.”

“We are partners. But that doesn’t change the fact that I won’t let you become a casualty.”

“You talk like I’m fragile. Like I can’t handle myself. I’ve proven otherwise.”

“Cecily, you know better than anyone that Thorne doesn’t play fair. He’ll exploit any window—literally or figuratively—to get to you.”

She tosses her hair back. “And you think locking me in the safest corners helps? Maybe for a day. Maybe a week. But what about after? Are you going to keep restricting my movements forever until I’m confined to my room like I was when I first got here?”

The word forever slams into my chest like a loaded possibility.

Forever. With her.

I never considered the idea, and the notion makes me lightheaded. I shove the thought away, forcing myself to focus.

“If it keeps you alive, yes.”

Her face falls for a second, then frustration returns. “That’s not living, Dimitri.”

“I’d rather have you hate me than see you dead.”

She flinches, as if I’ve hit a nerve. “I don’t hate you. But if you keep pushing me into a corner, I might start.”

Part of me wants to pull her into my arms and promise that this is only temporary. Once I figure out who’s in that car, I’ll ease off. But I don’t know how long that might take, and every second she’s exposed is a second she could end up in Thorne’s line of sight.

“Do you really think the situation is that bad?” she questions.

“I think we’d be fools to assume otherwise.”

“I can’t do this. I won’t let you treat me like an invalid. If you truly believe in me, you’d know I wouldn’t carelessly wander into a sniper’s scope.”

“All it takes is one second of inattention, one stray bullet—”

She lifts a hand, cutting me off. “Stop. I’m tired of hearing how close I am to dying. I’d rather die on my feet than be caged.”

“I’m trying to keep you alive because I—” I break off, forcing myself not to reveal the depth of my feelings.

She notices, and she squints at me. “Because you what?”

“Because it’s my job to protect everyone under my roof.”

She barks a bitter laugh. “Sure. Keep telling yourself that’s the only reason.”

Her accusation hits home, but I can't let her see how much it rattles me. "That car is still out there," I say instead. "And until I know what it's doing, the house remains on partial lockdown. You can stay in the interior quarters. I'll assign guards."

Her lips curl into a sneer. "This is exactly why I said you were no different than my father sometimes. You might not be as cruel, but you're just as controlling."

That hurts more than I expect. But maybe she's right. Maybe I am controlling, out of a fear I can't fully admit—fear that I've let her in too deep and now can't bear to lose her.

She turns on her heel. "I'm done with this conversation."

I step forward, wanting to stop her, but my phone buzzes again. A text from Maksim: The car's gone . Another from a guard says: Clear perimeter, no sign of intruders .

I open my mouth to inform her the threat is gone, but she storms off before I can speak, stomping through the hallway and vanishing around the corner.

I guess this is how it ends tonight, with her furious and me convinced the only way to keep her breathing is to keep her under lock and key.

I watch the space where she disappeared, and every fiber of me wants to chase after her, to beg her to forgive my iron grip on her freedom.

But I can't. If I chase her, I don't trust myself to keep my feelings to myself.

So I stand still and let her storm away, listening to the echo of her footsteps in the silence. The worst part is knowing that tomorrow might bring the same argument, the same fear, and the same longing.

Because I'm falling for her, and it's the most terrifying thing I've ever faced.

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:33 pm*

I find out I'm pregnant on a Tuesday. Maybe that's too mundane a day for something so colossal, but there it is. The test in my hand confirms what I can hardly wrap my head around.

I'm sitting on the edge of the bathtub in my private bathroom, knees quivering, staring at a tiny plastic stick that changes everything.

My heart pounds like it's trying to break free from my rib cage.

Two faint pink lines tell me that, despite the war raging around us, a baby is on the way. Our baby—mine and Dimitri's.

It started with a nagging suspicion a few days ago: the obvious late period coupled with fatigue and a wave of nausea.

I tried blaming it all on my nerves. When those symptoms refused to go away, I confided in Mila, one of the younger maids who's been assigned to help me with errands.

She's the only one here who seems to treat me like a friend instead of the boss's wife.

I asked her to be discreet, and she promised.

She returned from a trip into town late last night, handed me the small box, and whispered, "Good luck." Now, the proof stares back at me, and I don't know whether to laugh or scream.



A child changes everything. I have grown fond of Dimitri; somewhere between the forced marriage and the nights we've shared, my heart betrayed me. But I hate this environment. The Bratva's shadow threatens to swallow any chance at a normal life.

The child isn't even born, and I'm already terrified.

Will it grow up confined the way I have been, moving from guarded hall to guarded hall?

Will it learn that violence is the norm, that bullets and deals and territory define one's existence?

I swallow the lump in my throat and lean against the sink.

For a second, my vision blurs with tears I refuse to let fall.

No. I won't let my child endure what I have. I need a plan.

I hide the test in a pouch of toiletries under the bathroom sink. Then I splash water on my face, trying to steady myself. If Dimitri figures out I'm acting strange, he'll press for answers. And if I tell him, I know exactly what will happen: more guards, more restrictions, more fear.

Yet part of me longs to run straight to him just to see his expression when he finds out.

A baby might be the last thing either of us expected, but it might also be the only untainted thing in this entire war.

I imagine his arms around me, reassuring me.

Then I recall how he's locked down half the estate to keep me "safe." He doesn't trust me enough to walk by a window without having a meltdown.

How will he react if he finds out I'm carrying his heir?

I let out a shaky breath and exit the bathroom. I tiptoe down the corridor, passing one guard who nods at me, and head downstairs, trying to appear casual.

In the main hall, I see a pair of Dimitri's men with rifles slung across their shoulders, watching every corner.

Their presence reminds me that we're still on high alert after the suspicious car incident.

My father is out there, plotting. And now, more than ever, I realize I don't want to raise a child in the crossfire.

I find Dimitri in the study, barking orders into the phone. His gaze darts to me as I approach, and there's relief in it, perhaps, or something similar. But I also notice the caution. He never stops being the boss, never stops calculating the risks.

He ends the call and sets the phone on the desk. "Everything okay?"

"Why wouldn't it be?" I force a small smile, hoping my voice doesn't betray the thousand thoughts swirling in my head.

He eyes me for a moment. "You look...pale."

I shrug. "Didn't sleep well."

"Nightmares?" he asks, stepping closer.

I wish it were just nightmares , I think bitterly. But I just give another shrug. “Something like that.”

He wants to say more, I can tell, but an associate pokes his head in to mention a minor issue with the perimeter patrol. Dimitri glances between me and the door. “I’ll be right there,” he tells the associate, then to me, he says, “We can talk later.”

He brushes his hand along my arm as he moves past. It’s a fleeting touch that makes my pulse jump. Then he’s gone, and I’m alone with the knowledge of what’s growing inside me.

The logical part of me suggests that staying might be a wise choice. Dimitri is powerful. He has resources, men, and money. He can ensure we never want for anything. But that’s the problem. We’ll never want for anything except freedom.

My father used to claim he was protecting me, too, back when he dragged me from hideout to hideout. It’s the same suffocation, just a different man calling the shots. I can’t risk letting my baby grow up in this environment.

My decision solidifies in a single heartbeat. I’m leaving.

I think back to when I stumbled on a staff entrance near the lower level, the one only Irina has a key for. I was determined to get that key and make a break for it, but I let that go once Dimitri and I were married because he started letting me become more involved.

I need to get that key.

Of course, there’s the question of money, identification, and a place to go.

I don’t have all the answers, but I’d rather risk the unknown than wait for my father

to attack or for Dimitri to smother me further.

My heart aches at the thought of leaving Dimitri behind.

I do care for him, but that doesn't mean I chain myself to a man who sees me as a porcelain figure he must shield at all costs

I make my way to the kitchen, where I hang back and keep out of sight. Irina moves around the counters, focused on prepping the bread for dinner. Her keyring hangs from her pocket, jiggling with every step she takes.

She mutters something under her breath as she kneads dough, then stops to stretch her back. With a tired sigh, she tugs the key ring free and tosses it onto the counter beside the sink before grabbing a pitcher of water.

There.

I move fast and glide across the tiled floor before my nerves can talk me out of it. The keys are cold in my hand, heavy with the weight of what I'm about to do. I slip them into the pocket of my sweater and pivot back toward the pantry like I was never here.

My pulse pounds as I move through the halls, past the guards who have no idea I'm about to vanish from under their noses.

My heart races when I reach the service corridor. The staff entrance is ahead, just past the storage room. I press myself into the shadows, listening for movement. Nothing.

I pull out the key ring, shaking as I fumble through the keys and try one, then another.

Click .

The lock disengages. I push the door open just wide enough to slip through and step into the evening night air.

Freedom.

A rush of exhilaration floods through me. I made it. I actually made it. I swallow past the lump in my throat and move quickly, sticking to the shadows along the estate's outer wall. I'm not free yet. I need distance before anyone notices I'm gone.

A car engine rumbles in the distance, but I keep moving. The alley ahead is my best option. If I make it there, I can disappear into the night and find my way out of the city before Dimitri realizes I'm missing. I just need to—

A hand clamps over my mouth.

My scream dies in my throat as an arm wraps around my waist, dragging me back against a solid chest. I thrash, kicking out, clawing at the grip that locks me in place.

A voice whispers against my ear, low and vicious. "Gotcha."

I freeze.

I know that voice.

My father's men have found me.

## Page 25

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:33 pm*

Cecily is missing.

I don't realize it right away, but something prickles in the back of my mind when I notice she's not in the usual places—her room, the lounge, the library.

At first, I assume she's exploring, clearing her head.

She does that sometimes. Then, I pass a guard in the corridor who looks uneasy and mentions not seeing her all evening, and an alarm ignites in my gut.

I check the living room. Empty. I check the study. No trace of her. A gnawing sensation grows in my stomach. The estate isn't that big, and she's no recluse. She'd have made herself known if she was here.

“Maksim!” My voice echoes through the halls.

He appears from a side corridor with his phone in hand. “Something up?”

“Where's Cecily?” I snap. “Have you seen her?”

“Not recently. I thought she was in the living room going over the new intel. You checked there?”

“Yes,” I reply through clenched teeth. “She's not there.”

“You sure?”

“I’m not an idiot. I searched every room on that floor. She’s gone.”

He studies me for a second, then lifts his phone to give a quick series of orders. “Alright. We’ll approach this systematically. I’ll secure the estate and have the men do a full sweep. If she’s still here, we’ll find her.”

“Do it. Now.”

He strides away, barking orders at the nearest guard while my mind churns with worry.

Cecily—she’s strong-willed, restless, and hates feeling cooped up.

Could she have tried to escape? The thought strikes me like a hard blow.

I spin on my heel and head toward the security room, where banks of monitors cycle through camera feeds.

The guard on duty jumps to attention as I enter. “Mr. Barkov. Need something?”

I lean over his shoulder to inspect the screens. “Rewind the last hour’s footage. Every camera that might show Cecily.”

He nods and punches the keys as the monitors flick through recordings. I scan for her silhouette, her hair, or any sign that she passed through a corridor. At first, nothing stands out. Then the guard grimaces. “We have blind spots near the staff entrance. They’re not well covered.”

“Show me what you have.”

The footage is blurry and poorly lit. I see a dark figure slipping out, but the resolution

is so bad that I can't confirm it's her. My heart pounds anyway. "That could be her. Timestamp?"

He checks. "About forty minutes ago."

Forty minutes for her to vanish, or worse, for someone to intercept her. My thoughts snap back to that suspicious car we spotted recently near the estate. If those watchers realized she was trying to escape, they might've seized the opportunity.

"Stay on these feeds. If you spot anything else, call me immediately."

"Yes, Sir."

I exit the security room to find Maksim waiting in the hallway. "We did a quick sweep. Not a sign of her." He pauses. "Looks like she left, or someone took her. But no alarms, no forced entry. More likely she left on her own."

I push a hand through my hair. "She was restless. Angry about the restrictions. I guess she decided to act." I can't help recalling how she used to scowl at every locked door and every guard trailing her. I thought I was keeping her safe, but maybe I pushed her too far.

"Where would she go?" Maksim asks.

I shake my head. "If she planned this, she might have money stashed away, a plan to slip past us. Unless Thorne's men grabbed her the moment she stepped out."

"We'll widen the search. I've already told the men to patrol outside the walls."

"Good. I'll coordinate from here, but first, I need to make a call."



Grigor. Seraphina. I stride to my office, dreading what I might hear. The phone rings twice before he picks up.

“What’s going on, Dimitri?” Grigor’s voice is guarded. He always expects trouble.

“Cecily’s missing,” I say in a harsh whisper. “Can you confirm Seraphina’s safe?”

He barks a command to someone on his end, then comes back. “She’s fine. Why is Cecily missing?”

I take a ragged breath. “She slipped out—or she was taken; we’re not sure. She’s not here, and there’s no sign of a fight. I suspect she left on her own.”

A brief silence. “Are you sure she didn’t just wander to a corner of the estate?”

“My men have checked everywhere. She’s gone. And we saw that suspicious car around lately, so I’m worried Thorne might be involved.”

He curses under his breath. “You want me to mobilize extra eyes? Start asking questions?”

“Yes. If Thorne has her, or if he was waiting with his men—”

Grigor’s voice turns cold. “You think she might’ve willingly run to Thorne?”

The idea makes me choke on anger. “No. But if she was running from me, that gave him a perfect window to snatch her.”

“I’ll do what I can. Keep me updated.”

I hang up, and my chest is burning. My father-in-law has always been a threat, but

now the stakes are higher.

If Cecily's out there alone, she's an easy target for her father's men.

The frustration tears at me, and guilt weaves in.

This is my fault. I pushed too hard and didn't give her enough space. Now she might be paying for it.

Maksim appears at the door. "We found tracks near the staff entrance. Footprints, possibly hers. And a partial shoe print that looks bigger, maybe a man's. Not conclusive, but suggests she wasn't alone at the end."

My stomach knots. "So either she met someone, or someone intercepted her. We need answers."

"I have men canvassing the neighborhood. We'll check cameras from nearby shops, traffic lights, and anything else that might have captured movement."

"Good." The tension in my voice is impossible to hide. "Notify me the moment we get a lead."

He nods and steps out.

I sink into my desk chair, dropping my head in my hands.

Cecily's independent streak was obvious from day one, but I never imagined she'd actually run.

I can't believe she'd willingly hand herself over to Thorne, but maybe she was trying to escape both of us—her father's war and my suffocating protection.

The notion stings more than I want to admit.

I review a map of the estate's perimeter, tracing potential exit routes.

The staff entrance is the easiest. If she had a key, she could slip away.

Irina might have left them unattended. That's all the opportunity Cecily would need.

She's clever enough to time everything, wait until the guards are occupied, then vanish.

And if that black sedan was waiting, Thorne's men would've taken her in seconds. Just the thought of it sets my blood on fire. She might be in their clutches right now, powerless to fight back. My heart pounds at the image of her pinned in a car, terror in her eyes.

I force myself to breathe, to think logically. If Thorne wanted to rub it in my face, he'd contact me with demands. Unless he's planning something bigger. That possibility ignites a fresh wave of worry.

The emptiness in the mansion grates on me. Each quiet corner is a reminder she's not here. I storm to the security room once more to review every camera. My men scramble to gather intel from the city, but we're coming up empty. It's like she vanished into thin air.

I want to drive out and scour the streets personally, but I also need to coordinate from here in case we get a lead. The conflict roils in my gut. Standing still feels like a betrayal, but I can't abandon the nerve center of our operation.

Time crawls. Minutes, hours. My phone rings nonstop—false leads, men reporting dead ends, worried allies asking how we let her slip away.

My anger festers, aimed at myself as much as Thorne.

I was so busy tightening her security that I forgot she might resist it.

Now she's gone, and the only question is whether I can fix this before it's too late.

## Page 26

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:33 pm*

Pain lances through my wrists where the rope bites into my skin.

They tied me up for the car ride, and even though they untied me once we got here—wherever here is—the dull ache remains.

I keep my hands in my lap to hide the raw marks, breathing slow and steady to keep the panic at bay. Panic won't help me here.

I inspect the room for the hundredth time.

It's not a dungeon or the cell I envisioned it would be, but it's no better.

A bedroom, if you can call it that. The walls are bare, and there's minimal furniture.

There's a dresser and a bed with stiff sheets that smell like mothballs, a single window locked and covered from the outside with what looks like plywood, and a door I already know is bolted shut.

I don't know how long I've been here. A day, maybe longer. I slept at some point, but not well. The worst part is that no one has told me anything. No questions. No threats. Just silence. That terrifies me more than anything else. My father doesn't ignore problems. He doesn't wait.

So why is he waiting now?

I press my hand over my stomach. The gesture is instinctual.

Protective. I barely had time to accept what I learned before I was taken, but now, it's the only thing keeping me from unraveling completely.

My father can do whatever he wants to me, but my baby—Dimitri's baby—will not grow up under his rule. I won't allow it.

I sit on the bed and stare at the door, willing it to open. I need information. I need something to tell me what he plans to do with me. Killing me outright doesn't seem like his style. I'm more useful as leverage, but for how long?

The lock turns.

I shoot to my feet, bracing myself as the door swings open. A man steps in first—one I recognize as one of my father's guards. He has the same dead-eyed obedience I remember from childhood.

And then, my father walks in.

Evan Thorne is a man who has always carried himself like he owns every room he steps into.

Even with his graying hair, there's an aura of control around him, the kind that comes from decades of ruling with an iron fist. His expression is unreadable as he clasps his hands behind his back and studies me like I'm some insect under glass.

I don't speak first. I won't give him that satisfaction.

"So," he finally says, "you're alive."

I stare at him. "Disappointed?"

He huffs out something that might be amusement. “Not yet. But you are becoming a problem.”

“Just now? I’d think marrying into the Bratva would’ve bumped me to the top of your list months ago.”

His eyes darken, but his smirk doesn’t waver. He steps closer, and every instinct screams at me to move back, but I don’t. I plant my feet. I won’t let him see fear. “Tell me, Cecily, do you think Dimitri Barkov actually gives a damn about you?”

A muscle in my jaw twitches, but I keep my face blank. “Why do you care?”

He chuckles. “Oh, my dear, I don’t. But you should. Because if you think he’s going to burn his entire empire down to get you back, you’re sorely mistaken.”

I say nothing. I won’t play his game.

His smirk fades. “You’re not Seraphina. You never had her fire. You’re just a girl who was too naive to see where this path would lead.” He tilts his head. “Tell me, did he ever actually promise you a future? Or did you just assume?”

I don’t answer. It doesn’t matter what Dimitri said or didn’t say. I know what I’ve seen, what I’ve felt. And even if I was wrong, even if Dimitri never comes for me, I won’t let my father be the one to break me.

Evan watches me for a moment longer before sighing, like I’ve already disappointed him. “You have two options, Cecily.”

Here it is.

“You can stay here, under my protection, where you belong.” His voice is smooth,

coaxing. “I’ll let you have your freedom. You won’t be locked in this room forever. But you will sever ties with the Bratva.”

I scoff. “And the second option?”

“You die.”

A chill runs through me, but I don’t let it show. “Wow. What a generous choice.”

His smile vanishes. “You don’t understand the position you’re in. Dimitri won’t be able to save you. You can tell yourself whatever fairy tale you want, but the second he has to choose between you and his empire, he’ll pick his empire. His real family. Men like him always do.”

I don’t break eye contact. “And men like you always underestimate the people you think you own.”

For a second, just a second, something moves across his face. Annoyance, maybe. But then he smooths it away, and he exhales like I’m exhausting him.

“Think about it,” he urges as he turns for the door. “I’ll be back soon. Maybe by then, you’ll have realized where you belong.”

He walks out with his guard following, and the lock clicks behind them.

I sit heavily on the bed. My hands are shaking, but I press them flat against my thighs and force myself to breathe.

I don’t have much time. I need to get a message to Dimitri. But how?

The guards won’t listen, and I doubt my father leaves anything unmonitored. But



there's one person who might help. Someone who's been here longer than almost anyone. Someone who, despite her loyalty to my father, has always had a soft spot for me.

Marta.

While she was technically just a maid and not our nanny, she practically raised me.

After my mother passed away, it was she who tucked Seraphina in at night.

She'd sneak us treats from the kitchen when we weren't allowed to leave our rooms. She never outright defied my father, but she was the only warmth in a house filled with coldness.

Surely, when she realizes I'm here, she'll come for me.

I don't have to wait long. A few hours later, she enters with a tray of food, but she keeps her eyes downcast. But when she sets the tray on the nightstand and glances at me, she looks...sad.

"Marta," I whisper, stepping closer.

She presses her lips together. "You shouldn't have come back."

"I didn't."

Her face falls even more, but she doesn't ask for more information. She just exhales and turns toward the door.

I grab her wrist before she can go. "Please. I need your help."

“No, Cecily.”

“Marta, listen to me.” My voice shakes, but I don’t let go. “You know my father. You know what he’s capable of. If you let him keep me here, you know how this ends.”

She closes her eyes. “I can’t.”

“Yes, you can,” I push. “He will never spare me, not if it suits him. He wouldn’t have spared Seraphina if she had stayed, and he won’t spare you if you ever get in his way.” I squeeze her wrist. “You know I’m right.”

She lets out a slow breath. I see the conflict in her eyes. The years of obedience warring with the part of her that still cares. But then she pulls her wrist free and grips the tray so hard her knuckles go white.

“Marta,” I whisper. “Please. I’m...I’m pregnant, Marta.”

She whirls to look at me. For the first time, her mask slips. I see the anguish there, the regret, the horror. She knows exactly what that means.

A tear streaks down her cheek. She lifts her gaze to the ceiling, swallowing hard.

And then, she leaves.

The door shuts, and I hear the bolt slide. The tears come before I can stop them. This isn’t how I thought things would go. I imagined Marta would sweep me away, whisk me to safety, and everything would be okay. Instead, I feel the crushing weight of the walls, the hopelessness creeping in.

My baby. My poor, helpless baby.

I wrap my arms around my stomach. There has to be a way out. I have to find one, for his or her sake.

But how?

I sink onto the bed and rest my forehead against the wall. The tears don't stop, but I won't let myself scream. If I start, I don't think I'll be able to stop. I just have to hope that Dimitri will find me. That somehow, he can track me down before my father decides he's finished waiting.

He has to.

I close my eyes, trying to remember what it felt like in his arms. That security. The peace. It feels so far away now.

Why the hell did I run away? I've always been so stubborn. So convinced that I can fix things on my own. And now I might lose everything, all because of my pride. If I had just listened to him, let him protect me, we might not be here right now.

I hate that I might never see Dimitri again. The thought cuts deep. I love him. God, I do. But there's no chance to tell him now.

I take a deep breath and press a hand over my stomach.

I can't give up. Not yet.

So I get up and walk the perimeter of the room again, looking for any weaknesses, any way to get free. But there's nothing. No way out.

Time passes in a blur. I count the hours.

Day.

Night.

Day again.

Each time, Marta returns, silent, with a tray. She doesn't look at me. It's not until the third day that something changes. When she enters, there's a dimple between her eyebrows. She looks as though she's been arguing with herself.

"Cecily." She doesn't turn her back on me this time.

I sit up, staring at her.

"I can't let you stay here."

## Page 27

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:33 pm*

I haven't slept in three days. That's not an exaggeration.

Every time I close my eyes, I see her face, imagine her calling my name, and my mind spirals into a thousand different outcomes where I fail to bring her home.

I roam these halls like a restless ghost, snapping at anyone who dares ask how I'm doing.

I'm not doing well. I'm barely functioning.

Still, I keep moving because I don't have a choice.

Cecily is missing, and I can't rest until I find her.

Every single day, my men report no sign of that suspicious car near the estate, no indication of anyone matching her description in the usual places.

Each dead end grinds down my hope. But I can't give up.

I swore to protect her, and I failed. The guilt eats at me every waking moment.

The nights are worse—dark hours where I'm left alone with the memory of her eyes, of the hint of sadness I ignored.

I'm in my office, slumped behind the desk with a half-finished report from Maksim.

He keeps handing me updates on the Bratva's affairs and reminding me we can't let

business slide.

He's right, but I can't concentrate on shipping routes or supply lines.

All that matters is Cecily. Without her, nothing else matters.

I keep thinking about how I handled things. Should I have let her have more freedom? She made it clear that she felt trapped here. Was I too heavy-handed or too protective?

I sigh and rub my forehead. There are a hundred paths I could have taken, and they all ended in the same place—her slipping away.

A soft knock at the door sets me on edge, and I push up from the chair, praying for some good news for a change. "Enter."

Maksim steps in, but his weary face doesn't inspire confidence. "You need to eat something," he says.

I glance at the clock. It's nearing midnight. I haven't eaten since morning, but my stomach roils at the thought of food. "Later," I respond, waving him away.

He sighs but doesn't move. "We've tried everything. Informants, local watchers, old contacts who might know Thorne's movements. Nothing leads to her. We've combed the city four times."

I press a hand over my face. "Then we comb it again."

"We will," he promises. "But you need rest. You can't keep going like this."

I slam a fist against the desk, rattling the lamp. "She's out there. Either she ran, or

Thorne took her. I can't stop."

Maksim tilts his head. Growing up, we were the closest of all our siblings, and that hasn't changed much now that we're adults. He knows better than to push me when I'm this wound up. "I'll have the men double-check the outskirts. If we don't find anything by morning—"

"We keep searching." My voice comes out in a rasp. "She's not disposable, Maksim. She's my wife. I can't let her slip away."

Something unspoken passes over his features. Pity, maybe. I grit my teeth. I don't want pity. I just want her back. He leaves without another word, pulling the door shut behind him.

Silence descends. I pace to the window and look out at the shapes in the darkness.

Guards patrol. Everything is too calm, mocking the turmoil in my head.

I replay the day she vanished, recalling how we fought and how I insisted on confining her to safe corridors.

She hated it—I'm sure she hated me for it. If she left of her own accord, it's because I didn't trust her enough. That realization burns.

I sink into a chair once more, hanging my head.

My chest feels tight; there's an ache that's become constant since she disappeared.

Cecily. I never told her how I felt, how I need her strength, wit, and the spark in her eyes.

I love her, though I kept that hidden. Now she's gone, and I'm left with a regret so heavy it nearly crushes me.

The desk phone rings, startling me. I snatch it up. "Yes?"

A muffled male voice stammers out something about seeing a woman matching Cecily's description near the old rail yard. My heart leaps, but I keep my tone controlled. "When?"

"Earlier today," he answers. "Could be nothing."

"Check anyway. Report back." I hang up, gnawing on my lip. Another worthless lead, most likely, but I have to chase it.

Time crawls. Minutes turn into an hour, then two, with no follow-up. I step into the corridor, passing staff who glance at me with lowered gazes. They know not to engage me right now.

I find myself outside her room again. The door stands ajar.

I push it open gently and observe the small details she left behind.

Her perfume bottle on the dresser, a folded sweater on a chair, and her scent in every single damn corner.

It hits me how much I miss her presence, the way she'd fill a space with her quiet defiance or her sudden bursts of humor.

A guard intercepts me as I leave the room. "Mr. Barkov, we have no new information," he says softly, as if he's bracing for my outburst.



I just nod. Words fail me. I wander back to my office. The loneliness is suffocating. Usually, I thrive in silence, but now it torments me because it reminds me of what I lost.

Just after midnight, I'm slumped over the desk, head in my hands, when my phone vibrates. Not the desk phone—my personal one. Very few people have this number. The screen shows a series of random digits but no caller ID. I jab the answer button. "Dimitri."

A crackle of static. I hold my breath. "Dimitri?" a voice says, faint but unmistakably hers. My body jolts as though struck. Cecily. Relief and dread collide in me. "Cecily," I whisper. "Where are you? Are you alright?"

She exhales in a shaky burst. "Listen. I don't have time. This call is encrypted, but if my father finds me talking to you—"

I tighten my grip on the phone as adrenaline spikes through my body. "Cecily, talk to me. Are you hurt?"

"Not yet," she replies, though fear is evident in each syllable. "He has me in some old compound that used to be a resort outside the city. The Old Marina Lodge; do you remember it?"

She doesn't give me a chance to confirm before she rushes out with, "He set up a perimeter with guards, but there's a blind spot.

You can get in from the pool deck at the back.

There's a maintenance gate near the fence.

If you come in from the south, you'll avoid the main guard posts.

I have someone who will make sure it's unlocked for you. ”

I scramble for a pen and scribble the details on a spare envelope. My hands tremble so hard I can barely write. “Got it. Old Marina Lodge, maintenance gates. Any idea how many guards?”

“A lot. He keeps some near the main building on rotating shifts. They're all armed. You'll need to be careful.”

My heart hammers. She's risking everything to feed me this intel because she knows I wouldn't just abandon her. When she needed help, she called me . Her husband. That has to count for something.

“I'll come. Just hold on. Are you—?”

“I'm scared,” she confesses. “He hasn't done anything yet, but I know him. He's furious I married into the Bratva. He's waiting for something, maybe trying to lure you into a trap. But I had to try. I had to let you know where I am.”

My throat knots. “Cecily, I'm so sorry. I never wanted you to—”

“I know,” she cuts me off as her voice cracks. “Just promise you'll come. Please. I... I'm—” She halts, and I sense her fighting tears.

“I promise,” I assure her, pushing desperation aside to sound confident. “I'll bring you home.”

She snuffles. “He's always been cruel. But this is different. He's...planning something big. If you wait too long, he might move me.”

“I won't wait,” I vow. “We move tonight.”

She draws a shaky breath. “One more thing. The cameras around the pool are old. Probably easy to jam. But inside the compound, he upgraded to a newer system. Watch for a set of cameras near the eaves of the main house. If they catch you, he’ll sound the alarm.”

I scribble more notes. “We’ll jam them. We’ll find you. I swear.”

Her voice grows quieter. “Dimitri... I—” A clatter erupts in the background. A door slams. Another voice roars, menacing and cruel. “No!” she yelps. Then a crash. The phone connection sputters, and static blasts in my ear.

“Cecily!” I yell, but the line cuts out.

I stare at the phone in horror. My worst fear has been realized.

Thorne discovered her call. I grip the phone so hard my fingers ache.

She gave me the intel I needed, but at what cost?

He could punish her for this. The rage that burns through me is unlike anything I’ve felt before. I want to tear Thorne limb from limb.

I burst into the corridor, nearly running into Maksim. “Gather everyone,” I command. “Cecily called. Thorne has her at that old resort of the interstate. She gave me a route in.”

“She’s alive?”

“Yes, but he found out she called, so she might not be much longer. We have no time.” My heart pounds as I storm toward the foyer. “Get the rest of our brothers and all the men we trust, whether they’re in our family or not. We move out

immediately.”

Maksim nods, no questions asked. He vanishes to rally the troops while I hurry back to my office to collect gear.

My mind seethes with images of Thorne hurting her.

I won't let that happen. She's mine to protect.

I rummage through a locked cabinet, grabbing a sidearm, extra magazines, and a rifle.

Each piece of equipment I handle with a single purpose: rescue.

My phone dings. A text from Grigor: On my way with men .

Will coordinate with Aleksei. That's all I need.

We're going in. Pool deck, maintenance gates.

We'll slip in quietly, jam the cameras, get her out before Thorne can bring his network down on us, and then I'll find the son of a bitch and kill him myself.

A wave of guilt and relief tangles in me. She's alive. She wants me to come for her. Despite everything, she trusts me enough to risk that call. If I fail now, I don't deserve my title as her husband. I don't deserve her.

I jog to the foyer, weapons in hand. Men gather, suits or black gear, each armed. Maksim stands at the front with his phone pressed to his ear, relaying instructions to a second wave. Before long, all of my brothers and their respective men fill the space, waiting for my word.

They all turn to me, their silence thick with anticipation.

“She called,” I announce, my voice echoing against the high ceiling.

“She’s in Thorne’s possession. She gave us a way to slip in without triggering an alarm.

There’s someone on the inside helping her, and we need to be cautious of the cameras.

If we jam them, neutralize the guards, we can find her. ”

A ripple of tension goes through the men. They know this could be a trap. They also know we can’t stand by.

“We’ll keep the second wave outside the compound, block any backup,” Akim offers. “Keep Thorne pinned while you extract Cecily.”

I nod and look over each face. “We go now, no time to waste. Thorne might hurt her for calling me. We move in stealth if possible. If it escalates, we fight our way out.”

Nikolai slings his rifle over his shoulder. “Understood. Vehicles are ready.”

I glance at the clock. It’s late, perfect for a covert approach.

My pulse quickens with the knowledge that in a few minutes, I’ll be on Thorne’s doorstep.

Fear and fury mix inside me, but I push them aside for focus.

She needs me to be strong. She needs me to be the man who’ll tear down kingdoms

for her. That's exactly what I intend to do.

I check my pistol one last time before flicking off the safety and making sure everything's set. The men around me do the same—clicking magazines into place and securing their vests. After what feels like forever, I exhale and turn to my brothers.

Akim comments, "We're risking a war with Thorne. The question is whether we care."

"If he wants a war, he'll get one," Aleksei answers. As the head of the family, his word is gold. "But first, we get her out."

He inclines his head. That's the end of it.

We all know the consequences. We don't care.

She's worth every bullet if that's what it takes.

I pivot and march toward the front door.

The men follow in a tight formation. We pass the final set of guards, who open the door to the night.

Our SUVs wait outside, engines idling, headlights dimmed to avoid drawing attention.

The memory of Cecily's voice resonates in my mind, how she said, "I'm scared." The urge to soothe her drives me forward. I can't fail. She's out there, counting on me. On us.

Hoisting my rifle across my chest, I set my jaw and step outside. My men file in behind me, weapons ready. Each step is a promise: I'll find her, no matter what stands in my way.

We climb into the vehicles, closing the doors with a muffled click.

Aleksei takes the driver's seat of the lead SUV and Grigor slides in beside him.

Akim coordinates from the second wave as the rest of us settle in, radios in hand and guns at our sides.

The night envelops us like a cloak, providing perfect cover for the operation.

I meet Akim's eyes in the rearview mirror. "Let's roll."

He shifts into gear, and we surge forward. Our convoy exits the estate gates with each vehicle loaded with men prepared for anything. We have a plan, and we have the fury to back it up.

Cecily, hold on. I'm coming.

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:33 pm*

My father's face contorts into a terrifying mask. The same one I remember from childhood. The same one that always used to send me into a panic. Back then, he used his anger as a weapon, and it worked. He knew how to hurt me.

But not this time.

This time, I don't shrink back. This time, I'm not the small, powerless girl who lived in constant fear.

He speaks in a low voice that carries authority born of decades of cruelty. "I gave you a chance to come back. Instead, you went behind my back and called the very man who caused all this? Do you understand how reckless that was?"

My hands flex at my sides. He's trying to intimidate me, but I refuse to back down.

"I understand more than you realize. I understand that you don't care about me, or Seraphina, or anyone or anything except for your control.

You kept me as a prisoner for years. Did you ever once consider what that did to me?  
„

A muscle twitches under his temple. "You speak to me as though I owe you an apology. I gave you everything you could've ever wanted!

A home, a family. You were naive then. Maybe you still are.

Dimitri Barkov is no better than me. He sees you as leverage, nothing more.



Why do you think he married you? Out of love? Don't be foolish."

Hot rage ignites in my chest. "You don't know him. You don't know what he and I share. You never cared enough to see me as a person, so I don't expect you to understand. But Dimitri does. He cares about me."

"Is that so? Then where is he now?"

I steel myself, refusing to reveal my hand just to placate my pride. Dimitri is coming. I know that much. Even if my father pretends otherwise, Dimitri would never abandon me.

"You continue to test me," he practically growls. "It's time I make an example of you. I gave you life, and I can take it away."

My heart slams against my ribcage, but I hold my ground.

This is the moment I've dreaded for years—my father turning his unchecked aggression on me.

A part of me trembles inside, remembering the times I saw him lash out at underlings or threaten Seraphina, but I refuse to let that fear control me.

I'm pregnant, carrying Dimitri's child, and I won't let my father's tyranny define our future.

He notices the shift in my posture, the way I plant my feet. "What's this?" he drawls, mocking. "You think you can stand up to me now? Just because you have Dimitri's name?"

"I think you've manipulated me for the last time. I'm finished being your puppet or

your asset. I'm finished living in your shadow."

"You ungrateful brat. After everything I did—"

"Everything you did was for you ." My voice cuts through his tirade. "You never cared about me. You never cared about Seraphina. We were just convenient pawns in your war. Well, no more."

"You want to talk about cruelty? You sided with the Barkovs. That's not just betrayal, it's stupidity. Did you think that would end well?"

"Better with them than spending another day under your rule. You're the real threat here. You destroyed any hope Seraphina had for a normal life. You would do the same to me if I let you."

His face flushes, and he leans in, dropping his voice. "You dare speak to me like that? I'm your father."

"You're not. You forfeited that title the second you started using me as leverage. I'm done with you."

For a moment, he looks stunned. Then a snarl contorts his mouth. "You're finished, all right. Dimitri can't save you now. You're inside my compound. My men surround this place, and I decide who lives or dies."

"I'm not afraid of you anymore."

I realize too late that I've provoked him more than ever before.

His hand shoots up, moving with a speed fueled by anger.

I see it coming, but I have no time to block.

Just as his arm arcs toward me, ready to strike, the doors to the room burst open.

A rush of bodies floods inside, weapons drawn.

Gunshots ring out, deafening, as men in black sweep through.

My father spins, half-stunned. I stumble back and duck behind a chair.

In the confusion, I catch sight of Dimitri's brothers—Grigor, Maksim, Aleksei, Akim, and Nikolai—fanning out.

They take aim at my father's men, who scramble for cover.

There's a savage efficiency in the way the Barkov brothers handle their firearms. Each shot is razor-focused.

Within moments, half of my father's guards are down as bullets find their marks before they can even raise their weapons.

My father calls for reinforcements, but the men he reaches out to are pinned down by the onslaught.

Grigor ducks behind a column, firing back at two men who try to flank him.

They collapse under his rapid shots. Nikolai slips around a table and plunges a knife into the nearest guard's side.

Aleksei covers Akim, who launches a brutal takedown on a pair of guards who foolishly tried to rush him.

Maksim prowls near the walls, picking off stragglers with chilling accuracy.

Amid the chaos, Dimitri steps through the open doorway.

His gaze lands on me, and I swear I see relief flash in his eyes.

But he doesn't pause. He raises his rifle and shoots a guard who's aiming at me from behind a chair.

The guard topples with a groan. Dimitri doesn't stop.

Another man on my father's side rushes him, but Dimitri pivots, slamming the butt of his rifle into the man's face. A sickening thud, and the man slumps.

My father, cornered now, grabs a fallen gun from the floor. He tries to take aim at Dimitri, but Dimitri fires first. The bullet catches my father in the shoulder, spinning him around in agony.

"Cecily, get down!" Dimitri calls, racing forward.

I crouch lower as fear collides with a strange sense of consolation.

My father's men are either dead or disarmed, moaning on the ground.

Smoke from gun barrels drifts into the air, and the reek of gunpowder burns my nostrils.

Another guard is crawling toward a sidearm, but before he can reach it, Maksim's shot puts him down. That's the last threat.

But before anyone can move, a second wave of my father's men storms into the

room. The doorframe splinters under gunfire as reinforcements rush in.

Dimitri shoves me behind him and fires, dropping the first man through the doorway.

His brothers react instantly. Aleksei flips a heavy oak table onto its side, using it as cover while Grigor and Akim dive behind an overturned chair.

Maksim rolls across the floor, narrowly avoiding a burst of bullets, and returns fire, hitting one of the incoming guards in the throat.

The man gurgles and collapses against the wall.

The gunfight turns brutal. Two of my father's men manage to take cover behind the bookcase, laying down suppressive fire to keep us pinned. My ears ring as bullets rip into the furniture around us, splintering wood and sending debris flying.

Dimitri ducks, reloads, and pulls a knife from his belt. He glances at his brothers and signals—a sharp jerk of his chin. Aleksei nods, then turns to Nikolai. They move in tandem.

Nikolai fires a barrage of shots, forcing the enemy to keep their heads down.

At the same time, Aleksei dashes to the far end of the room, flanking them.

In a swift motion, he vaults over a chair, lands beside one of the guards, and drives his knife deep into the man's side.

The guard lets out a strangled cry before crumpling.

Another man lunges for Aleksei, but before he can fire, Grigor moves in.

He catches the man's wrist, twisting the gun from his grip before slamming his elbow into the guard's temple.

The man stumbles. Akim takes the opening and shoves the muzzle of his pistol beneath his chin, pulling the trigger. Blood sprays across the floor.

A guard rushes toward me from the side with his gun trained on my chest. I freeze, and my body locks up for one fatal second.

Dimitri doesn't.

He grabs a chair and hurls it across the room.

It smashes into the guard's legs, knocking him off balance.

Before the man can recover, Dimitri is on him.

He wrenches the gun from his grip and slams his knee into the man's stomach, sending him crashing to the floor.

With brutal efficiency, Dimitri brings his boot down on the man's throat, crushing it beneath his weight.

A loud grunt draws my attention. Akim is locked in a vicious fight with a burly guard, and their weapons have been knocked aside.

The man swings, but Akim ducks and drives his fist into the guard's gut.

The man stumbles back, only to find Maksim waiting.

Maksim grabs the back of his head and smashes it into the desk's edge.

The sickening crack of bone echoes through the room as the guard slumps lifelessly to the floor.

The remaining enemies panic. One tries to flee, but Nikolai takes him down with a clean shot to the spine. Another throws his gun down and raises his hands, trembling. Aleksei steps forward and puts a bullet between his eyes without a second thought.

My father's men are gone. Dead or incapacitated. Now, it's just my father, wounded and furious, facing Dimitri. He clutches his injured shoulder with red staining his shirt. "You think you've won?" he snarls. "You know nothing of me, Barkov."

Dimitri steps closer, weapon at the ready. "I know you used both your daughters for your own ends. You stole their lives, their choices."

My father's breath rasps. "Cecily's my daughter. You have no right to take her from me."

"She's my wife," Dimitri snaps.

He aims. My father's eyes flit to me, then to Dimitri's rifle.

I watch the realization dawn on him: he's lost. Without warning, he lunges, trying to raise his gun with his good arm.

Dimitri fires. The shot rips through my father's chest, halting him mid-charge.

His eyes go wide, and he drops to his knees before he keels over.

For a second, no one moves. My father stares at the floor, with his chest heaving with ragged breaths. Then he exhales one final time, and his body goes still.

He's dead.

I slump back against the wall with adrenaline crashing through me. My father is gone. The man who haunted my life for so long—his tyranny, his manipulation—ended with a bullet from Dimitri's rifle. Relief swirls with guilt, sadness, and a taste of freedom I never dared hope for.

Dimitri tosses his rifle aside and rushes to my side. "Cecily," he breathes. He checks me over as though ensuring I'm not harmed. "Did he hurt you?"

I shake my head as tears prickle at the corners of my eyes. "No. He tried to...but you came."

He pulls me into an embrace so tight I can hardly breathe, yet I cling to him and sob into his chest. The conflict, the fear, the heartbreak all pour out in gasping cries. He whispers soft words against my hair and wraps his arms around me like a shield.

A hand touches my shoulder gently. I glance up to see Aleksei standing beside us. "Well, this isn't exactly how we planned it, but I suppose we accomplished more than we intended today."

Maksim steps forward, reloading his pistol. "Are you sure you're not hurt, Cecily?" His voice is gentler than I've ever heard. "You went through hell."

I try to steady myself and wipe my tears with the back of my hand. "I'm okay. Thank you."

Grigor nods to Dimitri. "We'll sweep the perimeter, ensure no one else tries anything. We'll give you two a minute."

Dimitri bows his head in gratitude. The brothers quietly slip out, leaving the room



scattered with bodies but no immediate threat. A hush settles, broken only by my ragged breathing and Dimitri's quiet attempts to soothe me.

He cups my cheek and tilts my face to meet his eyes. "I was so afraid we'd be too late."

The tears threaten to resurface. "I was terrified he'd kill me before you arrived."

His hands slip around my waist. "Never again. I won't let anything happen to you."

I bite my lip, summoning the courage to tell him everything. "Dimitri, I—I have to say something important. The reason I left... I'm pregnant, Dimitri."

For a moment, he just stares, as though trying to process what that means. Then his expression softens with so much emotion I can hardly bear it. "Pregnant," he whispers, brushing my tears aside. "With our child."

I nod, voice trembling. "Yes."

He releases a shaky breath. "You...are carrying my baby?"

I swallow hard, feeling a flood of relief that I can finally share this secret. "I wasn't sure how to tell you. I was afraid. Afraid you might lock me up even more. Or that you wouldn't want this."

He cradles my face and presses his forehead to mine. "Cecily, I want it more than anything. I want you, and I want our child. I'm sorry if I ever made you think otherwise."

"You kept me so protected that I thought you didn't trust me at all. But now I realize you were just scared, too."

He kisses me, swallowing my tears. It's desperate and tender, and the thunder of blood in my ears mixes with the taste of salt and gunmetal. His lips part from mine just enough to speak. "I love you. I'm sorry I didn't say it before. I love you."

I cling to him as tears drip from my lashes. "I love you, too."

We stay like that for a moment with everything else melting away.

I blink around the room one last time, seeing my father's form slumped near his desk.

Years of torment, undone by a single firefight.

My gaze moves to Dimitri's brothers, who wait near the door.

They came together to save me. The Barkov family risked a war for me, proving my father wrong about them.

I search myself for guilt or sorrow, but I find only numbness and an odd sense of closure. "He can't hurt anyone anymore," I whisper.

Dimitri nods. "I wish it hadn't come to that, but I won't lose sleep over him."

I cling to the warmth of Dimitri's presence, letting it soothe me. "Take me home."

He presses a kiss to my knuckles. "I will," he vows.

Home. The Barkov estate. Once I hated that place. I saw it as another gilded cage. But now I realize the difference. Dimitri never wanted to break me; he just wanted me safe. I was too proud to see that. I was too angry, too hurt, too afraid.

But not anymore.

Now, I understand. Now, I have no fear. I can trust the man I married. And the Barkov estate has become more than a house—it holds a future for me.

With Dimitri.

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:33 pm*

I can't stop trembling, even though everyone keeps telling me we're safe now.

Dimitri walks into the room, and my pulse settles just enough for me to breathe easier.

I'm perched on a plush chair in our newly refurbished sitting area, unsure how to feel about returning here.

The Barkov estate used to make me feel trapped—now it's become a refuge I never expected.

Everything looks the same, but in my mind, it all feels new.

He approaches cautiously, as if he's gauging the distance between us. "Are you comfortable?" he asks, pausing a foot away.

"A bit overwhelmed, but I'm getting there."

Dimitri lets out a long breath. "I want to make sure you have everything you need. You've been through more than anyone should endure."

I glance at my abdomen. The baby remains a secret no more.

Ever since we shared that revelation at the old resort—my father's final stronghold—I haven't stopped thinking about the future.

The idea of having a baby is both thrilling and terrifying.

“To be honest, I’m still trying to wrap my head around what comes next. ”

He lowers himself onto the ottoman facing me.

“We’ll take it one day at a time.” He lifts my hand and studies my knuckles as though each one holds a story.

“I spent so long thinking about how to shield you from danger that I forgot you have your own voice, your own strengths. If I had listened sooner, maybe we would’ve avoided the worst of it. ”

“Don’t blame yourself. I made my own decisions. At times, I stormed off without explaining how frustrated I was. That didn’t help anything.”

A knock interrupts our conversation. Grigor stands in the doorway, and a trace of concern lines his expression, but he softens the moment he sees me. “Feel up to visitors, or should we come back later?”

“Come in,” Dimitri replies, beckoning him forward.

Grigor steps inside with Seraphina trailing behind him. My sister’s presence brightens my mood in ways I can’t fully articulate. She moves closer, and we exchange a quick embrace before she steps back and eyes Dimitri and me. “Are you two alright?” she asks, voice hushed.

Dimitri nods. “We’re fine. Still adjusting, but fine.”

Seraphina’s focus lands on me. “I’m just glad you’re out of that nightmare.

Every time I picture what might have happened if no one arrived in time...

” She presses her lips together, halting the thought.

“Anyway, I’m staying here now, if that’s all right.

Grigor insists. He’s convinced the estate is the safest place for all of us. ”

I grasp her hand, relieved. “Of course it’s all right. I want you here. We need each other, especially now.”

Grigor crosses to the window and looks out at the grounds. “Yes, we have some leftover concerns regarding Kovalev. I’m not letting anything catch us off guard again.”

Kovalev. The name triggers a memory of conversations my father once had, drifting through locked doors.

He might have been forming alliances, or maybe just sowing trouble.

Either way, it’s a loose thread we can’t ignore.

“We have to address it, but not tonight,” I say, glancing at Dimitri. “We’ll handle it carefully, right?”

“We will,” he confirms. “He’s not an immediate threat at the moment. But I won’t wait until he circles back.” He takes a breath, as if bracing for more responsibilities. “For now, let’s settle in. Let’s allow you both to rest, and then we’ll plan.”

Seraphina sets a small wrapped box on the coffee table.

“I brought a little gift,” she says, looking shy.

“I found it while I was going through some things at our father’s house.

It’s something from our mother. She had this old locket.

I want you to keep it, Cecily. Maybe it’ll bring you comfort, or at least a reminder that our family wasn’t always consumed by war.”

I pick it up and turn it in my hand. “This is from the days before Father started unraveling everything we knew.” The chain feels cool against my skin. For a second, my throat tightens with too many emotions colliding. “Thank you.”

Grigor clears his throat. “We’ll give you two some space,” he says, guiding Seraphina from the room, though not before she squeezes my hand once more. As I watch them leave, a slight hint of hope builds in my chest. They’re safe here. We’re all safe, at least for this moment.

Dimitri lets a pause linger, then he angles himself to face me fully.

“There’s something we should discuss. We have a child on the way.

That means everything changes—how I approach Bratva business, how I handle your involvement, how we define day-to-day life.

I can’t just keep you locked away or hide you from everything.

That wouldn’t be fair, and it wouldn’t be a good example for our child.”

“I don’t want to be barred from what matters. But I also don’t want to charge into shootouts, especially now.” My hand drifts to my abdomen. “I need to stay safe for our baby.”

“Exactly. We need to find a balance. You want a role in the business? That’s fine, but it should be behind the scenes. Intelligence gathering, strategy—those are the kinds of work you’ve shown a knack for. My family agrees it’s better to use your insights than to dismiss them.”

“I’d like that. I want to do my part, but I can’t handle the idea of risking myself—or the child—out there on the streets.”

He reaches for my hand again, fitting his fingers between mine. “I know it was never your dream to become part of the Bratva, but you are. And I promise I’ll make it something we shape together, not just an empire I run while you watch from a corner.”

“Thank you. And for what it’s worth, this might not have been my plan, but I’m realizing that it doesn’t have to be terrible. You and I, we can do more than just survive. We can create something good despite everything.”

“We will.”

Dimitri dips his head, bringing our mouths together. Our lips brush, and the warmth spreads. I close my eyes and sink into the kiss, allowing the world to fade. It’s the kind of kiss that feels like a vow, like the promise of a future.

But quickly, it turns to more. The hunger awakens, and suddenly, my husband isn’t close enough. I crave him with a force I can barely contain. With the fear and tension ebbing, the need takes over.

My fingers find the front of his shirt, tugging. The buttons snap open, revealing the hard muscles of his chest. He growls softly and scoops me off the chair. I gasp as he carries me across the room and deposits me on the bed, but before he can climb on top of me, I push myself upright.



“Cecily?” he murmurs, concern flickering in his gaze.

“Just let me look at you for a minute.”

He stands in place, waiting. His body is a work of art—the smooth, rippling muscles, the chiseled jaw, the way his pants hang off his hips. His dark hair falls forward, framing his face, and those intense, pale gray eyes stare back.

“Do you like what you see?” he asks, his voice low and husky.

“Very much.”

I reach for him, dragging him close. His lips land on mine again, and this time, the kiss is more fervent.

A fire rages beneath the surface, and the flames spread the moment we touch.

I fumble with the waistband of his trousers, and he tears his mouth away from mine, kissing a trail along my jaw, down my throat.

“You’re the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen,” he whispers, slipping his fingers under my dress. The fabric gathers around my waist, and a chill prickles along my exposed skin. I’m not wearing anything underneath, and the hungry way he stares at my body makes my stomach clench.

It’s tempting to just fall back and surrender, but tonight, I want to take control. I want to savor every inch of his body, to explore him and claim him the way he’s claimed me.

His cock is rock-hard already, pressing insistently against the fabric. I tug his trousers down, freeing his length. His shaft is thick and long, and when I wrap my hand

around it, he sucks in a sharp breath.

“Fuck,” he hisses, watching me stroke him. “That feels good, Baby.”

“I know.” I flash him a wicked smile, then lean in, running my tongue over the head.

He groans, and his hand comes up to tangle in my hair. “You’re such a tease.”

His cock is smooth and velvety soft, and when I take him into my mouth, he groans again, and the sound is almost pained. His grip tightens in my hair as I bob my head, taking him deeper.

“You look so fucking sexy right now,” he rasps.

His words only spur me on. I keep sucking and licking, enjoying the way his body shudders. His cock is throbbing in my mouth, and when he pulls me off him, I can’t help but let out a frustrated sigh.

“You keep that up, and this will be over far too quickly,” he says. “And there’s no way in hell I’m coming without being buried deep inside you.”

He pushes me back, and I scramble to get out of my dress. It hits the floor, and then he’s on top of me, with his naked body pressed against mine. The weight of him feels delicious, and when he rocks his hips, his cock slides between my folds, but I don’t let him enter me yet.

I push him over and roll on top of him. His hands come up to cup my breasts, and his thumbs flick over my nipples. “I could look at you like this all night,” he says as his eyes roam over me.

“Oh, yeah?” I tease.

“Mmhmm.” He grins. “You’re so fucking gorgeous. Your tits, your ass, that perfect little pussy.”

The dirty words make me even hotter, and I can’t resist the temptation any longer. I guide him to my entrance and sink down, moaning as his cock stretches me.

“Fuck,” he growls. “You feel so goddamn good.”

His hands move to my hips, and he urges me to move faster, thrusting up to meet my motions. Our bodies crash together, and my eyes drift closed as I lose myself in the pleasure. It’s so fucking good, and knowing that he wants me, needs me, makes it even better.

“Look at me, Baby,” he demands.

My eyes open, and I see the hunger burning in his gaze. It’s so intense, so powerful, and it sends a jolt of heat straight to my core. I bounce up and down, taking him deep and grinding my clit against him. The friction is perfect, and I can already feel myself climbing toward the edge.

I lean forward, bracing myself against his chest, and the new angle makes his cock hit just the right spot.

“Fuck,” I gasp.

He keeps moving, and the pressure builds. His hands roam over my body, exploring, claiming. I can tell he’s getting close, and the thought of him coming inside me, filling me, pushes me closer to the edge.

“Cecily,” he rasps, and the sound of my name on his lips is almost enough to send me over.

I ride him harder, chasing the release. His body tenses beneath me, and when his cock starts pulsing, I fall over the edge with him.

Wave after wave of pleasure crashes over me, and I cry out, shuddering. Dimitri grips my hips, holding me in place as he fills me, and the sensation sends aftershocks through my body.

When we're both spent, I collapse on top of him, panting. His arms come around me, and the steady thump of his heartbeat lulls me. We lay there for a long time, breathing each other in.

Eventually, he rolls us over, keeping his body close to mine. He cups my cheek and gazes down at me, and the intensity in his expression makes my heart stutter.

"You are everything to me," he remarks. "I love you, and I'm going to spend the rest of my life making sure you're happy."

Tears threaten to spill over, and I blink them back. "I love you, too," I whisper.

I'm safe, loved, protected. And even though I once feared this would never be possible, it is. No more threats. No more worries. Just peace and Dimitri. The man I never planned on marrying, yet the one I can't imagine living without.

The man who saved my life.

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*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:33 pm*

I never picture myself racing across the Barkov estate lawn with a toddler on my heels, yet here I am, halfway bending to coax my daughter, Amara, out of the flowerbeds. She spots me and bursts into high-pitched laughter, then gallops in the opposite direction with tiny yet determined feet.

My heart lurches every time she nearly trips, although she recovers with surprising grace.

Her grin is contagious, so I keep chasing, ready to catch her if she tumbles.

Two years ago, I would never have believed this kind of life existed for me.

Yet the past is behind us, and our family flourishes in a world I once considered unreachable.

I straighten, call out Amara's name, and watch her veer toward a patch of grass dotted with small blossoms. She picks one, then waves it around like it's a prized treasure. She swivels to face me, clutches the flower to her chest, and squeals, "Dada!" before charging straight into my arms.

I lift her and press a kiss to her cheek, inhaling the sweet scent of whatever shampoo Cecily uses for her hair. My daughter's giggle is the best sound I've ever heard, and every time I hold her, I think about how different things turned out compared to my original plan.

Cecily stands on the nearby path, watching this spectacle with a gentle smile. She balances a clipboard in one hand, looking every bit the confident partner who has

steered this estate toward genuine prosperity.

Just two years ago, we clashed at every turn, each of us convinced we knew best. Now, we've learned to listen to one another. I stride over with Amara perched on my hip, and Cecily lifts her free hand to caress our daughter's curls, which bounce with every movement.

"You two look like you're having fun," Cecily remarks. "I'm reviewing last-minute details for tomorrow. Are you sure everything is set for the vow renewal?"

"We've spent weeks planning. Seraphina has triple-checked everything. Aleksei is handling security. Maksim is coordinating the schedule with the staff. It will be perfect. Are you still nervous?"

Cecily exhales, then nods. "A little. This ceremony means more than the first time. That was forced, done under pressure. Tomorrow, we do it by choice. That reality overwhelms me in the best way."

I let Amara down, keeping an eye on her as she waddles toward a patch of clover.

Then I lace my fingers through Cecily's, squeezing gently.

"We've earned the right to be a bit emotional.

Two years ago, everything was uncertain.

Now, we lead together. I think you'll handle tomorrow with all the poise you usually show. "

She grins and pushes a strand of hair behind her ear. "I'll try my best. I just want everyone to see we're at peace—internally and externally. Amara has grown up in a calm environment so far, and I don't want anything to disrupt that."

“Nothing will. We have plenty of eyes on the perimeter. Kovalev hasn’t shown any signs of stirring up trouble. Our businesses are stable, and people know better than to challenge us.”

She leans in for a brief kiss, then glances around for Amara, who’s busy poking at a butterfly that flutters out of reach. “Let’s round her up. I promised Seraphina we’d finalize the color scheme for the vow renewal decorations. My sister insisted on some theme that pairs well with the interior.”

We gather Amara, who squirms a bit but eventually latches onto Cecily’s hand. The three of us head indoors, stepping through the wide entrance that once felt more like a fortress gate than a welcoming threshold.

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Morning dawns with a sense of promise. My eyes open to find Cecily already up, rifling through her closet.

She sets aside a simple yet elegant dress that’s totally different from the one she wore at our forced ceremony.

It’s a floor-length gown in an ivory hue, with a softly draping skirt that flows from a narrow band around the waist. Delicate lace frames the cap sleeves and traces the neckline, a detail Cecily picked to contrast the heavy embroidery of the dress she once despised.

There’s no excess beading or cumbersome train—just a timeless silhouette that showcases her natural grace and emphasizes how different this day truly is from the one we left behind.

I rummage through my suits and choose one that complements her selection. I want to appear polished but not intimidating. This vow renewal is about sincerity, not

power.

Downstairs, the staff rushes about, ensuring everything is prepared.

A few close friends arrive, offering early congratulations.

My brothers station themselves in strategic spots to greet attendees as they filter in.

Cecily and Seraphina vanish for a final check of the decorations while I speak with Grigor about minor logistical issues.

None of it feels stressful; it feels purposeful, as if everyone understands how important this day is to Cecily and me.

At last, it's time. The small cluster of guests—family, trusted associates, dear friends—gathers in the salon.

Chairs line the space, and at the front, Aleksei stands in place, ready to officiate.

Yes, we kept it in the family, preferring a personal touch.

I wait at the aisle with my nerves jumping in a way that surprises me.

Yet I wouldn't trade this moment for anything.

Seraphina appears first, wearing a graceful purple dress with her son in tow carrying the pillow with the rings.

She smiles, steps aside, and gestures toward the door.

Then, Cecily steps into view, carrying Amara on her hip.



My daughter is clad in a tiny dress that matches her mother's, and she's clutching a small bouquet.

Cecily's eyes lock with mine, and we share a look of mutual understanding.

We've come so far, from that day of grudging vows to this morning of genuine devotion.

She passes Amara to Seraphina halfway down the aisle, then continues alone. I move forward to meet her, catching her hands in mine. Aleksei nods in approval as we stand facing each other. The hush in the room speaks of respect, and I realize I'm grinning like a fool.

Aleksei addresses the gathering, speaking briefly about how this vow renewal differs from our original wedding. Then, he invites Cecily to speak.

"Dimitri, the day we first said 'I do' was fraught with panic and fear. Today, I stand before you willingly, filled with love for the man who became my partner, protector, and ally. You taught me how to trust again and gave me the strength to become more than I ever believed possible. Today, I promise to keep building a life with you—a life of honesty, family, and respect."

I swallow and turn my focus inward so I can muster my own vow.

"Cecily, I once believed power was my only currency in this world. Then you entered my life, forcing me to see beyond that. You showed me the value of genuine companionship. You challenged me, comforted me, and gave me a daughter I treasure above anything. Today, I promise to stand by you, not as a figure of control, but as a partner in every step. I choose you, always."

We exchange simple rings we selected together. This time, no deals were made behind closed doors, no hidden motives or forced timelines—just a personal decision

to commemorate what we've fought so hard to nurture.

Aleksei announces, "You have renewed your vows in front of those who matter most. May this be a lasting testament to your unity." He nods. "You may seal it with a kiss, Brother."

I draw Cecily close and kiss her softly.

My heart feels as if it might burst from the enormity of what we've achieved.

Our guests applaud in a chorus of goodwill that envelops us.

When we turn, I see Seraphina holding a beaming Amara, Grigor smiling at both of them, and the rest of my brothers wearing expressions that range from pride to a hint of teasing amusement.

It's a family scene I never dared to dream of in my old life.

The reception that follows is a low-key affair, set up in an adjoining space.

Tables hold an assortment of food, including some dishes that Cecily introduced after forging local business connections.

We chat with guests, accept compliments about how far we've come, and watch Amara toddle around, enthralled by the swirling fabrics of people's attire.

Seraphina ensures the meal runs smoothly, assisted by staff who have grown loyal to Cecily's leadership style.

Over plates of fruit and pastries, Cecily and I sit side by side. She leans against my arm, occasionally giving me an affectionate nudge. "Two years. It feels like yesterday you were glaring at me from across a locked room."

I chuckle, remembering how furious I felt each time she tried to defy my orders. “You challenged me in ways no one ever did. And I needed that. We needed that.”

She lifts a glass, beckoning me to join her. “To a future free from old grudges. And to us—making something worth protecting.”

I clink my glass against hers. “To us,” I echo.

We drink and let the flavors remind us that life can be sweet after so much bitterness.

Then I notice my brothers motioning me over.

I excuse myself from Cecily’s side, promising to return soon.

She waves me off, teasing that she’ll keep an eye on our daughter before she wreaks more havoc among the table centerpieces.

“Everything is perfect,” Aleksei comments. “No disturbances, inside or out. We have watchers near the gates just in case.”

Akim nods. “Kovalev’s been quiet, presumably because he knows stirring trouble wouldn’t end well. So go enjoy your day.”

I appreciate their diligence. “Thank you. You know, I never could have pulled this off without all of you trusting me to shift the Barkov direction. It means more than I can express.”

Nikolai claps a hand on my shoulder. “You’re our brother. Our family stands together, especially when someone’s forging a path that benefits us all.”

Maksim gives a firm nod of agreement, then steps away, returning to his silent vigilance.

I rejoin Cecily, who's crouched to help Amara with a tiny ribbon she found. Our daughter stares at the swirling color as if it's the most magical thing in the world. Glancing up, Cecily smiles at me. "They let you go that fast?"

"Apparently, they want me to spend time with my wife on her vow renewal day."

She grins, stands, and slides a hand through my arm. "If that's the case, let's mingle for a bit, then slip away. I want to hold you to your promise of a private celebration."

Our eyes meet, and I nod with a smile so big it makes my face hurt. We move among the attendees, expressing gratitude for their presence. Seraphina corners me and hugs me tight, whispering that she's never seen Cecily so radiant before Grigor shakes my hand.

Finally, after a few final polite conversations, Cecily and I fade from the main gathering, leaving our siblings and friends free to continue chatting. We step into a side hallway to lean against the wall to catch our breath. She glances around, confirming no one is watching.

She hooks her fingers in my belt, pulling me closer. "You ready to end this day on a high note?"

I brush my lips against her ear. "Absolutely. Let's see if we can slip upstairs before someone else corners me about security concerns or expansions."

We walk in tandem to the stairwell, passing a guard who nods in greeting. Once we're out of sight, Cecily gives a mischievous laugh. "We're sneaking away in our own home. Feels oddly thrilling."

"We can be as free as we want here." We ascend the steps, listening to faint conversation drifting from below. In the hush of the upper floor, we let out a small exhale of relief. This is our space, no demands, no ceremonial duties. Just us.

In our bedroom, I lock the door and turn to see Cecily gazing at me with a look I recognize all too well: love, gratitude, and a hint of anticipation.

She moves forward and wraps her arms around my shoulders before pressing a soft kiss to my mouth.

This vow renewal day cements a promise for a life we already live: mutual respect, shared goals, and unwavering devotion to our daughter and each other.

She breaks the kiss, and her eyes drift over my face. “I’m so happy, Dimitri. I never thought I’d say those words inside these walls, but it’s true. You gave me a home I can cherish, not fear.”

“You gave me a heart I can trust, not guard. I love you, Cecily. And I’ll spend every day proving how serious I am about that promise.”

She inclines her head in a small gesture of acceptance, then captures my mouth again, deeper this time.

The vow renewal might have ended, but the real celebration begins here, in the privacy of a room that once symbolized control yet now represents partnership.

As we tumble onto the bed, I acknowledge that we’ve reshaped the Barkov legacy.

We are more than a notorious family; we are a unit built on loyalty and genuine warmth.

Eventually, we lie entwined, her head on my shoulder, breathing in unison.

The world outside this room can wait for us to reappear.

For now, we savor the knowledge that we chose each other under no pressure, forging

a future that transcends the violence of our past. Our daughter and her cousins will grow in peace, our siblings will thrive and the estate stands as an emblem of what we've overcome.

I hold Cecily close, allowing the day's significance to settle in my thoughts.

Tomorrow, we'll return to our usual routines —meetings, expansions, and a cautious watch over potential threats.

Yet none of that feels daunting when I have a partner who stands beside me, not behind me.

We create stability for our child, for Seraphina, and for everyone who calls this estate home.

Tomorrow is another day, but right now, I'm exactly where I need to be.

We're free, at peace, and bound together by a choice stronger than any forced arrangement.

This vow renewal cements what we already knew: we are a family that overcame strife, built a foundation of trust, and embraced the hope we once believed impossible.

When Cecily curls her hand into mine and whispers my name, I smile, grateful for every step that led us here.

We stand on the far side of danger, united in love, and looking ahead with the certainty that we will always protect what we hold dear.

And so, we rest in one another's arms, mindful that the greatest victories aren't won by fear but by the bonds of a family that has finally found its place in the world.

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THE END