



Claimed Bratva Virgin (Yezhov Bratva #4)

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Category: Urban

Description: The Russian mafia boss saw me once...and now Im carrying his secret.

Rafayel Yezhov kidnapped me to punish my family but now Im his prized possession.

He is almost twice my age with a reputation for brutality.

Forced into his world, Im trapped in a web of loyalty, power, and deceit.

When he discovers Im carrying his child, the stakes escalate.

He says I belong to him but Ive been playing a deadly game.

One wrong move, and Ill face his wrath.

My heart beats for him, but loyalty binds me to my family.

Each night, he claims me, body and soul, in a tangled web of lust and possession.

Im torn between hatred and desire, my senses blurred.

I want to destroy him, but his eyes burn with a passion that melts my resolve.

Rafayels world are as dark as his soul, and Im caught in the crossfire.

Will I ever be free from the man who holds my heart hostage?

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Rewards were a natural part of life. If they weren't necessary, they would not exist.

I wasn't a good man. I didn't believe in the morals that framed the foundations of the world. But I had some reasonable integrity, believing that, all things being equal, dealing fairly where my business was concerned was non-negotiable, and one of the few results of my benevolence happened to be this moment—walking into the Obsidian with ecstatic, eager men trailing closely behind.

Soft golden light danced across lavish décor, glittering like diamonds. The ceiling shimmered like glass, and the stone pillars were works of art trapped in archaic and medieval times. I liked it, the ambiance of a secret underground world strictly reserved for us, the nightlife lovers.

“We're here, baby!” Laughing, Vasili whistled at a blonde dancer on the stage.

She whipped her hair back and forth, struck a suggestive pose, and winked at him. My men hooted, and he lifted his shoulders like a man who knew he was getting some tonight. To his credit, Vasili always got some. No one knew how he did it—and that was only if we were judging by the visible jagged scar running in a parallel slash from his left eyebrow to the sharp edge of his right jaw, the full-sleeved skull inked on both arms, and the dead look in his eyes. He was the roughest and toughest-looking in the bunch. You'd think the women wouldn't touch him with a ten-foot pole, but he always got them.

“Ya ne pomyu, Kogda v poslyedniy raz ya imel odnogo iz nikh.”

I can't remember the last time I had one of those.

Maxim raised a brow. “Thought you preferred Latinas.”

“I do. Some days, I prefer them light.” He gave Maxim’s back a playful slap. It was a loud, solid clap. Of all my men, he had the shortest fuse, but I watched him allow the steam to roll off his shoulders because tonight was an exception. It was a good—no, a great night.

Oh, happy day! Oh, happy fucking night!

We had Santana in the bag. Formidable partners Miguel Angel and Javier Hernandez were two of the biggest sharks in the corporate ocean, specifically Santana Corporation, a conglomerate with far-reaching influence beyond Mexico and California. Getting them on the hook had been easier than I thought. A compelling, strategic proposal, a few sweeteners, and...done. A solid handshake to seal the multi-billion-dollar deal. The alliance of the Mexican corporation with the Bratva was going to revolutionize the entire industry, and in anticipation of yielding unprecedented profits and promising substantial expansion, the men had worked the hardest to close this deal. I knew we had to celebrate.

In the end, no one could really say no to me.

Getting to the VIP section, Maxim peeled Vasili’s fingers off his shoulder, edging forward to raise the lush red ropes demarcating the private lounge from the main area. We got settled, Vasili and Maxim taking spots beside me on the wide black tuxedo sofa. One by one, they picked tumblers off the table, snatching bottles alongside.

Slinging an arm above the rim, I leaned back to relax. While they talked, I let my eyes linger across the club and inhaled a lungful of air. It was heavy, a mix of Kauffner, tequila, and champagne. The rich scent always appealed to me, like a strange, unique blend of culture I never paid attention to but somehow noticed. The hype and exquisite class were two of the reasons I preferred the Obsidian to other

clubs. Being inside here was different, like a sudden hush on the constant noise in my head. I could just sit for a minute and not think.

“Don’t forget, we’ve got work to do in the morning. Let’s get straight into the fun and turn in early.” Maxim had a tumbler raised while admonishing the men. Besides possessing the shortest fuse, Maxim was an unapologetic workaholic, always trying to keep the men in check and their eyes on the goal. “All play and no work makes Jack—”

“One successful son of a bitch.” A lopsided grin settled on Vasili’s face when he spread his arms to welcome two blondes on his thighs. They squealed and collapsed on his legs with glee.

Maxim took his tumbler to his mouth, hiding a faint smile. “Idiot.”

One of the girls flipped her red hair, eyeing Vasili with interested eyes. “Who’s this handsome devil?”

“If you don’t mind, I’d like to think I could be your guardian angel.”

Vasili groped the redhead from behind and tilted backward to watch the girls move in a seductive rhythm on him. In harmony, they whined, twisted, and twerked, and in seconds, the scene turned from PG to R-18.

To be honest, the view was entertaining, watching each of them take turns to grind Vasili and playfully fighting each other to have a taste of him. But a part of me had wilted, grown weary of the action, because that was all there was: fun and no promise of anything more substantial or daring.

When you were born into a world like mine, you learned to accept the packages that came with it: the good, the bad, the ugly, the gruesome—all of it.

Power, influence, and pleasure were a few of the items in the good package, and those three things often had women attached to them. I had my fair share—that was no secret—but the rollercoaster of rising body counts rapidly depreciated from the green rise to red lines.

One of the girls slid from Vasili's thighs over to Maxim. She was bubbly, with brown hair, bright blue eyes, and straight teeth. If I had to guess, the pretty one wasn't older than twenty years.

Her fingers found the gold snake chain on his neck, and she twirled it, leaned forward, and whispered indistinctly into his ear. Maxim stayed still before lifting a quizzical brow.

I gave it a few seconds. If she was alluring enough to catch my attention, the big guy wasn't going to stand a chance.

Ten seconds down, and he whispered back. The sound of her laughter tinkled like tiny bells when she nodded, and Maxim snaked a tattooed hand around her neck before crashing his lips against hers. I looked away.

Taking my glass to my lips, I opted to blame maturity. When a man grew far from the razzmatazz and nuances of being twenty-five, realizing he was forty, I believed he tended to change or modify his *modus operandi*.

That was my story.

Maybe.

Or it was something else, like a desire to meet women who would strike a challenge, pose to be some inferno I couldn't possibly quench, even if I tried. I'd never really enjoyed an easy chase, and the irony was that they all came too easy.

“None for you, Rafa?”

I met Maxim’s half-lidded gaze over the bare shoulder of the girl with her lips perched on his neck. He was high on ecstasy and desire, and I didn’t blame him. If I could channel my inner twenty-five-year-old, Maxim would have gladly sent her over to my suite when he was done. We’d never had a problem sharing our women. It was part of the package.

I rose to my feet, tilting a glass toward him. “None. But you have fun. You’ve earned it.”

The spread of their happiness spurred a smile to curl up the corner of my lips, and I basked in self-content. Fuck it, I was a proud man.

I tipped my head back to swallow. I liked this: the satisfaction of a fulfilled man. Didn’t matter that I’d had spontaneous urges to punch some of them in the faces at one point or the other; we were still family. And this was what we thrived on: loyalty, bond, and honor.

Dropping my glass, I fixed a hand on my hip. Everything seemed complete, and the vibe of the night progressed as planned. But someone was missing: the hype man. He’d been the most ecstatic out of them about our night out. He’d almost sponsored it. So, not finding him mingling amongst the rest of them was oddly strange. The possibility that he’d been mischievous with one of the strippers and taken her back home was not beyond him, but that was one activity I would’ve definitely caught in the partially empty club.

My eyes were still scanning, and I had my fingers hovering inside my jacket to pull out my phone when I caught movement at the entrance.

Tikhon’s shadows danced against the walls in rhythm with the pulsating lights, and

the darkness of his suit reflected the vibrant blue, red, and aqua-green colors. Knotting his fingers over his belt, he stayed there, unmoving, like a statue fixed in the ground. But it was the familiar clench of my lieutenant's jaw and the hardness in his eyes that made me groan. Current status: Harbinger of Doom.

If Tikhon Beroev saw a party with women and stayed far away from it, it meant one thing: There was trouble.

“Maxim, eyes and ears open. I'm not far.” The Russian flying out of my mouth was fast enough for another person to miss, but Maxim was the smartest and most quick-witted for a reason.

With his hands gripping Blue Eyes tightly on the hips, he nodded.

When I got to the entrance, Tikhon didn't even break into the smallest smirk. Loud music was reduced to a quiet muffle as he led me further away from the noise into a quiet room with yellow lights and beige sofas, shutting the door behind us.

“No explanations for your sudden disappearance?”

He stayed mounted by the door. “Rafayel, it's not good.”

Rubbing the crease between my brows, I slipped my hands into my pocket. “What happened now?”

His eyes spoke before his mouth did. Never before had I seen Tikhon with a frown so deep or a stare so ghastly. “Jabril Enterprises is no longer our client.”

It was my turn to frown. “What the fuck does that mean? The last time I checked—which was yesterday, by the way—everything was good. Lev had that assignment under control, or didn't he?”

Deafening silence followed, thick enough for a knife to cut right through. The only sounds between us were the heavy thumps of bass and beats from outside the room. Tikhon shifted uncomfortably. Worry wrinkles formed at the center of his forehead, and his jaw ticked.

“Lev’s dead.”

“Great.”

Shit.

I scrubbed a hand through my hair, and it wasn’t because of anxiety. If I hadn’t busied my hands, I might as well have shot something, and Tikhon was too useful at the moment to be wasted. Lev was one of my foot soldiers until I discovered his brain was bigger than pea-size and could be useful for more important things. I promoted him to the corporate ranks, granted him permission to click deals and supervise a fraction of the clientele. Now, Lev’s dead, and it smelled like someone was sending a message. His death and the loss of Jabril Enterprises were no coincidence.

With short, calculated steps, I walked toward one of the sofas, gripping the hard edge for support. My hands already began trembling. “What happened and when?”

“I found his body about an hour ago. Did a little groundwork, and it didn’t take long to find out he was ambushed while they were in an on-site meeting. Lev opposed, put up a fight, and didn’t stand a chance. Jabril was coerced to join the other side.”

“The other side....”

Tikhon blew out a breath, and I almost asked him to hold it before confirming my suspicion.

“Don Enzo Colombo. He’s had his eyes on Jabril for months now. Guess he waited for the most vulnerable time to strike.” Tikhon came up to me, so I saw the look on his face when he said, “Rafa, bagging Santana is going to mean almost nothing if Jabril is off the hook. They’ll be like mere compensation.”

My nails dug into the soft, lush fabric coating the seats, and I kept my gaze pinned on the wall. What I felt now was no ordinary anger. Fury licked up my blood and ran a course through my veins. Rage boiled and squeezed at the walls of my chest until I thought I was exhaling and inhaling internal heat.

It wasn’t the first, or second, or third time the Italians were crossing territories, smearing our walls with their filthy hands. They’d been at it, like children beating rattles for attention. But this time, Colombo went beyond the boundaries. Jabril was also one of the biggest sharks in the corporate industry and had a solid link in the sea of politics. Tikhon was right; if we lost them, then having Santana Corporations as clients was insignificant. We were going to lose millions, and more clients would go down the drain.

While we were closing one major deal, one of our clients was being snatched right from under our noses. Where we took time to present solid, meaningful proposals, the Italians enjoyed proving to be brainless crooks who preferred hitting below the belt.

And they called themselves a mafia.

More like a gang of powerless thieves.

I faced Tikhon. “Set up a meeting with Jabril,” I said in Russian. “If he is one minute late, I’m blowing off his fucking head.”

“ Da. ”

I headed for the door.

I was a fucking businessman, and I didn't fancy myself a good man, but I took pride in having reasonable integrity when it came to business.

But who said anything about not using my guns when I had to?

If Colombo wanted blood, then he'd better be ready because I was going to use his to build a bank, and I'd fill those packs with pleasure.

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:06 pm

“Car’s Outside” by James Arthur was my best song yet. I had it playing in my ears right now, and it worked its magic again. It was my go-to, the melody I relied on whenever something big was stirring inside me, whenever nerves threatened to take over. And just like every other time, it worked.

I refused to look when I passed by the grandstands and instead tried to regulate my breath.

With sharp focus, I hastened my steps to the paddock. I was already two minutes late. Any more than that off the clock, and Gavin could literally yell my ear off for slacking.

More than hundreds— thousands —of people were gathered, waving everything they could while cheering us on: shirts, pictures, flags, and cardboard. They turned up in various colors, and their energy was electric, charging the atmosphere with a harmonious excitement of spirited chants. Feedback from the commentators resonated from the speakers planted in every corner, formally preparing the audience for the big start. Their chants rose, swirling like wildfire.

Smiling, I finally succumbed to the thrilling temptation to look around. It was kind of like a personal habit I’d formed over the years: Try not to look, and then look. And the view never failed to amaze me. I could never get used to it.

It was about seventy-five degrees out, with clear blue skies and wispy clouds, and the gentle ocean breeze complimented the honey-hued warmth of the California sun. Deeply, I inhaled the Pacific air, filling my lungs with the invigorating freshness of eucalyptus and palm trees swaying gently alongside the track. In the mix, I caught the

aroma of seafood, avocado, and citrus wafting from food stalls, but those were going to have to wait until after I claimed my prize.

I got to the crowded shade in time to catch my car backing away from my baby. The 3.8L twin-turbocharged flat-six engine produced seven hundred horsepower at seven thousand revolutions per minute and seven hundred and fifty Newton-meters of torque.

For a second, I paused to adore her. The GT2 Porsche 991, sitting pretty under the shade, did not even need the sun to shine; her sleek red and black track-designed coat carried all the glow she needed.

“Leo.”

Clad in a sleek red and black team jacket, with sweat-dampened salt and pepper hair framing his face, Gavin patted her hood and tossed me the keys. The silver bunch jingled in my palms as I caught them with ease.

He was very unimpressed. “Race is starting in ten minutes.”

The noise around us grew louder, and most of the racers in the shed were already testing their engines. Giving my best remorseful smile, I walked around him to the driver’s door. “I know, I’m late. I’m sorry.”

Gavin narrowed his eyes at me, adjusting one headphone cup pushed back over his ear. “The only way you’re apologizing is by kicking some ass and getting that goddamn money, so listen up, kid. We needed to adjust the torque settings for maximum traction,” he shouted over the roar of engines, his headphones slipping slightly down his ear. “You have to ease off the throttle a bit, or you’ll overheat.”

“Thought you worked that off?”

His gray eyes squinted against the sun, and he looked like he'd aged five years older in seconds. "I didn't say don't use it, just don't put excess pressure. Now, pay attention—this setup change will give you an edge, and the tweak will give you insane speed. It's pure magic."

After spending an extra minute guiding me through the last-minute adjustments amidst the frenzied atmosphere, Gavin fixed me up with an earpiece, handed me my helmet, and gave me a reassuring pat on the shoulder before diverting his focus to something else outside the shed. "Hai tutte le carte in regola per riuscirci!" You have all the cards to succeed.

And he walked away.

Static whined from the speakers, and the commentators' voices came back on the speakers. All racers present were to proceed to the staging area. The race was commencing in six minutes. I started for the door, gripping the handle, but my reflection made me pause.

I stared back at myself, taking in everything, from my snug black leggings and cropped team red-and-black leather jacket to the fierce determination in my hazel-green eyes. I stole a deep breath because I desperately needed it and combed my fingers through my short bob.

In the twenty-three years of my life, I always put family first. Always. My destiny was premeditated, even before I was born, and I'd never tried to fight or question it. Protecting my father's legacy and preparing myself for the big shoes I would feel as the daughter of the Italian Don was the primary focus—my priority. I'd done it all, the necessary training, the meetings, the preliminary inductions into the mafia, and I let nothing stand in my way.

But after family, racing came next. It wasn't just a passion; it was oxygen. The

countless hours of tireless training, sweat-drenched sessions, and sacrifices—every moment had led to this big one. The Long Beach Grand Prix.

One hundred thousand dollars— 100,000 freaking dollars!— hung precariously in the balance. I could get that money from my father in less than ten minutes, but then it wouldn't be earned. It wouldn't be considered mine.

“Already practicing how you're going to cry after I beat you?”

I turned away from my car with a grimace at the driver in a green-and-black leather jacket. He was young and had racing experience, like me. Typical cliché, this one. Tall and brooding with a lean athletic build, he had intense grey eyes that were the shade of brewing storms, dark, tousled taper fade hair, structured cheekbones, a defined jawline, full lips, and a foreign symbol inked on the left side of his neck.

Other girls here would die for him. Some of them were already falling at the grandstands, hysterically shrieking his name and crying to get his attention.

But I wasn't other girls and never would be.

This intruder was, in fact, someone I'd been at loggerheads with from time immemorial—my arch-nemesis and rival, for two major reasons:

One, we'd been opponents on the tracks for a few years, and he made it clear that he wasn't going to stop trying to outshine me. Granted, he had decent skills, but that was as far as it went. Decent, but not good enough to beat me.

Two, Ivan Yezhov was proudly Russian, and it didn't stop there. Maybe, if he was a decent Russian fighting to survive like any other ordinary human being, I might have considered going easy on him a few times, but...no.

This particular Russian hailed from a long line of filthy bastards who believed they were better than everyone else. People who had no conscience, got their hands dirty, and trampled on others like they were meaningless trash—the Bratva.

I wasn't a saint; neither was my father nor our ancestors. We understood what this line of business demanded. But there were some people you could tolerate and others you just couldn't. The Bratva was on the latter list.

Ivan and I never held a reasonable conversation for more than three minutes, so his ignorance was clear; he didn't care much about knowing me beyond my name and who my father was. But I knew him and had gathered enough about his family to understand why Papa wanted them eliminated and wiped off the face of planet Earth.

Fun fact: They sickened me—all of them.

My grimace turned to a full-blown smile when I entered the car and strapped myself into the cockpit. He followed me, lowering his head to glare at me through the window as I fixed on my helmet.

“Hey, I’m talking to you.”

This pestering technique of his was very intentional, trying to spite me, to rile me up, with that smug look and spark in his eyes, and it wasn't working. I wasn't going to give him the satisfaction of watching me unravel.

“What?” I blinked, flashing a smile as innocently as it could get. “What was that? I’m sorry. I couldn’t hear you over the noise of my victory. But don’t worry, okay? I’ll be back in a couple of minutes to sign an autograph.”

If his ego was bruised, it didn't show. Then, again, the Yezhovs had a thing for striking back despite how low they fell to the ground.

“Nice to see you already pumped up.” Eyes glinting wickedly, he stroked his chin. “What’s that thing they say about overconfident brats? Oh, that’s right; they always fucking lose in the end.”

The smile on my face wobbled, and I frowned it off.

“I’ve got a better one: Race starts in three minutes, loser. Why don’t you worry about moving your garbage can over there instead of polluting my air with your bad energy? Yeah, that’s right; fuck off.”

Scoffing, he backed away, and I pumped the car out of the shed and toward the staging area.

“ Ce la puoi fare! ” You can do it. Gavin’s voice came through the earpiece. “No distractions.”

He must have picked up on the brief banter between the Russian and me, but Gavin understood me well enough to know nothing could faze me at this point when I could almost taste the victory at the end of the finish line.

“ D’accordo.” Agreed.

Leaning back on the seat, I shut my eyes for a second and tightened my grip on the steering wheel until I was sure my knuckles had turned white. Beside me, other racers were already gearing up. Engines roared to life around me, and I felt my heart pounding in my chest, every beat stronger than the one before.

Ivan’s blue Ferrari Enzo pulled up beside me. I felt the heat of his stare prickle at the side of my face but didn’t turn. What I needed now was focus.

Focus.

Nothing short of that.

The countdown officially started with the lights hanging overhead. As the digital numbers went down from three to one, I counted alongside them under my breath.

Tre.

I was going to win this.

Due.

I was going to win this.

Uno....

Game time.

The loud buzzer cut through the chants in the air, spreading tension from the drivers to the grandstands—everyone could feel it.

“Partenza !” Gavin charged over the earpiece.

As the numbers turned green, I slammed the accelerator, and my baby surged forward like a wild animal unleashed. The prize. The harsh sound of tires screeching or rubber burning didn’t matter. The wind whipped, and I felt the heat in my helmet. The world beside me and behind faded to a blur. I kept my eyes on the goal—the finish line.

Heat haze shimmered. The sun beat down, and the track gleamed like molten gold, the surface reflecting the vibrant colors of the cars.

A quick glimpse, and I caught the speedometer needle dancing toward triple digits,

and my stomach dropped with each sharp turn. I felt weightless, free, alive.

Narrowing my focus to the road ahead, my mind raced faster than the few cars ahead of me. I calculated, swerved the wheel, instinctively adjusted my line, braked, and then accelerated. From the window, I heard the audience go wild.

But it shrank. The noise and chants from the stands, the roar of engines beside mine—everything minimized to a singular, thrilling purpose: crossing the line first.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a rival Ferrari bump into mine. Ivan was attempting a daring overtaking maneuver. My heart rate spiked.

I'm going to win this.

I gripped the wheel tighter and shot a brief glare at him through the window before focusing on the track's curvature.

Then, I floored it.

My tires bit into the asphalt. Ivan's Ferrari's nose edged closer, its exhaust growing louder, our cars mere inches apart. The rush of adrenaline was intoxicating as we hurtled toward the turn's apex. I silenced the harsh pounds of my heart in my ears like drums and countered his move, subtly adjusting my steering.

Gavin was yelling something aggressively in rapid Italian over the earpiece, but I couldn't hear him. Not when I was sucked into a hole of emotions and memories, seeing nothing but all the times I'd broken my back to put the best into this sport: my stubbornness, as Papa would call it. My pain, my tears, my beginner's stage victories—all of it.

My ears were ringing, and my hands were shaking on the wheel.

If Ivan Yezhov or any other person thought themselves capable enough to snatch this moment away from me, they most certainly had another thing coming.

I held firm, my rear end rotating subtly in response to the throttle, and his car fell behind.

With his hot breath on my bumper, I didn't bother turning back. After the race, I'd rub his shit on his face.

The loud cheers from the spectators, the sound of screeching tires, and cars racing into each other fueled me and pumped the exhilaration flowing to the depths of my soul.

I got this.

The finish line was dead ahead, its bright colors like a beacon, and I was so close, close enough to taste the sweetness of victory.

With a final, desperate burst of speed, in a quick flash of colors and blurs—

Time slowed down.

My heart raced against my chest with the speed of quicksilver.

And I heard the crowd go wilder than the crackle of thunder and whooshing winds in a fucking storm.

“Oh, my! The crowd is on its feet! Un-be-lievable! “

“Leonora Colombo has successfully put her feet through the door of history! She has taken the top spot on the podium!”

“What a drive! What a finish! Car number 12, driven by Leonora Colombo, is your winner today of the Long Beach Prix! Woohoo!”

I’d done it.

I’d crossed the line. The checkered flag waved above me, and the feeling....

The feeling was indescribable.

I kicked the door open, with a grin so wide it could hurt my cheeks, when I stepped out of the car and into the charged atmosphere.

“ Leo! Leo! Leo! ”

The chants were heavy, the voices loud. I looked around and spread my arms under the rapid bursts of tiny confetti. I couldn’t believe it. Only moments ago, winning had been the goal. Now, it was a real achievement. I stood at the center of these people’s admiration. I’d inspired someone out there to dare to dream big and got my name carved on the stone of car racing champions.

“I’ve never been prouder! You just keep surpassing the limits.”

I pressed the earpiece deeper to block out the noise in the background. I’d worked with Gavin long enough to see the smug smile on his face from over the phone.

“Grazie per aver fatto parte di questo.” Thanks for being a part of this.

“Good job, kid! Now, go get your prize. You earned it.”

The prize. 100,000 dollars.

Marching up to the podium, I couldn't have been prouder of how far I'd come and how much farther I was ready to go.

The officials stood beside me, forming a semicircle, as they handed me the big paper check. I smiled big for the camera, and one thought echoed in the back of my mind.

This was just the beginning.

“ Don't you want me like I want you, baby? Don't you need me like I need you now? Sleep tomorrow, but tonight, go crazy. All you gotta do is just meet me at the....”

I whipped my hair in the opposite direction of the wind, though it didn't go very far because of the length, lifting my tulip glass to the starry night sky with one hand while dragging down the zip on my jacket with the other as I joined the others to scream the chorus at the top of my lungs.

Cool beach air ambushed us, brushing my bare stomach when I released the zipper on my jacket. It felt liberating. The energy was high tonight; mine was higher.

I was bound in the time capsule of this moment, just existing in this space, with a charged, euphoric atmosphere and cool sand beneath my feet. It spurred a trip down memory lane.

At the age of eight, I discovered my love for cars. When I was fifteen, I practically forced Papa to teach me how to drive. I could have learned easily before I was thirteen, but Papa wanted me to focus on proper formal education and, behind closed doors, black market lessons.

There was a distinct thrill that came with being seated behind the wheel, strapped in

and ready. No worries or concerns or thoughts about anything or anyone else. The reality of who I was and the life I had been born into faded to a noiseless background when the wind blew through my hair and my foot pressed down on the accelerator. The rush of adrenaline and liberation was intoxicating, and I'd grown into this fierce young woman with an intense desire to take over the world with speed.

With one hand, I clutched my boots against my thighs and tilted my head back. The taste of champagne was as sweet as the taste of triumph. And it tasted even better after every full glass. I was on my third now and had a feeling I wasn't slowing down tonight.

Still mouthing the infectious "Apt " lyrics, I looked around over the huge swarm of people here, scattered across the beach: the giggly girls clad in bikinis, testing the dark waves that lapped over the shore with male companions, and others mingling over barbecue and wine.

It was bonfire night, and at the corners, lit torches lined up at the entrance. At the center, a group of dancers displayed their professional exotic talent . But beyond these, knowing that they gathered here to celebrate me, to celebrate our big win, made the scenery even more surreal.

My head was still on the forty-five-degree rotation when my eyes caught something. Someone, rather.

From the group of racers surrounding me, one of the men stared at me.

Our eyes met, and he didn't even flinch; he just smiled and tipped his blue solo cup toward me.

Sandy blond hair, long, athletically carved legs, and a soft jawline. He wasn't close enough to tell the color of his eyes, but I had no doubt that they were pretty.

The stranger was cute, in a rich boy-playboy way. But a man like him wasn't cut from the same cloth as me.

If he got any closer, I could bet he had clean, trimmed fingernails, good designer shoes, and straight white teeth that, without a doubt, had never been knocked out before.

It was simple. Pretty Boy over there was a descendant of a soft and easy heritage, while people like me, who had illegal early childhood training in getting clear headshots, were not advised to mingle.

The reason was simple: Where I came from, Pretty Boy and his likes almost never survived.

Before he started trudging through the sand toward me, I turned away—

And accidentally bumped into someone else.

A girl, this time around.

We stood close enough to one of the lit torches for me to see her properly, and it was her eyes I saw first: crystal green, the color of priceless emeralds. Then, I noticed her raven black waist-length hair, as dark as night. Her skin was pale, a stark contrast beside the flickering orange burn of flames. She looked simple and ready to enjoy the night in a cropped brown halter top on a vibrant pair of dad shorts and cross-woven beach sandals. When she moved the red solo cup in her hands, I caught the cursive style intricately inked across the insides of her wrist but couldn't make out the words.

And when she smiled at me, from ear to ear, she reminded me of me.

That dangerous and audacious spark in her eyes, the subtle darkness that swirled

behind them, her aura that screamed everything a middle finger in the air would—I saw all of it. Felt all of it.

She took a step back, scanned me from head to toe, and went back again to my face.

“What do you know? A year later, we meet again, and I’m in the queue for your autograph.”

“I don’t see any queue behind you, or in front.”

A brief pause.

Then, we both busted out laughing.

Giselle Rae. We’d met at an auction a year ago, and the connection between us was instant. She shared mutual feelings toward the auction. We both thought it was boring and overhyped. Then, a conversation about a random topic started, and before long, I started talking about cars.

I didn’t see her anywhere else again after that night, but Giselle was one person I’d encountered that I was sure I would never forget.

“When I spotted you from the stand, I couldn’t believe it. Girl, you were on fire. God, I wish I was as cool as you.”

“Seems like you’re even cooler.”

She snorted. “Yeah, sure. Next thing, you’ll say I’m Charlize Theron.” Her lips curled to the side in a lopsided grin when she took her cup to her mouth. “All that talk about cars and making a name in racing. You finally made it, huh?”

I shifted my weight from one bare foot to the other, letting the weight of her words sink in. It's what I'd been doing for the past half an hour—musing on how fast my dreams were coming true. The sudden tilt of her brow and knowing glint in her eyes made her know she was right.

I know she's right .

I finally made it.

I took a sip from my glass. The champagne in it was almost gone. Time had been far spent. "I guess you could say that. I'm still making it, though. For me, today was just a start."

Her chuckle was a horse, a deep rumble from her throat, and a hearty "Congratulations, Leo" flowed from her lips.

"I'm actually happy for you—and me, of course, because I get to benefit. It'll probably be less than twenty-four hours of fame. We should take a picture, so I'll post on Snapchat that I have a friend who's one hundred thousand dollars richer. The world needs to know."

I laughed as loud as the champagne in my mouth would let me, and she moved to stand beside me with her smartphone raised for a friend selfie. The front camera focused on our faces, and I was barely halfway through a comment about the possibility of her post putting a moving target on her back when someone else appeared in our shot.

"You got lucky today, Colombo."

Giselle stepped aside as I turned to face him, my archnemesis with thick Russian blood running true in his veins.

“Look who came back for an autograph.” I raised an apologetic hand in the air. “Sorry, but this chick beside me was the last one on the line. I’m bumped out, and I should be getting my beauty sleep in, uh, five minutes? Sorry, but we have to wrap this up.” I offered a smile. “The life of champions, am I right?”

“You think this is funny?”

The burning anger and darkness in Ivan’s eyes made me know how upset my victory made him. It was the type of darkness that took a gun to a man’s head to draw blood without remorse. I didn’t only recognize it; being a Colombo ensured I possessed it. That, and the zero tolerance to put up with jealous sons of bitches like this one.

If the baby wanted me to put him in his place, I would be more than glad to.

“The only thing funny here is what you said a minute ago. I pretended not to hear your trash talk, but since you want to go there, it’ll be my pleasure to address it. Did you say lucky?” I looked away, at nothing in particular, with a scoff and back at him. “Sorry that I have to be the one to break this to you, chipmunk, but what you witnessed today had not a fucking thing to do with luck. I outdrove you, Ivan Yezhov. Allow it to sink in.”

“Outdrove me?”

“What, you need hearing aids now?”

The turbulence in his eyes only grew shades darker, cloudier, until his rage and embarrassment were all over the place. He took a step forward and edged closer. Good thing I had a decent height; I didn’t have to tilt my head back too much to hold his gaze. His rigid six-foot frame had nothing over me.

The volume of the music dropped a few notches, and hot gossip-hungry stares

surrounded us. Some even had their phones raised, and the breeze chose that moment to play with his hair. Talk about some tense scene from a novel.

Me? I didn't give a fuck.

“Says the pampered princess riding on her daddy's coattails.” His taunting smile was immediate, and I suddenly craved the urge to wipe it off with a fist. “The only thing you are is privileged, Leonora. Nothing more.”

BULL-SHIT.

That was exactly what that was. Trash talk, and nothing more. Only Ivan got off on talking trash to me.

Like the Russian Bratva, the Italian mafia did things to a person that ordinary ears were prohibited from hearing. Things that were not allowed to see the light of day. And I was a product of some of those things.

It was true that Papa knew how to get his feet through multiple doors, however, and whenever he wanted. Enzo Colombo was not a man most people said no to. He didn't allow it. Privileges came with the name, especially being the only daughter and heir apparent to take over his seat of power in the mafia. There was an edge; success and immeasurable wealth were already fixed for me and my brother even before our births.

We could literally have anything we wanted: a luxurious lifestyle, resources, connections—heck, even a degree from Harvard or wherever. Nothing was beyond our reach.

But racing? I'd broken my back for that one. I put in the necessary hours. I pushed hard during training. I spent so much time shuffling from Gavin's private garage to

the practice tracks and back—over and over again.

And on repeat.

Ivan's ego was hurt and brutally punctured, so that snarky remark was nothing more than a feeble attempt to get back at me. Well, that was what I kept trying to tell myself while glaring at him. But I remembered the feeling that enveloped me when I crossed that finish line, the feeling of accomplishment when I held that check on the podium, and the weight seated on my chest, suffocating all rational thoughts until one voice screamed louder in my head:

I fucking deserved it .

My hand moved before my mouth did, and a resounding “Oh, shit!” reechoed from the spectators encircling us. Beside me, Giselle gasped. Some female admirers of his cooed, and a few of the guys laughed.

My glass was empty, the champagne gone and now seeping into Ivan's hair, forming small rivulets down the length of his neck, past the collar of his jacket.

I'd embarrassed him, humiliated him. And if given another chance, I'd do much worse.

“You just can't stomach the reality that you lost to a woman. Why don't you go back to the junior's league? Seems like you still have a lot to learn.”

With his jaw clenched and curled fingers digging into his palms, Ivan eliminated the last bit of space between us and dropped his head low enough for me to catch the threat in his glare. Our proximity was so small that I could smell it, a choking rage wafting up my nose and into my lungs like smoky heat from a furnace.

“You’re going to pay for this.”

“Yeah, sure. Definitely.” Smirking, I stepped back. “Or did you forget I can afford to pay for that and probably your entire existence? At least I have a daddy with coattails to ride on. Yours held no major position of power, leaving you weak and powerless. But, unlike you, I’m not petty. I’ll consider forgiving you because you’re pissed, and I know you’re projecting.”

I turned away from him and everyone else, gritting my teeth into my gum hard enough to cause a headache. I still felt him watching, glaring knives behind my head. I raised my hand and flipped him off.

“Go home, Ivan.”

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:06 pm

“Not on board.”

The door closed with a click, and Tikhon’s steps toward me were energetic. A scowl on his face followed after he dropped a thin file on my desk and collapsed on the chair facing mine. He cocked his head to the side, spread an arm above the rim of the twin chair beside his, and kicked a leg out.

I should have known what he was talking about the minute he walked into this office. Honestly, I did know. The problem was, negative reports and I didn’t connect. We couldn’t exist in the same space. If I wanted something taken care of, then it had to be taken care of. There were no ‘buts’ or ‘ifs’ or ‘hows’—just what Rafayel wanted, he got.

So, Tikhon pouncing in here with that frustrated, dejected look and strained soulless eyes to deliver that message was a courageous move. A very costly one, but it meant he’d tried and was pissed that he was going to have to tell me he failed.

I folded my arms on the desk, instinctively knotting my fingers to keep my hands busy. Something to distract myself while Tikhon tapped his feet because—to stress the point—I didn’t accept failures.

“You didn’t meet with him?”

“As a matter of fact, I did.” he said sharply and gave me a look, asking if I suddenly doubted his capabilities.

I didn’t. For ten long years, he’d been by my side, knew how to get the job done

thoroughly, and served me with fervent loyalty I'd found nowhere else. I never doubted Tikhon. Before he came along, I didn't have a second-in-command, and after him.... He became mine for a reason. The man was as dangerous and as ruthless as they came, could off a man in a dozen ways with his hands and a knife, and to me, he was just fine. Maybe nearly perfect.

Trust wasn't one of those things that came with the job description of being a Yezhov. Watching our backs was more a habit than a chore. But Tikhon was one of the few that I could trust in this world without an iota of doubt, and we'd grown to be as close as brothers as two men could be.

In short, his competence wasn't at stake. It was that damn negative report that said the job couldn't be done.

"You met him. Then, what's the fucking matter?"

"Seeing him wasn't the problem. Getting him to switch sides was."

An uncomfortable lump restricted the airflow to my chest. That report didn't correlate, making it difficult to process. My fingers tightened.

"What?"

Tikhon rubbed his fist over his head. He was stressed out and, as always, didn't give a fuck about masking it. But I didn't care, and he knew it. I wasn't letting this go until I had it go my way.

"Rafa, coercion can't be the only thing Enzo has over Jabril. There must be something else because he's refusing to bend."

Still not processing.

“He’s refusing to bend.”

Tikhon kept on talking anyway. Lost in his own thoughts, he leaned forward, brows drawn and lips tight. “Colombo might have some dirt on him, something filthy hanging over his head. Fuck, if Lev was here, maybe we’d have clarity.”

“Why did he have to fucking die after being shot, right?”

The sarcasm was loud enough to get his attention. His head snapped up, and when our eyes met, he started to press further. “Rafa, the only way we’re Jabril back is if Colombo lets him—”

“Save it. I’m not hearing anything positive.”

Contrary to general opinion, there weren’t that many fish in the sea. Or fish like Jabril Enterprises, to be precise. Even if it was going to take months to win, I wasn’t losing any clients to the Italians. It was just not happening under my watch.

“Are you going to make me motivate you now? Tikhon, there’s a way; you’ve not broken the damn walls hard enough to fucking see it. If Colombo has something filthy hanging over his head, that means there’ll be more dirt wherever that came from. Do what you do best. Threaten whoever you should, and maybe make a few examples of those who aren’t cooperating. Get some sense knocked into Jabril’s head. If you have to do that literally, fine.”

There was a rapt knock on the door, but whoever it was did not wait for an acknowledgment. He entered without a word.

When he sat on the twin chair beside Tikhon’s, I ran a suspicious gaze from his blue-and-black leather jacket to his tousled hair and finally settled on the crazed but sullen look in his eyes. That daze in his eyes had always been there, a funny mix of

depressed, carefree, and egoistic, but often, his presence was nothing to celebrate.

Tikhon smiled at him and nudged a shoulder as a subtle greeting.

“What’s up, kid?”

Ivan groaned, his shoulders slouched backward, and his fingers made more messy tracks through his hair.

As expected.

From the minute he walked through that door, my gut told me trouble. Maybe I’d been gifted in the womb, but my instincts failed zero to one percent of the time. Rafayel Yezhov was always right.

That groan of his meant more trouble to deal with.

Already riled up and fucking irritated with the Jabril and Italian mafia shit going on, it was a battle suppressing the urge to whack my dumb cousin across the head with the butt of my gun.

If it wasn’t already clear, I didn’t like the kid very much. When he turned eighteen, he nixed his formal initiation as a Yezhov into the Bratva to pursue his passion for racing.

Racing.

What I thought started out as a raving madness of youthful exuberance turned out to be more than just a fucking joke, and to worsen the matter, ruining his reputation and dragging his name through the fucking soil, his progress chart recorded more losses than wins.

For years, he maintained his distance, focused on his cars and failures, and only came running when there were rough edges to smoothen out.

“What the fuck is it now?”

My anger was direct, like a missile locked in. Before it landed on the target, the entire room felt the catastrophic quake of the explosion.

“I, um....” He shifted under my stare, biting down hard on his lips, and the fear in his eyes gleamed sharper. Knowing he got on my nerves was making it worse for him. “I think now’s a bad time to talk about my shit. I should just go. I should.... I might come back another time, maybe?”

Luckily for him, Tikhon intercepted before I had a chance to throw something across the table with every intention of causing bodily injury to the kid . “Take it from me. Now’s not the best time to play. If you have something to say, say it.”

“Or don’t, and maybe risk losing a finger for wasting three hundred seconds of my fucking time.”

Averting my gaze, Ivan swallowed, gripping the armrest of his chair, and his spine stiffened on the chair. He ran a hand through his hair and cleared his throat. His nerves were all over the place, visible enough for me to watch his fingers tremble as he stuck them into the pocket of his jacket.

And when he opened his mouth, my expectations were low. I expected something else, anything dumb, to come out of that mouth of his. Anything but what he said.

“There’s this girl—”

“Son of a bitch.”

Tikhon hid a grin before I glared at him.

The kid had managed to run into all sorts of problems on good and bad days, but he'd never come into my office to chat about women, drop-dead gorgeous or nutty as they might have been. I'd never seen him majorly stressed out about one either, so this one had to be special.

Still, the unnecessary suspense was giving me a headache.

My fingers found a ballpen on the desk, and I fondled it, clicking and clicking, while I decided whether or not to wait to hear him finish.

“She’s actually Enzo Colombo’s daughter—Leonora. I’m sure you know her. Bitch enjoys making a name for herself, and apparently, she did a solid round today.”

Tikhon lifted a brow at my finger when the pen stopped clicking, but Ivan kept talking, barely noticing that I wasn’t listening to him.

Apparently , Leonora Colombo had beaten my cousin in one of their racing sprees, victoriously cementing her name in the records of history while wiping his ass in more dirt.

I battled a smile.

Always managing to leave her mark wherever she went. Like she did years ago when she tried to rain on Timur’s parade. That night, her superciliousness fascinated me and, more so, left me highly impressed after she broke her father from Timur’s jail cell.

The audacious brunette with the sharp tongue and daring hazel eyes—of course, I knew her. If she had her way, the whole world probably would, too. She was eager to

prove her capabilities of handling her own business, and yet, everything she did showed more evidence that Colombo's blood ran through her veins—more specifically, his ego and stubbornness.

“...kidnapped her.”

Ivan's voice shattered whatever bubble I was in, and the smirk melted off my face faster than heated candle wax. I blinked away the confusion, frowned, and sat up a little straighter. If I thought I'd heard part of his statement correctly, it meant—

“You kidnapped Leonora Colombo ?”

Tersely, he nodded.

Even Tikhon couldn't believe it. He looked from Ivan to me and back again.

“ Podzemnaya Tyur'ma” Underground prison. Ivan leaned forward, eyes sober and guard down. “That's where she is. And I swear, Rafayel, that's why I came here—to seek your permission. I don't want to go about messing shit up or stirring trouble with the Italians and the Bratva.”

“You kidnapped Enzo's daughter,” Tikhon cut in. There was no other way to make it clearer. “You've already stirred shit up, kid.”

Ivan wasn't looking at me, but the indication of his fear was the constant clenching of his fingers on the desk.

“I meant no disrespect, but I needed to teach her a lesson. She won, fine. I'll admit, she's a badass driver, knows her way around the track. Maybe if she was humble, I could learn a few things from her, but she's just so...so full of shit.”

He was breathing harshly, still battling his inner rage at the feisty Italian princess. Quite the contrary, to her credit, and in my opinion, maybe not exactly full of shit. But I got his communication loud and clear.

The kid had more than enough stings of the Leonora venom. He'd been humiliated, embarrassed, and for the first time in his life, did what a true Yezhov would have done if confronted with the same sassy bitch: retaliate.

Colombo had something that belonged to me, and currently, my genius cousin had helped me even the score.

Now, why the fuck would that upset me?

The gravity of the current situation forced me up from the chair and propelled me toward him. I shoved one hand into my pocket and stretched one out to his shoulder.

I couldn't believe I was saying this, but....

“Good job, kid.”

The light in the room caught the shock in his eyes as his head flew back. “What?”

I withdrew my hand. If he didn't hear it, then maybe he was better off fucking one of his cars. I wasn't repeating it. That compliment already cost me more than a shred of pride.

But I was smirking, and Tikhon kissed his teeth and dashed me a stink eye because he knew this revenge felt better than a trip to the Obsidian in more ways than one.

Fate, perhaps?

Or maybe Ivan just proved that he wasn't the spineless dick we all thought he was.

Whatever it was, it yielded the same result.

As for me and the Italian princess, our paths were going to cross once again.

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One Day Ago

Let's talk about my love interests.

Trudging through the sand to the black Audi R8 parked by the beach's raised wooden gates, my jaw stayed fixed and my fingers clenched. To everyone who squealed an excited "hello!" or hearty "congratulations" as I stormed past the exit, courtesy demanded that I mutter a response, at least.

Unlocking the car, I flung my shoes on the passenger's seat and buckled myself in. The engine purred, and bright headlights punctured through the thick clog of darkness. I latched a death grip on the steering wheel.

Back to the matter of love interests, there were zero.

That's correct— fucking zero. And the reason for that was simple. I grew up in a house surrounded by men and women who'd trooped in or were literally snatched from different walks of life. Although, we certainly had more men.

Papa didn't believe women could get the job done effectively, except if the job description included pole dancing, serving, or basically seduction. Something that required less brain and willpower because that was all he thought they were good for.

His low confidence in the womenfolk spurred me to push harder, to take on more responsibilities—more real action, more work—just to prove him wrong. I'd lost count of the number of times I'd thrown myself in the face of danger just to look Papa in the face and tell him, "L'ho fatto!" I did it! with a proud grin on my face.

And it was always worth it because the satisfaction derived from moments like those were more addictive than crack. Not like we did any of that shit. Papa only created pathways for transporting it and built some pretty big businesses alongside selling it. But he'd never waved the green flag to consume it. His men could, and his clients could, but if either Matteo or I tried, we'd be dead before we could blink.

I was going to give myself some accolades and say, with twenty-three years and counting, I was doing a pretty badass job convincing Papa that I was more than capable of handling my own business and running larger affairs. So, where did my boisterousness leave all the men?

In the fucking background, that's where.

Well, with clear exceptions made to my brother, growing up with them meant I'd seen them and their varieties—the big ones and small ones, the pure ones that always tried to maintain a piece of heart in their jobs, and the ruthless ones that ripped the hearts out with cynical smiles on their faces. I was a first-hand witness to their uniqueness and decided there was nothing special they had to offer. And they always proved me right.

Especially that stupid, fucking idiot, Ivan Yezhov.

My grip on the wheel grew tighter than I thought it possible to. If it were a person's neck, it'd have snapped in two already.

How dare he?

To me, his audacity was the height of disrespect, but I'd retaliated and, at the very least, humiliated him. That ought to keep him away from me for a while.

I let the wheel glide underneath my palms, forcing myself to relax while trying to

shove down thoughts of the Russian weasel. There were better things to fill my head with, like imagining the look on Papa's face when I told him I won the Long Beach Grand Prix, though word would have spread by now. And Matteo would seize the opportunity to remind me that I liked showing off.

Maybe I did, sometimes. Maybe I didn't like showing off. But the one thing I did like— love —was my family. We cared more about the pride of winning than the value of the win.

I cruised into a familiar street, not entirely surprised to find it deserted. I didn't bother with checking the time. We'd spent a lot of hours at the celebratory party, long enough to know when the midnight breeze seduced my hair and enough to feel the sting at the back of my eyes despite how much fun I was having—indicators of weariness and the urgent need to crash on my bed for a long, well-deserved sleep.

In the midst of stifling a yawn, a flash on the side mirror caught my attention. It was dark, and the car trailing mine with dimmed headlights blended with the night. Making out the model or any distinctive features proved impossible, but nothing ever hindered me. I was going to find out who the driver was sooner than later.

I accelerated slightly, and my engine responded eagerly. The black car kept pace, maintaining a constant distance, and I found its persistence suspicious— familiar , like the echo of someone's skills I was well acquainted with.

To confirm my suspicions, I was willing to take extra steps. We approached a sharp curve, and I slowed down. True to my guts, my follower did the same.

I wasn't going to lie; this driver was good, mimicking my moves and playing a game of being hidden in plain sight.

Too bad this mystery person was going to have a serious run for my money if he

thought he knew all the cards up my sleeve in this cat-and-mouse chase.

Before he could see it coming, I slammed hard on the brakes, cutting the air with the shrill sound of screeching tires. In the process, I almost flew off my car seat.

Good thing I wore a seatbelt.

The sudden silence in the car was interrupted by rapid thumps of my heart beating in my chest. I felt my ribs expand and the hot air burn in my lungs.

I gripped the wheel, tightened the seat belt, and stared out the window.

Chaotic strategy, but my plan worked.

My tailer pulled up beside me, and red-hot fury blinded me like a punch to the gut when I got a good look at him. I knew those moves were familiar and oddly suspicious, and when the windows rolled down, I put on my best poker face.

“Stalking me now, Ivan? Or you just can’t find your way home?”

His eyes flashed, and his fingers tightened on the wheel. If the anger radiating off him could tick off a bomb, maybe we’d have both been incinerated. “You’ll be the one wishing you could find your way home by the time I’m done with you.”

Yeah, right. No one else had ever given such feeble threats. I shuddered. “I’m so scared.”

Raising a finger, I flipped him off and floored the gas, plunging deeper into the road with reckless speed. If I could beat him once, I could certainly beat him again. Ivan was good but would probably never be good enough to match me.

Definitely petty and degrading of me to think that way, but, as always, I only had him and the rest of his bloodline to blame. To me, nothing good ever came out of those bloody Russians and associating with them.

I was down the road, already shifting gears to plunge deeper into the darkness, when I noticed there were no flashing headlights behind me. I stole a quick peek at the rearview mirror. Ivan was hesitating, and before I could figure out why, a black Tundra literally emerged from out of the shadows, causing a ghastly blockage on my path.

Shit.

I pumped the brakes, almost hyperventilating when my hood jerked up on the stranger's bumper. I tried to catch my breath, watching quietly as burly tattooed men dressed in black jackets hopped down from the car with guns. Huge and broad men with hard, unrelenting eyes.

Russians.

Poor imitations of Men in Black , if you asked me. One by one, they formed a wide circle around my car and aimed their guns high enough to tell me they weren't playing and meant business.

A set-up and an ambush. Perfectly thought out and crafted, and surprise, surprise: Ivan Yezhov was the mastermind.

He stepped out of his car and strutted with raised broad shoulders into my headlights. Standing at the forefront with one hand on his hip, his men lined up behind him.

Maybe I'd underestimated the weasel. I had to give it to him; this plot was well-played, and I didn't see it coming.

I stuck my head out through the window. “I told you already, I’m done giving autographs. Go home, loser.”

The irritation on his face formed a deeper scowl. “Get out of the fucking car, Leo. Unless you’re a coward.”

Coward?

Did he just insinuate that I was a coward?

I grinded my teeth hard, struggling to keep calm. He had the nerve to stand there and think he could order me around.

I pushed my door open, marching up to him with my hands stretched out, heading directly for his chest. I pushed him. He didn’t stagger.

“Coward? Pfft. If anyone’s the coward here, it’s you. You’re the one chasing girls after midnight.”

Ivan’s eyes hardened. The intensity was new and foreign, like the awakening of a greater, darker force from within.

“What you did back there was not funny, and that’s putting it lightly. You owe me an apology.”

Was he serious right now?

“An apology? For telling you the truth?” I scoffed. “It’s not my fault you live a miserable life under the shadow of everyone else above you, Ivan. Get that through your fucking head. Now, tell your ladies to move their toys out of my way and go home. That’s a warning, Yezhov.”

He raised a brow at my audacity, eyeing my hands that hit his chest, and I should have found it strange that he remained calm.

“Still keeping the sharp tongue, I see.”

I started to say something, but a loud shout of Russian in the air, like an angry war cry, and a sudden blow to the side of my head knocked me off balance.

Where the fuck did that even come from?

Sharp pain rippled from my skull to my neck and...all over. My hand flew to the side of my head, cradling my crown while I fought the stars dotting my vision.

“Fuck—Son of a....” I heard myself cursing despite the high-pitched ringing in my ears.

I was swaying, grasping at thin air to keep myself from falling. But I’d be damned if Ivan thought he was getting me tied up and bundled that easily.

Blindly, without precision, I clenched my fist and swung what should have been a clean hook at a blurry image of Ivan. He ducked, and there came another blow to my head.

This time, I felt myself fall to the ground, scraping my elbows and palms while at it. The surface wounds stung, but not as much as my pride, knowing I was literally on the ground before these filthy Russian weasels.

Ivan wasn’t punching. Apparently, one of his men was more than eager to do the job for him, and I’d been too engrossed in rubbing shit on his ego to notice them come up from behind me.

Angry tears burned at the back of my eyes; my head pounded crazy like a jackhammer had done a number on my skull.

Hands pressed to the cool asphalt, I summoned inner strength and tried to get up.

That effort earned me a solid kick to the stomach that sent me rolling over to my side while spitting up red.

I couldn't see him clearly, but the woody scent of his cologne wafted through the air when he crouched closer to me. I felt his warm breath on my neck and his fingers in my hair.

“An apology, Leo.”

I coughed, spat up more blood, and allowed my head to drop with resignation.

“Fuck you, Ivan.”

He sighed. “So be it.”

A heavy cloth was pressed against my nose, and a hazy spell dragged me down faster than I could conjure any thought. The stars multiplied, and my vision turned bleak and darker than the night's sky.

There was no use struggling.

Even as a champion, I knew when to accept defeat.

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Where I came from, we were in the business of calling a spade a spade; operate with things as they are, not the way you want them to seem. For years, that tactic worked effectively. That was why, with Enzo's daughter, I had every intention of applying for the same.

Ivan's problem was that he underestimated the girl, and that was one mistake I wasn't going to make.

"You're done."

His hand covered the brown envelope I'd slapped on his chest, and confused grey eyes met mine halfway down the stairs. Brows drawn, Ivan raised the package in the air. "What's this?"

"What do you think it is?"

"Money?"

I lifted a brow. "Then?"

He was questioning the reason for the money, especially when his eagerness to follow me down the rest of the stairs and into the dark space to visit our beloved prisoner was as clear as day.

"Money for what, Rafa?"

I didn't answer him. I turned back around to continue down the stairs, and when he

followed, I paused. “Jesus. Do I have to explain everything to you, kid?”

“Silence is an explanation?” I almost laughed. His response was a very Ivan-like thing to say. “I’ll take that as a no and still ask again anyway. Money for—”

“Your little beef with the girl ends here, Ivan. Right here on this step.” I didn’t let him finish. If he wanted me to spell it out, then I was going to spell it out. “Take the money as whatever you want to take it for: ticket to see the northern lights, one night at a fancy restaurant, spend it on one of your trulls, get a new toy...whatever. You’re out, and I’m taking over.”

When he nodded, I already knew he understood. Ivan wasn’t going to argue with me. Not because he couldn’t but because he knew the money wasn’t the only thing I’d take back from him if he dared counter my orders. The kid’s fear of me surpassed any sliver of respect he thought he had for me.

“Message received.” He didn’t like it, but he was going to leave anyway.

I watched him ascend back up the stairs and didn’t move an inch until his shoulders disappeared from the door frame.

Then I fished the blade from my pocket and went down as quietly as I could.

I dragged a hand against the wall, searched, and stopped after I found what I was looking for. I flicked on the switch and soaked myself in the satisfaction of seeing her rattle when her eyes met mine.

Sitting there, she looked small and fragile—nothing like the Viper that plagued my cousin and my mind. She didn’t look like much, like a girl that could outsmart grown

combat-trained men or skilled drivers. But that was just it about this one.

She blinked, initially disoriented, and after a moment of struggling with the ropes binding her securely to the iron chair, her eyes grew wide, and her jaw dropped.

First, I saw raw fear swimming in her hazel eyes before she clamped down, shielding herself with the familiar brave facade I recognized.

I stood close enough, blocking the single white light hanging from the ceiling above our heads. She had to tilt her head back for a better view. Her full lips twitched, but her eyes held disdain.

“If it isn’t the devil himself? The almighty Rafayel Yezhov.”

My mouth curved upward, and I couldn’t even pretend that I wasn’t enjoying every second of this moment. Ivan only took the version I’d forced on him but didn’t know that money was a small reward for a job well done. Comical how his pettiness had resulted in a strategic advantage.

My eyes raked down her body, greedily drinking in every detail, from the purple and black patch on the right half of her face, past the nasty cut on the swell of her lips, to her heaving bosom. Even though she looked like she’d gotten the crap beaten out of her, there was no denying the unexplainable thrill that took laps in my chest at the thought of sharing the same breathing space with her again.

“We meet again, Daddy’s princess.”

She flashed a phony smile, evoking pure laughter from me.

Leonora Colombo was unlike any woman I’d ever met. Beautiful wasn’t the word to describe her. Gorgeous seemed profoundly underrated. I wasn’t sure what it was or

why I was unable to place a finger on it, but this Italian princess intrigued me.

She'd done so from the first moment I'd set my eyes on her. Two years ago, when she interfered in my brother's business by helping his wife escape. She was stubborn. Perhaps the first woman I'd seen who refused to cower in Timur's presence. Her audacity had fascinated me, sparked a bit of interest, and riled me up enough to want to slice her throat and tongue with a knife.

Who knew? Today might just be her lucky day.

She arched her back and shifted her legs forward, slouching against the chair to appear comfortable—more in charge. “Let me guess, this was the plan, wasn't it? You couldn't get the job done, so you sent the other one to do it for you? I didn't think you'd bother.”

“The other one, eh?” No wonder Ivan wanted her piece of meat. “I see you're as spirited as ever.”

She swished her head to the side, readjusting her hair. It had grown a few inches longer than it was the last time I saw her—more shiny and brown. More feminine.

More pretty.

Those extra details shouldn't have concerned me. Like the mole on the right corner below her lip or the frequent scrunch between her brows, indicating how much she disapproved of being detained by me. She was a woman and should have been just another woman to me. Another pretty thing with beautiful eyes and something tasty beneath the skirt, or in her case, black leggings.

But this one was clearly different, more feisty, extremely insufferable, and it was inevitable.... I was still calling spades, spades—she intrigued me.

“I heard you won the championship.”

She nibbled on the inside of her cheek and tapped her feet, obviously distracted by more thoughts in her mind than the conversation we were having.

“What a surprise there. I wonder how the news got to you.”

“Go figure, Daddy’s princess. You’re famous now. That means you’re on the news.”

Her laughter was short and empty, and the look in her eyes was glacial when they met mine. “Silly me. For a minute there, I thought your idiot messenger was a big blabbermouth. My apologies, then, and thank you for the hearty congratulations. Need an autograph? I’m done for the day, but I can make an exception for a huge fan.”

“Fuck you and your autograph, sweetheart,” I clarified.

Like a loosely worn cloth over a bleak painting, the facade slipped off, and she surprised me by appearing more tired than apprehensive.

“Then what? What, Rafayel Yezhov? Why the fuck am I here? What do you plan on doing to me if you didn’t, I don’t know, drag me in to shower praises on me like a doting fan?”

Finally, she was slowly bringing out the Leo I wanted to see—the tough one with a sharp mouth who dealt with no-nonsense. The one that rammed insults at Ivan hard enough to shatter his walls of nonchalance and spark the Yezhov blood running through his veins. The same peevish, ill-tempered bitch that broke her father from his cell and eternally planted herself in my memory when she smiled up at the CCTV cam.

I dropped to my haunches and grabbed her chin roughly enough to leave some pink imprints for temporary remembrance.

My speed scared her, rendered her stiff and cautious in my grasp.

“Me? You should know, I didn’t do anything. Turns out, fate is on my side. You stepped on my cousin’s toes—well, more like stabbed his pride in the fucking chest with your razor-sharp mouth, and he didn’t like it. At all.”

Her brows dipped, and she eyed the glinting silver knife in my other hand. “So, you’re saying Ivan grew the balls to kidnap me without your help?”

“Exactly what I’m saying. He wanted to teach you one or two brutal lessons when he dragged you in. On a normal day, I wouldn’t care about how he’d like to play with you, but this time, the odds rolled in my favor. I’ll be kind enough not to hurt you, though.”

She didn’t look like she believed me, and I didn’t want to believe me, either. But I did. I knew, if she behaved and I got what I wanted out of this arrangement, I’d keep to my word and spare her.

Softly, I ran my thumb across her jaw and stuck the tip of the blade under her chin.

She gasped, and her head jerked backward. I thought I heard her hold her breath.

Her skin was soft—bruised but soft—and I allowed my fingers to move with a mind of their own to run a little longer, up the curve of her throat, and brush past her lips. She winced but didn’t move.

I eyed her mouth, fighting the irrational desire to feel them against my finger again. Instead, I fixed my digits at the back of her neck and let them thread lightly into her

hair.

Did I say anything about being a man of reasonable integrity? If yes, then honesty was also in the mix.

I edged closer, close enough to watch the flecks in her eyes grow wider and darker, when I whispered in Russian , “You are beautiful, Leonya.”

Her shock surprised me because it meant she understood me. I didn’t know how much Russian she knew, but I was convinced she heard my compliment.

She probably didn’t know I’d quickly figured it out, and I wasn’t willing to blow her cover. For now.

I needed a distraction for both our sakes, and I remembered I had my fingers in her hair. When I leaned forward, her eyes dropped to my mouth.

Our breaths lingered in the same space, and my mouth burned from the intensity of her stare. Until the loud shink of silver slicing through something caught her attention.

I retracted and rose to my feet like I’d been burned, and her attention diverted to the full strands of brown hair in my hand. Anger flashed over her face when she realized what I’d done, and she gnashed her teeth.

“What the—”

I didn’t allow her to finish. I shut down the rest of her words with a victorious, lopsided grin. Enzo was going to get it as proof that we had his daughter. Colombo was one of the most cold-blooded bastards on the planet, but every single one in the Bratva, and other syndicates, from the Irish to the fucking Armenians, knew he had a

soft spot reserved for his blood.

She and her fucking brother were his Achilles heel. And now, it was her in exchange for Jabril.

If he didn't surrender, we both knew what would happen.

"Now, it definitely smells like rats and weasels in here."

I looked around. "Rats and weasels? Funny, I thought I sent one of my men down here to clean up the place. You know, make it nice and cozy for you, our special guest."

"Really? No one's been down here."

"Ah..." I tapped my chin, folded one arm across my chest, and shook my head. "Must have been another mistaken order for another room. I'll send someone down here to take care of you as soon as I'm able to send your father this gift."

Something cold and hard fled past her eyes, and she tilted back so I could catch the slant curve of her lips. "I should have known that's what was in it for you."

What the hell was she blabbing about?

The smile on her face baited me, reeling me in to dive in and discover what dirty little secret she wanted me to uncover.

I should have legged it to the door and walked away without prying to save myself the trouble of dealing with the bitter princess.

But I'd touched her, gotten close enough to catch the peculiar swirl of green mixed in

the depth of hazel, and knew what texture her lips were beneath my fingers. I'd broken my unspoken and unwritten rules to keep my distance from the tempting Italian belle.

Surely, taking a dive to uncover a dirty secret was nothing.

“What the fuck are you on about?”

Her smile brightened somewhat with more darkness, and the spark in her eyes had a wicked glint. “J.E. Papa stole him from you, did he not?”

The humor was gone, and a scowl settled on my lips while I waited for her to confirm the nagging thought inside my head. I flicked the blade and slid it into its sheath.

“And you know this because?”

“Because...” the girl recreated her two-year-old CCTV smile, and I knew what hung on the tip of that tongue of hers before she concluded it, “it was my idea.”

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:06 pm

Now that Rafayel was gone, I released the most satisfying scream of frustration I'd ever mustered. After my confession, it should have been satisfying watching him seethe and stomp off with red ears and a clamped jaw. And it was a miracle when steam didn't blow out his ears.

We both knew I wasn't bluffing. I'd not only planted the seed in Papa's mind about upsetting the Russians, but I also went ahead and mapped out the entire frigging blueprints—every single significant detail, down to the men who'd bust into the secret location to force Jabril into switching sides after he saw incriminating photos of him in several hotel rooms with different women. The death of the Russian soldier was the one thing we hadn't accounted for.

But it had happened, and there was nothing to do about it except move on and keep our eyes on the goal.

Jabril possessed wealth and sat in the seat of power in one of the world's largest and top corporate ventures. His net worth cost more than cash cows. But he was a bloody unfaithful pig and didn't want the world, including his wife and children, to know how big of a scumbag he truly was. He knew, as well as we did, that such scandal would cause a serious crash and burn of everything he'd spent years of investments on.

We had him hooked and left him no option but to accept our proposal. It was a good ploy. A solid one. Jabril couldn't say no. And while we wondered how the Russians hadn't gotten their hands on that information, I chalked it up to them never having a reason to conduct a deeper background investigation on their star partner.

That was until now, probably.

Now, they were getting him back effortlessly, or rather, more clearly, Rafayel was getting him back without a sweat.

My hours of research and due diligence before executing a perfectly crafted plan to steal the multi-million-dollar client from under their noses were about to be brought to naught because the sly, conniving asshole knew how to deal his cards like a pro.

I screamed again, this time with less concern for whose ears I upset outside those doors. They could all grumble from discomfort, for all I cared.

Anger burned in my core, and I acknowledged the tension rolling off my shoulders when I relaxed.

Raw anguish and maddening anger echoed off the walls and filled the silence in the empty room.

God, how did I let myself get blindsided?

How and why did I not see this coming somehow?

It didn't matter. I'd learned my lesson, even if I'd had to learn it the hard way. This situation that occurred with Ivan marked the last time I was ever underestimating anyone ever again, even if they looked like they couldn't hurt a frigging fly.

Heaving, I glared at the ropes keeping me fastened to the chair like they were another source of my problem. Somehow, I had to admit, they were. I couldn't entirely take the blame for being unable to escape sooner when the ropes felt as thick as boulders.

Giving up, I threw my head back, redirecting my pent-up annoyance at the white bulb

above my head. Watching a moth dance around the flickering light caused a resurfacing of the moment Rafayel stood in this room, almost between my legs.

If I set my ego aside and inhaled long enough, traces of his distinct cologne lingered in the air, leaving a scent that was extremely far from rats and weasels. The cocky bastard. I had to admit, the Russian was too bloody beautiful and intelligent for his own good. It made being pissed at him a challenge.

Damn him!

Damn all of him!

Starting from those arctic eyes of his, that dark landscape that sucked you in, held you bound, and rummaged through the depths of your soul until it left you bare and empty. His sleek brown hair, Armani suits, and bloody expensive Richard Mille watches painted the charade of a calm and collected affluent gentleman, which he was absolutely not. Well, not the wealthy part. That part, he was—very filthy rich.

I knew better than anyone else the monster that lurked behind his rational and sensible get-up. When I looked past the hard jawline and enticing lips and, yes...that frigging diagonal scar running across his left eyebrow that caused my fingers to twitch, I remembered the man I almost ran over two years ago.

I remembered the crazed look in his eyes as he stood in the middle of the road, poised with one hand tucked into his pocket and the other aiming a gun straight at my car.

I remembered the man who pulled the trigger without hesitation, having every intention of finishing us off that night.

So, tonight, when he came close enough to see the worry in my eyes, filling my senses with his heavy, manly scent as he peered deep into my soul while caressing

my scalp with calloused fingers, I forced myself to ignore the burning sensation that rippled on my skin and rose to my cheeks—an effect of being close to him.

And when he pulled back with a handful of my hair, a warning gift to Papa, reality came into focus, reminding me once again that his appearance was certainly an icon of deceptiveness.

I wanted to knee him in the nuts and whack my head forward to knock him senseless. Sure, he definitely had his charm working for him with other women, and that wasn't taking a wild guess. In this life, men like him had women crawling on their knees between their legs without even lifting a finger. The hussies would clamor for his attention, beg for his touch, smile when he treated them like shit, and crown their inanity with a Thank You if he had to cut off part of their hair.

But not me. I wasn't a part of that crowd of admirers and never would be. Given a chance, I knew I'd show him just how appreciative I was of his grand gesture of keeping me locked in here.

Again, I vented my anger on the thick ropes, grunting hard as I tried to lift myself off the chair. The stupid things wouldn't budge. God! If I could just....

If I could just what? Lift myself and hopefully smash an iron chair against the wall, then I'd set myself free?

Pfft.

Sure.

Super brilliant, Leo.

That had to be the stupidest plan I had ever come up with in my life.

With nothing else to do but hope Papa was able to locate me before he received Rafayel's present, I slewed a string of curses at every creature that could hear me within and outside those walls before biting back hot, stinging tears as I shut my eyes.

I didn't know how long I was out, but a rattle of keys and the sound of the door unclicking jolted me awake from a very uncomfortable sleep. Napping with your head hanging off one side of an iron chair was the worst way to take a rest.

I flexed my shoulders and rolled my neck when heavy footsteps approached. At first, I thought it was the crazy Russian with a cynical smile and shiny businessman shoes. Maybe he'd forgotten to make my life more miserable with taunting remarks. But when this stranger in a black leather jacket and pants stepped under the light, I frowned deeper at the unfamiliar grin on his face.

"Pleased to make your acquaintance, champion of the Long Beach Grand Prix. You look a lot smaller in person, though."

And the other one said I was on the news. There was no doubt that Ivan blabbed about our encounter with the entire Russian Mafia.

"We haven't met."

He dropped to his haunches, pointing upward at me with a silver blade similar to Rafayel's, while he grabbed one of the ropes in the bounded bunch. Somehow, his black eyes appeared darker under the light.

"We're meeting now. That should count."

I eyed him and his combat boots suspiciously, narrowing my gaze at the knife in his

hand. “And you are?”

I was expecting something dramatic like, “ The man sent to kill you ,” but a cryptic scoff came before he grunted his name when he slid the blade under the rope and started cutting through.

“Tikhon.”

Tikhon. Big guy, broad chest and shoulders, with an easy laugh and murderous eyes, who somehow wasn't sent to kill me in cold blood but, rather, set me free from Rafayel's hold. There had to be an explanation.

He was too comfortable in his own skin, doing what he was doing, to be an inside man for Papa. He was handsome and appeared normal and level-headed. The only indicator that this man was Russian was his thick accent and striking hard features. The air around him was unexpectedly light and not as enigmatic as his leader's. He seemed like a fair fighter and honest man, the type who would deal you only what you deserved.

But it didn't end there.

As he grabbed another rope to slice, I saw the tattoos inked across prominent scars on his fingers and wrist, Russian alphabets that I couldn't make sense of. He was no doubt a gallant soldier. And if my guess was right, judging by the keys he held to this room, I'd say he was next in command after Rafayel. Only the most trusted had keys to the rooms where prisoners were kept

And that meant this big guy wasn't an ordinary person like his guise made him out to be. I knew from experience that anyone who worked with the head of an outfit was required to be equally as smart, heartless, and ruthless as they were.

One slip up with this man, and that knife would find solace in my throat.

But it wasn't going to keep me from asking. "I don't want to presume you're here for an autograph."

"Wouldn't that spike up your ego?" He laughed at his own joke and started ripping the shredded ropes with his bare hands. "You'd leave here with your head bigger than it already is."

"But not more inflated than yours."

He chuckled and muttered something under his breath in a rushed string of Russian. It was basic enough for me to catch on, but he didn't need to know that.

"No wonder he didn't let Ivan kill you."

According to the big guy, Rafayel wanted me around for sport. He enjoyed riling me up and watching me feel frustrated at my helplessness. How did that make me feel?

Like I should knee the smirking man in the nuts, too.

Frigging Russians.

Listening to Tikhon speak to himself made me remember another thing I wished I didn't. Rafayel's compliment, when he called me beautiful. He probably didn't know that I understood him. His face gave nothing away, not before dropping the bomb or afterward.

I wasn't sure if he'd said it for the mere sport of evoking a reaction from me or if he'd said it because he really meant it. With the man, you could never tell.

I caught myself before I envisioned his eyes again or the warmth of his body when he came close to me.

What the hell?

Why did it even matter what his motives were?

This man was snapping my ropes with his bare hands, obviously setting me free, and that was more important than musing over something undeniably stupid and impossible.

“Am I being led somewhere else?”

Rafayel did say he was going to send someone down to make me more comfortable, but I was being insulting when I started the rats and weasels taunt, and I could have sworn he was throwing his sarcasm right back with sickening content.

Tikhon stepped back, giving me some space to stretch my legs out. I stretched my hands above my head, feeling the air brush my bare stomach. Being a captive in a Russian underground prison didn't come with privileges attached, like having a bath or breakfast in bed. That left me in the same clothes I'd used to race on the track. And I was certain I had the odor of a skunk by now.

Tikhon regarded me with a hint of amusement, his eyes not once straying away from my face. Strange that he appeared to have his shit together.

He bobbed his head toward the door. “Not being led somewhere. You're free to go. Your father did as he was told.”

Shit.

We'd lost Jabril.

"How long?"

Tikhon knew what I was asking. How long did it take to break my papa? How long did it take before he made the decision to give up his pride?

I knew the answer before the big guy responded.

"One hour after he received the package, though it left us three hours ago."

I couldn't say I was completely sad. For a girl like me, having the reassurance of Papa's love was worth more than a multimillion-dollar client. Enzo Colombo didn't have a lot of love to give, but he made exceptions where Matteo and I were concerned.

What pissed me off was Rafayel's triumph, knowing he was getting off on his victory. He'd predicted right: Send hair samples to the doting father, and he'd do whatever it took to let his little girl go.

Without a word, I let Tikhon lead the way.

Rafayel might have won today, but his luck was going to run out soon enough.

The iron gates automatically rolled back, and my Audi climbed up the winding gravel driveway while the Mediterranean house came up into view. As always, the exterior was brightly lit, making the vibrant bougainvillea by the wall appear like an artificial attachment.

A glimpse of the sturdy structure and flowing fountain at the center brought back the nostalgia, jogging memories of my younger days when Matteo and I would ride our bikes down the driveway and up again without a care in the world. When life was simple, and we had no knowledge of the illegal activities our father conducted behind closed doors.

At that time, it was just us, existing in a beautiful world with child-like hearts and naive expectations of a future that could've as well been castles built in the air.

I killed the engine, and the stiletto heels of my knee-high cuffed boots dug through the stony ground as I walked up to the entrance.

A few of Papa's men were already waiting for me.

"Benvenuta." They acknowledged with curt nods, and I did a doubletake.

Most of them were unfamiliar and much younger. And I caught a pair of eyes wandering down the length of my body, lingering on the skintight burgundy jumpsuit and down the curve of my ass.

I raised a brow. "Eyes up here, fesso. " Silly.

He uncomfortably looked away, and the one beside him with green eyes and unruly hair snickered at his embarrassment.

Attractive young men with fresh haircuts, crisp white button-ups, and inexperienced eyes. New recruits, I supposed. If they were waiting outside, it meant Papa wanted them to get acquainted.

Three weeks ago, after the Russians graciously released me, I'd gone back to my apartment to cool off and snuck time in with Gavin for more practice.

Maybe it was the shitty experience with Ivan and his household, but I had never felt more exhilarated and focused on the track. With more practice racing under my belt than ever before, I dedicated those weeks to honing my skills and, with Gavin's encouragement, built a higher level of confidence that allowed me to push myself to new limits. Every lap, every turn, and every straightaway had felt more intuitive, more precise.

I pushed hard, relearned and mastered the subtleties of braking, acceleration, and cornering, and my instincts had become razor-sharp. There was something about the rush of adrenaline that was addictive, and every time I strapped in my seat belt, it felt like I was in my element, completely at one with the track.

The fun lasted until it didn't, and I had to emerge from the four walls of my apartment to ride to the tunes of reality. Papa hadn't set eyes on me for weeks, and one missed call and three vague messages from him said my presence in the house was due.

I mustered a small smile at the men and pushed the door open, almost bumping into Marco waiting in the foyer. Marco was Papa's second—the only one who could attempt to speak when my father ordered everyone to be silent.

He'd been by Papa's side for as long as I could remember—fought by his side, endured the rocky waves that hit hard every once in a while.

Marco was insanely skilled and a trained boxer, too. I'd watched him knock out three men in a ring in less than ten minutes. He was brawn and brains, and it was one reason Papa liked having him around.

To top it off, if loyalty was a person, it was Marco.

Dark eyes regarded me, with a frown etched on his face and his bushy eyebrows

drawn when he folded his arms across his chest.

“Leo.”

I had to crane my head backward to meet his gaze.

Marco was tall, with broad shoulders and chestnut brown hair that would have run down the length of his back for ages if he hadn’t chopped off a bulk of the silky mane about a year ago.

“Marco.”

He cursed between his teeth and rubbed the Saint Claire of Assisi tattoo on his neck. I’d known Marco for nothing short of a decade but still had no clue what that tattoo meant to him or why he always reached for it when he was stressed.

“Tuo padre è malato.”

Your father is sick.

Unlike Tikhon, Marco made small talk, smiled less, and went straight to business without any intention of wasting time. But now, I wished he’d beat around the bush a little before dealing the blow.

The weight of his words caused a wedge between my chest, and somehow, the air suddenly pricked like needles as it flowed in and out of my lungs.

“And Matteo? Does he know?”

Marco shook his head. And I wasn’t going to tell my brother, not until anything was confirmed.

I gave nothing away, but Marco knew me well enough to know the turmoil crashing in my head like a rollercoaster ride breaking down, with all the pieces falling out and the riders shrieking hysterically.

This should've flown above the radar. It shouldn't have been a big deal.

But it was, and seeing Marco's usual composure slowly faltering proved the same thought.

"How long?" I seemed to be asking that a lot lately.

Marco's lips tightened. "Before your competition, which, by the way...congratulations."

"Grazie. How bad is it?"

Marco dragged a hand down his face. "Santiago says it could get worse."

In simple English, it meant our family doctor was preparing us for the prospect of Papa's illness getting worse. But I needed Marco to be clear. He didn't mince words. If he was doing so now....

"Don't fucking baby me right now, Marco."

"Alright. The Don's dying."

That roller coaster spinning in my head turned into a nightmarish chaos.

Enzo Colombo was as strong as an ox, probably the strongest man I knew on the planet. He didn't get sick. In his own words, getting sick was for weaklings, and Papa didn't have time to accommodate anyone or anything that would drag his feet for

more than seventy-two hours. So, this was bad. Terribly bad.

Before my competition.... How the hell had he been able to keep it from me that long?

Or maybe I wasn't paying close enough attention. I'd had my head wrapped around the race, the track, and the Russian's bullshit for so long that I couldn't think of anything else.

"He's upstairs. You should go see him."

Marco didn't have to tell me twice. I was in Papa's room before he could blink. The room was just as organized as I remembered, but it had more smells of antiseptic and antibiotics than I was used to. More than I'd like to grow accustomed to.

"Principessa."

Papa's stubborn smile met me across the room, and he opened his arms when I perched at the edge of the bed. I fell into his arms, breathing in his familiar pinewood scent while he kissed my hair. Sue me, I was a daddy's girl.

"Principessa." He stroked my chin when I pulled back to stare at him. The wrinkles around his brown eyes were deeper, and his once jet-black hair was now a field of more silver strands than black.

He looked older, fragile, and less intimidating than I'd known him to be.

Tears burned behind my eyes. The powerful Enzo Colombo, the tough one, the ruthless one who knew fifty different ways to cut a man's blood supply with his bare hands, was now bedridden.

“Leonora!” His hiss was a warning, and the glare directed at me was a reminder that he didn’t tolerate weakness.

“I’m not crying,” I reassured him with a smile.

He didn’t look like he believed it, but the crinkles around his eyes softened, and he took my hand in his. “I heard you burned rubber into their asses and had Ivan Yezhov bitching about it.”

His way of telling me he was proud of my win.

I nodded, and he choked up on a fit of deep-throated coughs.

Watching him rumble, grunt, and grasp on heaves of air was frightening, but I maintained my cool, patiently waiting for him to relax.

“That’s my girl.”

When he patted the back of my hand and averted his gaze, I knew that something was wrong. It wasn’t the sickness; it was something else. Something that had his eyes shifting with worry and his smile wobbling after every ten seconds.

“Papa.”

“Principessa.”

“What’s wrong?”

He started to deny it, but I gave him a look he would have given me to warn me about lying to him. He’d trained me well and hard enough to let me know when I was on to something. And now, I was.

Swearing under his breath, he diverted his attention to the ceiling but kept his hands on mine. “Nothing gets past you, my girl. I like that. Sharp, as always. Don’t stop; stay on your toes at all times. Keep your focus. Eyes and ears open.”

He was breathing heavily, taking in oxygen one breath at a time. He was stalling, and the more he did, the more I knew I wasn’t going to like what he was going to say.

“Papa....”

“Leo.” His calling me by my name meant this was fucking serious. Like hell-about-to-rain-down-on-us serious. I eliminated the possibility that this discussion was about losing Jabril. He didn’t give two fucks about the man if he easily let him go.

So, I waited as silently as I could as he coughed his heart out before continuing.

“The Rossis are on our tail again.”

Awesome. Just what we needed—those frigging rebels trying to overthrow Papa. Luca Rossi and his stupid minions.

They’d been at it for a while, planting seeds and making marks to try and cause an in-house division between the Italians. More than once, we put them down and always beat the shit out of them. To us, they weren’t big enough to pose a problem. At least, that was what we thought until their resistance added more members and waxed stronger.

“You’re saying we can’t just shake them off our tails then.”

His jaw flexed, and an emotion I’d never seen in my father’s eyes flickered briefly. Pain. Was it pain from the sickness or something else?

Did I really want to know?

Stubborn me, I did.

“I’m saying we’re crumbling, Leo.”

We’re crumbling.

Crumbling how?

Surely, he didn’t mean—

“Papa, you’re not saying—”

He didn’t let me finish. When he looked at me, his eyes spoke louder volumes than his words. I didn’t want to believe it, but Papa didn’t joke about these things. He didn’t joke about a life he’d thrown his entire being into, a life he’d tirelessly labored to build for years.

“It is what it is, my girl,” he said in Italian. His fingers twitched, and I knew the state of things had got to him. How bad it was, I didn’t know.

“Our powers are waning. We’re growing weak. Our people are talking.”

Growing weak? Us?

“Then let them fucking talk because it’s not true!”

“Leo.”

It was the last warning he was going to give to get my shit together and screw my

head on my neck properly. What Papa needed now was a solution, something logical that would get us out of whatever ditch we'd somehow stumbled into.

But the look Papa pinned me with gave me the feeling a plan was already underway, cooked and ready to be served. And that gut feeling that never failed me told me I wasn't going to like this plan of his.

"Papa, what we need now is for you to recover quickly, get back in that office, and run those shithead Rossis into the dirt where they belong."

Papa's voice was firm, and briefly, that no-nonsense aura was back. He might have been fragile in appearance but still agile at heart. "What we need now is an alliance—"

It was coming, that part I was sure I didn't want to fucking hear.

"We need the Russians."

"You've got to be fucking kidding me! No, Papa. Fuck, NO!" I was on my feet, pacing the room faster than Usain fucking Bolt. "We are not groveling before those bloody Russian bastards. We can handle this. We can—"

"Leonora Colombo, you will watch your tone...." When he broke into a deadly round of spitting coughs, the ache in my chest intensified, and I slowed down my pace, going to his side again.

"Papa, please, reconsider...."

He shook his head, sucking in a deep breath to steady himself. "You're smarter than this, principessa. There's no hiding it; you know they're the strongest syndicate besides us. An alliance with them guarantees that the Rossis won't stand a chance.

We need them, Leo. And I fucking need you. Get your head in the game. We are not, and I repeat...we are not going down like cowards.”

That was it.

No more counters, no other proposals to consider another way out.

Papa needed me, and in this world, his wish was final.

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:06 pm

Almost nothing surprised me.

News could piss me off, but it wouldn't surprise me. Maybe it was a thing that came with having to watch your back every single minute of every day when you were unfortunately cursed with a psychopathic father who was always on the loose. He'd never made it easy for us. But growing up around him long enough helped us to see his crazy tantrums coming.

You could tell me the Armenians sprang a surprise attack and raided a drop five minutes before schedule, and I wouldn't blink. Tell me the Chinese government created some new technology that was liable to wipe out the entire human race in nanoseconds, and I'd swing a glass of Vodka and wait for the explosion.

So, when Tikhon bounced into the living room with a fancy glittering black-and-gold invitation to dinner with Enzo Colombo's daughter, a surprise bomb detonated in my chest, and "What the fuck did you say?" was out faster from my mouth than I'd ever said anything in my entire life.

Tikhon laughed and joined me on the sofa. He dropped the invite on the center table, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees and fingers clasped together, scrutinizing it like something else lay inside.

"She smelled rats and weasels. I smell Italian fish."

Tikhon was struggling to keep the smile off his face but failed miserably. While he found the situation amusing, my brain was spinning in circles, trying to decrypt the hidden message.

He pointed at the card. “This shit is real.”

“Or not.” I picked up the card, inspected it, and gave up when all I saw were gold letters on glossy black paper.

Special VIP invitation.

To: Rafayel Yezhov

Dinner at Bella Italia. Time: 7 PM. Don’t be late.

I leaned back against the sofa with a scowl. She’d successfully surprised me once with this invitation. I wasn’t going to walk headfirst into another surprise.

“Doesn’t make sense.”

A snort from Tikhon made me wonder if we were on the same page. “Because it’s not possible to be invited to dinner by a hot lady. You get plenty of invites from different women. Why’s this any different?”

So, my most trusted had checked the girl out. She was a beauty—a pure one. And I knew she’d not only caught the big guy’s attention. It meant nothing and shouldn’t bother me. That’s what I kept trying to tell myself, at least, while I tried to focus on what her ulterior motive could be.

And did he ask why this was different?

I had to look him in the face to be sure I was talking to the same person I’d known for years. Apparently, the girl’s charm had done a number on him to make him spew a truckload of nonsense.

“We’re talking about Colombo’s daughter, the Italian princess with a fucking temper. In case you developed some form of amnesia these past few weeks, I’ll remind you: We nabbed her. Three weeks later, she wants to have dinner, and you’re asking why this is different?”

He sat up straighter and, for a second, made me believe he had his thoughts buried deep in logic. “You’re thinking she’d plan a dinner at Bella Italia— note: a densely populated rooftop five-star restaurant—just to poison you?”

God, what the fuck happened to him? Did she get him that hard?

The last thing I needed was for him—or anyone, for that matter—to act like my level of intelligence was drastically low. I wasn’t overreacting. With the Italian involved, it was perfectly normal to think this way.

“Don’t underestimate her.”

Tikhon held up his hands. “After having the pleasure of a one-on-one meeting, that’s definitely the last thing I’m doing. Have you given it a thought that she could be into you? Wouldn’t be the first time a woman’s hitting on you in broad daylight.”

Wouldn’t be the first time, but Leonora Colombo, into me?

It was my turn to laugh at his absurdity. “Sure, and I’m the first man that made the trip to the fucking moon. Get your head out of your ass and think with me.”

A dinner organized at a populated rooftop five-star restaurant didn’t debunk shit. The girl was dangerous, and I knew accepting this invitation was akin to playing with fucking fire.

And yet, I asked Tikhon to get my suit ready anyway.

I sipped my glass of Pinot Grigio. Vodka tasted better, but this was going to have to do for now. The crisp taste tried to calm my growing paranoia as I gazed out at the view of the city skyline.

Tikhon was right about the place. If there was something there, and it turned out that the girl was testing suggestive waters with me, then the restaurant was a perfect spot for an intimate evening.

Soft music floated through the air, and twinkling lights were strung up around the patio.

My head dipped for the hundredth time to the jade watch on my wrist, and I heard the sound of high heels clicking on the stone floor.

Our reserved table was close to the entrance for good measure. I'd been fixed on this goddamn chair for half an hour since 6:50 PM, and more than a dozen heels had threaded on the stone floor.

But this one was...somehow distinct. It forced my head up, causing a collision with a vision of loveliness in the dim light. The hands on the clock seemed to slow down.

Aw...shit.

Something shifted in my head, above and below.

Fuck.

For the first time in years, my head blanked, and I lost touch with my vocabulary.

I was officially fucked.

This was the first time I'd seen her look like this. Like anything but a daredevil she-man who didn't tolerate mediocrity and results below her standard.

Swishing her slender curvy hips towards my table was a fucking woman—a temptress on the loose to make all men bow to her feet and kiss her red-painted toenails. I didn't fancy a feet fetish, but the sight of hers peeking from her black pointy designer heels made my cock twitch and mouth water.

If I thought she was pretty before... fuck , pretty. She was so fucking gorgeous, so fucking sexy, my throat dried up from the insufferable heat, and I snatched the bottle off the table to refill my glass. Majorly to cool the fuck down.

Jesus.

Her shoulder-length dark hair cascaded down her back like a waterfall of night, and her warm smile when she saw me lit up the entire rooftop. Clearly phony, but...still.

Hazel eyes, the color of mocha, with flecks of golden brown, seemed to sparkle like sunlight filtering through a forest canopy.

It stunned me that I'd committed those eyes to memory, memorizing every detail. The color was rich and warm, like a perfectly brewed cup of coffee on a crisp autumn morning. The edges of her irises seemed to fade into a soft greenish gold, giving her eyes a mesmerizing depth and complexity.

Was I ever going to tire of admitting that Leonora Colombo was stunning, with porcelain skin and full lips that forced thoughts into my head? Plus, that fucking mole that somehow just heightened her uniqueness?

Was I ever going to tire?

I was an honest man, so...fuck no.

Her slender figure was accentuated by a fitted silk black dress that hugged her curves in all the right places and hung slavishly low to the dip above the curve of her ass. I could tell by the bare glimpses of her tiny waist on each side of the flimsy fabric.

As she approached, I could see the subtle sparkle of silver jewelry around her neck and wrists, adding a touch of elegance to her already radiant presence.

And when she sat down, the realization dawned that I wasn't the only man ogling the goddess. Almost every fucking living thing with a dick had their heated gaze trained on her like laser beams.

And when she pretended not to notice, fixing her gaze solely on me, I drank in all the attention like a thirsty motherfucker with an impressed grin.

Fuck. Me.

"Sorry, I'm late." Confident as always, she slid into the chair across from me.

I shook my head, still feeling a little dazed by the impact of her beauty. "I'm starting to think you're worth the wait."

Flirting. I was flirting. When was the last time I flirted with anyone? Since...that's right, high school.

She laughed, a throaty sound that did more harm to the strain between my legs than any good, and the whole reaction was confusing as shit and annoying.

I lifted the bottle and eyed her empty glass. “Care to start the night?”

Time was ticking, and that meant I had to coax her real agenda for this meeting out of her before my control slipped, and I ended up doing something we’d both regret.

When she piped up, I noticed a significant detail that wasn’t there before: the constant twitch of her brows like an appearing and disappearing frown and the shift in her eyes, both telltale signs of anxiety.

Avoiding my eyes, Leonora fingered the glinting rose gold infinity-set knuckle rings on her fingers, and I knew I was right. She was anxious but usually quiet.

My theory might have been spot on, after all. She’d organized this charade to dig her claws into me and commit murder and was now growing cold feet, trying to back out.

“Yes, please. I could use a drink.”

Or not.

Surreptitiously, I filled a glass and handed it to her, ignoring a strange zap that traveled like bolts when our fingertips brushed. For months, I hadn’t touched a woman, and venturing into celibacy wasn’t by choice. There was always something to take care of, something more important than chasing skirts.

Leonora was sipping slowly, calculatedly, and the suspense got me in a chokehold.

“So,” I started to say and gestured to the table. “This.”

“This,” she reechoed with that phony smile and returned her glass to the table.

Her attention was on me now, and I had every plan to milk it until I’d obtained every

piece of information I needed. The first thing in my rule book, if I had one, was: DO NOT FUCKING TRUST LEONORA COLOMBO.

“What is this?”

“I thought the invitation spelled dinner correctly. Unless the almighty one somehow missed that.”

My lips twitched, and I crossed my arms over my chest. The girl could have a thousand and one issues burdening her small, flawless shoulders; regardless, she’d still hold her head high and find a way to dash a quick taste of her feisty venom.

I liked it.

I liked

“Thank you for that silent suggestion.” I made sure to clarify. “As a matter of fact, I can read. My surprise is directed at the purpose of this dinner.”

A smile danced on her mouth, which was highlighted with bold lipstick, but she kept mute. Little sly bitch. She was enjoying every minute of this, watching me battle with angst as I tried to wrap my head around the reason we convened at this location tonight.

Tikhon positioned men in every corner, and surveillance was tight. Just in case.

“I stand to be corrected but you’re leaving thoughts in my head, Leonora,” I pressed, and I thought I saw a shudder roll over her shoulders.

She pressed her lips firmly. “Thoughts like?”

“You, shooting your shot like this. Makes me think you liked it when I had you bound on that chair. Is that it? You like being manhandled, and it turns you on? Makes your heart throb for the one who has you subdued?”

My fingernails dug into my palms, so deep I believed my skin would crack. Where all that bullshit came from, I didn’t know. My bait was supposed to be simple: a quick dip inside the sea and wait for her to latch on. But I’d gone ahead and spilled my guts, fogging my brain with imaginations of what it would be like— feel like— to have the Italian princess subdued and at my mercy, bound on my fucking bed....

Or maybe, over this goddamn table.

Christ.

“You’d like that, wouldn’t you?” Her eyes were teasing.

I nodded. “I would.”

I didn’t need her to play this game. I didn’t need her fanning this fire. “But that’s not why you’re here, is it?”

“It could be.” Beating about the bush, she was. But I wasn’t going to stop her. If she wanted to talk and spill her guts as well, I had no intention of stopping her. “Don’t dampen possibilities because we had a rough start. You’re a fine man.” Her eyes glazed over with an unreadable shield when she gave me a once-over. “A handsome man. Probably the most sought-after bachelor on the planet—”

Leonora was buttering too much. And she wasn’t the flattering type. Dead giveaway.

This dinner had an ulterior motive, and I swore that if she wanted to poison me, we were both dragging our souls to hell at the same time.

“—what if I am shooting my shot?”

“It’s a night you want, then? I have a reservation made at the Glacier.”

She choked on the rest of her words, eyes big and fingers frozen on the table. Her shock was quick. If I’d blinked, I’d have missed it. “Yeah...yeah, sure, we could—”

“You’re the worst actress I’ve ever seen.” I dropped my arms and made sure she saw the seriousness in my gaze. “Last chance to tell me what this is, Leonya.”

The act died, and the real Leo emerged from the rubble of pretense. One exhale was all it took to wipe the anxiety off her face.

“A proposal, Rafayel.”

“Marriage?”

“Business.” Steeled eyes held mine from across the table. “I don’t like it, but it is what it is.”

And all the heat and burning flew off the rooftop. A spark was certainly there between me and this savage female, but this was business, purely business, as it should have been.

I wiped the smirk off and revealed my concern with a frown.

“A proposal for what, exactly?”

The grimace on her face was enough proof that she’d be better off swallowing needles than having this conversation with me. Her father was undoubtedly the brains behind this. Leonora was too fucking stubborn to come knocking or begging.

“An alliance.”

I was not expecting that. “Interesting.”

She glared. “We’re making an offer that will benefit both families: joint business ventures with equal splits in profit, shared resources, and mutual protection. In summary, we’d have each other’s backs.

“And this is suddenly springing up after your genius plot to snatch Jabril. Where were your thoughts on mutual protection, equality, and fairness then? Or are you worried about your soul rotting in hell and have come to make peace?”

“Fuck you, asshole.”

I smiled. My questions were met with silence. Although, I’d gotten the answer I needed.

There was only reason Enzo would submit a proposal for an alliance. They were running from something they considered themselves too weak to handle. Or maybe—

I lifted the glass to my lips. “Your powers are failing, aren’t they? The Italians are losing their grip, battling to regain influence—”

“I didn’t come here to be mocked.” Her teeth were clenched, like an uncultured dog ready to sink its canines into flesh.

“That’s on you, then.” I crossed my legs. “I’m not listening to a fucking word you say unless you’re transparent with the details.”

“I am being transparent. I’ve summarized the terms of the proposal. Both families benefit. We’ll grow stronger and garner more leverage together. Aren’t you all about

the power?”

I listed with my fingers. “And intelligence, and taking precautions, and basic fishing for reasons to know why an enemy suddenly wants to be best pals. Common sense, if you ask me. But I know you and your kin can’t relate to those sorts of things.”

If she could stab me with the knife across the table, she would. Her glare screamed bloody murder.

“I’m warning you, Rafa—”

“And I’m informing you that I have the entire perimeters of Bella Italia surrounded.” I flashed a phony smile of my own. “One wrong move and your brains will be served on the golden platter for dinner, sweetheart. Details or nothing.”

Leonora scoffed. “I’d tell you the details, and you’d still have the upper hand.”

“You’re smart.”

“And you’re trying to be smarter. Figure it out then, bastard.”

This dinner was going extremely well, if you asked me. “Should you be talking to a potential partner like that?”

“We’re both past the stage of decent courtesy. Take it or leave it.”

I wasn’t going to leave, and she knew it. I enjoyed our banter a little too much to back out. And she didn’t know it, but her tantrums had quite the opposite effect of whatever it was she was aiming for.

“Is it the Rossis?”

Every outfit knew Luca was making trouble, trying to divide the Italians between themselves. He craved more power and plowed the ground to have Enzo's disciples cave in and submit to him. Any attempt he tried now wouldn't have been the first, but Enzo had always been able to quench the rascal and surge forward.

What changed?

"My father's dying, Rafayel."

There it was—the truth, at last. Probably something I'd skipped in the moment of our bickering, but her eyes were glassy now, almost teary. She wasn't faking. She clutched the tablecloth between her fingers, and I surmised how hard she was trying not to cry.

Good thing she didn't. Handling crying women wasn't my strongest suit.

"He needs this, and, as I already said, I don't like it. If I had alternatives, I'd readily choose from there. But this is what he wants, so I'll grant it for him, even if it's the last thing I fucking do."

Her resolve was back.

"What I'm offering here...what we're offering here is a good thing, and you know it. You might think we're weak now, but you know we're not powdered dust. We need reinforcements to strengthen our pillars; that's all. And you need more ground—more people and resources to elevate your status."

Leonora was, unfortunately, right. At any chance given to expand, the Bratva was going to consider it if it was good.

And an alliance with the Colombos wasn't bad. We'd have access to their markets,

their clients , and leverage against rival factions.

I found the Colombos annoying, like pests that refused to be exterminated, but that was all there was to it. The Rossis, on the other hand.... I knew little but enough to grasp they were dangerous, less trustworthy, and high risk.

Leonora wasn't going to say it, but Enzo desperately needed our help. Made sense. We were the strongest peas in the pod.

Satisfied, I finished off the wine in my glass and rose to my feet.

The disappointment on her face when her eyes followed me was more visible than that darn bold lipstick seeking my attention.

“You’re leaving?”

“Yes, I am. I enjoyed dinner, even if there was no actual food.”

“But...” she stuttered, hurt and confused at the same time. Truly, her father’s child. She hated my guts but carried a spark of hope that this meeting would pull through for his sake.

“But the proposal—”

“We’ll review some terms. I didn’t like the sound of that equal profits part, but other than that, we’re good.”

Hope. It shone brighter than I’d ever seen in those seducing eyes of hers. “We’re good?”

“Unless the almighty one doesn’t understand basic English, I meant your proposal for

an alliance with the Bratva has been accepted. Enjoy the rest of your night, Leonya.”

Turning my back on her, I fished out my phone and put Tikhon on speed dial.

He picked on the second ring. “How’d it go?”

“Get Mandy to the penthouse.”

“On it.” The line went dead.

If I didn’t get a fucking release tonight, I was going to explode.

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Marco accompanied me up the stairs to Papa's room silently. He was brooding, probably over the report I was going to give Papa. Nothing reached me until it passed through Marco, meaning he'd been adequately informed of the dinner I had with Rafayel last night.

"Grazie." I nodded and entered when he opened the door for me.

As usual, the room was tranquil and organized, with every item in its designated place. There was something always warm and cozy about Papa's room, and whenever I stepped into it, for a minute, I forgot who we were and the life we led. He liked to keep his guns hidden, though I knew there was a spare under his pillows. A force of habit.

Sometimes, I thought he liked it too: the sobriety and peace of normalcy, without any pressure to keep watch behind your back twenty-four-seven.

His bed was neatly made, with a few pillows propped up against the headboard, but a somber atmosphere settled over it. The room was shrouded in darkness, the heavy curtains drawn shut to block out sunlight. The only light came from a small table lamp on the bedside table.

I moved to turn off the lamp, eliciting a tired groan from him. Then, I felt my way over to the curtains, my fingers brushing against the cool fabric as I grasped the cord to draw them open. The soft rustle of the curtains as they slid apart was the only sound in the room, and for a moment, I stood there, bathed in the brightness of dawn that filtered in from outside.

Marco stayed by the door like a statue while I marched back to Papa's bed, nestling by the side.

Papa looked up from the newspaper, his eyes squinting slightly as he took in my presence. I wondered how he was even able to read that thing without a good source of light. But I'd gotten my stubbornness from somewhere. You could put the man down but not tell him to drop the darn newspapers.

"Principessa."

He attempted a weak smile, but it faltered. He winced, his face creasing in discomfort. Despite his efforts to hide it, I could see the pain etched on his features.

A pang of worry hit me.

He looked only slightly better than when I saw him a few days ago, but it was clear that he still had a long way to go. His skin was pale, and his eyes had lost their usual sparkle.

"Papa, how are you feeling?" I tried to keep my voice light and cheerful. If he knew how much his ailment was affecting me, it'd only worsen his condition.

Nodding slowly, his eyes returned to the newspaper. "A little better, amore ." His voice wavered. "Santiago says I need to rest and stay on schedule with the medication."

"Skipping drugs, Papa?"

"Can't blame me for getting tired, amore. But Marco does great putting up with my shit." He tipped a finger salute at the soldier by the door.

“That’s good. You’ll be back on your feet in no time.”

Papa’s smile this time was not as convincing. “How did it go with the Russian?”

Recollections of last night came back in a whirlwind. I had an answer for Papa on the tip of my tongue: Terrible. It was Terrible, with a capital T . A constant push and pull, a tug of war, and a disastrous ruffle of emotions.

When I’d walked into the restaurant, I wasn’t sure why I didn’t shield myself from that dastardly effect of his, and an upset of fireworks went off in my chest.

Before Rafayel Yezhov, I didn’t know it was possible for a man to look more expensive and tasteful by the minute. I wanted to pinch myself when I noticed his fresh haircut, a slicked back taper fade with a touch of the nineties wave, and the snug fit of his Tom Ford suit across his biceps and chest.

Let’s not even get started on the facials or the constant battle I fought to keep my eyes off his frigging lips.

God.

“Good.” I shifted away to avoid Papa’s direct stare. Now was not the time to have him drilling into my soul to discover the crazy reactions my body experienced whenever I was close to the Russian. “He tried to play hard to get, but we both knew I presented an offer he couldn’t refuse.”

“He could.” Papa was grinning from ear to ear. “Rafayel is known as Zver. ” It was Russian for the Beast. The Italians recognized him as Il Macellaio (The Butcher).

“He doesn’t answer to anyone except the pahkan, his brother. Our offer might have contained all the succulent juices, but Rafayel could have shut it down if he wished.”

Papa dropped his papers and took my hand. A familiar surge of love and connection warmed my insides and strangely made me want to cry. “You did what you do best. You made me proud, my girl.”

Marco shifted by the door, and Papa shared a look with him over my shoulders. A message only both of them understood. I frowned. “Is there something I’m missing?”

“Nothing, principessa .” Papa shook his head, but the light in his eyes had dimmed considerably. “Nothing you might not already have guessed. I am sick and unable to work for a while.”

I knew where this was heading, and I didn’t like it. “And soon, you’ll be back and better, as lofty as always, and nobody will remember there was such a time as this.”

“Leonora.”

There was a sadness in his voice when he called my name, and it shredded my heart to bits.

He wanted me to understand, but I vehemently refused. Admitting that he was currently incapable of leading his empire had to be killing him inside, and I’d been too blinded by my selfish desire for him to recover to notice.

“You have to run things, lead our family until....” He wasn’t going to finish it because of the uncertainty plaguing us all. “I’m leaving it up to you to keep our family name out of the mouths of the pigs and bloody scoffers.”

“And Matteo? Wouldn’t the others talk? Questions will be asked, Papa. Your male heir is still alive.”

A scowl settled on Papa’s face. “We both know your brother wants nothing to do

with this life. He prefers his arts and doesn't have the balls to handle what I'm giving you. It's best he stays overseas, doing whatever keeps him happy."

Matteo realized he wasn't cut out to handle blood, initiation rituals, and guns. The action and adrenaline rush were all fun and games, till after he turned nineteen.

One time, he attempted to flee the country using the guise of a trip to South America with friends. Marco found him in Dublin, Ireland, and dragged him back to plead his case before Papa.

He'd developed a strong liking for arts and wanted to continue his studies in Europe. He wanted to be extricated from the mafia.

Letting him go was one of the toughest decisions Papa had made in his life, but he did it, and the weight of preparing for the seat of leadership rested on my shoulders.

"Papa, we haven't told him."

"And we won't." End of discussion. Papa didn't want anyone else to know about his condition, not even his son. A great number of his men were also intentionally left in the dark. The fewer the number of people that knew, the less chances we'd have that information reaching the wrong ears.

"I know you can do it, Leo. Every bone in that body of yours was trained for this. Marco will support you with whatever you need. Keep your head held high. I know I've taught you that much."

"You have."

"Good," he coughed. "You're smart, beautiful, and more daring than I count myself to be sometimes. Make right this deal with the Russians. The benefits are endless.

Keep an eye open for prospective contacts. Ride on their backs until we can stand on our own two feet and then...crush them to dust.”

That part, I was absolutely not prepared to hear, and it hit me like a frigging bulldozer crashing against steel and concrete.

The honest look in Rafayel’s eyes when he’d accepted the proposal resurfaced to haunt me, and my chest did a weird dip, sinking into a pit of conscience I never thought I had. It propelled me to make a defense on their behalf, even if, for the life of me, I couldn’t figure out why.

“Papa, we’re promising transparency to the Russians. That’s the cleanest cut we have in getting their defense against the Rossis. He thinks we’re lousy and not respecters of honor. I thought we’d be proving them wrong.”

Papa’s eyes grew hard. “And for as long as we need them, we’ll prove them wrong. After we regain our grounds, the Yezhovs must be eliminated.”

This was how it was done in this life: Stab first before you got stabbed. We’d had our fair share of them in the past. There was no guarantee that the Russians weren’t plotting the exact same thing against us, and for that, we had to act smarter and faster.

It would require a long stretch of patience and keeping my cool, though. Any slip-up would arouse their suspicions, and if they caught onto the plan, it would start a war. So, I’d have to wait, biding my time, gathering my strength.

Again, Papa’s wish didn’t align with me for an unfathomable reason. But it was final.

He’d made it clear: The Russians were nothing but temporary allies. I would take care of the Yezhovs and anyone else who crossed us. This was my family, our business, and I would do whatever it took to protect it

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Tikhon tapped my shoulder and leaned forward to mumble into my ears, giving the gist about a recent update on one of the casino houses in southern California and minor trouble one of our workers ran into with the cops. But I wasn't listening.

We entered the room, and my gaze swept over the polished table lined with Italian and Russian officials holding higher-up ranks and past to the far end, where the girl sat poised and confident.

A week after our little tete-a-tete at the restaurant, I received a memo for an 8:00 AM meeting with the princess and her father's men. Although, if there was anything I got from the twenty minutes of hushed conversation tossing back and forth between the Italians, another capo was in charge.

Obviously, the girl.

In the midst of able-bodied killer-machine men, she was the only woman. And the only person with a Styrofoam cup of black coffee on the table. No pressure. It just made it look easy, like we were in the middle of fingers hovering over triggers and eyes glaring murder at each other.

Among the selection of my men were Maxim and Vasili, and neither of them looked as enraged as I thought they would be. But others had it bad to draw blood.

The room was tense, thick enough to smell the testosterone in the air. Russians and Italians in one room never made a good mix. We had history. Bad history. And what was the saying about history?

It was never forgotten.

But no heads were rolling yet, so that was a good thing. She had the dogs on a tight leash, and I respected that. As long as we remained civil, everything would go as planned.

Her posture was a perfect portrait of authority as she offered me a curt nod and browsed through a stack of leather-bound folders with an expression unreadable.

Today, she scattered the image I'd saved of her in that black silk dress, replacing it with a corporate white button-up blouse on a brown high-waist skirt with a slit I was sure I wanted to see again. How she so easily changed her appearance into anything she wished, not aware of the repercussions that followed.

She looked harmless now, nothing like the wildcard she really was, and instead like a young, innocent girl signing a bunch of documents to effect a change of power in her father's company.

"Shall we begin?" I strode to my seat at the head of the table, and silence reigned easily over the quiet murmurs.

Tikhon grabbed the chair beside me and took out a MacBook, probably to follow up every word they said with background research. Amongst other fine skills, he was good with computers.

Leonora leaned forward, her manicured fingers laced together. "We shall."

"Great." Placing my elbows on the armrest, I knitted my fingers. "You have my attention."

"We need to discuss the details and terms of our agreement."

I lifted a brow. “I thought we already did that nights ago.”

She cleared her throat. Leonora was smart enough to know she was the only one I intentionally recognized in the room and was speaking to. Every other person, in this moment, was a blur and was going to remain that way for as long as this meeting lasted.

“Elaborately,” she clarified. “You said you had some terms you wanted to review?”

I shrugged. “The profit. That was all.”

“Still. It was important to bring the men here to get acquainted while we elaborately discuss.”

“Okay. I’m waiting to hear all about your generous offer.”

Her lips twitched into the smallest smile before she withdrew to retrieve one of the folders in front of her. And when she started talking, I was starting to understand why Enzo treated her like an asset.

“Our economic data suggests a promising forecast for the joint ventures. If we proceed cautiously, both parties will see significant returns. You have an issue here, so I’ll pass the mic to you to air your thoughts on the split. Our offer is fifty-fifty.”

“Seventy-thirty. You need us more than we need you.”

Leonora narrowed her eyes. “We’ll stick with forty-eight percent. And that’s the end of it.”

I didn’t argue. This alliance between my family and Leonora's had the potential to reshape the landscape of our operations.

“Our collaboration on the shipping routes will cut costs by nearly forty percent. Your ports in the East are strategically placed, but they lack the distribution networks we’ve already established.”

She wasn’t wrong. Their logistical network was unmatched—routes that threaded through cities like veins, connecting supply chains with brutal efficiency. In return, our control over the eastern ports gave us the power to funnel goods without scrutiny. If we worked together, we’d dominate the underground market from production to delivery.

“Access to our financial channels ensures that both families can launder funds seamlessly,” I added, smiling when her eyes locked with mine. “With fewer intermediaries, we’ll increase profitability and reduce risks of exposure.”

One of the men nodded in agreement, and I had to blink to catch a clearer picture. He wasn’t familiar, but seemed wise. He looked like he didn’t like me, but he concurred with my thoughts.

Our financial system was airtight—banks, shell companies, and even legitimate businesses woven into a perfect facade. It was something her family had been struggling to replicate for years.

“And let’s not forget manpower,” Leonora continued, leaning back slightly. “Your security teams are unparalleled, Rafayel. Pair that with the intelligence my family can provide, and we’ll eliminate threats before they become problems.”

That was the crux of it. This wasn’t just an alliance; it was a consolidation of power. The Colombos’ connections with corrupt officials and their knack for gathering intelligence complemented our brute force and economic control.

We’d be untouchable.

“And,” I said, letting a small smile tug at the corner of my mouth, “there’s the added benefit of mutual deterrence.”

Leonora’s eyes sparkled with something close to satisfaction. But before she opened her mouth, someone else shifted outside the blur.

He stuck his mouth close to her ear, and his hair brushed her neck when she shifted closer to hear him. It disturbed me that she looked comfortable enough to turn to him with a genuine smile that I’d never been a first-hand witness of.

What started as an uncomfortable pinch gnawing at the back of my mind inflated in the hollows of my chest until the hair on my skin rose and heat prickled over my neck at the back of my ear.

I gritted my teeth.

What was this? And who the fuck was he?

Amusingly, this man was familiar. I’d seen him stand guard by Enzo a few times at social events, and if I recalled correctly, I’d heard his name more than a few times.

“Marco.”

Startled, he turned, and I ignored her questioning gaze.

“Marco, is it?”

“Si . It is.”

“I’m not sure how it works where you come from, but an interruption like that in a meeting as important as this is unacceptable unless it’s connected to the discussion at

hand.”

Murmurs broke out, more in Italian undertones than Russian. They questioned my audacity to speak to one of their own with such incredulous authority. Vasili’s hand hovered below his jacket, and Maxim’s side-eye waited for a signal.

I shook my head, and Vasili released his hand from his belt.

Beside me, I caught Tikhon’s exasperated eye roll, and the other two Italian culprits exchanged glances. Marco sat upright, chest out, and eyes meaning business. He’d caught my insinuation, and I assumed by his body language that he didn’t like it.

As if I gave a fuck what he cared.

“As a matter of fact, it was connected to the discussion. We’re displaying everything on the table, but we’ve barely gotten any assurances from your end, except an informal confirmation of your acceptance.”

I didn’t bother with him. I faced her.

“Last time I checked, you came to me. Not the other way round.”

Leonora offered Marco a cryptic smile and touched his arm. I suppressed a frown at the movement, keeping my eyes on her face instead.

“Marco is Papa’s right hand. You can understand why he has his reservations.”

“No, I cannot.” My seat suddenly felt hot, and the sight of her hand still lingering on his arm disturbed me enough to want to shoot something. Or better yet, shove his reservations down his throat.

Tikhon grumbled indistinctly under his breath, but I caught the Russian words about breaking a sweat. My frustration might not be obvious to the others in the room, but he was catching every waving signal.

My lips twitched into a half-smile. “Let’s not get ahead of ourselves. I prefer to keep my cards close to my chest. Actions speak louder than words. I don’t have to prove anything to anyone. If either of you doubted the prospects of this alliance, you would not be seated here.”

My small speech seemed to calm Marco down, and Leonora gave a convincing nod of gratitude, however brief. The rest of our conversation flowed with a mix of tension and precision, every word weighted, every glance calculated. I could feel the undercurrents of their ambition in the room, which was as charged and eager as ours.

By the time we adjourned, the outlines of the alliance were firming up, though the details would take a few more days to finalize. As we rose from our seats, my men followed Tikhon out of the door, and Leonora whispered to Marco before her heels approached me. I didn’t miss the murderous look in Marco’s eyes directed at me before he led her men out of the office.

The door closed, and I perched at the edge of the table, one leg kicked out and my hand crossed over my thighs when she drew nearer.

Up close afforded me a better view of the slit on her skirt cutting high above knee-level that I itched to see again.

“So, you and your bodyguard, huh?”

A faint smile touched her lips. “You handle pressure well.”

“Is that mockery?”

She shrugged, her eyes teasing. “Maybe.”

“You should do a better job because I’m taking that as a compliment, and unlike you, I’m not selfish with compliments. You impress me with the way you navigate power plays like a pro. And I’m not easily impressed.”

Her smile deepened, but she didn’t respond. Instead, her shoulders sagged, and she grabbed the chair I’d occupied seconds ago before collapsing on it. When she peered up at me through thick, long lashes, I saw the exhaustion written all over her face.

“Don’t tell me a one-hour meeting has you wrung out.”

Leonora scoffed. “As if. Don’t flatter yourself. Three hours could have slipped by, and I’d be just fine.”

“Sure. Your slouched back on that chair is so convincing.”

“Asshole,” she murmured under her breath, but she was smiling.

What was strange was how seemingly normal it was to make small talk after a tense meeting—like it was second nature, and we did it all the time. It was almost like we existed in a world where she didn’t hate my guts and didn’t annoy the hell out of me.

“And, by the way, that’s not the only thing I’m pro at.”

“What?”

Aggressively, she rolled a hand in the air. “You called me a pro.”

“Is that right? And it stuck in your head because you can’t believe the almighty one would praise the Italian princess for using her brain. Gee, how sweet is that?”

“Are you always like this?”

“Always like what?”

Her cheeks flushed a shade of scarlet, and she looked anything but mad when her eyes met mine. “Always so full of shit sometimes. Before you interrupted me, I was saying, that’s not the only thing I’m professional at.”

I cocked my head to the side to make sure I heard correctly, and when she caught onto the silent allegation, she rolled her eyes. “Get your mind out of the gutter, Yezhov. I’m talking about the track. I’m one hundred percent better behind wheels than navigating through business power plays, in your words. I’m also great at kicking ass.”

I had no doubt about that.

“Ten thousand dollars says I’d hand your ass over to you and make you bite the dust.”

“Uh, excuse me, what ?” Her eyes lit up with an unmistakable glow, and her laughter was immediate, loud, throaty, and less feminine. But I didn’t mind when I liked the sound of it—genuine, like it was ripped straight from her soul.

Tears rolled down her cheeks when she composed herself, with her pearly whites still on full display. “I’m sorry. It’s just... I’m not trying to brag or anything, but you’re talking to a champion. I’d stake my hundred thousand dollars, knowing fully well that I’d be getting it back. If anyone’s handing over anyone’s ass, it’ll be from me to you. Your ass in my hand.”

I was sure it wasn’t her intention, and that wasn’t the effect she was aiming for, but that sounded fucking hot. And my cock seemed to think so, too.

“Remember: Actions speak louder than—”

“Inexperience? That had better be what you wanted to say.”

It was my turn to laugh. “Never underestimate your opponent, Leonya . I used to spend a lot of time on the track, too, when I had the time.”

“You mean during your more youthful days, don’t you? When you were younger and could hit it right?”

She did it again, coating her seemingly harmless comment with suggestive innuendos, and, at this point, I had no clue if it was intentional. The red burn at the top of her ears and the sudden stretch of her eyes made me think she knew she’d accidentally crossed a line.

Whichever it was, intentional or not, it was working. An instant rush to prove her wrong overcame me. I wanted to show her just how right I could hit it.

But she was faster on her feet, like a fleeing culprit. She ran a hand over her hair to smoothen unruly strands.

“I know a guy who owns a track—name’s Gavin. All I need to do is talk to him and we should be clear for this evening.”

“This evening?” Her zest was commendable. “Are you that excited to be defeated?”

“You run your mouth too much, Yezhov.”

I stood up, eliminating what little space was left between us. She was almost pressed against my chest when I leaned in, with our noses almost touching. “And you would be surprised how well I can put it to good use. Come prepared, Leonya. Today’s the

day you'll get your ass handed to you."

She didn't say anything. Instead, with a wry grin, she turned and walked away, leaving me to wonder whether this partnership would bring more gain—or more trouble.

“What the fuck, Leo?”

Shuttling between the driver’s seat and the car engine, I refused to look Gavin in the eye. “I know, I know. I’m crazy. Wouldn’t be the first time I’ve done something that made you question my sanity. You know, I’m hurt that you haven’t already come to terms with the fact that I’m not a normal human being.”

“No, kid. You’re not playing a fast one on me. Just crazy? Leo, you’re racing Il Macellaio. Rafayel Yezhov.”

I peeked at the older man from above the hood before I slammed it shut. I crossed my hands over my chest. “So? He’s not God. And I’m going to beat him. What’s the big deal anyway?”

I knew what the big deal was. Even my pounding heart knew what the frigging big deal was.

Gavin stared me down like I’d gone completely off my rockers. And I didn’t blame him. That was the first thing I thought the second I stepped out of Rafayel’s office. The wave of relief that filled me was surreal, like I could breathe again without having to worry about inhaling too much of him.

What the hell was I thinking, agreeing to a challenge with him?

Papa wanted me to do only one thing with him—technically, two: form a strong alliance and crush him.

It should have been as simple as that, but in the meantime, I was meant to stay away from him. Far, far away, where my heart won't skid to a bloody stop at every sight of him, and I would be able to think straight.

"You picked a fight with his cousin, and now you want to step on the big man's toes. How the—"

Turning around was unnecessary when I knew why the man had stopped talking. I felt him looming behind me, tall and broad, with his warmth enveloping me in a strange caress.

Zver.

Mustering the courage to look him in the eye and nowhere else, I spun on my heels to face him. The man made it hard to stay focused when he looked like a front-page model in a magazine.

That was a joke.

He looked like a fucking god.

"This the guy who owns the track?"

I barely responded with a nod when my eyes were glued to his flexing biceps and the taut pull of his black t-shirt around his torso beneath his striped black, red, and white Ferrari jacket. His black denim jeans were a perfect fit, and the dark boots were the cherry on top.

Gavin muttered something about active radios for communication and staying off the field before quietly handing off the keys to one of the Porsches and disappearing around the back of the shed.

“What’s his deal?”

I beamed up at him, snagging my lower lip between my teeth and feeling flushed when his gaze darkened as he followed the movement. “He’s only sorry you’re going to go back to your house sobbing like a baby after I’m done with you tonight.”

Rafayel smiled at me, and my heart did that crazy thumping when I realized how extremely handsome he was with that smile. “That means you’re ready?”

“As ready as I’ll ever be.”

The roar of engines filled the air as we pulled into the racing arena, lining up on the asphalt. The vibrations from the track reverberated through my chest. Bright lights gleamed above our heads, illuminating sleek cars that were already having some fun of their own.

I signaled Rafayel through my window, and he pulled on his racing gloves.

“You sure you’re up for this? I wouldn’t want you blaming your car when you lose.” The excitement in his voice came over the radio.

I smirked, adjusting in the cockpit of my car. The interior smelled of leather and fuel, a sharp blend that always sent a thrill through me. “Don’t worry about me. Just try to keep up.”

The starting lights flashed, and I gripped the steering wheel.

Anticipation coiled in my chest.

The moment the green light blazed, I slammed my foot on the accelerator, and like a bullet, the car shot forward, the force pinning me back against the seat.

The track was a blur of flashing lights and roaring machines. Each curve demanded accurate swerves and nerve. I caught glimpses of Rafayel's car in my side mirrors.

Holy frigging shi—

His car darted forward like a shark through water.

Now, I was impressed. And I wasn't easily impressed.

"Not bad for someone who claims to be the best," I laughed into the radio.

A deep, dangerously arousing chuckle came through the speakers. "Don't get cocky, Leonya. The race isn't over yet."

I grinned, taking the next turn with a sharp flick of the wheel. The tires screeched, and the back end of the car slid dangerously close to the barrier. My heart might have as well leaped from my throat, but I recovered just in time. The rush sent a jolt through me, and my hands were shaky on the wheel.

"Close one." Rafayel's voice crackled through the radio again, and I thought I heard a hint of worry in the mix of amusement. "You sure you've got this?"

I peeked at the mirror again, horrified when I spotted him gaining on me. I needed a boost to get out of this spot.

"Worry about yourself."

The next stretch was a straightaway, and I pushed my car to its limit, watching the

speedometer needle climb higher.

Rafayel pulled up beside me. With his car close enough, I could almost see the cocky smirk I knew he was wearing. Arrogant piece of—

“Let’s see how you handle this.” His car nudged ahead.

I wasn’t going to lie; Rafayel drove well and was better competition than all the Prix runners-up. I wasn’t expecting him to be this skilled on the track. Like some other things I believed about him, I thought he was exaggerating when he told me about his racing experience.

I refused to back down, and my competitive side blazed. The final stretch loomed ahead with a series of tight curves leading to the finish line.

Rafayel and I took the turns in near unison, our cars dangerously close to colliding.

“Better hold on.” I maneuvered my car through the last curve.

And in the final seconds, I floored the gas, my heart thumping in rhythm with the screaming engine as I surged forward. The finish line blurred past, and the realization hit me—I’d won.

I fucking won!

By a fraction of a second, but it was enough.

This conquest felt bigger, more significant than the exhilaration that flooded my veins after I emerged tops at the Grand Prix. Like I’d proved my value to someone worth proving it to.

“You’ve got to be fucking kidding me,” came his voice tinged with disbelief through the radio.

I laughed loud enough to let him feel the burn of my victory. “What’s the matter? Not used to losing?”

He pulled up beside me, his car idling as he rolled down his window. His smirk was intact, but there was the edge of victory in his eyes. “You got lucky.”

Pfft.

Yezhovs and their frigging pride. It was the same thing Ivan said.

“Skill,” I corrected, stepping out of the car and tossing my helmet onto the seat. “But don’t feel too bad. I’ll admit, you put up a good fight.”

“Remind me never to underestimate you again.”

I smiled, feeling the rush of the race still thrumming in my veins. “Smart choice.”

With the adrenaline still coursing through us, we stepped off the track. The roar of engines no longer charged the air. We’d been so wrapped up in our own excitement that neither of us noticed when the track emptied of other cars, but the tension lingered, thick and electric in the evening air.

Quietly, I walked back to the stands and threw myself on one of the padded seats. Stretching my legs out, I peeled off my gloves, flexed my fingers, and reeled in the satisfying ache that reminded me of my triumph.

Rafayel approached with firm, confident strides and a glow in his eyes that I couldn’t decipher. The man radiated control. Even now, dressed casually with beads of

perspiration dotting his upper lips and rolling down his carved jawline, his presence could still turn heads.

He stopped just close enough for the air between us to crackle.

Gazing up at him, I wiggled my fingers. “You owe me ten thousand dollars.”

When he carelessly ran his long, slender fingers through his hair, my gaze dipped to glimpse the fair skin on his torso when his shirt rode up above his belt.

“We didn’t finalize the bet, and I didn’t expect you to take that final corner so aggressively.”

I lifted my chin, meeting his gaze. “I didn’t expect you to leave me enough room to do it.”

Rafayel’s laughter was soft, almost indulgent, and when he laughed, there was this boyishness around him that erased the image of the rogue I was well accustomed to. I realized I enjoyed watching his eyes light up and the crinkle beside his lips deepen.

“I like a good challenge. You didn’t disappoint.”

Neither did he, though I wasn’t about to admit it again. It would spike his ego, and I wasn’t sure I could handle any more Yezhov pride tonight.

The heat of the race hadn’t dissipated, and standing this close to him, I wasn’t sure it ever would.

“I told you I was a pro.”

“At track.” I met his eyes when he tilted his head slightly. “Doesn’t mean you’re a

pro at other things.”

“I never challenged that.”

“But I did. I challenged you.” His eyes were saying something his mouth wasn’t, and his gaze lingered like he wanted me to catch on. “And you told me I run my mouth too much.”

I didn’t get why he remained quiet, and when I pondered hard on it, it clicked.

His mouth .

I grew hot all over again, remembering what he said. And you would be surprised how well I can put it to good use.

“Do you know the first thing I thought about when I watched you cross that finish line, Leonya?”

What could he have thought about except wallowing in defeat?

I was eager to hear it but, maybe, scared at the same time. Because...well, because I knew it was probably the first thing I thought about, too, the minute he walked into the shed this evening looking like the main dish on a gold platter.

Unable to speak, I shook my head.

Rafayel surprised me by dropping to his haunches in front of me. Now, we were at eye level, and I saw everything I’d been pretending not to notice from the minute we jammed paths again in that underground prison.

The foreign emotion swirling in his eyes was overwhelming, but what blew me away

was the raving intensity of desire swimming in them.

“I thought about kissing you.”

For the love of—

Shit!

I almost swallowed my fucking tongue because I thought I heard Zver confess to wanting to kiss me just now.

But he did say it, didn't he? My ears weren't bleeding in fantasy land; he fucking said it!

“Leonya.”

There was no denying it anymore. This man desired me, and I craved him worse than children craved chocolates and cookies. It was like a rising volcano with an urgent need to erupt—a maddening desire to burst. I was the balloon, and he was the pin. The ache was strong. None of this made sense, this energy rotating around us. But it was there, and we couldn't ignore it. I didn't want to.

“Leonya....”

I busted out in hysterical laughter because that was exactly how I felt now—fucking hysterical. “You're bluffing.”

“Bluffing.”

Rafayel chuckled, but it didn't sound like the first one. This time, it was dark and enticingly murderous, like wicked promises he wanted to fulfill for only me. Carefree

Rafayel was gone, and this was Zver chuckling. The lethal, malignant Russian killer we all knew him to be.

He leaned close, reached forward, and before I could shriek or react, long, slender fingers slid into my hair, and hard lips came crashing down on mine.

Musky cologne pulled me under a haze, and his distinct scent invaded my entire senses.

I froze—couldn't blink, or talk, or breathe properly.

But when he growled against my mouth like a hungry lion devouring its tasty prey, I knew this was real, and my reaction was instant. I parted my lips, almost falling from the padded seat and melting into a puddle when his hot tongue rammed its way into my mouth.

I had trouble keeping up. Cranking my neck, I bent it to the side and moved like a puppet dancing to its master's tunes.

He was hot and rough and greedy, lapping his tongue to taste me, nibbling on my lower lip to tease me. And fucking sue me, I liked it too damn much.

When my lashes fluttered shut, and I leaned forward to shamelessly sink into him, he pulled back. I opened my eyes to catch him smiling and rising to his full height like he didn't just unravel me from inside-out and leave me there, all wet and uncomfortably needy.

I managed to gasp out, "Not bad for someone who only hit it right in his youthful days."

I was dazed and confused.

What the fuck just happened?

“My estate is nearby. Why don’t you stop by? A drink, maybe. Or we could freshen up.”

That offer was anything but casual. I could see where this was going. He wanted to finish what he started.

A smarter woman might have refused, drawn a line in the sand, and stood her ground.

But I wasn’t in the mood to be smarter.

I arched a brow, letting the silence stretch just long enough to keep him guessing. “I suppose I could use a drink.”

His smirk deepened, his satisfaction unmistakable. “Then, let’s not waste any time.”

When we arrived at his house, I honestly expected not to make it past the door. Maybe a few jacks and throws and slams against the wall as he captured my mouth again and unscrewed all the working nuts in my brain while he mouth-fucked me would have been better.

But the man was full of surprises, and his mansion certainly wasn’t what I expected.

For a man like him who thrived on control and exuded confidence like a second skin, I anticipated something ostentatious—towering gates, sprawling grounds, a display of untouchable wealth. Instead, the estate was...understated, almost deceptively so.

A line of neatly trimmed cypress trees lined the driveway leading to a house, striking

a balance between old-world charm and contemporary restraint.

It wasn't grandiose, but it wasn't ultramodern either. Smooth limestone walls were accented with dark wood beams, and soft uplighting released warm glows on the arched windows. It was the kind of place that hinted at luxury rather than screamed it.

Now, inside, the surprises continued.

The foyer was modest, with polished wood floors that gleamed under a minimalist chandelier. There were no oversized portraits or gaudy gold accents—just a clean, inviting space that somehow still felt personal—a quiet elegance.

We walked past the parlor, and I took notes. It was a clash of moods. On one side, a sleek black leather couch and modern glass coffee table suggested a man of practicality and taste. On the other, a wall of bookshelves, crammed with everything from classics to what looked like obscure philosophy texts, hinted at a depth I hadn't expected. And then there was the massive vintage record player tucked in the corner, out of place but perfectly him—if that was even something I could define.

Every moment with the man felt like different pieces of him were being revealed, each one giving me whiplash.

A simple wooden dining table stood in stark contrast to the intricately designed wine rack on the wall. A quick tour of the study, which was not too far away, revealed stacks of papers, folders, and maps spread across a sturdy desk. The adjacent wall was lined with expensive liquor bottles, like trophies.

This was where he decided the tour ended, though. In his study.

He plucked out two glasses and a bottle of what looked like vintage wine. After he filled both glasses, he handed one to me.

I settled on the leather couch, feeling off balance. And it didn't help that he was watching me, his expression as unreadable as ever.

Why did it feel strange and different , as though he seemed both more approachable and more enigmatic, here in his home? Like a completely different person, and yet, one and the same?

“This isn't what I imagined,” I admitted and took a sip from my glass.

God!

It took every shred of dignity in me not to spit the wine back. I gurgled and dropped the glass on the center table, not able to decide if it was too sweet, too strong, or too old.

“What the heck is that?”

Smiling, he walked up to me, gingerly taking more sips from his glass than I was sure I could handle. “Romanée-Conti.”

“It tastes like a hundred years old.”

“It's not up there, but it's vintage for a reason.” He smirked, dropped to the couch beside me, and leaned back against the armrest. “Didn't think I'd be the simple type?”

“ Simple isn't the word I'd use.”

“Keeps things interesting, doesn't it?”

I wasn't sure if he meant the house or himself, but either way, he wasn't wrong.

Giving him a serious look, despite the fact that my heart was beating crazy in my chest, I rose to my feet, dusting my frayed denim bum shorts as I cleared the distance between us.

“I also didn’t imagine you invited me over here for an actual drink.”

So, I was being forward, throwing myself on him like a thirsty odalisque.

So what?

I always went for what I wanted, whatever or whoever it was.

His eyes dropped my bare torso peeking from underneath my cropped T-shirt, lingered for a second longer, and darkened.

When he lifted his chin to gaze up at me, his dark irises grew stormy, like two gleaming onyx stones, as if the turmoil of his soul was brewing within their depths.

The pupils seemed to dilate, expanding like black holes, drawing in the light around him, and I could almost see the turbulence churning within his eyes, like the dark, swirling clouds of a thunderhead on a summer’s day.

Lust.

Rafayel’s hands found my hips, and he dragged me toward him, roughly slipping his fingers along the base of my neck and into my hair once more. His touch against my skin was like fire on ice.

One touch, and I was melting, heating up like a piece of pie in a fucking microwave, losing my sense of self-control, self-respect, and everything self .

Thoughts prodded and poked: What would Papa think if he found out? What would the family think if they heard?

“I thought I’d start off with being a gentleman.”

Rafayel’s voice brought me back to the moment, turning me into a careening sack of flesh and bones without logic or the balls to smash my knee into the visible bulge between his legs and run away.

Right now, I couldn’t give two flying fucks if I was just going to be on his list of women he’d conquered. I wanted this.

No, I needed this.

Maybe, just once, and I’d purge the madness out of my system. The madness to feel him, to taste him, bite him, suck him.

“Fuck that,” I whispered when his lips were close enough to mine. “We both know you’re anything but.”

With a tight grip on my hair, he brought my lips to his, and we released a growl of satisfaction at the same time.

There were exactly seventeen years between Rafayel Yezhov and me. I knew because I’d done my research. He was a forty-year-old man who’d seen enough and had the experience to have lived the life of a century.

In short, he was out of my league. But nothing about the way he touched me was a century-years-old. He was everywhere—groping, sucking, fondling like an expert skilled in the art of giving pleasure.

My toes curled in my shoes, and hastily, I kicked them off, leaning on him for support.

Rafayel moved against me with the same fervency he'd used at the track but more gently than I wanted him to. So, I mirrored his actions, slipping my fingers into his hair and pressing my mouth deeper against his to pass the message to hurry the fuck up.

He smiled between snagging my lower lip and sucking my upper lip. "You're impatient already."

"I'm hot and bothered. Deal with it."

"Oh, trust me, I will."

I wasn't watching his fingers and didn't know when they moved from my hair to the gap between my legs. He cupped me through my shorts and slipped his index finger past my panties to the place where I ached for him the most.

I groaned. And he growled some Russian profanities against my neck.

The heat of his breath on my skin fried whatever restraint I thought I had left.

He kissed me on the lips and on the neck and dipped his head to bury his face between my breasts, which were aching to be free.

He stuffed his finger inside me, driving his index first and fingering deep to feel me. My walls clenched around him, my back arched, and my ass pressed deeper into his hand.

"You're driving me crazy, Leonya."

He'd said it in Russian, and strange whining noises left my mouth without my permission when I understood it. I dug my nails into his shoulder to steady myself when my knees buckled.

I stood in an awkward position, with him now seated on an armrest as my only support. His body posed as my anchor. I couldn't even feel the ground beneath my feet.

"You're fucking wet for me, sweetheart," he rasped, his breaths were coming in and out in heated puffs. "So wet. Fuck!"

There was an undeniable satisfaction in watching him revel in the act of touching me, as though every brush of his fingers brought him as much pleasure as it did me.

He was just too beautiful to look at, with his hair now messed up like a sexy nest—if that was a thing—and no longer gelled backward. The way his breath caught in his throat told me that he was savoring every moment, every sensation, every connection that flowed between us. He looked like the real rogue that he was.

And I was drawn into this absurd intimacy of the moment, my own senses heightened as I felt the heavy pressure of his fingertips, the harsh caress of his breath on me.

"Yes."

Yes?

What the hell did yes have to do with anything he'd said?

I'd lost it.

His finger moved harder inside me, faster, slapping against my clit and making me

buck against his hand. My juices slipped between my thighs, soaking my panties and shorts, and an insane pressure built in my core.

My arousal was so heavy I could hear it smacking against him with every thrust of his hand inside me. I had to bite my tongue from begging.

I'd never begged for anything before. And I'd certainly not experienced a man touching me this way, like it was his life's mission to please me.

I started to move against him myself, desperate to make sure he didn't stop what he was doing. I held his shoulders like my life depended on it, and he slammed his hand deeper.

I cried out as the orgasm washed over me, collapsing my body weight on him as I rode out the waves with jerky movements of my hips while he pressed hot kisses all the way down my throat.

Then he pulled his hand out of me and brought his fingers to his lips to suck me off.

I wanted to cry and laugh at the same time at how overwhelmingly conscious that made me. Did he like it? Having me in his mouth, knowing the true taste of me...did he fucking like it?

"This is insane."

He grunted his agreement, his eyes hazy with need. We both didn't understand whatever this was, but we were hanging on, not quite ready to let go of each other.

"What's more insane is how badly I'm aching to be buried inside you, sweetheart."

That had to be the hottest thing I'd heard anyone say.

“I need to get out of this.” I tried to shimmy out of my shorts, and my hand slipped over the band clumsily.

“You should.” His hands latched on to help me. “I need unrestricted access to fuck you. At this rate, I doubt I’m going to last ten minutes.”

I didn’t want ten minutes. I wanted him, and I wanted him now, so bad my chest was aching, and my blood was boiling. I was burning up fast, and so was he.

My shorts pooled on my feet, around my ankles, and I stepped out of them while he readily dived in to take off my shirt.

Rafayel didn’t hesitate. His hands found the clasp behind my lacy bra, and his fingers made short work of them before he tossed them aside.

When he jerked back, his eyes grew darker than I thought them possible to, like turbulent storms, and my nipples peaked to hard pebbles under his gaze.

“Jesus, you’re so fucking perfect. Come here.”

I walked to him, and he buried his face between my breasts, inhaling deeply as he cupped each mound in his big, strong hands and tugged on a nipple.

I bit down a moan when he kissed my chest and covered one of my breasts with his hot mouth.

“These tits.” His growl was animalistic, reverberating on my skin while he cupped one of my ass cheeks and squeezed like an angry bird. “These goddamn tits...fucking perfect, Leonya. ”

While he sucked on my breast, one after the other, taking his time to nibble and graze

on my tender flesh, more incoherent Russian compliments poured out of his mouth in a muffled spree, some darker and more profane than others.

And I wanted to pinch myself for how terribly I liked knowing how good I made him feel.

He slapped my ass, and I yelped, pushing my breasts deeper against his face. I ran my hands down his hard back, clawing at his spine with my fingernails.

“Take your clothes off,” I whined, and my voice sounded strange.

“Not yet. Now lie on the couch and turn around.”

It was an order from Zver —a command I almost hated myself for wanting to obey. But I grew rigid in his arms, understanding that he intended to take me from behind.

He noticed, and dark brows creased between his forehead. “What’s the problem?”

I shook my head, and he gripped my jaw, bringing me closer to peer into my eyes. “Leonya.”

I shrugged my face off his grip, irritated that I had to display vulnerability. “It’s nothing. I just...I haven’t....”

The sudden glint of amusement in his eyes meant he caught on faster than I expected him to, and I didn’t feel as embarrassed as I ought to have been.

“I’ll be good to you.”

He’d said it softly, and I didn’t know why the tension immediately waned, but it did, and I nodded slowly.

Rafayel slid to the couch, and when he was seated comfortably, he snaked an arm around my waist, pulling me down to his height so I straddled him. I rested my hands on his shoulders and eyed his jacket.

He led my hands to it. “You can take them off.”

Without a word, and very eagerly, I obeyed, peeling off the leather jacket before I tugged off the shirt that clung to him like second skin.

I wasn’t surprised when a broad chest and ripped torso came into view. He looked like he worked out a lot, punching bodies and committing crimes.

Tentatively, I ran my fingers across the ridges, and he tilted forward to press a warm kiss across my jaw.

“You’ve no idea how many times I’ve imagined ways I’d have you.”

I gasped when he cupped the base of my neck, yanked my head back, and trailed wet, biting kisses down my throat.

“Tell me.”

One hand cupped my breast again, and he played with it, weighing it in his hand as he bit my earlobe. “In my car, in the shower, on my bed, that fucking desk right there...everywhere, Leonya. I want to fuck your brains out.”

I couldn’t stop the moan that tore through my throat.

“Wouldn’t you like that, sweetheart?”

I didn’t answer, and he grazed my throat to rip out a response. “Tell me, Leonya,” he

growled. “Wouldn’t you like my cock inside you, fucking you non-stop? Wouldn’t you like me to screw you hard, as hard as you pump your accelerators and rev your engines? Just the way you’d like it?”

It was cheesy as hell, hearing him talk dirty car language. On a normal day, I’d have laughed and cringed. But his question rendered me speechless, but it was a good speechless because inside me burned to have him too in all those places.

I nodded. Driven by delirium, I assumed, I kissed the scar on his left eyebrow and kissed it again. I didn’t know why I went for the scar, but I did and wanted to do it again.

The slight tick of his jaw and tightness in his shoulders meant he’d felt it, and I’d done something that hit close to home. But he didn’t say a word and maintained a laser focus on kissing me.

He tasted hot and sweet and so many other things I couldn’t articulate. Whatever was going through his mind a moment ago vanished, replaced by a rapturous hunger, and I allowed myself to feel everything in just this moment.

He felt so good. So frigging good.

“I swear, I’m going to fucking burst if I don’t get inside you.” He grabbed my hand and pressed it down on the bulge hidden in his pants. Burning through the thick jean fabric, he felt searing hot in my palms. “Feel how hard I am for you?”

His eyes never leaving mine, he reached for his belt and shrugged down his pants to knee-level despite my weight on him.

My stomach fluttered at the sight before me.

He was perfect. Cut and lean and so fucking hot.

For a second, I felt like a slut for wanting him the way I did.

His cock stood rigid between his legs and mine, balls heavy with need as a drop of pre-cum leaked from the tip.

I bit the inside of my cheek. The strain looked painful, and I wanted so badly to ease that pain, to have him inside my mouth; it scared me.

“Just tonight...” he was saying. “I’m going to fucking have you all to myself tonight, and after....”

He didn’t finish, but I didn’t need him to. We were venturing past forbidden lines, an act that was bound to screw things up if we continued.

He spread my legs and leaned back just enough so that he could grip his cock in his hand, sliding it against my arousal.

A strangled noise left my throat, and the twitch of his lips showed it pleased him. He started to push inside, and just as I thought, there was a slight bite of pain. God, he was big!

I clamped down on my jaw and closed my eyes. And then it happened.

I squealed a little when he broke through my resistance, and Rafayel watched me with a warmth and tenderness that confused the hell out of me. Like he cared.

Then, he stopped, and the sound of our heavy breathing filled the room as I buried my face between his neck and filled my nostrils with his sweaty scent.

“Are you good?”

I nodded, and my entire body molded against his hard chest when he wrapped an arm around my waist and jerked his hip to slide deeper inside me.

We shared a deep groan, finding comfort in each other’s pleasure.

His finger found my clit, and he didn’t take his eyes off me for a second.

I didn’t look away either, and for some reason, watching him watch me was more intimate than the act itself. Knowing he was the first and only man to have me this way. To be inside of me.

I’d never thought a day like this would come, when I’d be rolling my hips on Rafayel Yezhov to help him stuff his cock deeper into me.

The world had definitely gone mad.

I didn’t expect this to feel so good. But it did. His was pumping in and out of my wetness, searing me with his claws and stares of heated possession, like I belonged to him beyond this night only.

The pressure became too much to bear, and I bounced on him, quickening our pace when I clashed our lips together while riding him back and forth.

Tension rippled along his back and his biceps as we both struggled for control. Sweat dripped down his forehead, and his face contorted like he wallowed in anguish.

I didn’t stop riding, even after a scream tore through my throat as I shattered against him.

Then, effortlessly, he lifted me off him, and he threw his head back with his mouth partly open as he groaned out his release.

I watched his cock jerk, with hot ropes of cum shooting between my thighs, while I half-hung above him, thoroughly fascinated by the moment of insanity we had just experienced.

When his labored breathing evened, Rafayel pressed a chaste kiss on my lips and whispered in Russian , “I’m not done with you, Leonya. We’re going upstairs.”

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My body felt heavier than usual, and I woke up to the feeling of something warm and pleasant pressing down on my arm. I fixed a hand under my pillow and glanced to the side.

There she was, clinging to me like she needed an anchor in her sleep. Her delicate fingers were curled around my forearm, her face pressed gently into the pillow, with one of her legs thrown above mine. She slept like she raced—rather roughly.

But the blame was mine to bear. I'd worn her out. We'd fucked everywhere I could place her: on the wall, on my bed, in the fucking shower. And each time felt better than the last.

I wanted more and couldn't stop taking until she reached the limit and collapsed on me with exhaustion.

Grinning like a fucking idiot, I tucked strands of hair behind her ear, trying to remember the last time I had that much fun. A night at the Obsidian didn't even come close to the excitement of last night. She looked so peaceful, so vulnerable, her usual sharp edges smoothed away in the softness of sleep.

For a moment, I couldn't look away. Her hair fanned across the pillow like spilled ink, and her lips were slightly parted as she breathed evenly. She looked...beautiful. No, more than that. Something about her tugged at a part of me I couldn't quite name, a part that wanted to know what it would feel like to have moments like this every day.

Fucking stupid.

I dragged my hand away from her face, running it down mine.

There was no denying that the Italian princess was special. Enzo knew it. Fucking Marco knew it. Her entire clan knew it.

I didn't know how or why, but she was. There was that loud strength in her that fascinated me, a fire that burned just beneath the surface. And yet, here she was, clinging to me like she needed me, with her guard completely down. It was almost fucking disarming.

My chest tightened, and it surfaced, a strange mix of protectiveness and something softer that I'd probably never admit.

We weren't supposed to have each other. A collision like ours was barred and bound to cause a train wreck. Our lives couldn't mix. We were both headstrong, stubborn, and ambitious. But maybe that was why it felt so different with her—so new.

My phone buzzed beside the bed, and I frowned when I saw the contact on the screen.

Carefully, I shifted, not wanting to wake her, but her fingers tightened slightly on my arm as if, even in her sleep, she didn't want to let go. I let out a quiet breath, a smile tugging at my lips despite myself. Maybe—just maybe—I didn't want to let go either.

But this was one call that couldn't be ignored.

“Privyet .”

Andrei was a man of few words, and his calls were as rare as they were deliberate, only for moments of necessity. All my life, I'd never once caught him bothered with small talk or idle chatter. So, I knew instinctively that something was amiss.

I slid open the glass door and stepped out onto the balcony attached to the room. When I leaned against the railing, the metal creaked softly beneath my weight, and I looked over my shoulder to be sure Leonora was still asleep.

“Bad news or good news?”

“None,” he clipped back. I imagined the look on his face, hard and gloomy as always, with his signature scowl pasted across.

I had many cousins, but Ivan and Andrei stuck closer, both cut from the same Yezhov cloth, but that’s where the similarities ended.

Andrei was the real deal—smarter, a razor-sharp field operator with a roughneck attitude and both feet planted firmly on the ground. He was the one who kept his wits about him, always thinking two moves ahead of the game. Ivan, on the other hand, was the wild card—unpredictable and prone to flying off the handle. But Andrei? He was the one you wanted watching your back.

I dragged a hand down my face, staring out at the estate and a troop of my men laughing by the fountain. “You have a problem?”

“Rafa.” He cursed under his breath. “The men are talking.”

“They’re laughing right now, from where I’m standing.”

“You know what I’m talking about.”

“Honestly, I have no fucking clue. Maybe, if you stopped being so fucking cryptic, I’d understand.”

We both knew I understood his unspoken words clearly, and I knew the men were

talking. Playing ignorant was just one of those things I intentionally did to waste time and rile him up.

“I heard about you and Leonora.”

I shouldn’t have been surprised. When the men weren’t working, they were gossiping like idle maids in scrubs.

“I heard about you and that dancer, Mikala. How did things turn out, by the way?”

He huffed. “Rafayel, this is serious.”

“Of course, it is.” I clenched my jaw. “We’re finalizing an alliance.”

It felt childish dodging Andrei’s bullets, but that part of me that wanted more mornings with Leonora didn’t want him raining logical shit on my parade.

“I heard about that, too, the alliance with the Italians. Word also has it that you took her home. To your fucking house, Rafayel?”

The irritation in his voice was clear. But I sure as hell was going to make mine clearer. “Now sniffing around my pants, Andrei? I thought you preferred keeping your nose in your business. Who I fuck is, frankly, none of your concern.”

“But it is when the bitch concerned is Colombo’s daughter. Jesus, Rafa. I don’t care who you fuck, but I care about who’ll get the chance to fuck with us.”

If I threatened to cut his tongue for referring to her as a bitch, he wouldn’t flinch, and it would only fuel his urge to call me out on my bullshit.

I combed my hair with my fingers to distract myself.

“An alliance was what brought her to you, and that should be the focus.”

“That is the focus.”

It was just one fucking night. Christ. Having Andrei breathing down my neck made it seem like we’d been sneaking around the outfit for months.

“I call bullshit, Rafa. The Italian is a distraction. I know you’ll probably make me regret saying this, but I’ll say it anyway, and I’ll say it once: Get your shit together and smell the coffee. You can’t afford to get attached. Once again, she’s Italian .” The pronouncement came out like a curse, and his disdain was palpable. “They’re only loyal to their kin. You, me, or anyone else? We’re nothing to them. Just pawns in their little games.

I frowned but said nothing, my jaw tightening while I let him talk.

“Besides,” he continued, a little lower, “the smart thing to do would be using her. Wipe out the entire Colombo clan after you deal with Luca. Isn’t that why you’re fucking her?”

My fingers flexed with the need to punch something. I hated how effortlessly he laid out the cold logic of it all.

A knot tightened in my chest. “I’ll handle it.”

“Stay realistic.”

“Fuck you, too.”

I almost saw his smirk before the line went dead.

I glanced back at the room, allowing my gaze to linger on her peaceful form as she slept. Her chest rose and fell with each quiet breath. She looked so innocent, so unaware of the storm brewing just outside the walls that sheltered her.

But Andrei was right.

The Italian princess was anything but innocent.

I couldn't afford to let my guard down, not now, not ever. I tore my eyes away and headed straight for the showers. My resolve hardened with every step.

There was no room for mistakes, not even for her.

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Seven weeks, five days, and seven—now, eight hours. But who was counting?

I didn't miss him. I didn't miss the way his scent lingered in my clothes, in my very soul, wrapping around me when I least expected it. I didn't miss the way it clung to my skin, dragging memories of that stupid night that I wanted to bury to the surface.

No, I didn't miss him. Not the way his presence followed me everywhere, reminding me of his hot breath on my skin or the profanities he filled my ears with. Or the way every leather and musk scent infuriatingly reminded me of him.

Or the way his absence now gnawed at the edges of my resolve.

But I refused to acknowledge it, refused to admit that a part of me still yearned for him, still craved the intoxicating rush of being near him.

I couldn't.

And yet, every breath I took betrayed me, aching for something I swore I was better off without.

Even if I felt it deep down in my bones that Rafayel intentionally avoided me, it was better this way. I could breathe again, think properly again, without having him mess with my head or cloud me with his essence.

We were enemies—enemies who somehow needed each other and had formed an alliance. And that was what mattered, the alliance and nothing else. Or so I tried to convince myself.

He'd said it, hadn't he? It was for one night only. And he kept to his word. I woke up that morning, and he was gone. With no note to explain anything, I got the message loud and clear.

He did a great job, too, steering clear and staying out of sight. Subsequent meetings were conducted via online platforms, and he cut off direct contact. We passed memos and other information through the men.

The distance was a good thing, I convinced myself for the umpteenth time.

So, why was I suffocating under a tangled mess of confusing emotions, battling the sting of rejection, the humiliation of being discarded, and, on top of that, the misery of being sick?

“Leonora Colombo?”

My head jerked up at the sound of my name, and my eyes fell on the blonde nurse poking her head through the waiting room. She was pretty with blue, innocent eyes that said she lived in an ordinary world, without worries of Russian-Italian alliances or crime.

There may have been a few times in my life when I wondered what it would be like to lead a normal life, but my thoughts always returned with a negative result. I loved my life. I loved the thrill of racing, leading the mob, and being able to do whatever I wanted.

An ordinary world meant leading a normal life. And normal was frigging boring.

My only problem now was getting my head back on track so that I would forget I had ever gotten mixed up with Zver and ended up in his bed.

And the walls of his bedroom.

And his shower.

And....

Every place else he'd marked me.

But first, I had to find out what was wrong with me.

Her smile was genuinely warm, but I felt unusually tired and didn't have the strength to reciprocate.

I adjusted the strap of my purse over my shoulder and followed her through the cold clinic hallway to another white room with transparent glass doors, which I assumed was Doctor Josè's office.

The air was thick with the aroma of fresh coffee and the faint tang of antiseptic. It made me nauseous, but I restrained the urge to gag. I ran my gaze from the row of worn, leather-bound medical texts that lined the shelves, with their gilt-edged pages, to Doctor Josè, who had a phone pressed to his ear and his mouth moving in a hushed, one-sided conversation.

He looked up, his eyes crinkling at the corners. Then, he smiled and motioned for me to take a seat.

I settled into the plush burgundy armchair, sinking into the soft cushions. In a low voice, he finished his call and turned his attention to me.

“Leo, good to see you. Come sta? E come sta suo padre?”

How are you? How is your father?

With a smile, I told him I was fine, even if it was a straight lie through the teeth, and that Papa's health was improving. Another lie. Day after day, I watched him battle to reign control over the weakness that subjected him to his bed. But he didn't want anyone singing the song to the world that his health was deteriorating.

The only reason Rafayel knew was because of the alliance and the transparency code attached to it.

Josè and Santiago were business partners at Nuova Vita and were practically family now, which earned Josè privileged information, and we counted on them to uphold confidentiality.

They'd worked for Papa for the longest time, years before I was born, and were a part of the handful of people he could trust with his life. So, when I started feeling sick, I booked an appointment at their hospital without informing Papa.

“ E Santiago? ”

“Business trip.” Josè smiled warmly at the nurse stationed by the door, signaling her to leave. “We're setting up a branch in Philadelphia, and the process requires one of us to be present.”

“Congratulations. Nuova Vita is expanding, and that's a good thing.”

“Santiago deserves more accolades. He talked me into accepting it.”

“Good for you, then. You'll be reaping the benefits soon.”

I was genuinely happy about their progress, but the weight in my chest sank lower

when he leaned forward and handed me a slender sheet of white paper.

When I came here complaining of weird symptoms, including frequent nausea and fatigue, Josè encouraged me to get some tests done. Not bothering to ask him which tests, I followed his instructions and allowed the nurses to do their job.

And now, the results sat in my hand, as heavy as a ton of bricks.

Maybe it was because, even before unfolding the paper, I knew what it was. The only reason I drove to this clinic in the first place was to have someone falsify my fears.

I opened the paper and scanned the page, the words blurring together before snapping into sharp focus. And the information printed in black ink only confirmed my worst nightmare.

Pregnancy confirmed.

The room seemed to fade away. Doctor Josè was saying something, but it sounded like a muffled noise in the background. I couldn't quite hear it over the thunder of my own heartbeat.

“Leonora, are you alright?”

I was hyperventilating because I was, in fact, not alright. My fingernails were digging so hard into the armchair that I might have chipped a nail.

But it made sense, right?

I had mind-blowing, unbelievable, unprotected sex with Zver , watched him spill his hot seeds between my thighs, and blindly believed that I was safe and good to go on with my life without repercussions when we didn't use a condom, birth control pill,

or contraceptive.

Weeks later, I'd missed my period. I developed symptoms. The frigging signs flashed like traffic lights, but I ignored them and continued living in denial.

So, why the hell was I freaking out?

"Uh," I said, rising to my feet, struggling to keep the stinging tears at bay as I snatched my purse from the table. "I'm fine. It's just the shock of everything...."

I swear, I didn't want to cry. But talking to Josè suddenly reminded me of the only reason I knew him in the first place.

Dio mio .

Papa was going to kill me.

"Leonora." Josè was on his feet, trying to reach for me before I possibly stumbled, fell, and killed myself and the unborn child in the process. "Leonora, wait. You don't have to go through with it. We can discuss alternative options."

But I couldn't wait and knew Josè's professional alternative options would get my head rolling in cold blood faster than the actual news of the pregnancy if Papa or any other person from the clan found out.

I was out the door, yelling, "My father can't find out, Josè. I'm begging you," before anyone else could stop me.

Once I made it into the car, strapping myself tightly with the seatbelt, I threw my head on the wheel and busted into salty tears. The last time I really cried, with my entire soul and might, I was twelve. It was a trip to the beach with Papa. I built a

massive sandcastle, gigantic enough to win a prize. Then, Matteo, from out of nowhere, ran into it with someone's dog.

Dio mio.

What the heck had I gotten myself into? And what the hell was I going to do now?

Pregnant?

Jesus.

I couldn't be pregnant. Not now when my world was already a frigging mess, with Papa's health, the outfit trying to regain balance, the alliance, and Zver —

Rafayel's silent treatment was killing me now, more than ever, because...it was his frickin' seed in the first place. I carried his child in my womb without an iota of assurance that he'd even want me or accept it.

But damn him if he denied it!

He was my first, and only, and he knew it.

Still.

Papa's reaction was already scaring the shit out of me, and words hadn't even gotten to his ears yet. Even on his deathbed, there was no putting it past him to request for his Glock to shoot me himself. The child wasn't going to pain him. It was the child being of Russian blood that would spur him to send me to my maker. And worse, he hated Russians, but he specifically hated the Yezhovs more.

Moving the car out of the parking space, I wiped my eyes and tried to fish out any

light at the end of any helpful tunnel. There was none. The only option available was to keep my secret for as long as possible until I could flee the country.

Maybe under the guise of visiting Matteo in Europe.

Matteo wouldn't spill a secret unless Papa threatened him himself.

I gripped the wheel until my knuckles turned white. My thoughts were a swirling mess, and a strange sense of foreboding worsened the anxiety that I wouldn't make it to Europe before Papa found out.

I barely noticed the familiar streets blurring past me as I drove home.

Then, out of nowhere, a convoy of cars sped past me, cutting me off. Tires screeched, and my car came to an abrupt halt as they boxed me in. My heart dropped into my stomach, and sudden anger at everything quickened my pulse.

The last time an ambush like this happened, it was a frigging Yezhov who planned it. Ivan, to be precise.

As I kicked my legs out of the car, I swore under my breath. I was ready to beat the shit out of him this time if he thought this little game was going to scare me. There was already too much on my plate to deal with his shenanigans.

Some men clothed in coffee brown suits stepped out of the cars, one by one, each holding their guns close to their thighs. But I was still stomping the ground, too pissed to notice the familiarity of the air hanging over them, like freshly brewed espresso, the sweet tang of lemon trees, and the musky hint of aged stone, all blended together.

But my ignorance didn't get far when I heard them shouting at one another as more

men stepped out. Their voices were sharp and fast. Smoother, more...melodic.

I stopped, and my pulse quickened with more confusion than rage.

These men weren't Russian.

“Eccola!” There she is.

One of the men stepped forward, and I had to take a step back to look at him twice.

His sharp facial features seemed to have been crafted by the gods themselves from the finest Tuscan marble. Green eyes sparkled with a hint of mischief and an unmistakable allure.

My gaze dropped to a striking tattoo of a serpent coiled around a dagger adorning his left forearm, and though it was unfamiliar, I thought it meant something.

He wore a crisp white shirt with rolled-up sleeves, the fabric seemingly glowing with inner light, complemented by a pair of rich brown pants that hugged his lean physique. His polished Italian shoes, certainly crafted from the finest leather, added a touch of sophistication to his overall demeanor.

An air of danger seemed to swirl around him like a mist, but somehow, while I was surrounded by the heat of this Italian hunk, a nagging voice in my head announced that Rafayel was still a thousand times hotter.

He extended a hand. The hand with a serpent. Apparently, the fine man was a southpaw.

“Name's Luca. Luca Rossi. I'm sure you've heard about me because I sure as hell have heard marvelous things about you, Leo. And sembri ancora più radiosa di

persona .”

You’re more beautiful in person.

The Rossi clan. The same family trying to overthrow us—the same people who’d been tearing at the foundation of Papa’s empire.

When I didn’t shake his hand, his sharp, predatory smile only deepened.

“Ah, the rumors are true then. You’ve heard of me.”

Before I could step back, his hand shot out, grabbing me by the wrist and pulling me closer. Close enough to feel his breath brush against my ear when he leaned in.

I stiffened when he kissed the spot beneath my earlobe.

“I’ve had a crush on you for the longest time now, Leo. You give me wet dreams. You don’t know how many times I’ve thought about what it’ll feel like to fuck you.”

Cringe.

He was certainly deranged if he thought he’d even make it to first base with me. And everything he said made my skin crawl with utter disgust.

Swallowing the urge to spit on his face, I offered a phony smile. “Is that so? Shame, thoughts about you make me want to put a fucking hole in your head. The only crush I have on you, Rossi, is the desire to crush you to dust. Stronzo. ”

The sound of Luca’s laughter was akin to dragging spikes against steel. I clenched my teeth and hoped my ears wouldn’t bleed before he stopped.

And when he did, his grip on my wrist tightened.

“Such a shame, then. If you aren’t with me, you’re against me. And you know what that means. I’ll have to get rid of you.” His free hand trailed down my arm, stopping on the curve of my ass.

When he smacked me, it sent shivers of revulsion through me, and I wanted nothing more than to bash my head against his and punch him until all his teeth fell out.

But I stood no chance with all these men surrounding us.

“You and me? We could’ve joined hands, darling. Built something...explosive.” He was still talking. Still squeezing and brushing his lips below my ear.

God, he was as sickening as the words he spoke.

My stomach churned, but I refused to let him see my fear. Instead, I glared up at him, my voice sharper than I felt.

“You know what, Luca? I’d rather die than work with someone like you.”

He chuckled, low and dark, his grip tightening just enough to remind me who held the upper hand. “Oh, don’t worry.” He smirked. “That can be arranged.”

Once his grip on my wrist relaxed, I seized the opportunity to strike. With lightning-fast speed, I slipped my wrist free from his grasp and rotated my hips, generating torque for a powerful hook. My eyes locked onto Luca’s jawline, and in swift, fluid motion, I launched my hook, feeling the satisfying crunch of my knuckles connecting with his jaw.

The impact sent a shockwave through his entire body, and his head snapped to the

side, his green eyes widening in surprise. He didn't expect the attack.

He stumbled backward, and I quickly regained my footing, distributing my weight evenly between both feet. I was poised and ready to strike again, but his men raised their guns, yelling angrily in Italian. The noise grew louder, and their rage became more palpable.

I could taste the charged tension in the air and the heavy adrenaline running through my veins. But I had to stay put. If I moved even a finger, I'd be dead in a blink.

Luca staggered back to his feet, grinning like the maniac he was, with a hand raised to signal his men not to blast my head off.

"Did I tell you I like them feisty? Makes things spicier."

Movement from one of the men behind him distracted me, and I didn't see his fingers curl before flying toward my face. Pain wracked my left eye down to my jaw, and if I wasn't trained in these types of gimmicks, my neck could have snapped, for Christ's sake.

The blow was solid, sending me flying backward without time to find a soft landing spot. Luckily, I twirled, falling on my backside and using my hips and arms as cushions to gauge the impact.

My heart raced fast, my pulse thrummed, and I felt those waterworks springing to my eyes again.

You're stronger than this, Leo.

I summoned the courage, deciding not to leave a moment for an attack. Springing to my feet, I ran back to my car without looking back. And though they didn't spring up

a fight or try to chase me down, the glare in Luca's eyes told me this fight, and our encounter, was far from over.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:06 pm

Between dealing with the mess some idiot called Rocky caused with cops at the casino and trying to track down some amateur gang that tampered with one of our safe houses, my afternoon had been shit.

Now, there was some other disaster to take care of. Apparently, a sparring session gone wrong between two grown-ass men. The ring was chaos, and while the rest of the men stood by the sidelines observing the chaos as though it was just another sport, Maxim waved his gun in the air and gave a clear aim at Vasili's head.

Beads of sweat ran rivulets down his back, from his bare torso to his shorts, and he looked mad, with a crazed look in his eyes. This wasn't the first time I'd witnessed Maxim's fuse blown to shards, and that was why most of the men preferred keeping their distance.

Today, however, the ring was a battleground between two of my best field soldiers, and the others were enthused spectators.

"I swear, I'm going to fucking blow your head off," Maxim roared loudly in Russian.

Vasili spat and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "Put the gun down and fight like a real man, bastard."

The tough guy didn't look the least perturbed, and at the corner, I caught Tikhon watching with an equally indifferent expression. He had hard eyes fixed on the two hyperactive men, one hand tucked across his chest and the other lifting a cigarette to his lips. He must have sensed me watching because his eyes met mine, and he walked around the ring to join me.

None of the others had noticed me yet, and I didn't plan to reveal myself until I figured out what the hell was going on.

At the same time, Maxim tossed his gun to one of the new recruits outside the ring, and Vasili seized the chance to deliver a clean right hook to his jaw, which sent him sprawling. The walls echoed with the sound of knuckles connecting with flesh, and a splash of red flowed from Maxim's nose and mouth.

"That was fucking dirty," Tikhon commented beside me and blew out smoky clouds from his mouth. I agreed. But Vasili preferred playing dirty. It'd always been his style.

"She's a fucking slut like the rest of them, bastard," Vasili barked, dealing another blow to Maxim's right rib without giving him a chance to recover. Then, he dealt another and another, smashing the same side until we thought Maxim's rib cage was going to cave in.

With a frown, I faced Tikhon. "This shit is about a woman?"

He didn't look at me, but his lips curved with the smallest smile. "This shit is about Vasili fucking Maxim's sister."

"Shit."

We both laughed. If that was the case, Maxim wouldn't stay down for very long, and that would mean Vasili had hell to pay. It was going to be a tough match but an interesting watch, and at least one of them would suffer more broken bones and bruised joints.

It also meant money could be made.

Watching the two of them go at it, clawing at each other with bones snapping and crimson saliva flying everywhere, I told Tikhon, “Five hundred bucks on Maxim.”

“Not today.” Tikhon shook his head. “Six hundred bucks on Vasili. He’s going to beat the shit out of him.”

“Means you’re on his side for fucking his sister?”

We weren’t big on morals, especially not when we thrived on fostering the very mechanisms that cut corners around that foundation. But hurting or taking advantage of family stirred a blood thirst. And I was big on that.

When Tikhon looked at me with a smirk on his lips, I knew the bastard had a secret of his own. “Works at a flower shop on weekdays and a call girl in Nevada on weekends. Crazy how Maxim only just figured it out. I’m not on Vasili’s side, but I’ve fucked the girl. More than a dozen of our men know she tastes like strawberries.”

I didn’t need more details. Shaking my head, I rolled my eyes and looked back to the ring to see Vasili straddling Maxim’s lap, dealing his blows from the left cheek to the right and back again.

But I was curious about Tikhon’s choice. “Why Vasili then?”

He shrugged with a shoulder. “Easy. Maxim’s distracted by emotions. He cares a great deal about her, you know? She’s the only family he’s got left, and she’s his soft spot. That means he’s fighting with his heart. Vasili, on the other hand, has got everything in place. His cock’s in his shorts; his head’s screwed on the right, and, see—watch that swing. Did you see that? He’s playing dirty, but he’s calculated every fucking....”

Tikhon’s explanation faded amid grunts and loud Russian curses from angry men. I

began to feel a strange connection to this charade.

Speaking of women, their mania was a welcomed distraction to rampant thoughts of the Italian princess who constantly plagued my mind for weeks.

I'd done my part: I kept my distance. There were no on-site meetings, messages, or other such activities. The problem was that I wished I hadn't.

Nothing was as challenging as keeping my fingers to myself when they itched to grab the phone and just call her. I wanted to see her again, to know what she was doing, every single minute of every fucking day. When I conquered that desire and kept my hands to myself, it didn't matter what business I had going on; I had a hard time concentrating.

Was this obsession?

I didn't know, couldn't tell. There was no woman on the planet who could boast of having such an effect. One night meant one night. The next morning, I wouldn't even remember what her titties looked like. I'd be out that door in seconds without feeling some magnetic pull that made me want to look over my shoulder to make sure she was secure.

It happened that morning, when I left Leonora sleeping peacefully on that bed.

Her voice. I thought I needed to hear it again, this time moaning my name in my fucking ears while I fucked her on my bed. Or better yet, feel her fingers in my hair. I liked it when she kissed me and acknowledged my scar with her lips, too. The thought of her moving on with another man, curling around his arm like she did mine, was like driving a torch through my chest. It fucking burned.

Christ. Fuck. I knew what this was, this seemingly unquenchable fire that blazed

when I thought of her: fucking attraction.

My phone buzzed in my pocket. I pulled it out, thinking it was Andrei. The man might just have telepathic powers to know when to burst my bubble.

It wasn't.

I turned my back to the growing bloodbath on the ring, pressing the phone to my ear to mute out the noise. "Any news?"

The rapid tapping of keys echoed over the phone before Urvan's low voice came through. "Yes. Bad. She's in trouble."

Knowing I couldn't have her didn't mean I couldn't keep my eyes on her. It just didn't have to be my eyes. Urvan was the best private investigator I'd hired for the job. Some days, I knew what she had for breakfast, her routine before she went to her father's estate, the last person she spoke to before turning in for bed, and, most importantly, how close Marco stayed by her side.

Urvan wasn't done talking, and that was the only reason I hadn't sprang into action yet. Red clouded my vision, and rage simmered beneath my skin. When Urvan mentioned Rossi, I frowned, and beside me, Tikhon noticed. He looked away from the match, keeping his eyes on me.

"Send me her location now."

The call dropped, and Tikhon stayed glued to my side. "Problem with Rocky?"

Fuck Rocky. I couldn't answer Tikhon, mainly because my mind was screwed, and the English words in my brain were fried. When I spoke, my anger flowed in Russian, and it was directed at the two lunatics in the ring who were still going at each other.

Vasili was roaring and gesticulating wildly with his arms. “Maybe if you took good care of her and provided for her needs, she wouldn’t have to be sucking cocks for a living. Did ya ever think about that?”

“Son of a—”

Maxim dived in for a kill, and I chose that moment to show myself.

“Enough!”

There was some bitching from the other men when the fighters paused and turned to me, breathing fast and heavy.

The muscles in my body burned with a rage I was not accustomed to. I was not only attracted to Leo, but I felt protective of her, too. And needed to get to her immediately with the help of these clowns. If they didn’t get the fuck out of there, I was going to pummel the shit out of both of them.

“You.” I glared at Maxim, ignoring his swollen face shining with blood and sweat. “I don’t fucking care if he screwed your sister ten different ways up to Mars. Get the fuck out here, and have the men moving to the location I’ll send you. Vasili, you’re with Tikhon. Stick with him and do whatever shit he tells you to.”

“Yes, Boss.”

They glared at each other before dragging their bruised bodies out of the ring. Between them, Maxim had it worse. There were swollen red and purple patches everywhere on his body. He winced and limped while flexing his jaw as he cleared the floor.

And before we legged it toward the door with the rest of the men, Tikhon leaned in

with a smugness I wanted to wipe off his face. “It’s the girl, isn’t it?”

Glaring at him, I didn’t answer.

But Tikhon was feeling awfully excited because he wasn’t deterred. Leaning in again, he stretched his hand out and flexed it. “You owe me six hundred bucks, Zver .”

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:06 pm

Rapid and urgent knocking on the glass startled the shit out of me, and when I raised my head, I didn't expect to see Rafayel and Tikhon, and a bunch of other men, breathing heated fogs down my window.

Rafayel pulled back, only to say something to Tikhon that I couldn't catch on to, before leaning back in and motioning that I wind the glass down. I unclamped my palms and touched my head, chest, and shoulders before rolling the glass down.

The look in his eyes was unbelievable. "Were you...were you praying?"

"No. It was the Shadow Clone Jutsu."

He couldn't be more baffled. "What?"

I shook my head. "Never mind." I was going to pretend that my heart wasn't racing a thousand miles per hour at the sight of him, with his head lowered through my window. "The question should be, what are you doing here?"

"Saving you, that's what. And you're welcome."

Once in a while, there were times I had visions, more like flashbacks, of a woman talking to me, smiling down on me, and putting my palms together, then drawing signs of the cross. I'd hear her whisper in my ears that whenever I got scared or felt alone, I should do what she'd shown me, and I'd feel better. Her voice was calm and soothing, like birds chirping over the rush of a waterfall.

I never saw her face clearly. A blinding light always shone behind her, like the harsh

rays of the golden sun, leaving nothing but her laughter and smile for me to hold onto.

Sometimes, I'd thought she was a figment of my imagination, a dream, or a reflash from a movie I'd seen, until a few days after I'd turned thirteen and saw an old photograph of the exact same woman in Papa's room. She was beautiful and looked happy, flung over Papa's shoulder, clad in a red polka-dotted bikini. She had jet-black hair resembling silk cascading down her back and piercing green eyes that reached the depths of my soul, with fair skin holding an unearthly glow like an angel.

I'd shown Papa, and he almost scorched me with deathly glares. He never talked about her. But our oldest maid knew who she was and how she was murdered in her sleep, the night of her and Papa's marriage anniversary by a rival syndicate, four years after she gave birth to me.

So, yes, I'd been praying because—I'll admit—I got scared and felt alone, and it made me feel closer to my mother. Because I wasn't prepared to face the reality of being pregnant or an encounter with Luca fricken' Rossi. Because today had been the shittiest day, and I wasn't sure how much longer my strength could hold on.

But shit, I didn't expect an answer that fast. And I certainly didn't expect my mother to send Rafayel as comfort.

But here he was, so I had to deal with him.

One of his men came up to his side and muttered something about the area being clear and Rossi not in sight. The man looked badly beaten, with patches of blood smeared over the skull tattoos on his arms.

Rafayel faced me. "Get out of the car."

“And why the hell would I do that?”

His eyes darkened when he sneered. “Because I said so. Now’s not the time to be fucking stubborn, Leonya. You’re riding with me, and Tikhon will follow behind us in your car,” was all he said before stepping aside, waiting for me to open the door. His tone left no room for an argument, and I didn’t even have the strength to start one.

Quietly, I snatched my purse and opened the door.

“I’m going to fucking kill him.”

Rafayel spoke in Russian, but I heard him loud and clear, so I looked up from the doctor applying ointment on my face and asked him, “Why?”

Why did he want to kill Luca?

But the stubborn man didn’t answer me. He still had the killer look in his eyes and was looking everywhere else but my face.

As far as I was concerned, Papa and I were the ones with the major Rossi problem. He was on our turf, so we were responsible for taking care of him. I didn’t understand why Rafayel had his men search the area to hunt down Rossi, and I sure as hell didn’t know why it wouldn’t have bothered me if Rafayel put a bullet or two in his head.

The stone-faced, silver-haired man, whose name I’d learned was Grigor, adjusted his jacket, fixed his briefcase and first aid kit, and backed away from me. “The wounds on her hands will heal soon. She just grazed her skin. Plenty of rest and consistently applying that ointment, and she’ll be good as new.”

He was talking to Rafayel in more Russian, speaking indistinctly in hushed tones. And when he started leaving, I waited for the door to close behind his back before I faced him and asked again. “Why do you want to kill him?”

“Why?” His anger was misfiring. It was intended for the other Italian, but I got the brunt of his scowl. “Have you seen your fucking face?”

Crazy, wasn’t it? Barely two months ago, this same man had me bound to an iron chair with a knife pressed to my throat, ready to kill me if he had to, and now he wanted to snap someone’s neck for touching me.

“I can handle my own shit, thank you very much.”

“Sure, with your Shadow Clone Jutsu, right? And why the fuck were you alone? Something could have happened to you out there.”

“Yeah, like another encounter with Rossi. I mean, what’s the worst that could happen, right?”

“You think this is a joke?”

“Do you see me laughing?”

Now, he looked madder and spoke with more aggression than before. “I don’t know, you tell me, because, at one glance, you look normal and okay in the head. But then you’re taking lone trips to hospitals and shutting yourself in your car by the roadside after a rival spins a surprise ambush on you. Does any of that sound normal to you?”

I started to respond, ready to yell his ear off for questioning my sanity, when his words replayed in his head, on repeat, and anger flared up in my veins when I realized. “How dare you? How dare you stalk me?”

“While you’re fucking yelling, remember it helped me find you in the first place.”

“Who asked you to find me? Who told you I needed your help?”

It was a shouting match now, regardless of who heard us outside those doors. He didn’t care, and I sure didn’t give a fuck either.

“How could I forget? You’re an ungrateful bitch.”

Ouch?

“And you’re an arrogant, narcissistic bastard! Fucking asshole.”

“Whatever you say.” There was a small smile dancing on his lips, like he was enjoying this. “Doesn’t change the fact that you’re with me right now.”

I glared because the rest of my words dried on my tongue. He was right, and I remembered why I was here in his house, lying on his bed in the first place.

When I looked again, it felt like years since the last time I saw him, although he looked the same. Maybe even more handsome than before. Now, in the light, I saw him more clearly. Tonight, he wore a simple pale grey shirt that clung to the ridges of his torso and black slacks that I considered sexy. His hair wasn’t gelled back like I expected it to be. It was more tousled, like he’d forked his fingers through it multiple times. Like he was stressed.

There were worry lines between his brows, small eye bags underneath those beautiful dark irises of his, and a constant frown on his lips. Somehow, this familiar image of him calmed my racing heart...and kickstarted the waterworks all over again.

He’d gotten a doctor to take care of me, had one of his maids prepare dinner for me,

and ordered one of his men to wash my car because I'd driven it into a muddy puddle. I wasn't sure how to handle all of this.

And like a broken dam, I let everything out again. Nose running, shoulders quaking, tears rolling—all of it. And it freaked him out, too. I noticed the instant tightness in his shoulders and the crease between his eyes, like he didn't know what to do. But I knew what to do and what I desperately wanted to do.

I leaned forward and wrapped my arms around his torso, burying my head deep into his chest. His scent hit me, forcing out more tears. God, I'd missed him. This was completely insane, but I'd missed this man so frigging much. And when he wrapped his arms around me and pulled me closer, I thought I would die from all the fuzzies floating up to my head.

"I swear, I didn't know what to do. Everything was...everything just—my walls felt like they were caving in on me, and I couldn't escape even if I tried." It was an honest admission, one I couldn't even admit to myself. I hardly remembered the last time anything frightened me, leaving me cornered and helpless.

I sniffled on his shirt, but he didn't seem to mind. "I was so scared, Rafa."

He tensed, and I cursed under my breath. Shit. Where the hell did that come from? I called him Rafa. Rafa!

"Shh, you're safe now. I'm not going to let anyone hurt you. If they try, I'll fucking kill them with my bare hands."

I knew he wasn't bluffing.

We stayed like that in each other's arms for a while, quiet and brooding. Being with him like this was absurdly warm and indeed made me feel safe and protected, like I

was exactly where I should be.

Rafayel stroked the back of my hair with a gentle caress that warmed its way down my spine. And when he pressed a soft kiss against my forehead, my toes curled under the blanket.

“I like hearing that.” His voice was low. And it was his own honest admission. “I like hearing you call me Rafa.”

I pulled back because the sudden urge to have his lips on my mouth clouded the rest of my thoughts.

I could have stayed with him that way for years and not wanted to pull away, but that nagging voice in the back of my head reminded me that this was wrong— very wrong. And it hit me: the memory of the paper in my hand in Josè’s office.

I was pregnant for this man, this full-blooded Russian male, who was, unfortunately, a Yezhov. Who was, unfortunately, a man Papa would never accept. Any association with him, besides business, was doomed from the start. These moments shouldn’t even be happening.

We were allies now, but how long was that going to last? Papa wanted them crushed to dust, and he wanted me to do it. We were rivals, enemies, destined to hate each other until the end of time.

Hugging this man and crying on his chest couldn’t even be a dream. Wanting—desiring to kiss him should have been a nightmare.

God.

I needed to leave here now.

“What—where the fuck do you think you’re going?”

I didn’t look him in the face. If I did, I’d be crying again, and those tears would have nothing to do with being scared. It would be tears of loss because, somehow, leaving this man made my heart stretch until it felt like it was ripping apart. Like paper dumped in a shredder.

“My father,” I choked out the only excuse I could give, holding back a lungful of tears while I painfully picked up my purse. “My father needs me. I need to go.”

The reverse was true. I needed Papa. Despite his illness, he had to know everything that had happened between me and Rafayel. I wasn’t sure how much longer the secret would stay with me.

Rafayel wasn’t convinced, but he didn’t press further. “Tikhon will take you home, and Vasili will follow from a distance in your car, just in case there’s someone on your tail.”

“Rafa....”

I did it again.

His lips made the slightest twitch when he came up to me. He moved his hands to my face like he wanted to touch me but withdrew like he had second thoughts. A shutter closed over his eyes, leaving them cold and unreadable before he walked to the door and said over his shoulders, “I’m not in the mood to argue with you. Tikhon’s taking you home, and that’s final.”

Tikhon took me home as Zver instructed, and except for the occasional heavy stares

he gave through the rearview mirror, he remained silent throughout the ride. He stopped a few meters away from the gate of Papa's estate, and I switched cars with the man called Vasili before driving the rest of the way to the house.

No one saw the Russians, and it was good that they didn't.

Marco stood by the entrance, his greeting unusually quiet. Something was cloudy and undecipherable in his eyes.

"Marco. Stai bene?"

"Benvenuta, senorita."

I eyed him, but the man was as solid as a wall. He didn't give anything away. "Si." His eyes flitted back and forth from the door to my face. He lifted a brow. "What's that?"

I wasn't going to tell Marco before informing Papa, so I made something up. "Ran into another car on the track and bashed my face against the wheel. I had Josè look at it—" If Rafayel could have me followed, anyone else could have their eyes on me. Including Papa, "and he says I'll be fine. Nothing to worry about."

Marco wasn't buying it. If I were him, I wouldn't have bought it either. But he moved aside, still wearing that uncomfortable grimace. And it was suspicious as hell.

"Want to tell me why Papa's got you doing patrol outside?"

"He's got a visitor in the study and wants me to keep an eye out."

I looked behind my shoulder but didn't see any unusual car parked in the shed. They were all Mercedes, black and shiny, except for my Audi, which was sitting pretty by

the fountain.

“A visitor. Interesting.”

“Leo....”

Knowing Marco, he was going to say something to deter me and give Papa privacy with his guest. But this couldn't wait. I had to speak with him. I marched up to his study with the announcement on the tip of my tongue. I didn't care if his visitor heard. This was a code-red situation.

“Papa, I was attacked by Rossi,” was the first thing I said once I breezed through the door, slamming it behind my back.

“ Principessa .”

Papa was in a wheelchair, looking up at the tall man standing at the edge of his gleaming desk. His eyes met mine through the man's lean physique, slightly blocking the full view. From where I stood, I saw the scarlet spots of blood on his shirt, and I thought I recognized his jawline.

“I know.” Papa wheeled his chair back behind the desk.

And when the man turned around, grinning, my heart sank to my stomach.

He raised his left hand, the one with the dark serpent coiled around the dagger, and waved. “Hi, again.”

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:06 pm

The first thing I did when I shut the door was toss my jacket and tie and march up to my study to fish out a bottle of the Shipwreck Heidsieck . Then, I put it back and went for the vodka. I lined up two glasses, cursed under my breath, and returned one.

I kicked my head back to chug down the full glass. It burned down my throat in a good way, but it wasn't the best distraction. She wasn't even present, but her absence screwed with my senses all the same. The lack of concentration became worse. My thoughts were frequently drifting to Leonora. And today, when I accidentally remembered the bruises on her face from last night, I suppressed the pressure to hunt down Rossi myself.

I swallowed another glassful. And when it didn't burn hot enough, I chucked the glass at the door, and it shattered on impact. Taking the bottle to my mouth, tiny shards of glass crunched under my shoes as I stomped off to the bedroom.

"Varya, I need you to clean up the mess in the study!" I shouted over my shoulder before slamming the door shut and collapsing on the bed.

Fucking hell.

How was it possible that my fingers itched badly to touch her, hold her, fuck her? I wanted to watch her quiver, desired for her to moan into my mouth. But then, it was more than just the thrill of using her perfect body. I wanted to keep her, to protect her from bastards like Rossi. I wanted her to be mine in every fucking sense of the word.

Ally or not, this attraction thing was growing stronger, like a madness that grew more unstable as time passed by. Did I trust her? Fuck no. There was no ounce of trust in

that one. I also wished I'd never laid eyes on her from the start. Don't know what the bloody hell got into me when I kissed her on that track like a hungry maniac, or brought her back home for a drink.

A drink. Ha! If my brother could see me now, he'd testify that I'd only gotten sicker in the head. For a woman. Jesus.

I was a mess.

I'd done it anyway. I crossed the lines with her, stalked her, and ran after her when she was in trouble. I was starting to be convinced that this was a case of bad obsession, but living in denial wasn't going to hurt anyone.

I dropped the half-empty bottle, kicked off my shoes, and headed straight for the shower. But it didn't work. Not when the water was ice cold or scalding hot. I grabbed my cock, closed my eyes, and succumbed to the rage of the confusing war going on in my head. I welcomed the image of her naked body and legs spread on my bed. I thrust my hips at the glistening sight of her dripping pink pussy taking in all of me. My nails dug hard against the wall when her lips brushed the scar on my eyebrow, and her tits brushed my chest. And a seizure-like vibration rippled through my core when her lips touched mine.

After ten minutes of miserably jacking off, I washed my load off the wall and went back to the room, dripping wet and more frustrated at the stagnant energy inside of me.

Vodka didn't work, smashing something didn't work, and a shower didn't work. Maybe breaking a few noses here and there would.

No doubt, Tikhon and some of the men were already smashing faces at the boxing gym. And I knew the lot of them would jump at an opportunity to spar with me, to try

and prove they could beat me. I could do with those, whether or not they could handle the load I needed to get off.

I was halfway through slipping on a t-shirt and a pair of sweats when Varya knocked once on the door and voiced that my cousin was in the parlor waiting for me. Which cousin, she didn't say. But if it was Andrei, I'd willingly take him on right there to vent. Partially, my decision to stay away from her was his fucking fault. If he hadn't come along, putting those rational thoughts in my head, I'd have her bent over on my desk by now, possibly with her pants down and ass up, ready for me.

Christ. I needed to get a fucking grip. Worse, every thought about yearning for the softness of another woman died like wilting grass. Leonora was the only woman I wanted.

I descended the stairs in seconds. As it turned out, today was Andrei's lucky day.

Ivan sat on one of the couches with a brown envelope in his hands and his elbows propped up on his knees. I frowned. He looked different, surprisingly mature. Gone were his casual all-the-time party or racing clothes. Now, he wore a dark blue suit, looking like a serious-minded young man with important business to attend to.

When his eyes landed on me, he jumped to his feet, shakily wiping a hand on the back of his pants.

“Privyet.”

I gave his clothes another once-over, raising a questioning brow. “Missed your turn?”

“What?”

“I'm asking If you missed your turn.” I sat on the armrest on one of the sofas, and

when he didn't catch on, I added, "For your job interview."

He looked at his outfit and laughed, but it sounded forced. "Oh, actually, no. I didn't miss it. I got the job as a computer analyst at Charleston's four months ago."

"Hm. Not bad."

"Da . Not bad at all."

"I didn't know. Congratulations."

"Yeah, you didn't. Especially not after I told you about it and you said, 'Fuck off Ivan, I'm not in the mood. I have more important shit to handle, a drop to monitor in twenty minutes and a meeting with Santana.'"

"Do I remember that?"

"Do you?" Without the slight twitching of his eyebrows giving it away that he was pissed, his poker face was a tight mask. "Doesn't matter. I got it; you were busy."

"If you got it, why do you look like you want to lay one on me?"

"Because you're an asshole sometimes?"

Smirking, I folded my arms over my chest. I liked it when this kid was feisty. It reminded me a lot of when I was younger and constantly irritating the shit out of my brother. "You came all the way down here to call me an asshole."

"Not necessarily. But I'm glad I got it in. I'm here because I have something you want to see."

“A receipt of your new toy? What is it this time? An Aston Martini?” I was picking on him, and while it was a small routine between us anytime I saw his face, today’s irritation wasn’t entirely his fault.

“Rafa, I’m not fucking around. It’s about the alliance with the Italians. You’ve been blindsided.”

“Blindsided, you say.” The smirk fell off my face. “And how would you know that? What do you know about the alliance? The last time I checked, if I recall correctly, you wanted nothing to do with this shit, or am I wrong? What made you get bored of your race tracks and nightclubs?”

“I’m not bored,” he clarified sternly. “Not like you understand any of that shit, but I care; there’s a difference. I might not be in the loop to know every detail, but I’ve got ears and eyes open, Rafa. You have me at arms-length, but you’re family. This is family. When I heard about the alliance with the Italians, I didn’t like it one fucking bit. Especially because that bitch was involved—”

The bitch being Leonora. Even now, as Ivan spoke, his face contorted with so much disgust and rage I knew how much he hated her.

And he didn’t know how hard I restrained myself from beating him to a pulp until he needed a hospital.

“—they were going to betray us somehow, one way or the other, because that’s what they are—fucking snakes.”

“Get to the fucking point!”

Ivan flinched, coming out from the haze of his anger to see the promise of murder in my eyes if he kept talking. He handed me the envelope and continued speaking while

I ripped the brown paper to take out the pictures.

My blood ran cold when I recognized the two men in the photograph, and for the tiniest split of a second, my beating heart missed a step. I eyed Ivan over the pictures, and the look on his face said it all; this was not a fucking joke. It wasn't doctored or tampered with. His intentions were good, and that was all the fuel I needed to stoke the fire blazing like an inferno inside my chest.

“They said they needed you to help them fight off Rossi. So why's Enzo meeting him frequently? You're not asking me, but I'll tell you. Leo, Luca, Enzo. Bad combination for the Bratva. They could have only had one reason for this alliance, Rafa: to rip you from the inside out.”

I knew what he was going to say next but didn't want to hear it.

Ivan said it anyway.

“She's playing with you, Boss.”

And that confirmed what I'd already known from the beginning.

Fuck her.

Fuck all women.

Not one of them could be trusted. Not anyone really.

I grabbed my phone, putting Tikhon on speed dial. “Rafa—”

“I need Leonora's IP address and her exact location right fucking now.”

Chapter 16 – Leonora

“Hi, again.”

Like a tree rooted in the soil, I stayed put. I was too stunned to speak, too angry to move. Papa was just seated there. With more gray hair scattered on his head and littered among the scruff on his jaw, he appeared frailer than he was at the last minute. His body slouched on the wheelchair, and the glow in his eyes was dull and tired. But he was smiling. Smiling because of whatever he’d discussed with this so-called visitor in the room.

“You.” I finally found my voice, but it lacked the strength I needed to confront him. “What are you doing here? Papa, why is he here?”

“Sit down, principessa .”

“But Papa—”

“Fucking sit down, Leonora. Goddamn it.” Papa dragged his hand down his eyes, and I obeyed, but only because he started coughing again.

I looked between Luca and Papa. This was a dream. This wasn’t happening. And if Papa thought I was just going to sit down without saying a word in the same room with the man who had the nerve to punch me in the face, he had another thing coming.

Papa had to know one of his children inherited a full dose of his stubbornness.

“I’m sitting, Papa. Now, I need to know what the hell is going on and why this man is here.”

“This man , principessa,” he pointed a shaky finger to a grinning Luca, “ E il Messia.
”

He is the messiah.

Papa’s illness had worsened. That was the only possible explanation for whatever lunacy he was experiencing now. Maybe he didn’t understand, or maybe the sickness affected his vision.

“Papa, the man you’re pointing at is Luca Rossi,” I pointed out. “As in the Rossi capo that has sought tirelessly to overthrow you and bring everything you’ve worked hard to build to ruin. You’re entering him with warmth and tequila.”

After my announcement, I expected Papa to frown, rain thunder on everyone, and order Marco to bundle the man to the basement and chop his fingers for daring to enter his home. I expected this sudden nightmare to end.

But nothing changed, and Papa’s crooked smile stayed intact.

“Again, my girl, I know. I apologize on his behalf about your face, though I know you’re stronger than a few cuts and bruises. He couldn’t blow his cover. Not yet, anyway.”

“Blow his cover—what do you mean, blow his cover, Papa?” I was trying not to hyperventilate because, somehow, Papa knew I was smart enough to put the pieces together. And I was putting the frigging pieces together. “Papa, Rossi. Is. The. Enemy. E-N-E-M-Y.”

“Try questioning my intelligence again, principessa . I dare you.” Papa’s warning was stern.

“Mi dispiace, Papa.”

I’m sorry, Papa.

But cut to the chase and frigging tell me already.

“The Colombos and Rossis have deep ties from our home, Leo. The bond of Italia is stronger than any other alliance, and the Rossis have proven to be useful in creating paths and structures for us back at home. We have relied on each other for decades now, lending helping hands to each other.”

Why was this revelation hurting like a bitch? I narrowed my eyes at Papa. “And I had absolutely no idea about this because?”

“That was the plan, Leo. Currently, the plan is underway to help the Rossis make a mark here in the United States. They need the recognition and influence, and we can make that happen. Scratch my back, and I scratch yours. You shouldn’t get mad. It was my idea to create a facade and send word out that the Rossis were our enemies. That way, when we presented a proposal to the Russians for an alliance, our story would be believable. The Yezhovs are power-hungry fools. They would have only considered their benefits without bothering to do background research.”

That was what Papa thought. However, I selfishly believed that Rafayel agreed to that proposal in the first place because of me. He hadn’t said anything to put such an idea in my head, but my intuition was hardly ever wrong.

“In reality, we are brothers. And as brothers, we will take down those damn Russians.” Papa smiled.

“Your papa trusts me. You should, too. You know we will achieve so much if we work together as a team.”

I looked at Luca with every intention of breaking his pretty face. He thought I'd quickly forget that he assaulted me in the presence of his men only hours ago. Newsflash: I didn't forget. I was never going to forget. Papa trusted him because we shared Italian blood, and, of course, money was involved. But I looked beyond his handsome front and saw the devil behind the mask.

I hated him. My entire being, mind, and soul loathed his existence.

“Fuck you, Rossi. And Papa—”

The second I was old enough to understand the life I'd been born into, I accepted it with no complaints or Cinderella wishes that my world would change. No. I embraced every inch of it in its raw form. I embraced Papa and my brother and cousins—every single one of them, with their flaws and imperfections. But I owed my bravado to Papa because, in the midst of the darkness surrounding us, he managed to shield us, protect us, and love us the best way he could.

In the hysteria and chaos, my own world was normal. I boasted proudly anywhere and to anyone that Papa was a good father. With Matteo and me, he played fair. He celebrated our birthdays, placed our desires as paramount, and made us his priorities.

But every good thing must come to an end, they say.

As I stared at the man I thought I knew all my life, that gloating dissipated to nothingness.

“—you used me. I can't believe this. You consented to this asshole punching me in the face because he couldn't afford to blow his cover. What—what the actual hell, Papa? You took advantage of my ignorance and used me as a pawn in your game. And for that, I'm greatly disappointed.”

Papa frowned at me, and, for the first time ever, I saw the man people feared—the real Enzo Colombo, without a sliver of emotion or concern.

“Don’t you dare go soft on me, Leo. Get rid of those fucking emotions and focus. This tactic was necessary. Now we have the Russians in our palms and can infiltrate with ease. Principessa, I’m doing this for us. My legacy can and will not end. By the Rossis’ side, you both will lead our people, Colombo and Rossi united. Uno Italia.”

“No! Did you say you did this for us?” I jumped to my feet like there were hot coals everywhere. I was suffocating. And those walls? They were caving in again, and the chances of finding an escape were slimmer. “No, Papa! No Uno Italia shit. You’re doing this for yourself.”

“Leo.”

“NO! I’m not hearing it. It’s Enzo Colombo’s legacy. Not the Rossis’. Not the Russians’. It’s ours, Papa.” It took all of my strength left in me not to break down in tears like an emotional wreck. “I’m not doing it. I’m not staying here and listening to this crap. This is not about being emotional. This is about you playing with me like I mean nothing to you. You betrayed me, Papa. You—”

“Leonora!” Now was the time Papa thundered. “I am dying, can’t you see? Look at me.”

I was looking at him, but I couldn’t recognize him.

“My time’s running up, and securing your future and our legacy is a priority. Luca is the most suitable match and will do well to bring us to unity. Your marriage to him will solidify the alliance between both families. And I’m not leaving you with a choice. This is my decision.”

His final wish. And Papa's wishes were always final.

Just when I thought it couldn't get any worse, Papa decided now was the right time to talk about unity.

Marriage to Luca Rossi. Not now, not ever.

Every part of me burned with hatred as I glared at Luca. Smug and certain, he looked at me like he'd already won. It made my stomach churn, and with the way he had his eyes pinned on me, subtly raking down my body, the man's intentions were pure evil.

I'd rather bite off my own arm than marry the bastard.

The propelling urge to cry and laugh hit me at the same time. I ran away from Rafayel's arms because I thought being there with him was a nightmare. Meanwhile, this was the nightmare. Coming back to Papa had to be the biggest mistake of my life.

I couldn't find the words.

My hands trembled at my sides as my thoughts raced.

Rafayel.

Our baby.

What about my baby?

Papa was dead serious about this arrangement with Luca, which meant that my baby could not be in the picture.

Would I have to.... No. No. I didn't want to think about it. I wouldn't let them take

this from me, too. The raging storm building up inside wasn't just about Zver's seed inside me; it was everything. Papa's manipulative games. This absurd marriage proposal. The suffocating weight of expectations that had probably been crushing me for as long as I could remember, and I never really noticed. And now, it was too much.

I needed to get out of here.

Away from that dipshit, Luca. Away from Papa. Away from all of it.

My shoes thudded sharply against the marble floor as I backed away. "I can't do this."

"Leonora!"

"Mi dispiace , Papa, but I just can't think right now."

Turning around, I bolted toward the door and to my car, which was still sitting by the fountain. Marco still stood there, not even trying to stop me. For that, I was grateful.

The sharp, cold air outside hit me like a slap, but it did little to clear my mind. I jumped into my car, strapping my seatbelt, and fumbled with my hands to start the engine.

Déjà vu.

I was back here again, in this dark hole Rafayel had saved me from barely a moment ago. Only, the hole was a lot darker this time, with louder voices screaming at me.

Rubber burned against asphalt as I pulled away. My heart was pounding so loud that I felt it in my eardrums. I didn't know where I was going, only that I needed to get far,

far away.

The road blurred ahead of me as I fought to suppress the tears threatening to spill, and I remembered how Rafayel found me in the first place. Even if Papa didn't care, my mother did. She would probably never know, but not having her in my life spurred me to make something of my life. To fill the shoes Matteo and Papa needed at the time, even if they didn't know it.

I lifted two fingers to my head, then my chest, then to my shoulders, and finally to my lips.

This madness wasn't over—not by a long shot. But Papa was right about one thing.

I was a lot stronger than a few cuts and bruises.

Chapter 15 – Rafayel

The first thing I did when I shut the door was toss my jacket and tie and march up to my study to fish out a bottle of the Shipwreck Heidsieck . Then, I put it back and went for the vodka. I lined up two glasses, cursed under my breath, and returned one.

I kicked my head back to chug down the full glass. It burned down my throat in a good way, but it wasn't the best distraction. She wasn't even present, but her absence screwed with my senses all the same. The lack of concentration became worse. My thoughts were frequently drifting to Leonora. And today, when I accidentally remembered the bruises on her face from last night, I suppressed the pressure to hunt down Rossi myself.

I swallowed another glassful. And when it didn't burn hot enough, I chucked the glass at the door, and it shattered on impact. Taking the bottle to my mouth, tiny shards of glass crunched under my shoes as I stomped off to the bedroom.

“Varya, I need you to clean up the mess in the study!” I shouted over my shoulder before slamming the door shut and collapsing on the bed.

Fucking hell.

How was it possible that my fingers itched badly to touch her, hold her, fuck her? I wanted to watch her quiver, desired for her to moan into my mouth. But then, it was more than just the thrill of using her perfect body. I wanted to keep her, to protect her from bastards like Rossi. I wanted her to be mine in every fucking sense of the word.

Ally or not, this attraction thing was growing stronger, like a madness that grew more unstable as time passed by. Did I trust her? Fuck no. There was no ounce of trust in that one. I also wished I'd never laid eyes on her from the start. Don't know what the bloody hell got into me when I kissed her on that track like a hungry maniac, or brought her back home for a drink.

A drink. Ha! If my brother could see me now, he'd testify that I'd only gotten sicker in the head. For a woman. Jesus.

I was a mess.

I'd done it anyway. I crossed the lines with her, stalked her, and ran after her when she was in trouble. I was starting to be convinced that this was a case of bad obsession, but living in denial wasn't going to hurt anyone.

I dropped the half-empty bottle, kicked off my shoes, and headed straight for the shower. But it didn't work. Not when the water was ice cold or scalding hot. I grabbed my cock, closed my eyes, and succumbed to the rage of the confusing war going on in my head. I welcomed the image of her naked body and legs spread on my bed. I thrust my hips at the glistening sight of her dripping pink pussy taking in all of me. My nails dug hard against the wall when her lips brushed the scar on my eyebrow, and her tits brushed my chest. And a seizure-like vibration rippled through my core when her lips touched mine.

After ten minutes of miserably jacking off, I washed my load off the wall and went back to the room, dripping wet and more frustrated at the stagnant energy inside of me.

Vodka didn't work, smashing something didn't work, and a shower didn't work. Maybe breaking a few noses here and there would.

No doubt, Tikhon and some of the men were already smashing faces at the boxing gym. And I knew the lot of them would jump at an opportunity to spar with me, to try and prove they could beat me. I could do with those, whether or not they could handle the load I needed to get off.

I was halfway through slipping on a t-shirt and a pair of sweats when Varya knocked once on the door and voiced that my cousin was in the parlor waiting for me. Which cousin, she didn't say. But if it was Andrei, I'd willingly take him on right there to vent. Partially, my decision to stay away from her was his fucking fault. If he hadn't come along, putting those rational thoughts in my head, I'd have her bent over on my desk by now, possibly with her pants down and ass up, ready for me.

Christ. I needed to get a fucking grip. Worse, every thought about yearning for the softness of another woman died like wilting grass. Leonora was the only woman I wanted.

I descended the stairs in seconds. As it turned out, today was Andrei's lucky day.

Ivan sat on one of the couches with a brown envelope in his hands and his elbows propped up on his knees. I frowned. He looked different, surprisingly mature. Gone were his casual all-the-time party or racing clothes. Now, he wore a dark blue suit, looking like a serious-minded young man with important business to attend to.

When his eyes landed on me, he jumped to his feet, shakily wiping a hand on the back of his pants.

“Privyet.”

I gave his clothes another once-over, raising a questioning brow. “Missed your turn?”

“What?”

“I’m asking If you missed your turn.” I sat on the armrest on one of the sofas, and when he didn’t catch on, I added, “For your job interview.”

He looked at his outfit and laughed, but it sounded forced. “Oh, actually, no. I didn’t miss it. I got the job as a computer analyst at Charleston’s four months ago.”

“Hm. Not bad.”

“Da . Not bad at all.”

“I didn’t know. Congratulations.”

“Yeah, you didn’t. Especially not after I told you about it and you said, ‘Fuck off Ivan, I’m not in the mood. I have more important shit to handle, a drop to monitor in twenty minutes and a meeting with Santana.’”

“Do I remember that?”

“Do you?” Without the slight twitching of his eyebrows giving it away that he was pissed, his poker face was a tight mask. “Doesn’t matter. I got it; you were busy.”

“If you got it, why do you look like you want to lay one on me?”

“Because you’re an asshole sometimes?”

Smirking, I folded my arms over my chest. I liked it when this kid was feisty. It reminded me a lot of when I was younger and constantly irritating the shit out of my brother. “You came all the way down here to call me an asshole.”

“Not necessarily. But I’m glad I got it in. I’m here because I have something you want to see.”

“A receipt of your new toy? What is it this time? An Aston Martini?” I was picking on him, and while it was a small routine between us anytime I saw his face, today’s irritation wasn’t entirely his fault.

“Rafa, I’m not fucking around. It’s about the alliance with the Italians. You’ve been blindsided.”

“Blindsided, you say.” The smirk fell off my face. “And how would you know that? What do you know about the alliance? The last time I checked, if I recall correctly, you wanted nothing to do with this shit, or am I wrong? What made you get bored of your race tracks and nightclubs?”

“I’m not bored,” he clarified sternly. “Not like you understand any of that shit, but I care; there’s a difference. I might not be in the loop to know every detail, but I’ve got ears and eyes open, Rafa. You have me at arms-length, but you’re family. This is family. When I heard about the alliance with the Italians, I didn’t like it one fucking bit. Especially because that bitch was involved—”

The bitch being Leonora. Even now, as Ivan spoke, his face contorted with so much disgust and rage I knew how much he hated her.

And he didn’t know how hard I restrained myself from beating him to a pulp until he needed a hospital.

“—they were going to betray us somehow, one way or the other, because that’s what they are—fucking snakes.”

“Get to the fucking point!”

Ivan flinched, coming out from the haze of his anger to see the promise of murder in my eyes if he kept talking. He handed me the envelope and continued speaking while

I ripped the brown paper to take out the pictures.

My blood ran cold when I recognized the two men in the photograph, and for the tiniest split of a second, my beating heart missed a step. I eyed Ivan over the pictures, and the look on his face said it all; this was not a fucking joke. It wasn't doctored or tampered with. His intentions were good, and that was all the fuel I needed to stoke the fire blazing like an inferno inside my chest.

“They said they needed you to help them fight off Rossi. So why's Enzo meeting him frequently? You're not asking me, but I'll tell you. Leo, Luca, Enzo. Bad combination for the Bratva. They could have only had one reason for this alliance, Rafa: to rip you from the inside out.”

I knew what he was going to say next but didn't want to hear it.

Ivan said it anyway.

“She's playing with you, Boss.”

And that confirmed what I'd already known from the beginning.

Fuck her.

Fuck all women.

Not one of them could be trusted. Not anyone really.

I grabbed my phone, putting Tikhon on speed dial. “Rafa—”

“I need Leonora's IP address and her exact location right fucking now.”

“Hi, again.”

Like a tree rooted in the soil, I stayed put. I was too stunned to speak, too angry to move. Papa was just seated there. With more gray hair scattered on his head and littered among the scruff on his jaw, he appeared frailer than he was at the last minute. His body slouched on the wheelchair, and the glow in his eyes was dull and tired. But he was smiling. Smiling because of whatever he’d discussed with this so-called visitor in the room.

“You.” I finally found my voice, but it lacked the strength I needed to confront him. “What are you doing here? Papa, why is he here?”

“Sit down, principessa .”

“But Papa—”

“Fucking sit down, Leonora. Goddamn it.” Papa dragged his hand down his eyes, and I obeyed, but only because he started coughing again.

I looked between Luca and Papa. This was a dream. This wasn’t happening. And if Papa thought I was just going to sit down without saying a word in the same room with the man who had the nerve to punch me in the face, he had another thing coming.

Papa had to know one of his children inherited a full dose of his stubbornness.

“I’m sitting, Papa. Now, I need to know what the hell is going on and why this man is here.”

“This man , principessa,” he pointed a shaky finger to a grinning Luca, “ E il Messia. ”

He is the messiah.

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"Again, my girl, I know. I apologize on his behalf about your face, though I know you're stronger than a few cuts and bruises. He couldn't blow his cover. Not yet, anyway."

"Blow his cover—what do you mean, blow his cover, Papa?" I was trying not to hyperventilate because, somehow, Papa knew I was smart enough to put the pieces together. And I was putting the frigging pieces together. "Papa, Rossi. Is. The. Enemy. E-N-E-M-Y."

"Try questioning my intelligence again, principessa . I dare you." Papa's warning was stern.

"Mi dispiace, Papa."

I'm sorry, Papa.

But cut to the chase and frigging tell me already.

“The Colombos and Rossis have deep ties from our home, Leo. The bond of Italia is stronger than any other alliance, and the Rossis have proven to be useful in creating paths and structures for us back at home. We have relied on each other for decades now, lending helping hands to each other.”

Why was this revelation hurting like a bitch? I narrowed my eyes at Papa. “And I had absolutely no idea about this because?”

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I hated him. My entire being, mind, and soul loathed his existence.

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“—you used me. I can’t believe this. You consented to this asshole punching me in the face because he couldn’t afford to blow his cover. What—what the actual hell, Papa? You took advantage of my ignorance and used me as a pawn in your game. And for that, I’m greatly disappointed.”

Papa frowned at me, and, for the first time ever, I saw the man people feared—the real Enzo Colombo, without a sliver of emotion or concern.

“Don’t you dare go soft on me, Leo. Get rid of those fucking emotions and focus. This tactic was necessary. Now we have the Russians in our palms and can infiltrate with ease. Principessa , I’m doing this for us. My legacy can and will not end. By the Rossis’ side, you both will lead our people, Colombo and Rossi united. Uno Italia. ”

“No! Did you say you did this for us?” I jumped to my feet like there were hot coals everywhere. I was suffocating. And those walls? They were caving in again, and the chances of finding an escape were slimmer. “No, Papa! No Uno Italia shit. You’re doing this for yourself.”

“Leo.”

“NO! I’m not hearing it. It’s Enzo Colombo’s legacy. Not the Rossis’. Not the Russians’. It’s ours, Papa.” It took all of my strength left in me not to break down in tears like an emotional wreck. “I’m not doing it. I’m not staying here and listening to this crap. This is not about being emotional. This is about you playing with me like I mean nothing to you. You betrayed me, Papa. You—”

“Leonora!” Now was the time Papa thundered. “I am dying, can’t you see? Look at me.”

I was looking at him, but I couldn’t recognize him.

“My time’s running up, and securing your future and our legacy is a priority. Luca is the most suitable match and will do well to bring us to unity. Your marriage to him will solidify the alliance between both families. And I’m not leaving you with a choice. This is my decision.”

His final wish. And Papa’s wishes were always final.

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talk about unity.

Marriage to Luca Rossi. Not now, not ever.

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I couldn't find the words.

My hands trembled at my sides as my thoughts raced.

Rafayel.

Our baby.

What about my baby?

Papa was dead serious about this arrangement with Luca, which meant that my baby could not be in the picture.

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for as long as I could remember, and I never really noticed. And now, it was too much.

I needed to get out of here.

Away from that dipshit, Luca. Away from Papa. Away from all of it.

My shoes thudded sharply against the marble floor as I backed away. “I can’t do this.”

“Leonora!”

“Mi dispiace , Papa, but I just can’t think right now.”

Turning around, I bolted toward the door and to my car, which was still sitting by the fountain. Marco still stood there, not even trying to stop me. For that, I was grateful.

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Rubber burned against asphalt as I pulled away. My heart was pounding so loud that I felt it in my eardrums. I didn’t know where I was going, only that I needed to get far, far away.

The road blurred ahead of me as I fought to suppress the tears threatening to spill, and

I remembered how Rafayel found me in the first place. Even if Papa didn't care, my mother did. She would probably never know, but not having her in my life spurred me to make something of my life. To fill the shoes Matteo and Papa needed at the time, even if they didn't know it.

I lifted two fingers to my head, then my chest, then to my shoulders, and finally to my lips.

This madness wasn't over—not by a long shot. But Papa was right about one thing.

I was a lot stronger than a few cuts and bruises.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:06 pm

I gripped the steering wheel tighter as I spotted her car ahead.

I'd always known you couldn't trust a woman. But we didn't listen to our heads, right? Sometimes, we'd see the burning orange and yellow flames and still dive right in.

Tikhon wanted to tag along, but I shut down his request. This was my shit to handle. Mine and mine alone. If anyone had to deal with her, it was me. And despite the pressure sitting on my chest like a boulder, I was going to snap her fucking neck with pleasure.

Did she honestly think she could slip away from me? Didn't matter what she thought at this point; I wasn't letting her out of my goddamn sight.

The taillights of her Audi glinted under the streetlights as she weaved through minimal traffic. I kept my foot on the accelerator to match her pace, maintaining enough distance not to catch her attention immediately.

I had blood roaring in my ears and intoxicating adrenaline rushing in my blood, like a juvenile on fucking meth. I couldn't tell what pissed me off more, accepting that Ivan and Andrei were right or not understanding why her betrayal felt like a fucking dagger had gone through my chest.

It burned.

Then, at that distance, she accelerated, as if sensing my presence.

A grin tugged at my lips. Fucking underestimating her. Leonora knew I was here. Good. Let's see how far she thought she could run.

I slammed my foot on the gas, feeling the engine roar to life as I surged forward.

I expected her to be as good as the blogs and headlines on the news gave her credit. I'd seen for myself her strength and bloody hellish skills on the track. So, when she darted through cars, taking sharp turns, I stayed right on her tail. My car's tires screeched as I followed her down a narrow side street, and the rest of the city blurred around me.

She was fast. And her fucking speed always had me impressed; I'd give her that. Not this time, though. I wasn't about to let her slip through my fingers again. Not like last time. She'd won that round, but this one? This one was mine .

I stayed close, following every turn she took. I was there, and I was going to stay there until I had her. She tried to lose me in a maze of alleyways, but these California streets were more than familiar. They were almost home.

"Nice try, Leonya."

There was no radio communication this time to tell her just how excited I was to be gaining up to her. I closed in on the distance.

Her car swerved into the highway, and a few moments later, she was zigzagging off. A distraction that wasn't going to work, as she pushed her speed to the limit. I didn't hesitate; I kept my hand steady on the wheel.

I hit the gas, pulling ahead of her car as the deserted road stretched out in front of us. The need to confront her was slowly biting in, overtaking every ounce of logic. The headlights from her car flared in my rearview mirror, but I didn't care.

I veered sharply to the right, cutting her off. Her tires screeched as she slammed on the brakes, the car skidding to a stop mere inches from mine. The silence that followed was deafening, with only the faint sound of engines purring in the stretch of darkness.

I stepped out of my car, slamming the door behind me. The night was sharp and cold, but I barely noticed.

Leonora got out, too, furious and radiant under the faint glow of the moonlight. She looked ready to kill me as much as I wanted to kill her.

I forgot my fucking blade. Else, her throat would have had it first, and I'd have finally finished what I fucking started when Ivan brought her in that night.

Her fiery glare cut through the shadows as she stalked toward me.

“What the fuck is this, huh? What are you doing?”

I didn't answer. Words weren't enough for what burned inside me. Instead, I closed the distance between us in two swift steps. Before she could react, I grabbed her by the wrist and pushed her back, pinning her against the rough bark of a nearby tree. A gasp escaped her lips as her back hit the trunk, her body tensing beneath my grasp.

Her eyes widened, anger flashing as she tried to shove me away. “Get off me—”

“The question should be, why were you running?”

“What—”

“Did you honestly think I wouldn't find out?” I growled, cutting her off. My grip tightened on her wrists as I pressed them against the bark above her head, my body

caging hers. "You thought I wouldn't know?"

"Know what? You chased me down the road and now have me pinned to this stupid tree like a psychopath ready to snap my head off, and yet, I don't fucking know what the hell is going on!"

"Enough with the fucking games already!" I slammed her hard against the bark, reveling in the groan of pain pouring out of her lips. "You fucking betrayed me!"

Her eyes widened in slight shock, and I knew she'd caught on. Her chest rose and fell like she'd run a marathon. She could try to run and escape me, but she couldn't escape the truth.

It fucking burned when I thought I saw guilt. Or was it fear? Either way, it wasn't enough.

She whispered, shaking her head. "No, I didn't. Look, I didn't know. I swear, I didn't—"

"Lies," I snarled, slamming my hand against the tree beside her head. She flinched, her breath hitching, and it only stoked the fire burning in my chest. "You thought I was a fool, didn't you? Smart Leo thought the big Russian was going to fall into her fucking trap and eat out of the palm of her—"

"I didn't fucking know, Rafa," she cut me off. And when I peered deeper, I saw her eyelids shimmering with unshed tears.

Leonora's voice quivered, and her hands came up, trembling, as if to plead with me. "I fucking swear it. Papa—my father...he didn't tell me what he was planning. I didn't know Luca was in the picture all along, Rafayel. You have to believe me!"

I wanted to.

God, I wanted to believe her. But the doubt coiled around my heart like a snake, tightening with every word she spoke. I stepped closer, caging her in, my body inches from hers. Her scent filled my lungs, intoxicating and maddening all at once.

"And you expect me to just take your word for it?"

Her lip trembled, and for a moment, she looked so fragile I almost softened. Almost. But then she dropped her gaze, and I knew she was hiding something. My hand shot out, gripping her chin and forcing her to look at me.

"Tell me the fucking truth, Leo," I demanded. "Every. Last. Word. Else, I am going to fucking snap your neck right now like a psychopath."

Tears welled in her eyes, spilling over as her composure cracked.

I hated it when she cried. Her tears upset me, made me want to hurt every damn person that hurt her. But now, I was the one hurting her, and while I still felt like a piece of shit, I needed to fight those unexplainable emotions and look past them.

"Uno Italia, " she said, looking up at me to clarify. "One Italy. Papa wants a Colombo-Rossi alliance. That was the plan all along. He...he set me up to marry Luca, to secure our legacy—"

My mouth crashed onto hers, taking what was only fucking mine, punishing and raw. My blood roared like a fucking pressure cooker, red-hot fury consuming me at the mention of that bastard's name.

I cupped her jaw, my fingers tightening to pry her mouth apart, giving way for my tongue to plunge deeper. She tasted just as sweet as I remembered, and for some

reason, that irked me more.

I tilted her face up, growling against her swollen mouth, “You’re mine, Leonya. Only mine,” before diving in again.

She gasped against me, her hands gripping my shirt as if she didn’t know whether to push me away or pull me closer. I didn’t care. I deepened it, nipping harshly. Possessive, I claimed her in a way words never could. She was mine, and I needed her to feel it, to know it in her bones.

When I finally pulled back, her lips were pink, her cheeks flushed, and her breath came in short, uneven bursts. She looked up at me through tear-filled eyes.

Shit. She was crying again.

“I didn’t want it. I didn’t choose it. He’s using me, just like he used me to get to you. But I swear to you, I would never—” She paused. Then, she burst into full-blown tears, like she did back at my house when she hugged me. “Rafa, I’m pregnant.”

The announcement hit me like a blow to the chest. I froze, my mind racing to process what she’d just said.

The silence stretched between us.

“What did you say?”

Her hands moved to her stomach, a gesture so subtle, so instinctive, that it made the truth sink in. “I’m carrying your child, Rafayel.”

I wanted to believe her. But doubt lingered, festering like an open wound. I narrowed my eyes at her flat stomach.

“How long?”

“Seven weeks,” she responded in a heartbeat.

“Why didn’t you tell me sooner?”

But the answer stared at me in the face before she answered. “I found out today. The lone hospital trip? That’s where I received the diagnosis. Honestly, the signs were there, but I didn’t want to believe it. Coupled with that, you kept your distance. I couldn’t just come running to tell you I was pregnant now, or could I? Would you have believed me?”

It made sense. When she said she was scared, I hadn’t understood her fear better until now. Leonora was a smart woman. Betraying me and getting married, though accidentally, wouldn’t have been a mistake she would have made at the same time. She would have geared up, equipped, and prepared herself to sever all ties with me when the time came.

That was the most logical reason I could come up with because if I didn’t, my head would explode with all the uncertainty.

A thousand emotions surged through me at once.

Shock. Anger. Confusion. Protectiveness. They clashed, vying for dominance, leaving me standing there, staring at her like the ground had been ripped out from under me.

I looked at her, truly looked at her. For the first time in what felt like forever, I saw her vulnerability, fear, and hope. And I realized that whatever else I felt, one thing was certain: If she was carrying my child, I would protect them both.

Even if it killed me.

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Rafayel didn't say a word to me throughout the ride to his house.

Quietly, but with a brooding rage hanging over him, he dismissed his men patrolling indoors and asked one of the maids, Varya, to prepare dinner and take the rest of the weekend off. She had salt-and-pepper hair and wide, knowing eyes. I felt small under her curious scrutiny but had no opportunity for small talk.

Rafayel and I ascended to his study.

I sat on the chair across his polished desk, intentionally avoiding the leather couch and the memories that came with it.

He received a phone call, and from the one-sided conversation about taking a car to the shed, I knew it was Tikhon. Rafayel had him retrieve my car because he insisted—scratch that. He ordered that I ride in his.

When the call line went dead, he dropped the phone and faced me with a dead look in his eyes. I'd never seen a man so rigid and uptight.

“You'll be staying here in my home until I resolve the situation with your father. I don't want you or my child near any of those darn Italians. They're unpredictable, and that's one risk I'm not taking.”

Those darn Italians ? And did he mention staying in his home, like I was, what, a coward on the run?

“Uh, excuse me, Almighty. I don't mean to throw you off your high horse, but look at

me.” I glared, so he got the point. “I am one of those darn Italians .”

Rafayel scrunched his nose as if he were eating sour grapes. “No need to remind me.”

My heart squeezed painfully as I watched his fists clench and unclench on the top of the desk. I couldn’t make sense of the knot tightening in my chest. His anger shouldn’t have mattered to me, the way his exterior morphed into an impenetrable wall because of the weight of the betrayal. It shouldn’t have meant anything.

But it did.

There was something about the way he looked at me, his dark eyes filled with hurt that cut deeper than his words ever could. I hated it. Hated the way guilt settled heavy in my stomach, clawing at my resolve.

I shouldn’t have cared. He was the enemy. His pain was deserved, wasn’t it? Yet I found myself wishing—deep down in the parts of me I tried to ignore—that Papa hadn’t done this. That I hadn’t hurt him.

“Listen to me.” I was willing to try a softer approach, “I cannot stay here.”

A perfectly carved brow hung up on his forehead. “Did I ask you if you can or cannot stay?”

I massaged my temple. He was making it too fucking hard to stay nice. “Rafayel....”

“To make it clear, Leonora, there is no room for your opinion. I know you’re used to having things always go your way, the brat that you are. But not here. Here, you will do as I fucking say. And I say you’re listening only to my fucking orders from now on.”

And that was exactly what I feared, that his need to dominate and protect us was going to cost me a great deal. Gritting my teeth, I rose from the seat and marched up to his looming figure brooding by the bookshelf.

“I appreciate your compliments and endearment, asshole. But I have a fucking empire to run. My papa might have played the role of a conniving villain, but that doesn’t make you some sort of saint. You’re not any better, Mr. Yezhov. And I’m not abandoning my people just because you ordered it.”

“Is that so?” Dark, dangerous eyes challenged me, and I carefully selected my words before speaking.

“It is.”

“Then, I dare you,” he sidestepped, glancing at the door over his shoulder, “to walk out that door.”

He gave a dry smile, and when I noticed how close we stood, suddenly, a ferocious heat crackled in the air, thick and oppressive, wrapping around me like a vice.

“You won’t obey me, am I right? You refuse to subject your fucking pride and surrender, am I right, Leo? Then walk out that fucking door before I do something we’ll probably regret.”

Every nerve in my body fired in unison, warning me, urging me to step back, to create distance. To seize this moment and run out that door without looking back.

But I couldn’t. My legs refused to move. He loomed too close, and his presence overwhelmed me.

Suffocating and inescapable .

I barely had time to process it when he spun me, and suddenly, my back pressed against the tough wood of the bookshelf. The sharp edge bit into my skin through my thin silk shirt, but it didn't matter. All I could focus on was him, his body crowding mine, his musk scent intoxicating, his heat searing into me like a brand.

He growled against my throat like a wild predator. "You're not running."

I shook my head, barely able to speak. God, his breath felt so warm. And he felt so good. Quick warmth pooled between my thighs

"No, I'm not. I'm not a coward, asshole."

"But you're a fucking brat." He trailed hot, wet kisses down my throat, to the dip of my collarbone, and back up again.

I quivered, ridiculously saying, "Yes, I'm a fucking brat."

"My fucking brat," he corrected. "Mine, Leonya."

Jesus.

My pulse thundered in my ears, my breath hitching as his hand braced above my head, his other settling beside my waist.

He murmured, "In this instant, is that a good thing or a bad thing?"

God, the more he spoke, the more my skin sang. I wasn't processing any reasonable thing. I couldn't. I was trapped, completely at his mercy. Worse, I didn't want to break free. Being with him like this was a nightmare I was willing to welcome with open arms—like comfort food for the soul.

“I don’t know,” I sighed against his hair. “You tell me, is it a good thing or a bad thing?”

My heart slammed against my rib cage, every inch of me hyperaware of the charged energy crackling between us. Like a storm, chaotic and consuming, pulling me under its weight.

He nipped at my neck, sucking the tender skin roughly enough to leave a mark. My eyes rolled behind my head, my knees buckled, turning to Jell-O under the pressure, and I arched my head back to give him more access.

“Is it a good thing or a bad thing, Rafa?”

“Fuck!”

The space between us vanished as his chest brushed mine, and my skin ignited. Beneath my clothes, my nipples peaked, aching for him, and the warmth between my legs grew extremely uncomfortable.

I’d done it again—called him exactly by the name he wanted to hear.

He pressed against me, the hard bulge between his legs digging deeper between mine, and the tension brewing between us grew into a firestorm, building to an explosion I wasn’t sure I wanted to stop. I wanted this man badly and unashamedly.

And then, just like that, the world narrowed to him and the wild, reckless sensation of falling into something I couldn’t control. Something I didn’t want to.

Rafayel dragged his lips from my throat and planted them on mine. I groaned into his mouth, and he growled back.

He was rough, hard, and unforgiving. He took with more speed than I could match, cupping my jaw to keep my head in place while he sucked and grazed my lips like the greedy bastard he was.

I felt heady and light. I needed air, oxygen. But I couldn't summon the courage to break free from him. Maybe because I didn't want to.

His hand skimmed down my face, latching onto the buttons on my shirt. In one grip, he tugged, and the tiny buttons went springing apart, dropping to the floor like pebbles on tiles.

Ripping off the destroyed shirt, he snaked his hand around my back to unclip my lacy bra and tossed it aside. My breasts bounced free, and I arched into his palm when he grabbed one mound, kneading my soft flesh.

“Leonya....”

He brought his face down to my chest, sniffing hard, before taking one nipple into his hot mouth. And I could have burst into tears just because of how terribly good he felt.

God, what was wrong with me?

I arched into him, moaning like an uncontrollable animal in heat when he took a nipple between his teeth, pulled, and sucked hard like a maniac.

“Do you like it?”

I wanted to say no, but my mouth seemed to be having thoughts of its own. “Yes. Yes—God, I do.”

He gave both breasts attention, moving from one to the other with equal

concentration. And I felt the push driving me closer and closer to the edge of the cliff. But I wasn't going to fall until I had him buried deep inside of me. Until I had him right where I thought he belonged.

When he moved his lips back to mine, I thought I was spent. Until he dragged down the zipper of my jeans, dropping to his haunches to help me peel them off.

I kicked off the denim, but Rafayel didn't get up.

My eyes grew a fraction wider when I realized what he was doing. Before I could pull him back up, he was kissing his way up, biting the spot between my thighs to make me spread my legs, and when I did, he threw one of my legs over his shoulder to support me and allowed his mouth to linger just below my thong. It was thin enough, barely covering my essentials.

So, when his smiling eyes met mine, I knew what he saw—how soaking wet my pussy was. For him.

He slipped a finger to move the thin rope aside, and his mouth instantly went in for the kill.

My head flew back against the bookshelf, and my eyes rolled.

Holy shit.

This man and his tongue. There was no doubt now that he knew how to use it. I slid my fingers into his hair, rolling my hips and making all sorts of funny, embarrassing noises while he ate me out and lapped up my juices.

From my view, the only thing I could see was the satisfaction on his face, with his eyes closed and his head bobbing up and down.

My chest flared with more heat. Who would have thought I'd find a view like that so unbearably hot?

I swear I tried to hold on. I tried so hard not to fall off the cliff, but I hit my climax anyway, shattering over his mouth in less than five minutes.

Rafayel pulled back with his lips still wet with my juices and rose to his feet. With his eyes never leaving mine, he moved his hand to the rope holding his sweatpants together. But I reached forward, stopping him.

I wanted to do this. And thankfully, he didn't stop me.

Tentatively, I released the ropes and slowly pushed the downy material and his boxer briefs lower, below his hips. My mouth watered when his cock sprang out, and the pulse between my legs throbbed with more intensity.

Rafayel was staring at me with an unreadable emotion, and even that was so frigging hot. He leaned forward, brushing my hair away from my face, as he hoisted my other leg from the ground so I straddled his waist.

He kissed me cautiously. Then softly. And I kissed him back, snaking my fingers into his hair—because I loved the feel of his hair between my fingers.

Knowing how hard he was for me, despite everything, made me want to apologize with his cock in my mouth, or better still, inside me. I wanted to do things to him that scared me. And this crash of emotions flew out of my mouth in three simple words.

“I hate you.”

Growling, he murmured something intelligible against my lips and sunk his cock into me. “I hate you, too.”

I gasped, raising my hips and spreading my legs wider to accommodate the size of him. My body hummed for more. My heart soared. It felt liberating. Did I mention that he felt so good? If yes, then I didn't think I'd said it enough.

“You annoy the hell out of me.”

“I know. I like seeing you all hot and bothered,” he said in Russian.

When I opened my eyes, he was looking at me with his lips curved to the side. He knew. The bastard! All this time, he knew I understood him. I didn't know when he'd found out, but...that was beside the point.

Rafayel didn't give me any time to react. He wedged his cock like a weapon and slammed into me with more force than I ever thought I could handle.

My fingernails dug into his back. And he fucked me hard and fast.

“That's it, sweetheart .” More Russian. “ Say my name .”

“ Rafa...” I moaned, and he sucked on my neck, biting his way up to my ear.

It felt like I was giving, but I wasn't giving enough. I rolled my hips and clawed at every part of him I laid my hands on. I wished he had taken off his clothes. But I knew the decision was punishment. And I took it.

His name spilled out from my lips faster than I revved my engines.

“Fuck, Leo. This was not the fucking plan!”

Aggressively, he slapped my ass cheeks and squeezed, burying his face between my neck when I practically begged him to fuck me faster instead of raining curses on him

like I wanted to.

The bookshelf clattered behind us, the wood scraping hard against the floor. The books clamored, the pages rustling as they dropped to the ground.

Sweat soaked us up, but he kissed me as if I tasted like apples. And I kissed him because he tasted like intoxicating wine. When he bucked faster, I matched his grunts and squeezed my legs tighter around his waist to keep him steady.

“This was not the fucking plan,” he thundered again, more to himself than to me. “But you’re here now, and you’re fucking mine. You belong to me, Leo. Your tits, your fucking pussy, this body—they’re mine and no one else’s. And I’ll fuck you whenever I bloody want. Do you fucking understand?”

I wanted to scream at him, tell him I belonged to no one, but the scream was strangled with chaotic moans when I came all over him again.

Growling, he covered my mouth with his and jerked, spilling his hot load inside me with a deep, guttural groan.

We stayed like that, neither of us pulling away, and I wasn’t sure when it happened, but I fell asleep to the sound of his heartbeat racing against my chest.

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:06 pm

When Leonora had said her father was sick, I didn't expect the results to literally be close to the grave. He was sick as fuck. No wonder he needed his daughter to run things.

Enzo's eyes were tired and dull, and the hazel in them was not as vibrant. Olive skin was now pale ash with wrinkles, making him look years older than he was, and the vigorous and brutal feared man I'd clashed with once was nothing but a shell now.

But dealing with his daughter taught me not to underestimate anyone, not even a walking corpse.

His lapdog, Marco, pinned sharp eyes on me while he wheeled Enzo's chair around the table and stood by his side. Marco didn't trust me; Enzo sure as hell didn't either. I might have as well brought them into the open as an easy target for a gunman. But that was not why we were here.

Enzo started speaking but stopped short when he began coughing and wheezing like an off-tune bagpipe. It was harsh and disastrous. Half-heartedly, I expected the old man to slump like a sack of potatoes.

Marco handed him a glass of water and leaned back, massaging the tattoo on his neck. Judging by the frown on his face, I knew we were thinking the same thing.

"I got your invite," Enzo resumed hoarsely. "But I don't understand the reason for my presence here."

"I didn't understand why either when I got mine. Until she walked through those

same doors you wheeled through with a proposal for an alliance.”

Enzo’s dull eyes flickered with confusion, and I opened my arms, gesturing with a plastic smile. “Welcome to Bella Italia, Enzo Colombo. The place where you officially launched the plan to fuck and screw me over. I know about your plan with Rossi. Clever. Could’ve almost fooled me.”

He grunted something Italian under his breath and dragged his hands down his face. “Now you have a heart? You fucking care about being fucked and screwed over? Quit the bullshit, Yezhov. This is the cycle: fucking kill or be killed. And we both know I didn’t do anything you wouldn’t have done.”

“And that, I’m well accustomed to. But you’re a fucking snake for taking the route you did. And I deal with snakes the way they ought to be dealt with.”

Marco’s brows drew closer, and I saw his hand hover over his belt.

“Don’t even think about it, spokesman. Before you lift a finger, you’d have bullets feeding your brain.”

I faced Enzo. Kudos to the man for not being phased in the slightest. “I didn’t invite you here to grieve. As a matter of fact, I have an announcement to make: Leonora will be staying with me now.”

Enzo’s eyes flashed with anger after he tried to put the pieces together. “Did you fucking kidnap my daughter?”

“Hmm, let me see.” I played with the Cartier on my wrist, then looked up. “I might have. Or I might have just fucking killed her when I had the chance if I didn’t find out that your daughter is about to become the mother of my child. So, no, I didn’t fucking kidnap your daughter. I fucked her.”

My triumphant smile was enough to make Enzo run mad if he didn't get a grip. His silence spoke volumes, and I almost laughed at the absurdity when his nose scrunched and chin wobbled. The great Italian Don, the man who could strike fear into anyone with a glance, sat there as if the life had been knocked out of him.

Nothing could be worse for the old man than hearing the news of his Italian daughter getting screwed and knocked up by a Russian—specifically, by me. The man's hate for me ran deeper than the bloodlines he swore to destroy.

And now he was faced with the one thing his power couldn't undo—his precious daughter carrying my child.

The irony tasted sweeter than the finest vodka. I watched the conflict play across his face—rage, disgust, and a flicker of helplessness. And I relished every second of it.

"End your alliance with Rossi. This is not a negotiation, Enzo. It's a fucking warning. If you insist on keeping Luca at your side, I will bring both of you down and won't lose sleep over it."

His jaw tightened, and I caught the flicker of rebellion in his eyes. But before he could utter a word, I cut him off.

"The reason I brought you here, take it that I'm only showing you this sliver of mercy because of Leonora. The thought of her in distress during her pregnancy.... Well, even I have my limits. But don't mistake my leniency for weakness."

Before I left, I placed the pictures in front of the table, letting him take in every detail.

There they were—Luca and some woman, smiling at each other, standing at an altar in Italy. The images had been carefully selected, proof of what I had uncovered. A little digging, a few well-placed questions, and I'd learned that Luca Rossi had a

wife. Something Enzo clearly hadn't known.

I watched the surprise hit him like a punch. I could see it in his eyes, the shock and more confusion.

Enzo hadn't expected this, hadn't known that the man who'd been so eager to marry his daughter and form an alliance was already bound to someone else. His expression twisted with anger, and I allowed the silence to stretch between us.

"You have a choice, Enzo. Make the right one, or I will ensure you both regret it."

I turned around and started to walk away.

"Rafayel. Wait."

My head snapped quickly to be certain that it was Enzo who called me and not someone else. The mask of rebellion was gone, and what remained was regret.

He looked older, much sicker.

And when he looked up, his hands were shaking and cheeks trembling. "Whatever you do, please don't hurt my daughter."

He was a sorry sight. Pathetic. Couldn't even do the damn deal right for the sake of the daughter he claimed he loved. But who was I to judge? It was the first time I'd witnessed his weakness first-hand.

No man walking the face of the Earth, ally or rival, could deny Enzo Colombo as a good parent. He fucking loved his children more than life itself and could off a man for daring to look at them the wrong way. It didn't matter how much money was involved; he was ready to go to any length for them.

While I headed to my car, it made me think.

I had never imagined myself in this position, not in a thousand years, to have the weight of impending fatherhood pressed on me. I didn't fancy myself a good person, or have a good heart, or any of that weakness Enzo displayed a moment ago. But these things were needed to raise a child, were they not?

I didn't know. My father wasn't the best bloody example. His techniques were the absolute worst, and I hated the bastard too much anyway. I could ask my brother. I didn't know how he navigated through, but he had.

If it were up to me, my entire lineage would be screwed. A child was on the way, and I damn well wasn't prepared.

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“Thank you.” I smiled up at the quiet maid who was retreating. She didn’t talk very much, but I successfully got to pry her name out of her. Mary. Varya was ill, and, on Rafayel’s orders, I needed to be looked after round the clock, so she had to stand in.

The door closed behind her, leaving the delicious aroma of the Russian breakfast she’d brought in and placed on the bedside table: blini, caviar, and a steaming cup of tea.

I stared at the food but couldn’t eat. A sense of unease I couldn’t shake gnawed at me, a feeling that had been growing since the moment Rafayel had stepped out earlier. Updates. I was dry on them. I couldn’t remember the last time I wasn’t involved in the action. As much as the silence was welcomed, I needed feedback.

It felt like I was starving without any.

I couldn’t stand being cooped up inside. Sometimes, it was suffocating, but what choice did I have? Rafayel had made it clear that I wasn’t allowed to go outside. He said it was dangerous. Dangerous? As if I didn’t know what that felt like.

I laughed in the face of danger—until I cried. Sometimes.

But, as much as I hated it, I listened. I’d never been good at arguing with him, not when his voice was firm and he threatened me with those eyes of his. I also understood that it was for the protection of our baby.

Still.

The house felt quieter without Rafayel, and it wasn't the kind of silence I welcomed. A few days had passed since everything shifted between us, since we had that mind-blowing sex that sealed my submission to his commands. And when I wanted to get upset about how I turned into a pile of jelly in his arms, the anger just never came.

But I couldn't stand it any longer. The last time I saw my father, he was planning my wedding to Luca. Knowing Papa, he was going to have his way however he seemed fit.

But it felt like the more I strongly expected Papa's men to raid Rafayel's estate and scatter the place with bullets to seize me, the more nothing happened.

The uncertainty that simmered inside of me needed to be confronted. I grabbed my phone, my fingers hovering over Marco's contact name. He had always been straightforward with me, and if there was anyone who could offer clarity in the midst of all this confusion, it was him. He would tell me what I needed to know. And what I needed to know also concerned my family.

I wanted to make sure they were alright. That Papa was fine.

The call connected, and Marco picked up on the second ring.

“Hola.”

There were muffled sounds in the background before his stiff voice came through the speakers. “Leo? Stai bene?”

It felt refreshing to hear someone from home. But all was not good. I had questions that needed answers.

“No.” I turned away from the door and my food, snuggling deeper into the pillows, as

if someone could hear me talking over the phone from outside. “I need to know what’s happening, Marco. How is Papa?”

Silence. And then, “Good. Your father is good, senorita. ”

Before I was able to question his unconvincing tone, he fired on, clipped and curt as always.

His voice crackled through the phone. “The alliance with Rossi is over.”

That was unexpected. “Ended how? What happened to being brothers? What happened to Papa’s dream of Uno Italia ?”

“Incinerated. Turned to dust. The dissolution ended badly. Your father found out Luca was playing both sides. He sought a marriage to you but had a wife back in Italy.”

What?

“Your father couldn’t stand the thought of such shame and disrespect it would have brought you, so your papa called for a meeting with the guise of discussing more details—”

I knew before he said it.

“Two bullets to Lucas’ head. I helped him put a third when discarding the body.”

My jaw dropped, but there was no need to ask for more details. I knew Papa.

He didn’t tolerate betrayal, especially not when it affected the things he held close to his heart. Still, a rush of disbelief hit me.

Marco and I talked more about operations, and after a brief ten minutes, I disconnected the call. The door opened, and my heart skipped a beat when Rafayel walked in—not out of fear.

The man's charm certainly went up a notch between the last hour I laid eyes on him and now. Today, he wore a dark tailored suit that hugged his frame perfectly, the deep shade of navy blue complementing his piercing dark eyes. His shirt was crisp white, the collar slightly open, offering just enough glimpse of the strong neck that I couldn't help but notice.

I'd always known Rafayel was the kind of man who didn't need to speak to command attention. His presence alone, his confident stride, and the way his hands moved had a magnetic pull. I was charmed and undeniably drawn to this enigma, yet I couldn't tell if it was his looks, aura, or something else that had me utterly intrigued.

I couldn't help but let my eyes flicker back to the scar on his eyebrow—a subtle reminder of our encounter that had planted his seed inside me. A tiny mark that somehow felt more intimate than anything else between us. The last time I kissed it, my lips brushing against the roughness of the scar, I had felt something more than just the heat of the moment. The memory lingered in my mind, and....

I had to force myself to stop looking.

God, how worse could this situation get?

By the look on his face and those intense eyes of his watching me, he knew I wasn't playing video games after he saw the phone in my hands.

“Who were you talking to?”

I got it. He still didn't trust me. How sad. Now, moving on....

I wasn't about to give him more reasons to doubt me. I didn't flinch. There was no point in lying to him. Not when I was aware he tracked my phone for security reasons.

I straightened my back, met his gaze, and answered simply, "I was talking to Marco. I asked about my papa and the situation with Rossi. He said the alliance ended badly. And Luca is dead. My papa shot him."

He visibly relaxed and shrugged. "Was bound to happen, wasn't it?"

I looked again and noticed that Rafayel was unnaturally calm. He was always calm, but this one had something more to it. The air he carried was unbothered, and he didn't seem to care.

"You had something to do with it, didn't you?" That was the only explanation I had.

"Maybe." He shrugged again.

"Rafa."

His eyes flashed with that familiar heat, and I suppressed a grin. I knew I would get my answer if I called him that. It always disarmed him.

He folded his arms across his chest and leaned against the blue-gold vintage dresser he installed in the room for me. "What do you honestly think?"

"I think you had a huge hand in what happened with Luca."

"Smart. And correct. But I only set the ball rolling by investigating and showing proof to your father about his existing marriage. Enzo pulling the trigger was his own doing."

“Sure, I believe that.”

“Do you want to meet your father?” he asked, the question so direct, and I blinked, taken aback by the suddenness of it.

The idea of meeting him, of facing the man who betrayed me, stirred a mixture of curiosity, fear, and maybe even a bit of hope because he ended the alliance. But I didn’t hesitate for long.

“I don’t know,” I said, my voice quieter than I meant it to be. “I don’t think I’m ready.”

“I’m not going to force you.” Rafayel’s lips curved into a small smile. “But I’m going to ask you to marry me. There’s a disclaimer, though. You don’t necessarily have a choice.”

What?

“What?” I blurted, and it was a miracle I hadn’t fallen off the bed.

How could he pop such a question so casually? Was he fricken’ serious?

“What?” Did I ask that before? Yes? I wasn’t sure I’d asked it enough then. This was a dream, wasn’t it? I was going to wake up, pinch myself, and it’ll all be over before I knew it.

He was laughing now, like he wasn’t the same man I reunited with months ago that had a knife to my throat. Like he wasn’t the same man who squeezed the air out of my lungs against that tree with murderous eyes. Like he wasn’t the throat-ripping bloodthirsty Zver we all knew him to be.

I stared as he slowly pulled out the ring, the diamonds sparkling under the soft light. Each one caught the light, sending little glimmers dancing across my vision. It was mesmerizing.

My heart hammered in my chest, uncertain yet surprisingly strangely calm. He held it out to me, his gaze steady.

“You’re my family now.” His voice was deep and sure. “You’re mine. And I want to make it official. It’s...right that I do so.”

I froze, my breath catching. This wasn’t how I imagined it happening. I had never pictured a marriage proposal like this, not in a million years. But somehow, it felt right. The shock settled into something unexpected yet entirely welcome.

I blinked, still trying to absorb his words, but there was no mistaking the certainty in them.

His words didn’t sound like the typical promises of love, and I knew he wasn’t offering me just a ring. It was a place in his life and his in mine.

The weight of it hit me, and for a moment, I felt an overwhelming rush of relief. This was good, right?

It wasn’t what I expected, but it was...good.

“I—” Just as I was about to say something, anything, I caught a faint sound—a melody from somewhere beyond the window, drifting in like it had always belonged there.

James Arthur’s “Car’s Outside.” It was so soft, so perfect, like it was part of this moment, too.

I blinked. I almost thought I had imagined it. But no, it was real. The song, the ring, the words. And I knew my answer anyway.

“I—” I finally whispered, still feeling the strange pull of it all. My voice was soft, unsure at first, but then it steadied.

“Yes.”

Four Months Later

“Can’t believe you went ahead and did it.”

Andrei clapped my back from behind, but his blue eyes held mirth when I turned around. He tipped his chin up, with that rugged jawline exuding a familiar intimidating air I’d already grown used to.

“You never listen to me, do you?”

“I did listen,” I said honestly. “But life happened.”

He shook his head, taking his glass to his lips. “Life never just happens to you, Rafa. You have everything fucking planned out. If you didn’t want it, I wouldn’t be wearing a tuxedo.”

Andrei wouldn’t be anywhere in a tuxedo. My best man was scarce and always preferred working behind the shadows or undercover. Frankly, I’d known the man for decades, but today was the first day I saw him formally dressed up. His dirty blond hair was neatly styled, and the black tuxedo was a perfect fit, emphasizing his broad shoulders and lean frame and hiding the map of tattoos he’d inked all over his chest.

Andrei was family. Our bond went beyond blood; it was built on years of loyalty. He was one of the few men I could trust. He was right. Life didn’t happen to me; I made things happen.

Having children before marriage was disallowed. It was tradition. So, this morning,

Leonora and I got married. We swore our oaths before the priest, took our vows, and sealed it with a kiss in front of my men and family. Timur and Serena couldn't make it, but I had Andrei and Tikhon standing firm by my side.

I fished her out from the crowd of people she warmly greeted and kept my eyes on her the entire time. She was breathtakingly gorgeous in her gown. I knew she wasn't the fairytale-wishing type, and I wasn't surprised when she insisted on keeping things simple, from the bun on her head down to her makeup, dress, and shoes. With her small baby bump more visible, Leonora's glow intensified.

And yet, one glance at her had all the blood in my veins flowing south. She wasn't even doing anything besides talking and laughing with people she didn't know. And that was one of the things I liked about her.

Leonora was feisty, resilient, super smart, fucking sexy, and bitchy. But she also had heart. She didn't wear it on her sleeve often, but it was there. She only stepped on your toes when you stepped on hers.

Neither Enzo, Marco, nor Matteo made an appearance, either, and I knew how much their absence affected her, even if she was too stubborn to admit it. She'd moped for a second, wiped the soberness off, and excused herself to grab a drink. She wasn't ready to reconcile with her papa, and I had no intention of forcing her.

At the corner, someone tapped her shoulder and whispered into her ear, and in a second, they were on the floor dancing.

Leonora danced like she knew how to, undeterred by how many times she tripped on her own feet and almost knocked down the poor girl dancing. I recognized the girl—Mary. One of the maids. Bunching up her dress, Leo tried again, following her partner's tune and swaying to the tunes.

When she threw her head back, laughing like she did when we talked about cars, warm fuzzies upset my chest, and it took me a minute to realize I was smiling.

“She’s got you whipped, Rafa. That’s for sure.” Andrei patted my shoulder before walking away.

“Dio mio. Today was one of the best days of my life.”

Leonora walked out of the showers, smelling like soap and jasmine, with a dreamy look in her eyes, as she wrapped a big fluffy pink towel around her hair. “I can’t remember the last time I partied so hard.”

Peeling off my shirt and pants, I chuckled at her silliness. “You partied hard at your own wedding?”

“Hush. Don’t judge, okay? I had fun.” Cinching her bathrobe, she hummed her way to the mirror by the dresser, picked a bottle of lotion, and bent over to start squeezing.

“Come here,” I said to her in Russian. She rolled her eyes but obeyed, dropping to the edge of the bed with her smile intact.

Taking the bottle from her, I dropped to my haunches to help her apply the lotion to her legs. It was a ritual she’d started two months into the pregnancy. Every night, before she slept, she’d apply lotion on her skin. I’d never told her, but watching her do it always drove me crazy with an insatiable lust that made me want to take her right there on that stupid dresser.

But she was pregnant, so I kept my cock in my pants because the doctor’s orders were to take things slow.

I'd barely even touched her, but my balls were already hanging heavy in my boxer briefs. I wasn't sure how slow I was willing to go tonight.

Leonora lay back on the bed, gluing her eyes to the ceiling while I pressed the lotion onto my palm. I started from her feet, rubbing her heels and gently massaging all the way up to her ankles. She hummed. I knew they were sore from all the moves she'd made on the floor.

"Rafa?"

Blood thrummed in my ears, my cock grew between my legs, and I wasn't sure whose heavy breathing filled the silence in the room.

"Yeah?"

"Why do people call you Zver?"

I laughed, swearing under my breath. The memories were still as fresh. "I ripped a man's throat out once. And another time, I fed a man his dick. Both happened years ago."

She shuddered, and I expected her to question it, but she didn't. "You did stand in the middle of a goddamn road to shoot at me once, so I believe you. The other two, what did they do?"

"Both were pedophiles. Both trafficked women, and one raped his twelve-year-old daughter."

She gasped. "Who raped his daughter?" When I didn't respond, she arranged the pieces and immediately knew the answer. "God. The one who had his dick fed to him."

Silence.

“And the scar?” she continued.

I didn’t bother asking what scar. It wasn’t related to her previous question. The scar she pointed out was the one she kissed on my eyebrow. I gritted my teeth.

“My father,” was all I offered. And I appreciated it when she didn’t push.

Tonight was my wedding night. Not gather-around-the-fire-to-share night.

I continued in silence, rubbing her calves and stretching her skin under the pressure of my palms. She made too many noises. Many, many moans that made it hard to concentrate. But I focused, taking the cream up to her knees.

My head came up, positioned between her kneecaps. Her robe had risen high above her thighs, exposing soft flesh—a long stretch of olive skin and curvy hips. My mouth watered to taste her, cup my mouth over her pussy, and eat her out the way I’d desperately craved to since I watched her walk down that aisle.

“You didn’t dance with me,” I heard myself say.

She raised her head, holding my eyes above our baby bump. “What?”

“You danced with Mary, Varya, and Tikhon. But not with me.”

Leonora lifted her body, leaning back on her elbows. “I didn’t know you’d have loved to dance.”

“You didn’t ask.”

She snorted, a wry smile playing on her lips. “What world do you come from? The husband does the asking.”

“Doesn’t matter. I ought to punish you for that.”

Her smile grew wider. “And how do you intend to do that?”

“What do you suggest?”

The sound of her laughter left me needy and hungry. And I wasn’t sure how much longer I could hold back from unleashing.

“In what world does an offender suggest his punishment?”

“In my world, Leonya,” I murmured.

Being this close to her was intoxicating, as always. I wasn’t getting used to it anytime soon. I bent my head, pressing a kiss on her thigh. Christ. She smelled even better up close. She fisted her fingers in my hair, and I supported her weight, snaking an arm around her back when she lay down.

“Okay,” she rasped shakily. “I want my punishment to be quick but gentle.”

“I can do quick. And for your sake, gentle.”

My fingers found the knot keeping her robe tied together, and I unraveled it. The soft material came apart, and I skimmed a hand, brushing past her stomach, to knead her breasts. They were soft and full. And her tits pebbled under my touch.

She arched into me, whimpering. “You don’t even know what the punishment is.”

“Well, it better be what I have in mind.”

Growling, I pulled away the robe off her thighs, kissing my way up to her sex. As expected, she was already so pink and so fucking wet for me. I buried my face between her legs and covered her hot cunt with my mouth. An oasis.

I grazed her nub with my teeth, sucked hard on her pussy, keeping her from squirming with a firm grip on her waist. I dipped my head, licking from the base of her ass up to her quivering folds and back again. And when I couldn't get enough, I smacked her ass hard.

Her hips bucked, driving her pussy deeper into my mouth.

“Si—Rafa.... Dio mio...!” More Italian words poured in a rush from her lips, and she choked on a sob when I lapped my tongue over her clit, latching hard enough to leave a bruise. But her cry was of pleasure.

She cupped one of her breasts in her hand, pulling and tugging, and...she was so fucking beautiful. So fucking gorgeous. I needed to be inside her. Unable to keep up with the torture, I rose to my feet, freeing my cock from its prison. It sprung out, and her pupils dilated. Loosening the towel from her hair, she edged deeper into the bed, spreading her legs wider for me.

I stroked my shaft, clenching my jaw as I held her gaze. “What’s your punishment, Mrs. Yezhov?”

“Fuck me, Rafa.” Her eyes stayed glued on my hands while I stroked. She knew I liked it when she begged. She could get me to do almost anything when she was at my mercy. “Fuck me hard and fast, please, Rafa.”

I grabbed her by the hips, closer to the edge, and sunk inside her. We groaned at the

same time, reveling in the pleasure we knew, deep down, only we could provide for each other. These weren't words we spoke aloud, but she saw it in my eyes, and I'd seen it in hers. Every time we plunged into ourselves, that ravenous hunger we had only grew stronger. And it wasn't going away anytime soon.

I fucked her gently but hard enough to make her titties bounce. Hard enough to force my name out of her lips multiple times. Hard enough to have her screaming and trembling when her orgasm hit stronger than I'd witnessed before.

And when she opened her eyes and gave me a lazy half-drunken smile, I lowered my lips to hers, kissing her hard when the tension rolled off my shoulders and my body tightened. I came inside her, as hard as she'd shattered beneath me.

I started to pull away, but she threw her arms around my neck and hugged me.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:06 pm

The afternoon was quiet, and it was the kind that felt heavier than it should have.

For the past five months, the weight in my chest grew as steadily as the child in my womb. I sat on the edge of the sofa, resting my hands protectively over my swollen belly. The house was still, except for the distant noise from some of the men beyond the windows.

When I heard familiar footsteps echo through the foyer, I knew it was Rafayel before his tall frame came through the parlor. Relief swept through me. He was home.

Recently, I craved his presence as much as I craved his body. Just having him in the same space kept me from teetering off the edge or crying for no reason. I looked up as he stepped inside, his tie loosened, his phone still pressed to his ear. I smiled, but he didn't. He mouthed, "Just a second," and retreated to the kitchen to finish his call.

I sat there, staring at the pattern on the rug, rehearsing the words I'd been turning over in my mind for weeks. When he finally reappeared, I cleared my throat, backing my voice with the confidence I felt. It was taking a lot of pride to do this, but I couldn't hold off much longer.

It'd been eight whole months since I heard from Papa, and it was killing me.

"Rafayel," I started, my hands clenching into fists in my lap. "I've been thinking. It's been a while. Eight months. Phew. I can't...I can't keep holding onto this anger. I want to talk to Papa. He's just as stubborn as I am, so I guess he's never going to call. But maybe it's time to make things right."

Rafayel sat on the couch face and put his phone on the center table. His face shifted, and I saw it, a crack in his usual calculated demeanor. “Leonora, I just got off the phone with Marco.”

Marco? Why would Marco call Rafayel and not me?

“Enzo....” He paused, as if searching for the right words. “He passed away this morning.”

For a moment, I didn’t move. I didn’t breathe. Papa? Passed away? No, he couldn’t have. The last time I saw him, we were at each other’s throats. He wouldn’t leave without giving me a chance to apologize. He wouldn’t—

Papa wouldn’t leave me.

“No,” I whispered, shaking my head. “You’re fucking joking.” I laughed, but it was strangled with tears I struggled to keep in because, somehow, I knew Rafayel wouldn’t play with me like that. I shot to my feet. “Marco’s fucking joking. This is a—no.”

The room swam around me, and my heartbeat thundered in my ears. “No, that can’t be. He—”

Rafayel was at my side in an instant, his hands firm on my shoulders as though he could anchor me to reality. “Fuck, Leonya. Breathe,” he coaxed in Russian. “Fucking breathe.”

But what would it matter if I did? The walls were caving in again, and a grief deeper than anything I’d ever known swallowed me whole.

I clutched at my stomach instinctively. The tears spilled freely now. I hadn’t made

peace with him. I hadn't said goodbye. My father was gone, and the chance to fix what was broken had gone with him.

Five Days Later

It rained a lot today.

As I stood frozen beside his grave, the air was thick with the scent of wet earth and roses. The sky mirrored my heart, overcast and gray, as though the world itself mourned his absence. The soft murmur of the priest's voice barely registered in my ears; I could only hear the echo of my own regrets.

Matteo stood beside me, silent and composed, but his hand gripping mine betrayed his struggle to keep it together. The second I told him, he'd booked the last flight back from Ireland to California. He'd grown so much and looked a lot older and more refined, like a responsible adult. They didn't have the rosiest father-and-son relationship, but Papa cared for him deeply, and I knew he'd have wanted him to see how manly he'd become. He'd left the path Papa paved for him, but the Colombo blood visibly ran through his veins.

I envied my brother's strength. My knees felt like they would give out any second, and my body trembled under the burden of guilt.

I stared at the casket, the polished wood glistening with rain, as if the heavens themselves shed tears for him.

The great Enzo Colombo—gone forever.

The words I never said haunted me now, louder than the funeral prayers, louder than

the shovels of dirt waiting to bury him away from me. I should have called him. Should have swallowed my pride. Should have told him how much he meant to me before it was too late.

But I hadn't.

And now, all that was left were broken memories and the hollow ache of what could have been.

"Leo." Matteo's voice broke through my spiraling thoughts, his hand tightening around mine. I turned to him, his face pale and etched with lines of pain I couldn't erase. He was strong but not untouched. His eyes glistened with unshed tears, reflecting my own misery.

I shook my head, unable to find words. My chest heaved, and I covered my mouth to muffle the sob that clawed its way up. The tears I had tried to hold back finally spilled, burning hot trails down my cheeks.

"I should've...." My voice cracked. "I should've told him, Matteo. Papa didn't know how much I—how much we loved him. How sorry I was."

Matteo's jaw tightened, and he pulled me into his arms. His strength, his silent solidarity, was all that kept me from crumbling completely. I pressed my face into his shoulder, letting the sobs shake me, feeling the raw agony that refused to be soothed.

The priest's voice rose for the final prayer, and Matteo gently released me, guiding me closer to the grave. I stepped forward, my legs trembling, and stared down at the casket. My vision blurred with tears, but I could still see it. The stark reality of it.

"I'm sorry," I whispered, the words choking me. My fingers gripped the edge of the rose I held, its thorns biting into my skin—a fitting pain. I deserved it.

“I love you,” I said, louder this time, though it felt like shouting into an abyss. The wind carried my words, but I knew they would never reach him. Not now.

I let the rose fall, watching as it landed on the smooth wood, its crimson petals stark against the dark rain-soaked surface. My heart twisted as the first shovelful of earth fell, a dull thud that felt like it echoed in my soul.

Then, I looked up, and I remembered Mama.

“He’s alone.” Salty tears dripped on my lips. “Watch over him, too, okay?”

I took my fingers to my head and my chest and drew the cross to my shoulders.

Heavy footsteps approached me, loud against the cobblestones, and when I looked up, it was Marco.

I didn’t bother asking him how he was holding up. He wasn’t. The hardness in his red eyes and the tightness of his jaw were enough evidence.

Without a word, he handed me a folded letter, the edges worn as if someone had held it for far too long. I stared at it, my fingers trembling as I took it from him.

“It’s from your papa,” Marco said softly, his voice strained. “He wrote it before....” He didn’t finish the sentence, but he didn’t need to. My father had said his time was running out.

The funeral felt like a blur after that. Faces came and went, whispers and condolences barely registering. I felt weaker when Matteo drove back to his hotel, with Marco and some of Papa’s men accompanying him. He wasn’t ready to stay in the house. And

by the time Rafayel and I climbed into the car, my chest felt hollow, as though the sorrow had emptied me out entirely.

I held the letter tightly, my gaze locked on the handwriting that was unmistakably his. Rafayel sat beside me silently, with his hand resting lightly on my knee. A quiet reminder that I wasn't alone.

With a deep breath, I unfolded the letter, the faint scent of my father's cologne lingering on the paper.

Principessa,

If you're reading this, it means I'm no longer by your side. I've always believed there would be enough time for everything—time to fix my mistakes, time to hold you close, time to tell you just how proud I am of the woman you've become. But time, it seems, is never truly ours.

The words blurred as tears filled my eyes, spilling over before I could stop them. Rafayel's grip on my knee tightened, grounding me.

I promised your mother, my Angelina, that I would love you and your brother more than life itself. I gave it my best shot and loved every moment of it. But you two are the only ones that can say for sure if I did—

My heart shattered to more pieces. "You did, Papa. God. You did."

Your best interests have always been my priority. Hurting you was not the plan. But I got blinded by my greed and selfishness, and I did it anyway. When you left and never once looked back, I knew I'd lost you forever. I forgive you for the rash choice you made, for the ones you couldn't. I hope, in time, you can forgive me, too—for the things I didn't say, for the moments I caused you pain. You and Matteo were my

greatest joys, even when I failed to show it.

I let out a shaky breath.

You have my blessings, principessa. I hope to live long enough to see my grandchildren and to watch you be the wonderful mother I know you'll be. But if I don't, know this: My love for you and Matteo will carry on beyond this life and into the next. Never doubt that.

The letter ended simply, his signature scrawled at the bottom as though he'd run out of words but not love. I clutched it to my chest, sobbing openly now. Rafayel pulled me into his arms, and his warmth cut through the icy ache in my heart.

"If it's any comfort, everyone knows how much your father loved you and your brother," Rafayel murmured against my hair, and the world around me blurred as I buried my face into his chest, my sobs breaking the heavy silence in the car.

My hands gripped his shirt like it was the only anchor keeping me from drowning in the sea of grief that tore through me. His musky scent wrapped around me, but it did little to fill the hollow ache inside my chest.

"He's gone," I choked out, my voice cracking under the weight of the words. Saying it aloud made it unbearably real. My father was gone.

Rafayel's arms tightened around me, as though he could physically shield me from the pain. "Let it out, Leonya," he whispered, his breath warm against my temple. "I'm here."

I cried harder, tears soaking into the fabric of his shirt, but he didn't flinch, didn't pull away. His hand smoothed over my back in soothing circles, his presence grounding me in a way I'd grown familiar with.

After a while, the sharp edges of my grief dulled enough for me to lift my head and meet his gaze.

“I feel so...lost now. Papa was all we had,” I admitted. My throat was raw, my words fractured, but I needed him to understand.

Rafayel’s dark eyes brimmed with warmth, like the first rays of sunlight after a storm. He cupped my face gently, brushing away the tears with his thumb.

“You’re not alone, Leo. I’m right here, and I’ll never let you feel unloved again.” The whirlwind was still in my chest when he said words I hadn’t dared to expect. “I love you, Leonya.”

My heart skipped a beat, and without thinking, I nodded, a small, shaky smile breaking through the sorrow because that was what it had been this whole time—the mad obsession, the insane attraction, the stubborn need to always be close to him. The pieces fell into place.

“I love you, too, Rafa.”

He pulled me into a gentle hug, murmuring in soft Russian, “Everything will be fine.”

And for the first time since the world had shattered around me, I began to believe it. His arms felt like home, and the ache in my heart lessened, replaced by the faint flicker of something new.

Something whole.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:06 pm

Normal girls wanted normal men to cook for them, clean for them, and treat them like princesses, which honestly wasn't a bad thing. But in the world where I came from, the women did the serving. They treated their husbands like kings, even if they were the world's biggest assholes. Finding a man to uphold you like his queen—rub your feet, feed you breakfast in bed, eat you up like delicious dinner—was extremely rare.

Luckily for me, I found one. Or he found me. Or we found each other, really.

I woke to the weight of my body pressing me into the mattress and the ache in my back more fucking insistent than it had been the day before.

My swollen feet throbbed even as they lay propped up on a pillow, and the baby, as if in a bid to remind me of its imminent arrival, kicked sharply against my ribs. I groaned and shifted, but even that simple movement felt monumental. My belly was like a fucking obstacle.

“Leonya?”

Rafayel's voice came from somewhere nearby. It was low, and he sounded concerned. I turned my head slowly, catching the sexy sight of him leaning against the doorframe. His dark hair was more tousled than gelled, his shirt half-buttoned, like he hadn't fully decided whether to start his day or stay by my side. The look on his face was tender and worried.

“I'm fine,” I muttered, though it was a lie through the fucking teeth.

“No, you're not.”

“Yes, I am.” My breath hitched as I tried to sit up, only for his long strides to carry him to my side before I could even attempt it.

Big hands slid under my arms to help me upright. “You’re not fine.” His touch was careful, as though I would shatter under his fingertips at any minute. “Why didn’t you call me?”

I didn’t answer right away, too focused on the relief of finally sitting up.

My hands cradled the round expanse of my belly, and...the stupid waterworks started up again.

A tear of frustration pricked the corner of my eye. I didn’t want to need his help for something as simple as sitting, but my body betrayed me. “I didn’t want to bother you.”

“Bother me?” He crouched beside me, dark eyes searching my face. “Leonora, you could scream my name in the middle of the night, and I wouldn’t think twice about coming to you from wherever I fucking am. You know this.”

The sincerity in his tone undid me.

I pressed a hand to my face, but Rafayel gently caught it, pulling it away. “Don’t hide from me.” He brushed his thumb over my knuckles. “I told you I want to be here for you, and I meant every word.”

The intensity of his gaze overwhelmed me. His feelings for me, as hard as it was to finally admit them, so often obscured by the strange circumstances of our relationship, were suddenly laid bare.

I had no doubts; this crazy man of mine loved me, truly, deeply. And sometimes, it

scared the hell out of me as much as it comforted me.

His other hand came to rest on my belly, and the tension in his shoulders eased as he felt the faint movement beneath his palm.

“You’re already so fucking strong, sweetheart,” he murmured, and I marveled at the awe in his voice. “But you don’t have to carry everything alone. Let me take some of the weight.”

I swallowed hard, my fingers curling around his. “I’m just...tired. It feels like every day is harder than the last, and I don’t know how much more I can take.”

He rose to sit beside me on the bed, pulling me against him. His hand moved in slow circles over my belly.

“And you’re almost there. When the time comes, I’ll be right beside you.”

He kissed my nose, and I tilted my head back to meet his lips. He groaned, cupping my face softly and parting his lips to grant me access. I kissed him gently, slipped my fingers underneath his shirt, and moaned against him. I could blame my frequent horniness on the pregnancy, but that would be unfair when Rafayel was solely responsible for giving me the flutters.

Before I slipped my tongue into his mouth, smiling against my lips, he pulled back. “You know we can’t. Doctor’s orders.”

“Since when did you become a fucking saint?”

In response, he slammed his mouth hard against mine, knocking all the air out of my lungs by kissing me senseless. Again, he pulled away, a turbulent storm in his eyes. “You know I’m anything but.”

Fuck the doctor's frigging orders; I wanted to pounce on this man right now. Even his eyes said he definitely wanted me, too. I knew if I pressed between his legs, I'd feel him, hard and ready for me.

He knew what I was thinking. "Leo?"

"Fine," I sighed. "I know."

I leaned into him, my head resting against his chest, and for the first time today, I felt a measure of peace.

I was in the kitchen, preparing Rafayel's dinner, when the first pang hit me like a bolt of lightning, ripping through my abdomen and doubling me over in a mixture of shock and pain.

My hand shot out instinctively, gripping the edge of the table for support as my knees buckled. I gasped, the breath stolen from my lungs, and felt a sharp bead of sweat rolling down my temple.

"Leonora!" Varya's face appeared blurry in my vision when she perched by my side.

"The baby..." I groaned. "The baby is coming."

I forced myself to breathe, shaky and shallow at first but then steadier. I had prepared for this moment, yet no amount of planning could have truly braced me for this sort of pain.

"Help!" Varya called out. "Someone, help us!"

Panic clawed at the edges of my mind, but I wrestled it down. People rushed in—mostly men and maids, a blur of concerned faces I barely registered. I heard Varya’s voice, though indistinct, and there was a brief argument about how I wouldn’t make it to the hospital on time.

Another voice, a man’s this time, suggested calling the boss.

I nodded, too shocked to speak. I needed to see my husband. I needed Rafayel.

Another pang hit, stronger than the last. “God!” I cried, twisting in pain.

Strong arms guided me to the bed, and my world narrowed to the shocks of agony that seemed to split me in two.

It felt like I was underwater.

Hands pressed cool cloths to my forehead. Someone whispered encouragements I couldn’t process. All I could do was hold on, gripping the bedpost until my knuckles turned white, my cries tearing from my throat in guttural bursts.

“Rafa!”

“It’s time to push!” someone said.

“Rafayel!”

I bore down, my body straining with a force I didn’t know I possessed. Each contraction felt like climbing a mountain. Sweat dripped from my brow, mixing with tears I hadn’t realized I’d shed. My nails dug into the sheets as I roared against the pain, primal and raw.

“Come on, child. You have to push.”

I screamed.

Minutes blurred into an eternity.

The pain, the pressure, the exhaustion—it all mingled into a single, overwhelming moment. Just when I thought I couldn’t endure another second, a sharp, searing final push brought with it a rush of relief.

And then, piercing through the quiet chaos, came the sound I had been waiting to hear for months.

The first wail of life.

“It’s a girl,” one of the maids squealed.

I smiled. “A girl.”

Her cry was so loud, strong, and insistent, almost as stubborn as I was. My chest heaved as I collapsed back against the pillows, tears streaming freely now. But before Varya handed me my baby, a heavy blanket pulled me under, and all I saw was black.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:06 pm

Blood, sweat, and fear were a trifecta I had grown all too familiar with over the years. And the room reeked of it now.

When I had my casino designed, it wasn't for this kind of business. The leather chairs, polished oak desk, and the glittering lights of the slot machines beyond the tinted glass were to depict opulence. Yet here I was, standing before a pathetic excuse for a man strapped to a chair, his head lolling forward like a broken puppet.

The idiot who thought he could slither out of my grasp.

“You almost sang, Rocky.”

I flexed my fingers inside the tight leather gloves, the blade in my hand catching the low, artificial light. It gleamed with the promise of pain, and I knew it wasn't a question of if I'd use it.

It was when .

Rocky's muffled whimpering grated on my nerves, though I hadn't even touched him yet.

“You disappointed me, Rocky. I gave you opportunities, much more than you deserved. And this? You run your mouth to the fucking cops?”

He could barely crack his swollen eye open. He shook his head. “No, Boss. I swear, I didn't—”

“Don’t fucking lie to me, kid.”

The blade slashed through the air, its tip biting into the wooden armrest beside his hand. His entire body jolted as though I’d gutted him already. I leaned in close, close enough to feel the warmth of his shallow, terrified breaths. “Do you know what happens to traitors in my world? Do you?”

He stammered incoherently, the words slipping away in a rush of saliva and terror. I grabbed his jaw, forcing him to look at me. His pupils were blown wide. Good. He needed to fear me. Fear was control.

“The cops might’ve been willing to cut you a deal, but me?” I hissed, dragging the blade lightly across his cheek. The skin didn’t break—not yet—but he flinched violently. “There are no deals here. No second chances.”

He sobbed now, a pathetic sound that echoed in the room. “I didn’t tell them anything! I swear on my mother’s grave, Boss. Please! I have a wife and daughter.”

“Your mother’s grave and your family mean nothing to me.” I smiled. “What matters is my business. And you’ve put that in jeopardy.”

I dragged the blade lower, pressing just enough to let a thin line of blood bead at his throat. His breathing hitched, and the look in his eyes reflected the reality of his predicament settling in.

“You’ll talk tonight, Rocky,” I whispered against his chin. “The truth. Every detail. And when I’m done with you, you’ll pray the cops had you instead of me.”

I stepped back, rolling my shoulders. The blade gleamed in my hand, mirroring my hunger for the blood of betrayal, and I raised it to his mouth, ready to start with his fucking tongue, when the door busted open.

Tikhon, ignoring the glare I gave him, marched straight up to me to whisper low in my ears.

“Congratulations, Rafa. You’ve got yourself a baby girl.”

My tires burned against the asphalt, and the streets blurred. My chest burned. My heartbeat pounded against my ribs. I didn’t know what I was feeling, but the rush left me high, like I was floating on the fucking clouds. The only problem was that a wave of foreign emotions was crashing down on me hard, all at the same time, and I had no clue how to deal with them.

Reaching for my phone, I dialed my brother. He was the best person to call for a situation like this. The phone didn’t even ring before he picked up like he was just waiting for my call.

“Look who’s become a man. Who would have thought?”

In the background, I heard my niece shrieking, and hearing Timur laugh actually calmed me down. “Fuck you, too. How did you know?”

“How did I know?”

Yeah, shit. For a moment there, I’d forgotten who I was speaking to. Word traveled fast around our parts, and there was no doubt he’d gotten the news before I did. I raked my fingers through my hair, blowing out a breath.

“It’s a code red. I don’t know—I can’t handle this. I don’t know what to fucking do.”

“First....” He paused to say something in Russian, which made my niece shriek more.

“Calm down. You’ve got this. You can handle it.” He said the last part with more emphasis, and we both knew he referred to the trauma we’d both suffered at the hands of our father. “You’re better than him.”

When he said that, I caught the sight of the gloves on my hand and the dots of crimson on my shirt and let out a dry chuckle. “I was ready to slice out a man’s tongue, for fuck’s sake. He swore on his mother’s goddamn grave. He has a fucking family. Timur, I didn’t give a fuck about any of those. What I wanted was the satisfaction of seeing that tongue out of his mouth. I wanted to teach him a lesson. You know this. I’m sick in the head. I can’t...I can’t be a fucking father.”

He was quiet for a minute before he spoke again. “Get your shit together, Rafa.” It was an order. “You’re going to walk into that room, look your wife and daughter in the face, and realize you’re not the person you think you are. If I could do it, so can you.”

“Timur—”

“I’m with Serena. See you in a few minutes.”

And the line went dead.

The moment I got home, I brushed past my men at the entrance. Tonight, it didn’t matter. Nothing mattered but getting to her. I marched up to the bedroom and shoved the door open.

Leonora lay there, pale and exhausted but radiant in a way that looked good on her. In her arms was a tiny bundle swaddled in soft pink.

“Rafa.” She smiled up at me.

And I stepped closer and leaned over her—my baby girl. Timur was right. When I looked my wife and daughter in the face, I felt transformed. The doubts, the fucking fears—everything melted away. My confidence sprung back up. And I caressed her tiny cheeks gently.

Jesus.

I was a father, a father to this beautiful angel. Maybe this was how Leonora's father had felt the first time he looked at her.

My baby was impossibly small, her tiny fingers curling into a fist, her chest rising and falling in fragile motions. She was perfect. Our perfect creation. Her face was soft and innocent, already so much like her mother. Leonora's eyes, her lips, her skin. It was as if I was seeing a reflection of the woman I loved, a woman who haunted my every waking moment and lingered in my dreams.

"She looks like you," I whispered, and the words tumbled out without thought, but they were true. "She's going to be as beautiful as her mother."

The baby stirred, a tiny whimper escaping her lips. My chest tightened, and I knew in that moment I'd kill for her. I'd burn the world to the ground if it meant keeping her safe.

"You did this." I smiled at my perfect Leonya. "And I fucking love you."

Leonora laughed through tears, her head falling back against the pillow, and a warmth spread through me. My pulse quickened, the kind of quickening that told me I wanted her. I wanted her like I'd never wanted anyone before.

The way she looked at me...I could see it in the flutter of her breath, the way her lips parted, as though she didn't know how to respond, but she felt it. She felt what I was

saying. I saw the butterflies in her stomach reflected in her gaze, the way she couldn't quite hide the emotions stirring within her.

It was almost too much.

I'd never been one for soft words. Never. But for Leonora, I knew something darker, something deeper than love, had taken root inside me. Something that would never let her go.

Matteo stood on the other side of the bed, grinning proudly. "Feels great to be an uncle." He kissed the top of his sister's head.

And the door creaked open behind me. Timur walked in, his foreboding presence commanding as always, with Serena following close behind. And I'd never been gladder to see him.

My older brother's eyes softened as he looked at the baby.

"She's beautiful," Serena whispered and slipped her hand into Timur's.

"Of course, she is," I muttered, my eyes never leaving my daughter. "She's ours."

Leonora laughed weakly, and I reached out, brushing damp strands of hair from her face. "You did good, Leo." I pressed a soft kiss at the side of her mouth. "So damn good."

"Thanks." Her eyes flitted to my chest. "But you can't carry her until you change that shirt."

I kissed her again. "Sure thing, Boss."

“Good thing I brought an extra one.” Timur held out a crisp white button-up to me with a knowing smile. And before I took it from him to change, he patted my shoulder and muttered lowly, “You’ve got this.”

One Year Later

“You know what we can control. But what if I told you we could offer something more? Something that the corporate world would benefit from, something that could take your business to new heights?”

I clicked a button, and the screen behind me flickered to life, revealing a sleek, detailed proposal. The corporate elite in front of me shifted in their seats. They had no idea how deep this went.

“Paragon Syndicate Inc. is one of the most powerful players in the business world. But even the most secure empire can fall without the right protection and alliances,” I continued, pacing slightly, my eyes narrowing on each individual in the room. “In our line of work, we’ve learned the importance of protecting what matters. And trust me when I say, your assets, your brand, can never be truly secure without the right people watching over it.”

A murmur rippled through the room.

“Security, control, and influence are what we offer—not just in the form of muscle but in strategy, information, and leverage. With us, you gain access to networks you wouldn’t even know existed. And we have the resources to make sure your competitors never get too close.”

One of the board members, a man with thinning gray hair, leaned forward with evident skepticism.

“And why would we trust the Italians?”

I smirked. “Because you don’t have a choice. The question isn’t whether you trust me. It’s whether you’re willing to let someone else in the game who can offer you what you can’t even fathom. We can secure your future while you sit back and collect the profits.”

I clicked the remote again, and the next slide flashed—data, projections, and a roadmap of how we could integrate seamlessly into their operations. A detailed analysis of how our assets, from legitimate businesses to underground networks, could bolster their operations.

And their resistance started to crack.

“The corporate world and the underworld aren’t so different. You and me, we’re the same,” I said. “Both thrive on power and the ability to manipulate situations to your advantage. The only difference is we’re not bound by the same rules. Imagine what you could achieve with that kind of freedom.”

Another board member, a younger woman with sharp eyes, raised an eyebrow. “And what do you want in return?”

“Simple.” I shrugged. “A seat at the table. The mafia doesn’t operate in the shadows forever. We’ve built empires without your kind of legitimacy, but what if we combined the two? The protection, the reach, the influence. You get to expand your corporate empire—and we get control over markets and power that could change everything.”

There was a shift in the room. The walls were coming down, bit by bit. They didn’t know it yet, but they were already mine.

“You don’t have to agree today,” I added smoothly, stepping closer to the table. “But

remember this: Every day you wait, someone else out there will be making the same offer to your competitors. And trust me, if they beat you to it, you'll regret not taking this chance."

I let my words hang in the air, and my gaze drifted to the most prominent man in the room: my husband. Dark desire lingered in his gaze, and a satisfied smile sat on his lips. I nibbled down on my lips because I knew he liked it before I faced my clients again.

And just like that, the deal was already done.

One year.

One year since I had given birth. One year since everything had changed.

But nothing really changed. I was back to work, pumping harder than before. The Colombo family still ran like a well-oiled machine, and the alliances I had forged remained intact. I was feared before, but now, the people respected me.

The weight of motherhood hadn't crumbled me; instead, it had hardened me in ways I didn't even realize were possible.

My body was still adjusting—subtle shifts that no one else could see, but I felt them every day. My hips had widened slightly, a curve I hadn't known I'd need but now embraced, and my chest was fuller than before. The tautness of my skin, once as smooth as silk, now held traces of motherhood in the soft stretch marks that no longer felt like imperfections but the marks of strength, of survival. I was different, but I was still me. Just stronger, sharper.

The moment we stepped out of the building, the air felt cooler against my skin. And

with every step I took, the burden of the day's events seemed to lift.

Rafa's presence beside me grounded me, and the tension I didn't even realize I was holding in my shoulders started to ease.

We got into the car, and I relaxed in it, the familiar scent of leather and him filling the small space.

I didn't wait a second before leaning my head onto his broad shoulder.

I exhaled softly, letting the exhaustion of the day settle into my bones. "It's been a long day."

His hand found mine, and he intertwined our fingers. I felt the heat radiating from him and leaned in closer, brushing my lips against his neck. It was meant to be a casual gesture, but it had my pulse quickening.

"You know," he murmured into my hair and kissed my cheek, "you're even more captivating when you're in control."

I lifted my head just enough to meet his eyes. The intensity of his gaze made me shiver. "Is that so?" My lips curved into a playful smile. "Maybe I just needed the right incentive to let someone else take the lead."

He chuckled, and the sound traveled straight between my legs. "Oh, I can think of a few ways to make you let go."

He'd said it confidently, and I bit my lip, anticipation rising like a slow burn between us. The car moved through the city, and somehow, I missed being behind the wheel, but in that moment, I was entirely focused on him.

"I love you, Rafa."

He kissed my forehead and relaxed on the seat with his eyes shut. “I know you do.”

We stepped out of the car as we arrived at Timur’s house, and I smiled at the imposing structure before us. Serena invited us for lunch today. Rafayel didn’t say it often, but we both knew how appreciative he was that Timur and his family shuttled between states just to spend time with us. And it was surely a blessing because Serena had fallen madly in love with Nadya.

Normally, I stayed home with our daughter, who was a rare moment of peace in the madness of our lives. Marco was more than capable of handling the operations while I focused on what mattered most—our baby girl. But tonight, it was different. I had to be with Rafayel at the meeting with Paragon, and I knew Serena would be happy to take over for a while, giving me the time I needed.

I didn’t like leaving Nadya in someone else’s hands, but Serena had always been good with her. She’d always been a mother in her own right. She was Timur’s wife, but I felt a bond with her that went beyond just family.

Hand in hand, we walked through the front door, instantly smiling at the faint sound of laughter echoing from the living room. Serena was there, sitting on the floor, Nadya nestled in her arms. Her smile melted away the tightness in my chest.

Serena lit up as she looked at me. “She’s been asking for you.”

Nadya reached out for me with chubby hands, her small fingers curling around mine as if she’d been waiting for this moment. I pulled her close, breathing in the scent of her hair, and kissed her forehead.

“Thank you.” I hoped she saw the depths of my gratitude because I doubted that I could repay her back for her kindness.

“Don’t mention it. She’s a joy. Come on, let’s go eat. I’m almost starving, and your brother throws quite the tantrum when he’s hungry.” She directed that at Rafayel.

We thought Timur was away on a trip and hadn’t expected to see him here. But then again, he was always around when his wife hosted something. I admired the kind of love they had but didn’t envy it. Rafa’s version was enough for me.

However, what I didn’t anticipate was the presence of Rafayel’s cousins—a whole damn lot of them.

But more specifically, the one with gray eyes: Ivan.

He stood by the window with his hands buried in the pocket of his pants. A soberness lingered in his gaze. I barely recognized him. The last time our paths crossed, he’d knocked me out, kidnapped me, and...you know how the rest of the story goes.

Now, he looked older, just like Matteo. A bit more refined.

As I made my way further inside, I felt his eyes on me, and a prickling heat rose up the back of my neck. Then, like fate had decided we couldn’t avoid each other any longer, he approached me. Rafayel quietly excused himself, taking Nayda in his arms. And I narrowed my eyes at Ivan, but he didn’t return the glare.

His expression was guarded when he talked. “Leo.”

“Came to knock me out again?” I gave him a raised brow.

He flinched. “On the contrary, no.” He blew out a deep breath. “I want to apologize. What I did.... It was childish and stupid. I was immature.”

I almost didn’t know how to respond, and I wondered if I was imagining it.

Ivan—apologizing?

This version of him was new, unfamiliar. He wasn't the reckless, cocky man I'd crossed paths with before. His sudden change was impossible not to notice. His tailored suit, the careful control of his words, the way he seemed more at ease with himself.... It was like I was meeting a completely different person.

"There's something different about you. I'm not buying it. Could be a ploy. Who knows?"

Ivan smiled, and it looked genuine. "I work at Charleston's."

That, strangely, tore a laugh out of me, loud enough to catch my husband's concerned stare. I looked back at Ivan. Whether I liked it or not, this dipshit was family now. The only reason I wouldn't trust him was if he gave me a solid reason not to. I was letting go, burying the hatchet.

"Well, that's...shocking. But congratulations are in order."

"You're late," he whispered and then chuckled. "I started a year ago."

"Still. Congratulations, Ivan. And we're cool. I guess what happened between us is one of those things about life, isn't it? And ironically, I owe my happiness to you. As crazy as it sounds, you brought me back to Rafa. So, thank you, I guess."

His eyes lingered on me for a moment, and I saw something flicker there. Relief, maybe? Whatever it was, I liked it. This new version of him was...intriguing. Gone was the guy who never thought before he acted, replaced by someone who understood his own faults. And somehow, it made him far more dangerous, in a way.

A slight smile tugged at his lips. "I'm glad," he said and then walked away.

And I moved over to the table to join the rest of them for lunch.

I was laughing, caught up in the conversation at the table. The chatter was easy, the kind that flowed effortlessly when you were surrounded by people who made you feel at home. I was smiling. But then, like a bolt of electricity, there was a sudden charge in the air that had nothing to do with anything but the weight of a gaze. It sizzled at the side of my face, burning intensely.

Rafayel.

Across the table, I felt his eyes on me, heavy, intense, burning through the layers of conversation, locking on me as though I were the only person in the room.

I looked up instinctively, and sure enough, there he was, his dark eyes locked onto mine.

My heart skipped. I tried to focus on the conversation again, but it was impossible, and I shifted in my seat, trying to adjust to the heat crawling up my neck, attempting to break free from the intensity of his stare. But it felt like I was trapped, and the worst part? I didn't want to escape.

I wanted to look away, to keep my composure, to pretend nothing was happening, but I couldn't. Not when his eyes were searing into mine with such force. I swallowed, my breath suddenly shallow.

But if he wanted to play that game, two could certainly play. A slow smile tugged at my lips.

Tonight, I was going to be a little naughty.

I slid my foot beneath the table, brushing it lightly against his leg, just enough to make him flinch. My heart pounded, and my breath quickened, but I kept my gaze

fixed on him, pretending to focus on the conversation, as I felt the heat rise in his body and mine.

The subtle shift in his posture didn't go unnoticed by me. He was starting to squirm just a little, and it was delicious.

A rush of power surged through me as I stroked his leg again, this time just a touch higher, making him stiffen. The way his jaw tightened, the barely contained intake of breath, it was intoxicating. I couldn't help myself. I giggled softly. The way I could make him unravel with just a simple touch.... The control was too much to resist.

Then, he leaned in, his body heat wrapping around me like a vice, and whispered something dark and delicious in hot Russian, only for my ears.

“Don't make noise. She's asleep.”

“You should take your own advice, sweetheart.”

Like an animal, Rafayel ripped the thong from my waist, cupped me where I'd ached for him all day, and pressed my back against the door until I was breathing his scent and nothing else. His breath came fast and shallow, his eyes fixed on me with a hunger that matched my own.

“Spread your legs,” he ordered, and I obeyed.

He slipped one finger in, grunted against my neck, and pumped in another one. My back flew off the door, and I dug my fingernails into his hard biceps to keep my legs steady. He moved against me, thrusting his finger inside me with a rough speed that I wholly welcomed.

“Punishment for teasing me tonight,” he growled against my ear and nipped at my earlobe.

The words in my brain had turned into an incoherent mush, but I was still able to say, “You started it, staring at me like I was dinner.”

A low chuckle rumbled from his throat and his mouth latched on my nape while his finger worked its magic inside me. While he thrust like a maniac, he grazed my skin with teeth and marked me with an insane number of love bites.

“Who owns this pussy, Leo?”

He slapped my pussy, the sound of my juices echoing against his palm, and before I could scream, he covered my mouth with his, swallowing down my groan. If Nadya batted a lash, our night was over.

“Who, baby?”

I whimpered, feeling my pulse throb with insane need. “You, Rafa.”

With his free hand, he cupped one of my breasts and tugged on my tits. “And these perfect tits? Who owns them?”

“You.”

He slid his fingers into my hair, yanked my head back, and kissed me like a man dying of thirst who’d seen a clean spring. I struggled to keep up with him but didn’t pull away. I kept him locked in, pinned against me, because that was the only place I needed him—with me.

Inside me.

I shattered against him, crying deliriously into his mouth, while I came over his hand. But he wasn't done.

He withdrew his fingers, lifted them to his lips, and sucked me off with half-hooded lids, making noises of satisfaction as he licked his fingers.

Dio mio.

My skin burned from how hot that made me, and I reached for his bulging cock in his pants before he could stop me. Rafayel liked hearing me beg. And damn my pride; I'd do it a million times if it made him feel good enough to give me what I wanted.

"I need you inside me now, Rafa. Please."

Without a word—because there were no more words to say, really—he pulled me close, my body pressed to him as he sank inside me with a roughness I hadn't felt in a while.

I felt that deep, raw need between us, a fire that had been building for far too long. The past months, with the pregnancy, had dulled the edge, but tonight? Tonight, it was like all of that restraint was shattered. Zver was unleashed. He had no plans of going easy on me, and I didn't want him to.

He moved over me with a force that left me gasping, his hands on my skin, pulling me closer, urging me to meet him halfway. I wanted it—needed it. His touch was demanding, desperate, as if he couldn't get enough of me. The way he kissed me, his lips bruising mine, told me everything I needed to know about the frustration he'd been holding back.

His grip on me was possessive, almost painful, but I welcomed it. Every thrust, every push of his body against mine, was a release of everything we'd been holding in.

The sound of our bodies, our groans, and our sighs filled the room in the quietest way we could manage to keep Nayda asleep. The heat rose between us until I was on the edge, teetering, and then we both fell.

He buried his face between the crook of my neck, and I held tightly onto him as we busted together, coming over each other in the most synchronized harmony ever.

When it was over, he moved us to the bed, and we lay there. Rafayel's arm was around me, his breath still uneven, and I could feel his fingers tracing circles on my skin, his touch almost soothing now. But his voice broke the silence.

"Don't take the pill." He kissed my chest. "I want another child. I want Nayda to have a brother or sister."

I turned to face him and pressed a tired kiss on his lips. I had thought about it before: the idea of another child, of giving our daughter a sibling. And it was refreshing knowing he thought the same.

"I like that idea," I whispered back. "I love you, Rafa."

His lips met mine again, this time slower, almost tender. "I know. Most women do."

And I punched his chest.

"Asshole."

THE END