



# Deadly Devotion (Avilov Bratva #1)

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**Category:** Dark Erotica

**Description:** It was like a scene from a bad movie.

I watched in horror as the shot glass

slipped from my fingers landing in his lap.

Aleksandr Avilov is danger and temptation rolled into a very sexy package.

He is everything I know I should avoid, but don't want to.

After spilling vodka all over his perfectly tailored suit, he insists that I have a drink with him.

One drink turns into one night, and I thought that would be the end of it. No strings, no complications.

I was wrong.

My life is turned upside down when I accidentally witness a murder, and the only person who can save me is the man I swore I'd never see again.

Now I'm caught in his world – a world of crime, power, and deadly secrets. And to make matters worse, I'm carrying his baby.

I have no idea how I'll survive, let alone escape. But one thing's for sure, Aleksandr isn't letting me go without a fight. And neither is the enemy hunting us down.

**Total Pages (Source):** 39

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 3:12 am*

## Chapter 1

Talia

“Ugh, I shouldn’t have eaten pickles with the ice cream,” I groan, holding my stomach. I’m on my knees in front of the toilet. Sandy stifles a laugh, handing me a wet washcloth. I never thought I’d be pregnant at twenty-four years old.

“It’s not funny,” I mumble. “Pregnancy cravings are no joke.” I clean my mouth with the washcloth and Sandy helps me to my feet. “Neither is morning sickness. Well, in this case, night sickness.”

“I told you not to mix them!” Sandy chuckles. “I’m just thankful you didn’t ask for sardines and ice cream.”

“Please, don’t talk about sardines. Let’s talk about my shift tonight instead.” I splash cold water on my face, patting it dry with a soft towel.

“Are you nervous? It’s only your third night working at the club, and Phil has assigned you to the back room.”

“What exactly is the back room?” I’ve been in New York for a few weeks, and I’m grateful that Sandy got me a job as a cocktail waitress at the club she works at. I know it’s an exclusive club, but after two nights of work, I wonder precisely what kind of club Echo is. It looks like a typical dance club in the front, but the room in the back is a whole different story.

“I’ve only worked in the back room a few times. I think all those guys are in the mafia.”

Sandy says this so casually it catches me off guard. “The mafia?!” I squeal. “You can’t be serious. You’re joking, right?”

“Sis, I’m dead serious. Look at the facts. It’s a secret back room in a club in New York City. The men that hang out in this secret room all wear suits. And not just ordinary suits picked off a rack in the store. These suits are custom-made and luxurious. They always have burly guys hanging around, too, like bodyguards or something. And they spend big bucks gambling in that room. Plus, the amount of money they spend on drinks. It’s thousands of dollars a night, and they act like it’s nothing. I guess that’s why they tip the waitresses so well.”

“I’m not feeling well again.” My stomach is churning at the thought of being surrounded by these men. If they are in the mafia, they’re dangerous. I just left a dangerous situation behind in San Francisco, and I certainly don’t want to get mixed up in one in New York.

“You’ll be okay, Talia. Phil has bouncers in the room to watch over the waitresses.” Sandy brushes my hair away from my face. “You left Danny and all that shit behind you in San Fran. This is a new start for you and the baby.” She gives me a soothing smile. “Besides, I can’t wait to be called ‘Aunt Sandy’.”

Danny, my ex-boyfriend in San Francisco, went from a romantic, doting boyfriend to a dangerous stalker in a handful of months. It was bad enough he cheated on me with a stripper. Then he decided to stalk me, claiming I belonged to him. After our altercation, he trashed my apartment. That’s when I decided to move to New York with Sandy. I certainly wouldn’t hang around to see what he’d do next. Especially when the police said there wasn’t anything they could do to help me.

“You better get dressed, or you’ll be late.” Sandy hands me her favorite red lipstick, ‘Reckless Ruby.’ Now I’m smiling. She knows how much I love borrowing her things.

“Since you’re in such a giving mood, can I borrow your silver earrings?” I ask, giving her a cheesy smile.

Sandy snorts. “Do you want the matching necklace too?”. Most days, she mothers me even though she’s only one year older than me. On other days, she’s the typical older sister.

“Yes, please! And can I borrow your black skirt?” I give her my best puppy-dog-eyed expression, and she caves.

“You’re lucky I love you so much!” she exclaims, laughing down the hallway to her bedroom.

A few minutes later, she returned with the earrings, necklace, and skirt. “Have you given any more thought to finding Aleksandr and telling him about the baby?” She put the toilet lid down and sat on it cross-legged. Braiding her strawberry blonde hair, she gazed intently at me. I could see her deep blue eyes through the mirror, burning into the back of my skull.

Taking a deep breath through my nose, I slowly release it out of my mouth. I try to not to let her notice how rattled I am hearing Aleksandr’s name. Acting nonchalantly, I begin brushing my chocolate brown locks. “I don’t think he’d want to know about the baby,” I say matter-of-factly. “I already told you; he made it very clear that our night in San Francisco was exactly that—one night. He didn’t sign up to be a father.”

“It seems a shame that you don’t know for certain.” She uncrosses her legs and stands up. Putting her hand gently on my arm, she peers over my shoulder, looking at me

through the mirror. “We both know what it’s like to grow up without our parents. Just think about finding him. You still have plenty of time before the baby arrives.” She gives me a quick hug and leaves.

As I get ready for work, my mind conjures up images of Aleksandr and the night we spent together in the penthouse suite of the Paradise Heights Hotel in San Francisco. His intense ice-blue eyes are forever burned into my memory. I can still feel his hands on my skin, exploring every inch of my body. And his tongue...mmmm...that magical tongue dragging orgasm after orgasm out of my pussy. It was indeed a night to remember.

My hands drift to my stomach, cradling it gently. When I woke up in an empty bed the morning after our rendezvous, I assumed I’d never see him again. And now I’m carrying his baby. Maybe Sandy is right. Maybe I should track him down and tell him. I’m in New York...he’s in New York. I know he owns an art gallery. I can find him and tell him. Maybe he’d be happy. Stop it. Nothing good comes from daydreaming.

It’s better to leave things as they are. He told me he was in San Francisco on business for just one night. He said he didn’t have relationships. He said those words. There’s no point in dreaming about something that will never happen.

“It’s just me and you, kid,” I whisper to my stomach. “And Aunt Sandy. You’ll love her.”

I finish applying my makeup and quickly get dressed. Pulling my favorite red T-shirt over my head, I take one last look in the mirror. I wonder if the baby will look like me with my hazel eyes and chocolate-brown hair, or will it look like Aleksandr with his chiseled features and raven black hair-or maybe a little bit of both of us.

Stuffing my work uniform and heels into a black backpack, I turn off the bathroom

light and enter my bedroom. I pull on light blue jeans, black boots, and a denim jacket. It's the beginning of autumn in the city, and the weather has gotten cooler. In a week or so, pumpkins will decorate doorsteps, and the smell of apple cider donuts will waft out of bakeries. And I'll finally get my pumpkin spiced latte. Sandy hates pumpkin spiced, but I can't get enough of it.

My stomach churns. Oh no, the baby doesn't like pumpkin spiced! Don't do this to your mama. "I think the baby will take your side on the pumpkin spiced debate." I roll my eyes at Sandy as she does her victory dance.

Checking my clock, I see it's almost 9 p.m. "I'm headed to work. Are you staying in tonight?"

"On my night off? Not a chance," Sandy replies, grinning mischievously from ear to ear. "I happen to have a date with Nick."

"Nick?" I gasped. "Nick from the Italian restaurant on Forty-fourth Street?"

"The one and only. He couldn't resist my charm," Sandy giggles, flipping her hair over her shoulder.

"Have fun! But not too much fun. You don't want to wind up with a bun in the oven like me," I tease.

"Unlike you, I take my birth control pills religiously," she smirks.

"Hey, that's not fair!" I pout. "It wasn't my fault I forgot to fill my prescription. I blame it on Danny and his psychotic behavior stressing me out."

"I know, sis." Sandy pulls me into a hug. "I'm just glad you're safe...and the baby isn't his."

“I couldn’t agree more,” I declare. Pulling out of the hug, I stuff my cell phone into my back pocket and head out the door.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 3:12 am*

### Chapter 2

Aleksandr

“ Brat , are you listening?” Dimitri waves his hand in front of my face, catching my attention. His coffee-colored eyes narrow as he tries to figure out where my mind is. There is no way I’m going to tell him I haven’t heard the last five minutes of whatever he was talking about. The truth is I only have one thing on my mind-or should I say someone on my mind?

Talia has occupied my thoughts since I left her naked in the penthouse bed in San Francisco. She is the most beautiful woman I have ever seen. Her hazel eyes with golden flecks captivated me from the moment she arrived at my table in the bar lounge.

Thoughts of her long silky hair wrapped around my hand as I plunged my cock deep inside her throbbing pussy bring me right back to that moment.

Swiftly lifting her, I twist around, sitting down on the edge of the bed and impaling her on my cock. She gasps in surprise, arching into me. Slowly rocking back and forth, she develops a rhythm, pushing my cock deeper into her pussy. Her juicy breasts sway to the rhythm of the rocking. Sucking her nipple into my mouth makes her release a throaty moan. My tongue circles her nipple, my hands grip her hips, and I bury my cock balls deep into her tight pussy. Her insides are quivering as I drive into her faster and faster. Gripping my hair, her pussy spasms as she cries out from pleasure. I bury my face in her neck, breathing in her sweet scent and tasting the saltiness of her skin.



“ Brat ! Where are you right now?” Dimitri demands. “Are you still thinking about that waitress from San Francisco?” He laughs, shaking his head in dismay. “I’ve never seen you this wrapped up in a woman before. She must have been very good in bed.”

Giving him a death glare, I get up from the sofa and cross the room to stand in front of my penthouse’s floor-to-ceiling windows. “I heard everything you said.” My jaw clenches as my fingers rake through my raven hair.

“So, you heard what I said about Mikhail?” Dimitri probes.

I sigh deeply. The thing about Dimitri being my half-brother and my second-in-command is that he knows me too well. “No,” I admit. “What’s happening with Mikhail?”

“He’s MIA. I’ve called him four times since last night. The calls go straight to voicemail.”

Pouring two glasses of brandy, Dimitri walks over to the windows and hands me a glass. I take a sip, looking out at the city below. Dazzling lights cut through the cauldron-black sky, casting an ominous glow over the New York skyscrapers.

Mikhail is probably on another bender. Ever since he lost his wife, Anya, he’s been a shell of his former self, drinking himself into an early grave. I don’t have to explain any of this to Dimitri. He’s tried to help our younger brother since the night Mikhail’s world shattered. He’s cleaned up Mikhail’s messes and fixed his screw-ups, seemingly behind my back. But I know. As pakhan of the Avilov Bratva, I can’t be seen showing mercy to Mikhail even though he is my brother. If one of my men screws up, they have to pay the consequences. If he were anyone else, I’d have put a bullet in his head a long time ago. Dimitri does his best to cover for Mikhail, for Mikhail’s sake and mine.

“Blyat! He’s probably drunk off his ass gambling at that damn club again. We need to keep this quiet. I can’t have the men thinking I condone his behavior. Let’s head over to Echo and see if he’s there.”

“Before we go, I should tell you about Adachi.”

“Adachi is a fucking thorn in my side. What happened now?” Draining my glass of the last drops of whiskey, I take off my suit jacket and throw it over the back of the plush black velvet chair that sits to the right of the white leather sofa. Waltzing over to the custom black granite bar, I refill my whiskey glass and drink it in one gulp.

“Angelo said Adachi’s men gave him a message, and you won’t like it.” Dimitri drains his glass of whiskey and takes a seat on the sofa.

Heat rushes up my neck as my temper rises. My eyebrows snap together as I spin around to face Dimitri. I feel the beast rising in my chest, ready to shred someone apart. “What was the message?”

“Angelo’s man David was found in the parking lot of his warehouse with his throat slit and a business card sticking out of his pocket. It had the Yakuza symbol printed on it.” Dimitri runs a hand down his face, keeping his temper in check.

My temper, on the other hand, is as hot as wildfire. I throw my whiskey glass across the room as a string of Russian curses fly out of my mouth. The glass shatters against the far wall, pieces of it twinkling on the marble floor like diamonds.

Dimitri sits calmly on the sofa, used to my temper. “We can’t let it go unanswered, but do you want to start a war with the Yakuza?”

Grabbing a new glass from the bar I fill it with whiskey, taking a long sip. I relish the burn as it slides down my throat, giving me a chance to think.

Haruto Adachi took control of the Japanese Yakuza in San Francisco upon his father's death. But he is nothing like his father. His father was a scumbag and would cut a man's throat for coughing too loudly. But as far as business was concerned, he kept his word.

Adachi has already tried to fuck me over. Dimitri and I flew to San Francisco to move forward with a deal for the Yakuza to handle the distribution of my art and drugs on the West Coast. We agreed on twenty percent, but then he decided thirty percent was better.

At the time, I thought it was a good idea to secure a second avenue of distribution after Mikhail fucked up and mouthed off to my New York distributor, Angelo Carvallo. In retaliation, Angelo raised the price of transporting paintings from my gallery to my dealers. In a situation like this, where I'm hiding the drugs in the frames of the artwork, I can't hire a regular delivery service. Angelo and his guys have been distributing my drugs to my dealers for years. I didn't have any problems until Mikhail accused Angelo of stealing close to three hundred thousand dollars of drugs hidden in the artwork frames. It turned out that Angelo didn't steal anything; the paintings were put onto a different truck to keep the cops off the trail. Mikhail wasn't thinking clearly, too drunk to realize there was a second truck and to stop himself from insulting Angelo. I had to agree to the increased delivery rates to appease Angelo.

That's when I decided to reach out to Adachi. And that's when he decided to screw with me. He wasn't happy when I left San Francisco, and I told him to go fuck himself. It seems he's trying to scare off Angelo and get my attention. Well, he has my attention. Now, to decide what kind of message to send back to him.

"Adachi should have stayed on the West Coast," I say, grinding my teeth together. "Call Boris and get the word out that I want our vors on the street looking for Adachi's men. Once we find them, we'll send their heads back to Adachi, gift-

wrapped.”

“Do you think that’s the right response,” Dimitri asks calmly, sipping his whiskey.

“The Yakuza will take that as an act of war.”

“It’s the only response,” I reply, emptying my glass and setting it on the bar. “I don’t want a war, brat , but Adachi needs to understand that he can’t fuck with my business or my associates.”

“What about Angelo?” Dimitri asks, finishing his whiskey.

“Send him one hundred thousand dollars to appease him for the death of his man.” Dimitri nods as I grab my suit jacket and pull it on. “Let’s get over to the club and deal with Mikhail.”

Dimitri grabs the car keys from the glass cocktail table. Pocketing his cell phone, we leave the penthouse, taking the elevator down to the garage. My black SUV is parked on the far side of the garage, away from the elevator. Before we reach it, Dimitri’s phone rings. Answering it, he stops in his tracks. The color drains from his face, his eyes scanning the garage nervously. Ending the call, he ushered me quickly to the SUV.

“Who was that? What’s happening?” I press.

“We have to get to Echo...now,” Dimitri snaps.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 3:12 am*

### Chapter 3

Talia

An hour earlier

Making my way through the crowded dance floor, I slip down the hallway and into the changing room. A few cocktail waitresses are chatting and changing into their work uniforms. Judy makes a beeline for me.

“You have the back room tonight. What did you do to get that gig?” Judy asks snarkily.

“I guess Phil wanted a waitress with class,” I reply, smirking. Judy’s face turns bright red as she stomps away.

Flipping my hair over my shoulder, I open my locker and push in my backpack. It’s only my third night of working at Echo, and Judy has been a pain in the ass for the first two. She hits on every customer, whether single or not, and tries to steal the other waitresses’ tables. She tried that shit with me on my first night and quickly found out that I’m no pushover. She’s been snarky with me since.

I slip out of my street clothes and quickly change into my work uniform. Closing the top button of my black vest, I check my appearance in the mirror. My short shorts fit like a glove, and my breasts are voluptuous. I’ve always been blessed with more than a handful, and I can’t imagine them getting any bigger as my pregnancy progresses. I slip on my black heels and close my locker. A quick touch-up of my lipstick, and I’m

ready.

I feel the music's bass vibrating off the walls the closer I get to the bar. Skirting around a group of women sipping on the bartender's latest fruity creation, I squeeze through the crowd to get closer to the bartender. Joy was the bartender the last two nights, but I didn't see her tonight. A tall, thin, blonde-haired man is pouring drinks and chatting with a brunette cocktail waitress. I take her spot at the bar when she's finished loading drinks onto her tray.

"Hi," I say loudly. It'll be a miracle if he can hear me over the music.

"Hi yourself. I'm Chris. You must be new here." He smiles genuinely, cleaning the shiny bar with a rag.

"I'm Talia. I was assigned to the back room tonight." I rub my wrist nervously, my thumb circling my small black bird tattoo. I wish Sandy were working tonight.

"Wow! I'm impressed. Phil doesn't usually give new girls that assignment."

Apparently, working in the back room is a huge deal. Chris leans his elbows on the bar, leaning forward as if he's about to hear top-secret information. I hate disappointing him, but I don't know why I was given the back room.

"I'm Sandy's sister." It's the only thing I can think of. A pink blush runs up my face, heating my cheeks.

"Well, that might be true, but you're gorgeous! I'm not surprised Phil has you working a room full of men. There's nothing better than being served by a stunner," he states, giving me a wink.

"Thank you," I reply sheepishly. I suddenly feel incredibly self-conscious. Most days,

I still feel like the awkward, skinny little girl I was growing up. “Can you tell me where I’m supposed to go?”

Pointing to his left, he quickly gave me instructions. “Go down this hallway until you reach the black door with the gold star. Joey will let you in. Tony will be behind the bar tonight. It’s exclusively for our VIP guests.”

Giving him a quick nod of thanks, I adjusted my vest and made my way through the crowd to the black door with the gold star. I feel like I’m about to walk into an alternate universe. Taking a deep breath helps steady my nerves. I push the doorbell button once, and a blue eye peers out of a peephole.

“Name?” he asks in a gravelly voice.

“Talia,” I reply, wishing I felt as confident as I sound. A burly man opens the door, giving me a quick once over. He steps aside to let me through the doorway. “Arms out,” he instructs.

“Oh, okay,” I stutter. I put my arms out as if I’m about to take flight. Starting at my shoulders, he pats his way down my body, feeling for...weapons? What have I gotten myself into?

Seeing the alarm on my face, he gives me a tight smile. “You’re new here.”

“Yes,” I mutter. Stepping away from him, I glance around the room. The walls are velvety black with minute silver specks. They look like tiny jewels sparkling in the night. Four red leather oversized chairs sit on a faux white fur rug in a circular group. A round glass coffee table is set in the middle. A white leather sofa sectional is placed to the right, and a white marble bar is to the left. A hallway runs behind the bar to more rooms.

“Everyone gets patted down,” he states. “Phone,” he demands, holding out his hand. I pull my cell phone out of my back pocket and hand it to him. “I’m Joey. You’ll be serving our VIPs. They’ll be in the poker room down the hall. Tony is behind the bar. He’ll hold your phone until your shift is over.”

I nod in understanding. Joey sits at the bar, sipping on a club soda and watching a football game on the oversized flat screen hung on the wall behind Tony.

“Hi,” Tony greets. He smiles broadly, showcasing a row of sparkling white teeth. “Is this your first night?”

“No, it’s my third,” I reply, trying not to look frazzled. “But I’m not new to this kind of work. I waitressed in San Francisco.”

“The VIPs can be a little intense, but they’re great tippers.”

I’m tempted to ask him if they’re all mobsters, but I bite my tongue instead. “I’m sure I can handle them.”

“That’s the spirit!” Tony praises. “Head down the hallway to the third door on the left. If you need a quick break, there’s a small kitchen on the right just before the office.”

“Thanks, Tony.” Pulling my shoulders back, I adjust my cleavage and begin down the long hallway. To my immediate right are restrooms, and to the left is a small room with a grey leather sofa, a few plush velvet chairs, and a large cigar humidor cabinet flush against the wall.

A few more steps down the hallway, I pass the kitchen and office before stopping in front of the poker room. Glancing toward the end of the hallway, I see it intersecting like a ‘T’ with a more extended hallway. I see an emergency exit to the left and a few



rooms to the right. It appears there is another hallway past those rooms. This space is much larger than I thought. I expected a single room for the VIPs, but this is like a second club.

I head back to the poker room and put on my best waitress smile. As I open the door, I'm greeted by a spicy aroma similar to nutmeg with hints of black tea. Five men in tailor-made suits sit around a poker table, three puffing on fat cigars. I nod to the two burly men standing in the room's corners, then greet the men at the table. "Good evening. My name is Talia, and I'll be your waitress tonight. Can I get you gentlemen anything to drink?"

"Gentlemen?" a fat, balding man laughs. "You must be new around here," he teases.

"I might be new to this establishment, but I can see you need another glass of whiskey." I smile politely, picking up his nearly empty glass.

A younger man with dark brown hair and a crooked front tooth narrows his eyes, glancing at me suspiciously. "How did you know he was drinking whiskey?"

All the men turn to look at me. "You have a beer in front of you, and it looks like the man next to you is drinking vodka or gin since it's a clear liquid. These men don't have drinks in front of them," I state, pointing to the two men across the table. "There's a nearly empty whiskey bottle on the table in the corner of the room. This is the only other glass on the table. It has a small amount of brown liquor, so I assumed it was whiskey."

"Wow, beautiful and smart," an older man with silver hair compliments.

"Thank you," I reply, masking my emotions to hide my insecurity. "What can I get you to drink?"

“Vodka, neat.” He is staring at my breasts and licking his lips like he’s about to have me for dinner.

A younger man with raven-black hair and deep blue eyes sits beside the silver fox. He smiles and asks for a single malt bourbon in a sexy Russian accent. After taking the rest of their orders, I leave the room to get the drinks.

After an hour of delivering drinks to the high rollers, hearing every pick-up line you can imagine, and feeling like I’m the main item on the menu tonight, I need a break.

“Tony, I’m going to take a break.” I wipe down the serving tray and leave it on the end of the bar.

“Sure thing, doll. Take fifteen minutes, and I’ll cover the poker room.” He gives me a wink and a smile, pouring himself a beer. He’s chatting with Joey about the football game they’re watching as I begin the walk down the hallway toward the restroom.

Pulling my hair back with a black hair tie, I turn down the adjacent hallway. Muffled male voices are coming from a small room to the right of the restroom. It sounds like they are arguing. I slow my steps down as I get closer to the door. I hear one man accusing the other man of stealing money.

I quiet my steps and peek through the doorway, which is cracked open an inch. I don’t recognize a man pointing a gun at the young raven-haired man from the poker room. “We’ve given you enough time,” the man spews. “It’s time to pay up.”

“I’ve given you half. You’ll get the rest next week,” the raven-haired man argues.

“You lose more than you win. And tonight, you’re losing Mr. Lupani’s money. Pay up, now. “ He screws a silencer on the end of the gun and pushes it into the raven-haired man’s chest. The raven-haired man doesn’t seem frightened. Instead, he gets

angry... very angry.

“Do you know who I am, mudak ? If I say I’ll pay you next week, I’ll pay you next week,” he spits through clenched teeth. “Tell your boss he’ll just have to wait.”

“And I’m supposed to believe you? You’re nothing but a drunk loser. Do you think Mr. Lupani is your wallet? You’re just one of many losers that he loans money to. Keep pissing me off, and I’ll add another ten percent on top of the five percent interest you owe. Now, pay up! “ He hits the raven-haired man on the side of the head with the gun. Before he can hit him again, the raven-haired man grabs the gun. They struggle, each trying to get control. In the blink of an eye, the raven-haired man stops struggling, his eyes going wide as saucers. Backing away, he looks down at his chest, where a crimson circle forms on his white silk dress shirt. He falls to his knees, clutching his chest.

I let out a yelp, taking a step back from the door. Oh my god, oh my god. He shot him. He just shot him. The man holding the gun snaps his head around, peering through the crack of the open doorway. He’s looking right at me. He takes a step toward the door, and I panic. My instincts kick in; it’s fight or flight time. I choose flight.

Running as fast as I can, I fly down the hallway. I chance a quick look behind me, but I don’t see the man, although that doesn’t slow me down. He saw me, or at least I think he did, and I’m not sticking around to see what else will happen. Turning the corner, I pull off my high heels and keep running until I see the emergency exit ahead. Pushing open the door I run into a dirty alley behind the club. I run until I reach the street where cars are whizzing by.

Ducking into a twenty-four-hour grocery store, I dared to release the breath I had been holding in. Instinctively, I reached for my cell phone to call Sandy, only to realize my street clothes, backpack, and cell phone are still at the club. Fucking hell. I

have no money and no phone. Rubbing the tattoo on my wrist, I try to calm down.  
Now, what do I do?

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 3:12 am*

### Chapter 4

Aleksandr

“Dimitri! Tell me what’s happening!” I bellow.

The SUV swerves around a corner, the tires screeching on the asphalt. Dimitri’s knuckles are white from his death grip on the steering wheel. “Mikhail’s been shot,” he shouts over the roar of the engine.

My heart pounds in my chest. The world falls silent, and my vision goes white as his words sink in. Mikhail’s been shot. A sharp pain shoots to the top of my skull. I felt the same pain when Otets was killed. I suck in a deep breath, and the world comes back into focus. “Is he alive?”

“I don’t know,” he replies tersely.

In a matter of minutes, we’re parked in front of Echo. A line of clubgoers is anxiously waiting their turn to be let in. The stocky man holding the clipboard unhooks the velvet rope to the entrance when he sees us exit the SUV. “Mr. Avilov,” he acknowledges with a nod of his head. Passing by him, we enter the club, dodging dancers gyrating to the music on the crowded dance floor.

Stopping in front of the black door with the gold star, I ring the doorbell. The peephole cover opens and closes, and then Joey opens the door. “Mr. Avilov,” he greets with downcast eyes. “Phil is waiting for you in his office.”

I push past Joey and storm into Phil's office. I find him sitting behind his desk with his head in his hands. "What the fuck happened?!" I roar. "Where is my brother?"

Phil lifts his head, a defeated look on his face. "I'm so sorry..."

I don't give him a chance to finish the sentence. I lunge across the desk, my knuckles connecting with his nose. A satisfying crunch tells me his nose is broken. Grabbing his face, he backs up as far away from me as he can. His mouth hangs open in shock as crimson blood seeps through his fingers. Dimitri grabs me from behind, pulling me away from Phil. Joey runs into the office, positioning himself protectively between me and Phil. "Mr. Avilov..." His words trail off as the ringing in my ears climbs to a deafening level.

"Brat, take a breath," Dimitri urges, pulling me toward the doorway.

Shaking him off, I take a deep breath through my nose, hold it for a few seconds, and release it slowly. "Where is my brother?"

Joey looks hesitantly at Phil, then back at me.

"It's okay, Joey," Phil mutters. Cleaning the blood off his face with a white handkerchief, he walks around the desk to stand in front of me. "I'm so very sorry, Mr. Avilov. By the time we found Mikhail, he was dead. One of our waitresses found him."

"How the hell did this happen?!" Dimitri bellows, tugging on the ends of his short blonde hair. "You check everyone for weapons when they enter the VIP area. How did someone get a gun in here?"

"I don't have an answer for you," Phil explains. "Everyone who entered the VIP area, including the staff, was patted down."

“Get every motherfucker that was here when it happened and put them in the poker room,” I demand. “I want to speak with each one of them.” Joey nods and leaves the room. Slipping off my suit jacket, I hang it on the back of the black leather sofa. No use getting anymore blood on it tonight. I face Phil, my fists balled up at my sides. “Take me to my brother,” I demand.

Phil nods and leads us out of the office to a small supply room down the hall. He unlocks the door and then steps to the side of the doorway. I glance at Dimitri, his emotions masked behind a stone face. “Wait here,” I tell him. He nods once, pulling a gun out of the waistband of his pants and standing guard.

The room is dark and smells faintly of bleach. Paper goods and cleaning supplies line shelves along the left wall and metal filing cabinets line the right wall. Straight ahead, there are more shelves lined up.

Mikhail is lying on the floor, covered with a white tablecloth. Bending down next to him, I pull back the tablecloth to see his lifeless eyes staring up at me. “Brat, I’m sorry it ended this way. Now you can be in peace with Anya,” I whisper.

Stepping outside the room, I pull Dimitri aside to speak to him quietly. “Make sure the body is taken care of, then call Denis. Tell him we don’t want the police involved and that we’ll handle this ourselves. See if he’s heard anything around the precinct.” It has been invaluable to have my cousin Denis infiltrate the police department. After he graduated from the police academy, he moved through the ranks to become a detective. He’s a good cop, although he is loyal to the family. We have five of our men on the local police force.

“We’ll avenge him, brat,” Dimitri swears, placing his hand on my shoulder. “We’ll get the motherfucker that did this and cut off his head.”

I nod once, then turn my attention to Phil. He’s visibly shaken, as he should be. My

reputation precedes me as a ruthless sonofabitch. “Let’s chat with your guests,” I snarl.

Opening the door to the poker room, I see four men sitting around a game table, a waitress cowering in the far corner, a dark-haired man with a medium build sitting on a loveseat, two burly men who are clearly bodyguards, and Joey by the door.

“My name is Aleksandr Avilov,” I state. All eyes are on me as I scan the room, looking over each. “Someone killed my brother, and I’m going to find out who it was.”

The waitress lets out a small whimper, her eyes glassy with unshed tears. A fat, balding man shifts uncomfortably in his seat. A younger man with dark brown hair is nervously tapping his fingertips on the table. A silver-haired older man drains the glass he is drinking from and stands up.

“Mr. Avilov,” he says in a raspy voice. “We were playing poker when your brother got up to use the restroom. No one left the room.”

Narrowing my eyes, I look at each one of the men. Then, I address the waitress. “Is this true? Did any of these men leave the room after my brother left?”

“I...I d-don’t know,” she stutters. I raise an eyebrow in question. She lets out a small whimper. “Phil asked me to cover the room after the other waitress didn’t return.”

“What other waitress?” I question through clenched teeth.

Phil clears his throat, and my head snaps in his direction. “Maybe we should talk in my office?” he suggests.

“Bring her,” I command, pointing at the waitress. “No one leaves this room,” I tell



Joey.

Spinning on my heels, I storm out just as Dimitri is headed my way. “No one leaves,” I instruct him. “I will speak with them individually in Phil’s office.” Dimitri’s tall, muscular build is quite intimidating, and his fighting skills are lethal. No one is getting past him.

I make myself comfortable in the seat behind Phil’s desk. Leaning back with my fingers steepled in front of my face, I scrutinize the waitress. She is a quivering mess standing before me. “What is your name?”

“Lisa,” she whispers.

“Lisa,” I repeat. “Who was in the poker room when you first entered it?”

“The four men that are in there now,” she replies, wringing her hands. “Oh, and the two big guys...the bodyguard guys.”

“What happened to the other waitress?”

“I don’t know,” she answers quickly, looking over at Phil sitting on the sofa across from the desk.

“Did you find my brother?” I ask, curbing the urge to flip the desk over.

Looking down at her feet, she replies in a small voice. “Yes. I noticed the door to the supply room was open, and when I went to shut it, I saw him lying on the ground. I only took a step into the room before I saw that he had been shot in the chest.” A stray tear rolls down her cheek.

“Look at me, Lisa,” I instruct. “Think carefully before you answer. Did you see

anyone else in the VIP area before I arrived?"

She hesitates, nervously shifting her weight from foot to foot, biting her lower lip. "Just Tony and Joey." The poor girl looks like she is going to faint. She clearly doesn't know anything.

"You can go," I tell her. Relief washes over her, and she rushes out of the room.

"What happened to the other waitress?" I asked Phil.

"You don't think she did it?" he asks in surprise, wiping a bead of sweat off his forehead.

"Where did she go?" I snap, slamming my palms down on the desk.

"I don't know," he mutters. "Tony said she took a break and didn't return."

"Bring him to me," I order. Phil jumps to his feet and scurries out of the office. A minute later, he returns with the dark-haired man from the poker room trailing behind him.

"You...sit," I growl, directing Tony to sit across from me. Given the circumstances, he appears relatively calm. "Where did the other waitress go?"

"I don't know," he replies. "She was serving cocktails for about an hour, then came to the bar and said she needed a break. I told her to take fifteen minutes, but she didn't return. I told Phil and, he sent Lisa to cover the poker room."

"Is it normal for you to lose a waitress in the middle of a shift, Phil?" I direct my attention to him, biting back the urge to put a bullet in his brain.

“No, Mr. Avilov,” he assures, standing up from the sofa. “She’s new, and I assumed it was too much for her. Our VIPs can be a bit intense for some girls,” he says, dragging his fingers through his thinning brown hair.

“Was there anything about this girl that would make you think she killed my brother?”

“No,” they reply in unison.

“Hmm.” My eyebrows pinch together as I think over their quick responses. “You can leave,” I tell Tony. “Phil, bring me the men one at a time.” Phil rushes out of the office, eager to get this over with.

Closing my eyes, I think about the last time I spoke to Mikhail. Three days ago, he stopped by my estate to see his children. Sasha and Maxim were excited to see him, and I could tell he did his best to hide the fact that he was drunk. After Anya died, Mikhail couldn’t take care of them. He spent his nights drinking to numb the pain. No matter how strong his love was for his children, the pain of losing Anya was stronger. They’ve been with me for two years, and I love them like my own. How am I going to tell them Mikhail is gone?

Phil clears his throat, interrupting my thoughts. Opening my eyes, I see he brought the silver-haired man with him. “Take a seat,” I instruct.

He sits in the chair across from me while Phil sits nervously on the sofa. “Mr. Avilov,” he begins in his raspy voice, heavy with a Greek accent. “My name is Georgio Bouras. I’m associated with the Velentas family. I told you earlier everything I know.”

The Velentas family is also known as the Greek American mafia in New York City. I’ve had dealings with them through my art gallery. That doesn’t mean I like them or

this mudak. Crossing my arms over my chest, I study him before asking, “Was my brother winning or losing money before he got up from the poker table?”

Georgio admires the gold ring on his pinky finger before answering. “I don’t want to speak ill of the dead, but your brother is known for losing.”

My temper is beginning to flare again. Not because he’s lying, but because my brother is dead, and I need to hit something. Or better yet, maybe I should just shoot him between the eyes. That might take the edge off. “I appreciate your honesty,” I say dryly. “Did he owe you money?”

“No...no, he always paid up at the end of the night. He might have been known for losing, but he was also known for having plenty of cash on him for gambling and booze.”

He leans back in his seat, crossing his legs at the ankle. My gut tells me he didn’t have anything to do with Mikhail’s death. I nod toward the door without saying a word, indicating he may go.

I speak with the other men and come to the same conclusion. They had nothing to do with Mikhail’s death. Dimitri closes the door and sits on the sofa.

“What do you think?” I ask, scrubbing a hand down my face.

“I don’t know what the hell to think,” he says, leaning forward with his arms on his knees.

“It wasn’t anyone here so that leaves two options. It was the waitress that disappeared, or someone snuck into the VIP area and killed him.” I stand behind the desk to stretch out my legs. “We need to find out more about this mysterious waitress.”

“Let’s go ask around the club. Someone must know something about her,” Dimitri suggests.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 3:12 am*

### Chapter 5

#### Talia

I'm pacing the aisles of the 24-hour grocery store, trying to think of my next move. I can't go back to the club to retrieve my belongings, so I have to make my way back to the apartment. Behind the counter is a young guy with a nose piercing and a neck tattoo. Taking a deep breath, I steady my nerves.

"Excuse me," I say politely. "My purse was stolen when I left work. My cell phone and money were in it. May I use your phone to call my sister?" I give my best damsel in distress look, and it seems to work.

Ring, ring, ring, ring. Chewing on my lower lip, I silently beg the universe to help me. Come on, Sandy, answer your phone. She never picks up calls from unknown numbers; as my luck would have it, she doesn't pick up this time either. I make a flash decision not to leave a message since the clerk is staring at me...well, at my boobs...and I don't want him to hear what I have to tell her.

I know I must leave the store to return to the apartment, but my paranoia seems to get the best of me. It's trying to convince me that the minute I step out of the store, that killer is going to put a bullet in my head. Circling my tattoo with my thumb, I think back to when I got it. Sandy planned to move to New York and wanted me to go with her. I had just started my job at the Rum Room in San Francisco. I wasn't ready to leave the city, so after a night of lousy tequila and tacos, she dragged me to a crappy little tattoo shop to get matching tattoos. I got this tiny black bird sitting on a wire, and she got a small black bird with wings spread wide soaring across the sky. She

said she'd always be with me, looking out for me, no matter where her wings took her. And she has kept that promise. Now, I need her more than ever, and I don't know how to reach her.

You can do this. Pumping myself up with confidence, I exit the store, looking up and down the street for signs of the killer. The only people I see at this late hour are a young couple holding hands heading into a bar across the street and a group of girls giggling in front of a coffee shop.

Walking briskly, I stick close to the buildings, my instincts telling me it's safer than being out in the open. I rub my arms to warm up, then wrap them around my body. I made it down the street safely, but now I must cross the open intersection. The crosswalk signal blinks, letting me know it's safe to cross. Halfway across, my feet freeze in place. There's a man half a block away walking toward me. It's him, I know it is. It looks just like him.

Oh my god, he's going to kill me. My heart is pounding so loudly in my chest that I don't hear the car horn beeping at me to get out of the way. I can't move or scream; I'm just frozen in the middle of the intersection. The car swerves around me, an older man cursing at me as he whizzes by. The man across the street is running toward me now. I can't breathe as he gets closer and closer. Running into the street, he grabs me by the wrist and pulls me onto the sidewalk.

"Are you okay?" he asks, checking me to see if I'm hurt.

Blinking rapidly, I regain focus. Realizing it's not the killer and just a man that saved me from getting run over, I suck in a deep breath. "I'm okay. I couldn't breathe for a minute, but I'm okay now. Thank you for helping me." Turning away from him, I hastily walk down the street, leaving him there shaking his head in dismay.

I travel ten more streets before ducking into a laundromat. Two college kids are

making out while their clothes spin around and around in the washing machine. Sitting in the corner, I pull off my high heels and rub my sore feet. I just need a minute to rest, warm up, and collect myself. My anxiety is off the charts, and if I don't calm down, I won't make it to the apartment.

The fluorescent lights buzz overhead as I sit huddled in the corner. Being surrounded by the steady hum of washing machines and occasionally clinking coins in dryers gives me temporary sanctuary. Clutching my belly protectively, I attempt to steady my pounding heart that continues to race with fear and adrenaline. Witnessing a murder, a cold-blooded act of violence, shattered my sense of safety.

The streets outside are dark and deserted, and my tiny apartment seems impossibly far away. A shadow falls across the laundromat's glass door as I collect my thoughts. My breath catches in my throat. Peering cautiously over the top of a folding table piled high with clothes, I see a man silhouetted against the dimly lit street.

My heart is racing now. Is it him? Has he tracked me here? I duck down, heart pounding in my ears. Every instinct told me to stay hidden, to wait until the man outside moved on. But time was slipping away, and I couldn't stay in this laundromat forever.

Summoning my courage, I edge toward the door, my steps slow and deliberate. I strain to see through the glass, my heart thudding painfully. The figure outside lingers, peering in as if searching for someone.

Suddenly, the man's phone rings, breaking the silence. I freeze, my breath catching. The man answers the call with a casual tone that sends relief washing over me like a cool breeze. It isn't the shooter.

Just then, my stomach rumbles, indicating I need something to eat—or should I say, the baby needs something to eat? "It's okay, baby," I whisper to my belly. Mama will



get you something to eat soon. Everything is going to be alright.”

Gathering my newfound strength, I carefully exit the laundromat and walk eight more streets to the apartment. I climb the stairs to the third floor and retrieve the key hidden in the dirt of the potted plant next to the front door. Unlocking the door, I slipped inside and quickly shut the door behind me. Planting my palms on either side of the peephole, I peeked outside. I don't think I was followed, but checking again makes me feel better. Thankfully, I made it home. I kicked off my high heels and entered the kitchen to get the cordless phone. Punching in Sandy's number, I held my breath until she answered.

“Hello?” Sandy asks tentatively.

“Oh, thank God!” I blurted. “I need you to come home right now. Please hurry, sis.”

“Talía, slow down. What's going on? Is it the baby?” she asks, her voice getting higher with concern.

“No, the baby is fine. But I saw something at work, and now he's after me. At least, I think he is. But he'll find me; I know he will.” A silent tear rolls down my cheek as I plop onto the kitchen chair.

“Who will find you? What happened?” she demands.

I can hear people talking in the background. It sounds like she's at a restaurant or a bar. In the commotion, I forgot about her date with Nick. “I saw a man get killed tonight while I was working the VIP room. A man shot another man, and I saw it happen,” I whisper, choking on a sob. I relay the details until she knows everything. Sandy is silent, and the background noise grows quieter. I hear a door bang and then street noise. “Sis?”

“Talía, are you okay?”

“Yes. But I need you to come home.”

“Lock the door and close all the blinds. Stay in the apartment and don’t open the door for anyone. I’m going to stop by the club to get your things. I’ll quietly ask some of the girls if they know anything about the man who got killed or the killer. Then we can figure out what to do.”

She hangs up, and I breathe a sigh of relief. I do as she said, bolting the door and closing the blinds. Taking off my work uniform, I rummaged through my dresser drawers until I find my soft grey t-shirt and black jeans. As I got dressed, I decided it was a good idea to pack a bag. No matter the plan Sandy comes up with, I don’t think I should stick around here. I need to lay low for a while until I’m sure that man isn’t looking for me.

Opening all my dresser drawers, I start pulling out clothes and dropping them into my dark green suitcase. Then I collect my toiletries from the bathroom and put them in the suitcase too.

Returning to the living room, I’m too wound up to sit. I pace back and forth a few times before peeking through the closed blinds. I don’t see anyone lurking outside. Then, I double-check the locks on the door.

In the kitchen, I pour myself a glass of water and drink it in one gulp before I realize my stomach is rumbling again. “Okay,” I mumble to my belly. After a handful of crackers and a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, my stomach finally settles.

Forcing myself to go sit on the couch, I curl up in the corner, pulling a soft quilt over my legs. Now, all I must do is wait.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 3:12 am*

### Chapter 6

Aleksandr

As I scan the crowded dance floor, Dimitri talks to a cocktail waitress. Everyone here is oblivious to what happened and has no idea that my world was turned upside down. I take a sip of vodka, appreciating the burn as it slides down my throat.

“She doesn’t know much about the missing waitress,” Dimitri says, gulping down the last drops of vodka from his glass. “Tonight is the first time she has met her. Phil isn’t much help either. He said she is the sister of one of the waitresses and started working here three nights ago. That’s all he knows. All the waitresses work for cash tips, so he doesn’t keep addresses on file.”

“Where is the sister?” I ask, frustrated that we’re getting nowhere fast.

“She has the night off. Phil called her, but she didn’t answer.”

“Keep asking around. I’m going to chat with the bartender.” Draining my glass, I walk to the bar, getting the bartender’s attention. He’s a tall, thin, blonde guy flirting with a girl with huge breasts. Sliding a pink martini before her, he excuses himself and directs his attention to me.

“What can I get you?” he asks smoothly, placing a white square cocktail napkin before me.

“Information.”

“It must be my lucky night. Everyone needs information from me.” He places a vodka shot on the crisp white napkin and leans closer. “But for you, Mr. Avilov, it’s free.”

The vodka is doing nothing to ease my tension. The beast inside of me wants revenge. It wants to tear these apart limb by limb until satisfied. “Who needed information from you?” I question through clenched teeth.

“There were two men earlier asking about a waitress.”

“Who were these men? Are they here now?”

“No, they left after I told them I knew nothing about her. I don’t know their names, but they’re connected to the Lupani family. I’ve seen the older guy in here before. He’s a real sonofabitch, and I thought it was best to not give them any information. She seems like a nice girl, so no reason to send trouble her way.” He slides another shot in front of me.

My hands are balled into fists at my sides to keep from smashing the shot glass on the bar. Fucking Lupani. He’s the greaseball son of old man Lupani, head of the Italian crime family. The old man is tolerable, although he doesn’t leave his estate often due to his failing health. His son, Gio, is a real scumbag. Word on the street is he has a loan shark business that his father doesn’t know about. He keeps all the money for himself and doesn’t give any of it to the family. He has a handful of loyal men that run the business for him.

“And the waitress? What did they want to know about her?”

“Basic information; her name and address. She’s new here, so I don’t know much. Her sister is a waitress here, too,” he says quietly.

“Where does she live?” I ask, scanning the crowd around the bar.

“Sandy, the sister, lives in an apartment on 34<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup>. I don’t know the apartment number. Maybe she lives with her. You’ll know her when you see her. She’s gorgeous; long brown hair, light hazel eyes, and legs that I wouldn’t mind wrapped around my neck.” He winks at me, and I have to dig down deep to not lunge over the bar and beat him unconscious. Gulping down the shot of vodka, I pull a few hundred dollar bills out of my pocket and put them down on the bar.

“Thank you, Mr. Avilov.” He smiles brightly. “By the way, Sandy just walked in.” He nods toward the front door.

A pretty, strawberry-blond-haired girl in her mid-twenties is talking to the bouncer near the front door. She nods and then quickly starts wiggling her way through the crowd. She walks right past me, and I notice her deep blue eyes and tiny freckles scattered across her porcelain cheeks. She stops to chat with one of the waitresses.

I get closer, straining to hear what she is saying over the music. She pats the waitress on the arm, giving her a friendly smile. Then she heads toward a hallway, her eyes nervously scanning the crowd. Her smile is gone now, and her lips are pulled into a tight line. Clutching her bag against her side, she walks down the hallway and stops in front of a red door. She looks around before pushing the door open and going inside. Why is she nervous? What does she know?

I follow her and stop in front of the red door. Pushing it open a crack, I see it’s a dressing room where the waitresses get ready for their shifts. Sandy is standing before a locker, putting items into a backpack. I hear her chatting with another waitress.

“What did they say?” Sandy asks, zipping up the backpack and slinging it over her shoulder.

“They were asking about your sister,” the blonde-haired girl replies. “They’re scary, Sandy, but I didn’t tell them anything. I’ve seen the older guy in here before. He’s a real creep. He slapped my ass once and tried to corner me, wanting a blowjob. I told Phil about it, and he made him leave the club. He told the creep that Mr. Sanzone wouldn’t like how his girls are being treated.”

“Thank God for Phil. At least he looks out for us,” Sandy mutters.

“Yeah, well, I think it’s because he’s afraid of Mr. Sanzone. He likes to keep his club classy, and if Phil allows these creeps to harass us, then he’d have to answer to Mr. Sanzone.” She smirks, smacking her ruby-red lips together. “Just be careful, okay?” She gives Sandy a quick hug and then goes to the other side of the room, where her uniform is laid out on a chair.

I quietly close the door and briskly walk back down the hallway. Pulling my phone out of my pocket, I call Dimitri.

“Brat, where are you?” Dimitri inquires.

“I’m in front of the smaller bar near the VIP door. I have a lead. Meet me here now.” I put my phone in my pocket and lean casually against the bar.

Sandy passes by just as Dimitri is walking my way. I nod my head in Sandy’s direction. Dimitri’s eyes find her, and he nods back in understanding. I need him to get the SUV so we can follow her. My gut is telling me that Lupani was involved in Mikhail’s death, and I need Sandy to lead me to her sister. If Lupani’s men asked about the waitress, she must know something that scared her enough to flee the club earlier. I stay a few feet behind Sandy, watching her float around the club, chatting with a few waitresses and a dark-haired bartender with a handlebar mustache. Eventually, she exits the club, hailing a yellow taxi. Dimitri has the SUV idling in the valet area. I slide into the passenger seat, and we follow her through the dark city

streets to her apartment building.

The taxi pulls up in front of the building, and we watch as she punches in a code to open the glass door and then pulls it shut behind her. Dimitri parks the SUV and gets out, trying to open the glass door. I see him scanning the names on the apartment buzzers next to the door.

He comes back to the SUV and gets in. “We can’t open the door without a key or a code. There are two apartments with ‘S’ listed as the initial of the first name; 2D and 5F,” he announces, slipping back into the driver’s seat. “How do you want to handle this?”

“For now, let’s keep an eye on the door. I’m sure someone will buzz a delivery guy in soon enough, and we can slip in behind him.”

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 3:12 am*

### Chapter 7

#### Talia

The front door unlocks, and I jump to my feet. “Thank God you’re here!” I run over to Sandy and give her a tight hug. “What did you find out?”

“First,” Sandy says, pulling out of the hug, “are you okay? Is the baby okay?” She looks me over, her eyebrows pinched together.

“I’m okay. We’re okay.” Instinctively, I cradle my belly. “But my nerves are shot.” Sandy leads me back to the sofa, and we sit down facing each other. She takes a deep breath and pulls her long hair back into a ponytail.

“No one knows anything about the man that got killed. But Dana said two men were asking about you.” She sips water from the glass I left on the small coffee table. “She said that one of the men is a real creep, but she didn’t tell them anything.”

I stand up and start pacing around the small living room. “If they were asking about me, then the killer definitely saw me.” A bead of sweat trickles down my back as I nervously chew on my bottom lip. “I knew he saw me. Shit, sis, what do we do now? Do we go to the police?”

Sandy contemplates the idea, pulling a pink pillow across her lap. “I don’t know. It’s rumored that most of the VIPs are part of mafia families. And we don’t know who they know in the police department. If the killer is connected, the cops might be on his side.”



She stands up and begins pacing the floor with me. “I think we have to get out of here,” she says, sighing heavily. “He’s not going to want any witnesses.”

“I completely agree. In fact, I already packed my suitcase.”

She lets out a dry laugh. “Fight or flight,” she says, giving me a hug. “I don’t have much cash here. I’ll go to the bank and withdraw as much as possible from the ATM. Pack my suitcase, and when I get back, we’ll check into a motel until we figure out what to do next. I’ll go out the back entrance...just in case.”

Giving me a quick hug, she grabs her purse and leaves. Rushing into her bedroom, I pull an old brown suitcase from her closet and filled it with her clothes and toiletries. Halfway through, I hear knocking on the front door. Freezing in place, I hold my breath, trying not to make a sound.

What do I do? I look around Sandy’s bedroom for a weapon, and my eyes land on a baseball bat leaning against the dresser. Taking the bat with me, I quietly creep to the front door. The knocking is getting louder now. Holding my breath, I peek through the peephole and see a tall, muscular man with ice-blue eyes and raven-black hair. This can’t be happening. It’s Aleksandr Avilov. How did he find me? He knocks again, louder and more insistently.

“Sandy,” Aleksandr calls out. “I need to speak with you,” he says, banging on the door.

I open the door and watch as his eyes go round with shock. “Talia,” he says in his sexy Russian accent. “What are you...?” His voice trails off as he looks me over from head to toe.

“Aleksandr. How did you find me?” I ask, gripping the bat in both hands. He’s even more handsome than the last time I saw him in San Francisco. His spicy scent of

cinnamon and clove sails across the threshold, enveloping me.

His eyes focus on the bat, and his confusion turns into understanding. “You’re Sandy’s sister,” he states matter-of-factly. “You’re the waitress.” He pushes past me and steps into the apartment, closing the door behind him. “Blyat! ”

His blue eyes burn into me as he steps closer. Nervously, I step back with every step he takes forward until I’m boxed in between him and the window. “Why are you here?” he demands.

“What...what do you mean?” I stutter.

Placing his hands on either side of me, he leans in until his nose touches the tip of mine. “Why are you in New York?”

“I moved here a few weeks ago. I needed a change of scenery,” I say defensively. It’s none of his business what happened with my ex-boyfriend Danny.

“Were you at Echo tonight?” he probes.

“That’s none of your business,” I snort, pushing him away.

Grabbing my wrist, he pins me against the wall. “My brother is dead,” he hisses. “It is very much my business.”

I feel the blood drain from my face as the realization hits. The man that got killed...the man I saw get shot...is Aleksandr’s brother.

“Oh my God,” I whisper. “I’m so sorry. He was your brother.” Placing my hand gently on his chest, I see a fleeting glimpse of pain in his eyes before he masks his emotions.

“Mikhail. His name is Mikhail. What do you know? Tell me what happened.” He steps away from me, scrubbing a hand down his face.

“I was assigned to work the VIP area. About an hour into my shift, I heard two men arguing in a small room. When I got closer, I could see that the door was cracked open, and a man was pointing a gun at the other man...your brother.” I begin rubbing the tattoo on my wrist, wishing Sandy would hurry up and return.

“And? What happened next?” He goes to the window, peeks through the blinds, and then turns his attention back to me.

“They were arguing about money, and then the man shot your brother.” A tear rolls down my cheek, and I wipe it away. “I could see the shooter looking at me through the crack in the door. I panicked, and then I ran.” Choking back a sob, I take a seat on the sofa. “I’m afraid he will find me, so Sandy and I are leaving.”

“Do you know who he is?”

“No, I’ve never seen him before. But I would recognize him again. I’ll never forget his face.” I take a deep breath and then another.

Before Aleksandr can respond, I hear the doorknob rattle. I look toward the door, and a loud thud makes me jump.

“They’re here,” he says, looking out the window.

Grabbing my wrist, he pulls me into the bedroom and locks the door behind us. Pulling out his cell phone, he sends a quick text and opens the window leading to the fire escape.

“Wait, what are you doing?” I ask, my voice going up an octave with fear.

“There’s too many of them. We have to go.” It wasn’t a request. He pulls me through the window just as the front door crashes open. “Go!” he yells, pointing at the fire escape. I hear heavy footsteps in the living room as I climb down. Aleksandr is right behind me when a bullet bounces off the metal railing to my left.

“Keep going!” he yells, pulling a gun from his waistband and shooting at the burly man in the window. The bullet hits the glass windowpane as the man steps to the side, hiding himself inside the apartment. A black SUV swerves around the corner just as we reach the sidewalk. “Get in!” he shouts, holding the back passenger door open. I get in and Aleksandr follows.

After catching my breath, I realize I know the driver. It’s the blonde-haired man with the coffee-colored eyes who was with Aleksandr in San Francisco. He drives the SUV around the corner before I realize we’re leaving Sandy behind. “Stop!” I screech. “You have to stop!”

“Are you hurt?” Aleksandr grabs me by the shoulders, checking for a wound.

“We can’t leave Sandy!” I screech.

“Dimitri, pull over. Where is Sandy?” Aleksandr insists, pushing loose strands of hair away from my face.

“She went to the bank to get money. She’s coming back, and we’re supposed to go to a motel. I can’t leave her!”

Aleksandr says something to Dimitri in Russian. Dimitri nods and gets out of the SUV.

“What’s happening? What are you doing?” I ask, exasperated.

“Dimitri will wait here for Sandy. You and I will go to my estate, where you will be safe.”

Before I can react, he gets into the driver’s seat. The SUV’s tires screech on the black asphalt as it speeds away.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 3:12 am*

### Chapter 8

Aleksandr

The drive to my estate in Old Westbury is taking longer than anticipated. Maybe it's because I've been arguing with Talia for thirty minutes. This woman can be infuriating, yet I feel very protective of her. And I can't deny my attraction to her. Somehow, she's even more beautiful than when I left her in San Francisco. Her voluptuous curves are making my mouth water, and her sweet honeysuckle scent is getting my dick hard. She climbs over the seat and sits in the passenger, her eyes burning holes into the side of my head.

I steal a glance at her out of the corner of my eye. She's tapping her fingernails on the armrest and her lips are drawn into a tight line. She's scared and angry, and all I want to do is wrap her up in my arms and protect her from the world. But she is the only one who can identify Mikhail's killer, making her valuable to me.

"Why did you move to New York?" I ask, hoping to get a more informative answer this time.

Squaring her shoulders, she looks straight ahead at the cars before us. "I already told you I needed a change of scenery," she replies, pursing her lips.

"There is more to your story than you are telling me."

"If you say so," she mutters, crossing her arms over her chest.

Blyat! This woman drives me crazy! I don't know if I want to force her to tell me or shove my cock in her mouth to keep her from saying anything else. "You will tell me why you moved here!" I bellow. "Were you looking for me, hoping I would rescue you from your drab little world and shower you with riches? That's not going to happen."

Her face twisted in shock as she sucked in a deep gasp. "How dare you!" she screeched. "I didn't come looking for you! You knocked on my front door! I don't want anything from you! Let me out!"

She slammed her palm against the passenger window so hard I thought the glass would crack. She's feisty, and that's a huge turn-on.

"Stop this car right now and let me out, you...you... asshole!"

Her face is beet red with anger. I slow down the SUV, steering it to the side of the road. She tries to open the passenger door, but I don't give her the chance. Grabbing her wrist, I pull her toward me, my lips slamming down on hers. The kiss is full of anger, lust, and desperation. My fingers tangle in her silky brown hair, holding her in place. My tongue explores her mouth, savoring her taste and desperate for more. Her nails dig into my shoulders, but she's not pushing me away. She's pulling me closer, forcing my tongue deeper. The chemistry between us explodes. My mind fills with images of her soft, supple body pressed against mine as I drive my hard cock into her tight, wet pussy.

A low whimper escapes her lips, and then she pushes me away. Her lips are red and swollen, and her eyes are wide with shock and desire. "I want to call my sister," she whispers between heavy breaths. "We have to go back."

"No, Dimitri will take care of her," I explain, running my fingers through my hair. We're going to my estate, where I can protect you. After all, you are the only person

who can identify my brother's killer, and I'm not letting you out of my sight until you do."

I pull the SUV back onto the road, and that ends the conversation. She spends the rest of the trip absently rubbing the little black bird tattoo on her wrist and looking out of the passenger window.

Before long, I can see the golden glow of my mansion lights against the tranquil black sky. I own many homes worldwide, but this one was my favorite. It was a testament to the wealth and power of the Avilov Bratva, a sanctuary that commanded respect. With the push of a button on the dashboard, the ornate iron gates open to allow us entrance down the long driveway. Rows of perfectly trimmed hedges lined each side, and a grand circular fountain stood at the entrance.

We were greeted by Anton, the head of my security team. "Boss, the grounds are secure," he states, his voice smooth and composed. Walking around to the passenger side, he offers Talia his hand, helping her out of the SUV. Awe flicks across her face as she watches the cascading water flow from the top of the marble fountain down through the mouths of the lion figures stationed around the base. Her expression changes to hesitation as we ascend the marble stairs to the grand foyer.

"Good evening, Mr. Avilov." Abram, my house manager, greets us in the foyer. "Christian has retired for the evening, sir. May I warm you up some dinner?" Abram waited while I directed my attention to Talia. Her stomach rumbled at the mention of food. Her embarrassment was evident when a light pink tinged her cheeks.

"Yes, thank you, Abram. I'm going to show Miss Martin around the mansion. We'll be in the dining room shortly." Taking her by the elbow, I escorted her through the grand entrance hall. "You'll be safe here. I have the best security team, a state-of-the-art alarm system, and cameras throughout the mansion and adjoining grounds."



“What about Sandy?” she inquired. “Will Dimitri bring her here, too?” Her thumb rubbed small circles again over her wrist tattoo.

“She cannot come here. Dimitri will take her to a hotel and check her in under a false name. He will watch her tonight, and then I will assign another man to watch over her tomorrow.”

“I need to speak with her. I’d like to call her now.”

“Dimitri will call when he has retrieved her.”

“But, if you just let me...”

“That is final.” I cut her off before she could complete the sentence. I don’t allow strangers inside my estate to keep the Bratva business secret, and I don’t want her to tell Sandy where my estate is. To the ordinary person, I am just a successful art gallery owner. To my enemies in the criminal underworld, I am a target they would like to bring down along with the entire Avilov family.

Walking through the mansion, I watch Talia’s gaze wander over the marble floors, crystal chandeliers, and expensive paintings. The grand staircase and ornate arched doorways hint at the elegance and sophistication of the estate design.

Continuing the tour, I point out various rooms until we enter the spacious living room. The elegant décor enchanted her, although she kept her guard up. Wandering over to the grand piano, she admired a painting on the wall above it. “This is beautiful,” she expressed. “You must do very well at your art gallery. Your family must be very proud of you.” Turning to face me, I could see her scrutinizing the luxurious surroundings.

“Yes, as I told you when we met, family is everything. I am in charge of my family,

and my art gallery is an important part of our business.” I sit on the velvet sofa, gesturing for her to sit as well. Her knee bounces up and down as she contemplates asking me what she really wants to know.

“What do you want to know, kiska? Go ahead and ask.” Draping my arms across the back of the sofa, I wait for her to ask her questions.

She releases a deep breath and looks me square in the eye. “Are you in the mafia? Is your family a crime family?”

“I am the head of the Avilov Bratva. We are a family, and we are businessmen,” I reply casually. “Occasionally, we have disagreements with other families, which can get messy. Some people call us criminals. It makes no difference to me.”

“Is that why your brother was killed?” she murmured.

“I don’t know why my brother was killed. But you are going to help me find his killer, and when we do, I will know what happened.”

“Are you going to kill the man that shot Mihail?” she asked cautiously. She seemed to be holding her breath, waiting for my answer.

“Yes.” I won’t lie to her. She should know the truth sooner than later.

“Have you ever killed anyone before?” She asked that question carefully, her eyes darting around the room.

“Yes, but you are in no danger here,” I assured her. “You are safe with me.” That was the absolute truth. I would sooner cut off my right hand than harm her.

She searched my face for any hint of dishonesty. Finding none, she visibly relaxed.

“Come, let’s get something to eat.” Holding out my hand, I helped her to her feet.

Ring! Ring! Glancing at my phone, I see it’s Dimitri calling. “Dimitri,” I answer. “What’s happening?”

Talia stiffens at the sound of his name. She is visibly frozen in place, hanging on every word. As soon as I end the conversation, she bombards me with questions.

“Is she okay? Where is she? Can I speak to her? I need to speak to her.”

“Sandy is okay. Dimitri took her to the hotel and will stay with her until tomorrow. Then I will send one of my men to relieve him.”

“I need to speak with her. Please, you don’t understand. I have to speak with her.” Her eyes are boring into me, begging me to understand.

I remember her telling me in San Francisco that Sandy was more of a mother to her than a big sister. They grew up together in a foster home, and Sandy has been looking out for her ever since. That’s my job now. That thought took me entirely by surprise. She’s not my responsibility. She’s just valuable to me because she can identify Mikhail’s killer. I have enough responsibilities and don’t need this woman to become another one.

To get her off my back, I dial Dimitri’s number. “You may speak to her but do not tell her where my estate is. I don’t need your carelessness bringing enemies to my doorstep.”

Nodding in understanding, she eagerly takes the phone. Relief washes over her at the sound of Sandy’s voice. Ending the call, she hands my phone back. “Thank you, Aleksandr,” she says earnestly. “I think I need to lie down. It’s been a hell of a day.” Her face is creased with exhaustion. Cradling her stomach, she leans against the arm

of the sofa.

“I will take you to your room and have Abram bring you something to eat.” Leading her up the grand staircase, I guide her to a guest room down the hall from mine.

I watch her reaction as she looks around the grand space, admiring the large four-poster bed, rich velvet curtains, and the chinoiserie floral wallpaper. The sitting area by the windows is adorned with a grand mirror with an intricately carved frame. She points to a painting over the bed and asks, “Who is the artist? It’s beautiful.”

“I am,” I reply.

Surprise paints her face as she spins around to face me. “ You are? I didn’t realize you’re an artist. Was that your painting in the living room?”

“Yes.”

“It’s beautiful. You are very talented. No wonder you own an art gallery.” She looks me over as if I’m a puzzle she’s trying to figure out.

“Thank you. Get some rest. I will see you in the morning.” She grabs my forearm before I can exit the room. Unspoken words hang on her lips. Shaking her head, she releases my arm. “Good night,” she says, smiling softly.

I nod once, closing the door behind me. Pulling a brass key from my pocket, I turn it over and examine it before locking the door and walking away.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 3:12 am*

### Chapter 9

Aleksandr

Settling into the oversized leather chair in my office, I reflect on everything that's happened tonight. My thoughts bounce back and forth from Mikhail to Talia. Dialing Dimitri's number, I wait two rings before he answers.

"Is everything okay with the girl, Sandy?" I inquire.

"Yes. She's tough...strong...although she's worried about Talia. I get the feeling there's something she's not telling me."

"She's just worried about her sister's safety. Talia told me Sandy is a mother figure to her. This will all be over soon enough." I pause, pouring whiskey into a crystal glass on my desk. "Tell me about Mikhail."

"It's taken care of, and no one in the club will speak with the authorities. Denis will let me know if he hears anything around the police department."

"Make arrangements for a private funeral. That's what Mama would have wanted." I gulp down the whiskey and pour another.

"When will you tell Sasha and Maxim?"

I swallow past the lump in my throat. "Tomorrow." Draining my glass again, I open the file on my desk. Staring at the list of names, I run my finger down the black and

white print. They all belong to members of organized crime families in the New York City area. “Get me the names and photos of all the men that were in the club tonight, including everyone in the Lupani family. I’m hoping Talia will recognize someone as the man who killed Mikhail. I’ll meet you in two hours.”

Ending the call, I have another shot of whiskey. There doesn’t seem to be enough whiskey to clear my head. Thoughts of Talia play in my mind on a loop. I should check on her and make sure she is alright. And by ‘alright,’ I mean fuck her until I spill every drop of cum into her tight pussy. I haven’t stopped thinking about her or the night we spent together since I left San Francisco. And now she’s here, under my roof. Her supple body spread out on the bed like a feast set just for me. My cock is rock hard as I replay our night together in my mind.

Her honeysuckle scent envelopes me as I swirl my tongue over her clit. She’s gripping the bedsheets, moaning as I dig my fingers deeper into her creamy thighs. Her pussy is dripping wet, her moans pushing me over the edge. Grabbing her ass, I pull her closer to the end of the bed. My mouth covers her clit, licking and sucking. I push a finger into her pussy, and her back arches in response. Nibbling my way down her luscious thigh, I push a second finger in. She gasps, a moan caught in her throat.

Her fingers tangle in my hair, gripping tightly as I fuck her hard with my fingers. My mouth ravishes her clit as my fingers work an orgasm out of her. Her face is radiant when she falls apart for me. I don’t give her a chance to catch her breath. Wrapping my arms around her knees, I lift her ass off the bed, thrusting my cock into her. She cries out, digging her nails into my forearms. I don’t have the willpower to take it slow. My cock is the hardest it’s ever been, my balls ready to explode. The desire is overwhelming, creating cracks in my control. She’s so tight, so hot, so perfect. Fuck. I push harder, faster, sinking my cock balls deep.

I fuck her even faster, cupping her ass in my hands. Her insides are on fire. Throwing her head back, she cries out, sobbing from pleasure. Her pussy ripples around my

cock as she rides out her orgasm. She falls back on the bed, her limbs limp and lip trembling.

I've never experienced that type of chemistry before. And I never thought about a woman as much as I've thought about her. Fuck them and leave them, that's how it's always been. No desire or time for a relationship. Being pakhan of the family and caring for Sasha and Maxim has been enough for me. Mama tried convincing me to take a wife, but her words fell on deaf ears. It's been over a year since died, and I miss her nagging me. I miss everything about her. She loved her children fiercely.

I wonder if Talia could use a drink? Maybe she'd like some whiskey with a side of cock. Blyat! This woman has me under a spell! She is in my home for one reason, and it's not to bounce up and down on my cock. I will keep her under lock and key until I find Mikhail's killer and avenge him.

Pushing thoughts of Talia out of my mind, I open my laptop. Typing in my passcode, I check my business accounts and review today's transactions. I noticed that Boris transferred one hundred thousand dollars into an offshore account. Angelo Carvallo will receive that money to make up for the loss of his man, David.

Fucking Adachi. It's bad enough I have Mikhail's death to deal with, not to mention Talia, Sasha, and Maxim. I don't need this situation with the Yakuza to explode. Grabbing my phone off the desk, I quickly message Anton. Ten minutes later, he's sitting in my office chair across from me.

"Any word on finding Adachi's men?"

"Not yet," Anton replies. "But we have it on good authority that they are still in the city. It's just a matter of time before we find them."

"I need them found sooner than later. I can't have Adachi screwing up our

arrangement with Angelo.” I tug at the ends of my hair as thoughts of Talia creep into my thoughts again. “Keep me informed.”

Anton nods his head in acknowledgment, leaving me alone with my thoughts. I haven’t eaten since breakfast, so I go to the kitchen. Walking down the long hallway, I turn right instead of left. Creeping as quietly as I can, I stop in front of a door with a mermaid door hanger. I crack the door open and see an empty bed where Sasha should be sleeping. Quietly opening the door across the hall, I find Sasha snuggled in bed with Maxim. They look so peaceful; it pulls at my heartstrings, knowing that they lost both parents at only five and nine years old. Closing the door silently, I make a silent vow to avenge their father and always take care of them.

Before I reach the stairs, I stop in front of Talia’s room. My fingers find the brass key in my pocket, feeling its weight before I decide to walk away. I need to get as far away from her as I can.

Descending the stairs quickly, I find Abram in the kitchen sipping on a cup of tea. “You’re still up?” I ask.

“Yes, sir. Since it’s so close to sunrise, I thought I’d stay awake to see it. The colors are brilliant this time of year.” Standing and moving his cup and saucer from the table to the counter, he removes a plate of food from the stove. “The food is warm, sir. May I set it down for you?”

“Thank you, Abram, but I will take care of it. Go enjoy your tea and sunrise.” Taking the plate, I set it down on the table. Curiosity gets the better of me, and the words are out of my mouth before I can stop them. “Did the girl eat?”

“Yes, sir. However, she decided soup and crackers would be best. She said her stomach wasn’t well. I gave her mint to help settle it.”



“How was her demeanor?”

“To be frank, sir, she wasn’t a fan of being locked in the bedroom. I took the liberty to reiterate that it was for her own protection. She is a lovely girl.”

I nod, dismissing him to enjoy his tea, although his words stir the beast in my chest. Abram has been with my family since I was a young boy, and even though he is no longer a young man, a pang of jealousy shoots through me at hearing him call Talia ‘lovely’. I shake off the feeling, recognizing how ridiculous it is. I’ve never been jealous of a man, indeed not of Abram. He’s a father figure to me and always will be.

Checking the clock, I see it’s almost time to meet Dimitri. Finishing my meal, I put the plate and utensils in the sink, then fish the SUV keys out of my pocket. I scribble a quick note letting the nanny know I must speak with Sasha and Maxim in the morning. Releasing a heavy sigh, I turn on my heels and leave through the side door that connects with the garage. If all goes well, Mikhail’s killer will be identified within a few hours.

### Chapter 10

#### Talia

“Ooooooh, not again....” I make it to the bathroom in the nick of time to deal with another bout of morning sickness. The sun is barely up, and I want to crawl back into bed. Pulling myself off the floor, I examine my reflection in the mirror. I’m not winning any beauty contests today. Tucking a loose strand of hair behind my ear, I splash cool water on my face and then search the cabinets for a toothbrush and toothpaste. Hitting the jackpot, I brush the sour taste out of my mouth and return to the bedroom.

Spotting a note on the nightstand next to the bed, I pick it up, admiring the neat handwriting. It reads, ‘The closet has been filled with clothes in your size. Please feel free to freshen up.’ Thank goodness! I can’t imagine walking around smelling like vomit all day. It’s difficult enough trying to hide my pregnancy.

The walk-in closet is bigger than Sandy’s entire apartment. I’m in awe of all the beautiful clothing. Evening gowns and dresses hang on the left side. Blouses, tops, and slacks hang on the right. Straight ahead are rows and rows of gorgeous shoes. I pick up a pair of black strappy heels and turn them over to marvel at the red bottoms. Holy shit. These heels cost more than the monthly rent on the apartment. Carefully placing them back on the shelf, I browse the clothing options, selecting a cotton pink v-neck top and a pair of casual cream slacks. Everything fits perfectly except for one teeny tiny problem. I can’t button the slacks. My little baby bump is preventing me from closing them, no matter how much I try to suck in my belly. Putting the slacks back, I opt for cream stretch leggings. Cute cream ballet flats finish the ensemble.

As I leave the closet, I hear knocking on the bedroom door. A muscular man with a scar on his right cheek unlocks the door and opens it slightly. “Miss, are you decent?” he calls out in a thick Russian accent.

“Yes, please come in. Hi, I’m Talia.” I hold my hand out for him to shake, but he just stares at it.

“I am Nikolai. You come, I take you to breakfast.” He gestures toward the door, and I obey.

He leads me down the long hallway to the grand staircase and into the kitchen. Abram is speaking with the chef, and I see an older woman and two young children sitting at the table. The little girl has long blonde hair and green eyes, and the boy has raven-colored hair and the same ice-blue eyes as Aleksandr.

“You’re pretty,” the little girl says, jumping up from her seat to greet me. “What’s your name?” she asks, bouncing on the balls of her feet.

Before I can answer, the older woman scolds the girl. “Sasha, where are your manners? Sit down and finish your breakfast.” She guides the girl back to the table and then faces me. “I am Olga Popov, the children’s nanny. This is Sasha and Maxim. Will you join us for breakfast?” She motions to an empty chair at the table.

“Thank you.” I sit in the empty chair across from the boy, Maxim. “Hello,” I greet.

Narrowing his eyes, he looks me over before deciding to reply. “Hi. Are you a friend of Uncle’s?” he asks while scooping scrambled eggs into his mouth?

“Oh, um...yes, I am.” I give him a tight smile, wondering if these children belong to Aleksandr’s brother, Mikhail. “Are you visiting your uncle today?”

“No, silly!” Sasha giggles. “We live here.”

“Oh, how nice. Do your parents live here too?”

“Mama died,” Maxim replied. “And Otets lives in a different house.” He scoops another forkful of eggs into his mouth, washing it down with a gulp of juice.

“Mama was sick. I don’t remember much about her because I was too little when it happened.” Sasha pushes eggs around her plate while munching on a strawberry.

“The children have lived here for two years,” Olga chimes in. “Mr. Avilov is a very generous man.”

Giving her a small smile, I turn to look at Sasha. “I’m so sorry about your mother. I lost my mother when I was little, too.” Without realizing it, I begin rubbing circles around my wrist tattoo, thinking about my parents. The only thing I have left of them is an old photo. “You know, Maxim, you have the same color eyes as your uncle,” I remark.

“I know,” he smiles. “Otets has the same color eyes, too.” He hands his empty plate to Abram, who puts another scoop of eggs on it. His eyes light up with excitement when Abram returns the plate with more eggs and potatoes. “Thanks, Abram!”

Directing my attention to Nikolai, I see him standing in the kitchen corner, drinking coffee, but his eyes are glued to me. Clearing my throat nervously, I glance out the window, admiring the meticulously manicured garden.

“For you, Miss Talia,” Abram says, sliding a plate of scrambled eggs and potatoes before me. Without warning, my stomach flips, making me feel like I’m going to be sick. “Are you alright?”

“Oh yes, I’m fine. My stomach still feels a little off, though.” I push the plate to the side to avoid throwing up on it. “Do you have any ginger ale?” I ask hopefully.

“Of course, I’ll bring it right away.” Abram disappears into a walk-in pantry, allowing me to ask the children more about their father.

“Is your father’s name Maxim, too?” I look directly at Maxim, hoping their father isn’t Mikhail. It would be terrible to be orphaned at such a young age. I know all about that kind of life.

“No, his name is Mikhail. And Mama’s name was Anya.” Finishing the last forkful of eggs, he pushes his plate aside and picks up his electronic game.

My heart sinks thinking about Mikhail. It’s clear they don’t know their father is dead, and I’m not about to tell them. I gaze out the window, listening to Olga and Sasha talk about swimming in the pool today.

“Miss Talia.” Abram puts a crystal glass in front of me filled to the brim with ginger ale. “May I get you some toast or crackers?”

“Crackers would be wonderful. Thank you so much.” I take a few sips of the bubbly soda, hoping it settles my stomach. At almost eight weeks pregnant, the morning sickness has turned into morning, afternoon, and night sickness. In between the nausea, I’ve been having weird cravings, like pickles and ice cream or bowls of sauerkraut. Abram places a plate of saltine crackers in front of me.

Sasha finishes her breakfast and gives me a big smile. “We’re going swimming today!” she announces.

“After your lessons,” Olga insists.

“Do you want to swim with us? Uncle makes the pool hot so we can swim even when it’s cold outside.” Clasp ing her hands in front of her, she sways back and forth, anxiously waiting for my response. Olga nods her head, indicating her approval of joining them.

“Thank you for inviting me,” I answer, nibbling on the crackers.

“Okay!” Sasha beams. “Nanny Olga, may we show Talia the pool? And can we show her the library and the theater, too?”

“Da, “ Olga agreed. “We’ll give Talia a tour of the mansion. We go now.”

Leaving the crackers on the table, I follow Olga, Sasha, and Maxim out of the kitchen. Nikolai trails behind, giving us some space but watching over us at the same time.

The tour of the mansion begins with the grand library, an immense chamber lined with floor-to-ceiling bookshelves filled with leather-bound books. As impressive as it is, my eyes drift to the corner of the library to what appeared to be a children’s area. An alphabet-patterned rug was surrounded by brightly colored books lined up like soldiers on low shelves. Plush toys were scattered around, some sitting in children-sized chairs, some lying on the rug. An oversized bean bag chair and a low table completed the area.

Sasha led me to the children’s corner, picking a book off the shelf and plopping down on the bean bag chair. “This is my favorite place in the library,” she announced. “Uncle had it made just for me.” She smiled proudly with her arms spread wide.

“It’s lovely.” I sat in one of the little chairs, feeling like a giant. “Is this also your favorite place, Maxim?”

Maxim snorted, rolling his eyes. “ My favorite place is the theater room. It’s awesome playing my racing games on the big screen.”

Sasha jumped up from the bean bag chair, grabbing my hand, and pulling me out of the tiny chair. “Come on! Let’s go see the theater!”

Olga held back a laugh at Sasha’s enthusiasm. Nikolai, who was stone-faced, softened a bit when Sasha flashed him a toothy grin. Sasha led the way to the lavish theater room, where plush red velvet seats lined tiered rows facing a massive screen. A popcorn cart, slushie machine, and candy counter were just a few splendid complements to the cozy seats.

Sasha and Maxim described their favorite movie nights as we explored the theater room. Even Olga chimed in with a short narration of one of her favorite movies. At this moment, my heart felt full watching the bond between the children and Olga.

“Children, let’s show Talia the gardens, and then it will be time for your studies.” Olga ushered the children out of the theater, down the long hallway, and out the glass doors into the immaculately manicured gardens of the Avilov estate.

Blinking against the sun’s brightness, my eyes gradually adjusted to the opulent surroundings. Sasha and Maxim walked with me, pointing to tall hedges ahead. “What is that?” I asked, squinting to see better.

“It’s a maze,” Maxim stated casually.

“A really cool maze!” Sasha jumped up and down in place, barely able to contain her excitement. “Nanny Olga, may we go in?”

Olga glanced at Nikolai, who nodded in approval. He took a seat in an ornate garden chair under a blue umbrella. At the same time, the children, Olga and I, embarked on

our journey through the labyrinthine maze. Giant hedges loomed overhead, casting shadows on the ground below. The children guided us through the maze's twists and turns, their laughter filling the cool air.

At last, we emerged into a small clearing at the heart of the maze, where a marble fountain stood surrounded by vibrant colored flowers and lush greenery. The fragrant scent of the blossoms filled my nose as I marveled at the fountain.

"This is beautiful," I whispered.

Sasha beamed with delight. "It's our secret place. No one else knows about it."

Maxim nodded, his eyes sparkling with mischief. "Except Olga, of course."

Olga chuckled softly, her gaze softening as she watched the children revel in their secret haven. "Yes, except Olga. Now it is time for your studies."

"Oh man," Sasha pouted, kicking the grass softly with her foot.

"I think today we will study outside," Olga announced.

"Yay!!" Sasha cheered.

"Cool! Let's get our books, Sasha." In a flash, they were off running.

"That was very nice of you. How long have you been their nanny?" I asked as we began winding our way through the maze.

"Mr. Avilov hired me two years ago after Anya died. Their father could not care for them, so Mr. Avilov brought them to live with him. They are wonderful children."



Olga leads me out of the maze. Nikolai stands when he sees us. “The children are getting their books.”

“Yes, thank you, Nikolai.” Olga sits at the table under the blue umbrella. “You are welcome to stay with us while the children work.” She gestures to the empty chair next to her.

Since I don’t have anywhere else to go, I accept the invitation. If I have to be a prisoner, I might as well enjoy the estate as much as I can.

### Chapter 11:

Aleksandr

After a long night, I arrive home to find Talia in the garden with Nikolai, Olga, and the children. Sasha and Maxim splash around in the pool while Olga and Talia chat on lounge chairs. Nikolai is sitting at the table, looking at something on his phone.

“Boss,” he greets, standing as I approach.

“Uncle! Watch me!” Sasha calls out. She does a cannonball into the pool, splashing Olga and Talia with water.

“Devochka, I told you no more jumping!” Olga dries herself off with a fluffy towel, then smooths back her grey hair and adjusts the bun on her head. “Good afternoon, Mr. Avilov.”

“Is it afternoon already?” Talia squints at me as she dries off her cream-colored pants.

“Olga, I must speak with you. Talia, please stay with the children.” I take Olga into the kitchen, requesting she sit in a chair at the table.

“Is everything alright?” she asks, concern etched on her face.

“I don’t know how to say this, and I don’t know how I’m going to tell the children.” I release a heavy sigh, leaning my elbows on my knees. “Mikhail is dead.”

“Oh no,” Olga gasps. “How did this happen?”

“He was killed last night, shot once in the chest.” Scrubbing a hand down my face, I lean back in the chair, briefly closing my eyes. When I open them, Olga’s face is twisted in horror, her mouth forming a silent ‘O’.

“I’m so sorry, Mr. Avilov.” She gently places a hand on my forearm. Her eyes glisten with unshed tears. “The children...” Her voice trails off as she chokes on the words.

“The children will remain here,” I assure her. “They will want for nothing.” Patting her hand, I cross the kitchen for a glass of water. Placing it in front of her, I sit down again. “I don’t know how to tell them,” I admit.

“It is a delicate situation. I think less is better.” She takes a sip of water and then stands abruptly. “I will tell them.”

“No, I will tell them. He was my brother, so the burden is on me.” I stand, straighten my jacket, and run my fingers through my hair.

“I will get them out of the pool and into dry clothes. Then I will bring them to your office.”

I nod and watch her walk out the door. Pulling my cell phone out of my pocket, I sent Nikolai a quick message to bring Talia to my office.

Nikolai ushers Talia into my office, directing her to take a seat in the leather chair across from me. Dimitri gathers all the names and photos of the men who were in the VIP area of the club last night. I’m hopeful Talia will recognize one of them.

“I have photos of the men who were in the club last night.” I spread the photos across my desk and then walked around it to stand next to Talia’s chair. “Do you recognize

any of them?”

She stands, getting closer to the desk. Running her fingertips across the photos, she studies each one, stopping at the last one. “I recognize the men who were in the poker room, but I don’t see the man who shot your brother.”

After scooping up the photos, I set them aside. Then I laid down more pictures in front of her. “Does anyone look familiar?”

Looking closely at their faces, she shakes her head. “No, I’m sorry.”

“Blyat! “ I slam my fist on the table hard enough to make Talia jump backward. “I was sure you’d recognize that scumbag, Lupani.”

“Lupani?” she asks. “I heard the man say that name before he shot Mikhail.”

“You’re sure?” I ask, hope rising in my chest.

“Yes. He said something about Mikhail taking Mr. Lupani’s money.”

This was just what I needed to make a positive connection between Gio Lupani and Mikhail. Lupani might not have pulled the trigger, but one of his men did. And that makes him responsible for my brother’s death.

Olga’s gentle knocking on the office door gets my attention. “Mr. Avilov, the children are ready.”

“Thank you, Olga. Please bring them in.” Quickly gathering the photos, I tuck them away into my desk drawer. “Nikolai, escort Talia to the living room while I speak with the children.”

“Da,” Nikolai replies. Sasha gives Talia a small wave from the office doorway. Maxim high-fives her as they pass each other. It appears she has a fan club.

“Sasha, Maxim, please sit,” I request. They sit in the chairs across from me while Olga stands behind them. “I have some news.” I take a deep, slow breath before continuing. “First, I’d like to remind you that I love you both very much.” The children look at each other, bewildered. I don’t use the word ‘love’ often, so it’s strange for them to hear. “There’s been an incident; your father was killed last night.” Sasha’s eyes well up with tears, while Maxim’s expression remains stoic.

“What happened?” Maxim asks. His voice is strong as he looks me in the eyes, wanting the truth. He is aware of the family ‘business’, although he is still young. Sasha thinks we’re an average family and rich because of my art gallery.

“I don’t know all the facts,” I respond in the most truthful way I can. “I’m looking into it and will hopefully know more soon.”

Maxim accepts this answer without pushback. He hugs his sister, consoling her tiny sobs. Olga hugs them both, offering comfort and support. “I’m so sorry,” she whispers, drying Sasha’s tears.

“You will both remain here and have everything you need and want.” Sasha rushes around the desk, hugging me tightly. Maxim joins her, uttering his gratitude. “We’re family, and family takes care of each other.”

Olga takes the children out of the office, and Talia returns. I sit on the edge of the desk across from Talia’s seat. “You will remain here until we find Mikhail’s killer. I’m sure it was one of Gio Lupani’s men, which means you are in danger if they find you. And I need you alive. You may not contact or speak to anyone outside of this estate.” I dismiss her by walking around the desk and sitting in my leather chair.

“Wait a minute, this conversation isn’t over.” Standing, she plants her hands firmly on her hips.

“Yes, it is. You may go.” I ignore her scathing look as I open up my laptop.

“Aleksandr! I will not be dismissed. What about Sandy? I want to speak with her,” she insists.

I look up from my laptop to see her face red with anger and her lips drawn in a tight line. The fierceness in her is turning me on, which is the last thing I need right now. I raise one eyebrow without saying a word, waiting to see how far she will take this.

“Please, I want to speak with Sandy.” Her tone has softened, but I can still see the fire in her hazel eyes.

“Sandy is fine. She is protected,” I say, leaving her no room to argue with me.

Seemingly defeated, she sits down in the chair. “What about with the children? Do they know about Mikhail?”

I can hear the concern in her voice, and it’s surprising since she just met them. “Yes. I didn’t give them details, but they know he is gone.”

“What will happen to them now?” she inquires, chewing on her bottom lip.

“They will remain with me.”

“That’s very kind of you. I wasn’t lucky enough to have family take me in when my parents died.” A sadness flashed briefly in her eyes before she focused on me again. “What about your parents? Are they still alive?”

I'm not the type of man to open up to someone, but for some reason I find myself telling her about my family before I can pull the words back. "My mother died a year ago, and Otets died eight years ago. I took over the family after him, when I was twenty-four years old."

"You mean you took over the art gallery?" She seems genuinely interested in wanting to know more.

"I am the pakhan of the Avilov family. Do you know what that means?" Closing the laptop, I lean forward on my elbows, studying her intently. Shaking her head, I continue. "We are a Bratva family. Some of our businesses aren't exactly legal, and some things we do aren't condoned by law enforcement."

Talia's eyes open wide as she grips her knees. "You mean, you're in the mafia?"

"Some people call it mafia, others say syndicate. In Russia, we call it Bratva. I am in charge, the pakhan, of the Avilov Bratva. My father was pakhan before me, and my heir will be pakhan after me."

She visibly shakes before wrapping her arms around herself. "Is that why Mikhail was killed?"

"Mikhail fell apart after he lost his wife, Anya. I've tried to help him, but there wasn't much I could do. He became a shell of a man, unable to care for his children. All he was able to focus on was drinking to numb the pain and gambling to occupy his mind. That is what killed him." I stand, crossing the room to the bar, pouring vodka into a crystal glass. "I will find the man that killed him, and I will cut his heart out." I drink the vodka in one gulp and pour another. Before I can drink it, I feel Talia's hand on my arm.

"I'm so sorry for your loss," she whispers. A single tear glides down her cheek. I

wipe it away with my thumb, then fixate on her plump lips. I cradle her face before I can stop myself, my lips crashing down on hers. I'm filled with desire, and she's the only one that can satisfy it.



### Chapter 12

#### Talia

My heart quickens as Aleksandr devours my mouth. His spicy scent wraps around me like a warm embrace. I feel his nimble fingers grip the bottom of my pink v-neck top, pulling it over my head. All thoughts and concerns fly out of my head when he drags his lips down the side of my neck and kisses the swell of my breasts. I want him...I need him...inside me, filling me up with his thick cock.

Stepping back, he takes off his jacket and then his tie. His pupils are blown wide with desire, and his jaw is clenched tight. His eyes bore into me as he unbuttons his shirt and drops it on the floor. "Come here," he demands.

Tentatively, I take a step toward him, then another, until I'm in front of him, close enough to feel the heat of his skin on mine. Gathering my long hair in his fist, he tilts my head, exposing my neck. His tongue glides up my neck until his lips are next to my ear. "I want to feel your lips around my cock," he whispers, his warm breath causing goosebumps on my arms.

My panties become wet the moment I unbuckle his belt. Unzipping his pants, I slide them down to his thighs, easing his cock free. He's so hard, and the tip is already wet with pre-cum as I grip the thick shaft. Tilting my head up, he kisses me hard, sliding his tongue into my mouth like a condemned man having his last meal.

When he releases me, I get on my knees, sucking him into my mouth. I swirl my tongue around the tip while running my fingertips over the shaft. He sucks in a gasp,

digging his fingers into my hair. “ Kiska, “ he moans, pushing his cock deeper into my mouth.

His cock throbs against my tongue as I lick and suck at a steady pace. His balls are heavy as I massage them in my hand. Tilting my head back, he guides his cock deeper into my throat.

“Yes, just like that.” I obey his silky command, opening my throat to take him even deeper. Tears form in the corners of my eyes, but I don’t stop sucking and massaging his cock. He picks up the pace, fucking my throat until I’m desperate to have him shoot his cum down my throat, marking me, owning me. “ Fuck. Not yet,“ he says, quickly pulling his cock out of my mouth. “I want to taste you on my tongue before I fill you up with my cum.”

It’s not a request Pulling me to my feet, his fingers find the waistband of my cream-colored leggings and strip them off me. Clasp my hands, he takes a step back, admiring my silhouette in my white lace bra and panties. “You’re so beautiful, dushenka.”

A blush creeps up my neck, tinged my cheeks pink. He’s seen me naked before, but the way he looks at me makes me feel like a shy schoolgirl. Unhooking my bra, he frees my breasts from their confines, sucking my nipple into his mouth. I grip his forearms as his tongue licks and circles my hard nipples.

Pushing me back onto the desk, he slowly slides off my panties, pausing a moment before spreading my legs open and hooking them over his shoulders. The tip of his tongue glides over my clit, making me arch my back with need. Spreading my pussy lips apart, he pushes his tongue in, gripping my thighs tightly. “Ohhhh, yes...” I moan, pushing my pussy hard against his lips, needing more.

He pulls his tongue out, placing light kisses on pussy, then nibbling on my inner

thighs. Without warning, he pushes a thick finger between my folds, then another, hooking them inside me to stroke against the spot that makes my eyes roll into the back of my head. His mouth sucks on my clit as fingers piston in and out of me faster and faster.

Pushing a third finger makes me cry out, “Yes! Please, Aleksandr...” Tangling my fingers in his thick, silky hair, I hold his mouth steady against my pussy. His fingers drive into me at a frightening pace. My legs begin to tremble as pressure builds up in my core. “Don’t stop,” I beg. “I’m going to come.”

He swirls his tongue over my clit, then clamps down and sucks hard, fucking me into oblivion with his fingers. Reaching up with his free hand, he twirls my nipple between his thumb and forefinger, then pinches it hard. Crying out, I fall apart, coming harder than I ever have before. My pussy spasms as my juices flow out of me and onto his tongue. He laps it up, savoring every drop. The intensity of my orgasm has me seeing stars as my body twitches from the endless electric shocks running from my pussy down to my toes.

Releasing my pussy from his lips, he kisses me gently from my navel to my mouth. I’m in such a euphoric state I don’t even notice him trapping my wrists above my head until I feel the tip of his cock pushing against my throbbing pussy.

“Fuck me, Aleksandr,” I moan, wriggling my pussy against his cock.

“Are you my little dirty kiska ?“ he breathes against my mouth. “Do you want me to fuck you so hard I brand you on the inside with my cock?”

His words make me tingly all over, an orgasm gathering in my core. “Yes, yes, fuck me,” I gasp. He releases my wrists, and I dig my nails into his back. “Please...” I let out a small whimper, his gaze capturing mine. The heat behind his ice-blue eyes is too much for me. Sliding my hands down to his ass, I try to force his cock inside my

pussy.

Flipping me over, he lays himself across my back, pinning me to the desk. Sliding his foot between my legs, he spreads them apart, rubbing his cock against my ass. He dips his fingers into my wet pussy, pulling them out and sucking on them.

“You’re so sweet,” he says, gathering my long hair in his hand and holding it at the base of my neck. “Aleksandr...” I whimper. He pushes the tip of his cock to my pussy, pushing apart my soaking wet lips. This is too much; it’s like torture. I need him in me...now. “Aleksandr, please!” I cry out.

That gets him moving as he thrusts forward, pushing his cock balls deep in one motion. My pussy stretches to take all of him, stinging lightly from his girth. It’s bliss, and I want more. Pushing my ass back against him, he slaps it hard, leaving a bright red mark on my cheek. Drilling into my pussy, he gives me exactly what I want. It’s rough and hard, animalistic in the way he’s claiming my body.

Sliding his hands underneath me, he lifts me up slightly, grabbing my breasts and pinching my hard nipples. But all I can feel is his massive cock slamming into me over and over as the fire in my belly heats up every inch of me.

“Oh God, yes...yes...” I beg him. I’m on the verge of another orgasm when he pulls my hair hard enough to make my scalp tingle.

“You will not come until I tell you to come,” he orders, smacking my ass again, harder than the last time. “Do you understand, kiska ?”

“Yes,” I whimper, tears pricking my eyes. My pussy is throbbing, and I don’t know how much longer I can hold back the orgasm. “Aleksandr...” my tiny voice trails off as he fucks me even faster, splitting me open with every thrust.

“Not until I tell you.” His voice is deep and raspy as he fucks me harder and faster. His arms are still wrapped around me when he lifts me off the desk, pulling my back flush against his chest. Grabbing my breasts, he squeezes, plunging into my pussy balls deep. “Now!” he commands, crashing into me one last time, releasing streams of hot cum deep inside me.

My pussy clenches violently around his cock, my release an explosion setting my body on fire. “Oh my God!” I gasp for air as electrical shocks shoot through my pussy, and my juices flow down his cock.

Releasing my breasts, he falls on top of me on the desk, both of us limp and gasping for air. We stay like that for a few moments before he pulls out of me, flipping me over and kissing me gently on the lips.

While his cum is still running down my thigh, he gathers up our clothes. He hands me mine and dresses himself quickly. Before I can get my leggings on, he picks up his cell phone, calls Nikolai, and instructs him to come and get me.

I hastily finish dressing, confused about what is happening, when Nikolai enters the office. “Take her to her room,” Aleksandr orders. He sits at his desk and opens his laptop without saying anything else. I’m so shocked I can’t speak. He dismissed me as if he didn’t fuck me raw moments ago. It was as if I was a toy to be used, and now he’s lost interest in it. Anger boils under my skin, and I stomp out of the office with Nikolai trailing behind me.

### Chapter 13

#### Talia

How dare he! He can't just toss me aside like I'm nothing. Unfortunately, my head and my body are disagreeing. I'm pissed off at him in my mind, but my body is still tingling from the best orgasm I've ever had. Flopping down on the bed, I clutch the soft pillow, hugging it close.

Nikolai stands in the doorway, looking as if he wants to say something but holding back the words. Finally, he clears his throat and says, "If you need anything, dial 0 on the phone, and Abram will bring it to you." Closing the door, he leaves me alone to sort through these conflicting feelings. I don't hear the door lock, but with all the security in the estate, I'm basically Aleksandr's prisoner.

Sitting up, I pick up the phone and listen for a dial tone. I dial Sandy's number, but the call doesn't go through. Damn it. How do I get an outside line? I try pressing nine before dialing Sandy's number, but that doesn't work either. I hang up the phone in frustration.

He's such an asshole! And the worst part is, he's the father of my baby. If I thought that telling him I was pregnant with his child would help me out of this situation, I'd tell him. Unfortunately, I think telling him will just make it worse. I do realize there is a crazy amount of chemistry between us. Still, I don't think springing a child on him is the best idea, especially since he has Sasha and Maxim to take care of. He never agreed to have a child with me, and I don't think he'd think of this as a happy surprise. Like he said, he needs to keep me around to identify Mikhail's killer. Once I

do, he'll be done with me.

Sighing, I cradle my stomach, whispering to the baby. "It's okay, little one. I'll always be here for you and keep you safe. It's you and me, kid." Just then, my stomach rumbles from hunger. It's not dinner time yet, but the baby doesn't care. Picking up the phone, I dial 0.

"Miss Talia, what can I get for you?" Abram's voice is comforting and soothing. He's like the grandfather I never had.

"Can I have something to eat?" I ask.

"Of course. Would you like a snack or something more substantial?"

"A sandwich would be great." My stomach rumbles so loudly I wonder if he can hear it through the phone. "And maybe an apple. And if you have pickles, will you please add them, too?"

"I'll bring it right up," Abram replies.

I clean myself up in the bathroom before Abram brings the food. After wiping myself down, I select new clothes from the closet. Whoever picked them has good taste. I pair comfy grey sweatpants with a soft blue cable knit sweater.

Abram knocks on the door, brings a food tray, and places it on the table next to the chaise lounge. "Ring me if you require anything else."

"Thank you, Abram," I say sincerely. Just looking at the delicious sandwich makes my mouth salivate.

Settling on the white velvet chaise, I take a bite out of the sandwich and then the

pickle. I contemplate my escape, trying to figure out the best way to leave the estate unnoticed. Once I have a plan, I'll get a phone and call Sandy. She'll know what to do after that. We can leave the city for a while and leave Aleksandr, Mikhail's killer, and all the drama behind. Once the coast is clear, we'll return and resume our lives as usual.

I was lost in my thoughts, so I didn't hear the door creak open. Sasha was standing in the middle of the room before I noticed her.

"Hi," she says sadly, looking down at her tiny feet. "Can I sit with you?"

"Yes, of course," I tell her, brushing sandwich crumbs from my fingers. "What's wrong?"

"My daddy died," she sniffles.

"I'm so sorry, sweetie. Can I give you a hug?" Nodding, she nestles into my arms, letting out a small sob. "Shh, it's okay." I run my hand down her soft blonde hair, consoling her.

"I lost my daddy when I was little, too," I tell her. She peeks up at me from underneath her lashes, her green eyes shiny with tears.

"You lost your mommy and your daddy just like me?" she sniffles.

"Yes, I did. But I didn't have an amazing uncle and brother like you do. Or the best nanny in the world. Everything will be alright. They'll take good care of you."

"You were all alone?" she asks innocently.

"At first, but then I met my sister, Sandy. We're not related, but we became as close



as sisters.” A soft smile hikes up my lips as I think about Sandy. “She looks out for me and takes care of me. She’s the best sister I could have ever gotten.”

“Where is she now?” Sasha asks, twisting the ends of my long hair between her delicate fingers.

“She’s not far away, but I can’t see her right now.” A soft sigh escapes my lips, and Sasha looks up at me with concern.

“Do you miss her?”

“Yes, very much. I wish I could speak to her and ensure she is okay. But I don’t have my cell phone, and the phone here doesn’t work.”

“I can get you a phone,” Sasha whispers, her face lighting up enthusiastically. “Then you can call her.”

“What do you mean? Get a phone from whom?” I sit up straight, anticipating her answer.

“Alyce, the maid. She cleans my room every day, and I know where she keeps her cell phone.”

“Oh no, sweetie. I can’t let you do that. You’ll get in trouble, and then that would make me very sad.”

“I can do it! She’s cleaning the living room right now. I can get the phone and put it back when you’re done.” Jumping to her feet, she runs out of the room faster than I can stop her.

This isn’t a good idea. What if Aleksandr finds out? He’ll be furious. And I can’t let

him get angry with Sasha.

I'm pacing in circles when Sasha returns with the cell phone. "Sasha, you shouldn't have done that!" I grab her, hugging her tightly.

"Don't worry, I won't get into trouble. Uncle loves me very much. He said so." Her innocent little smile warms my heart. "Here." She thrusts the phone into my hand and stands guard at the door. "I'll let you know if anyone is coming."

I'm still not convinced this is a good idea, but the need to speak with Sandy outweighs my fears. I dial her number and then hold my breath until she answers.

"Hello?" Sandy answers. I release the breath and began speaking as quickly and quietly as I could.

"Sis, it's me. Are you okay? Please tell me you're okay?"

"Yes, I'm fine. I'm at the hotel with a very large man watching guard outside my door. Are you okay?" she asks quickly.

"Yes, I'm okay. Although I'm basically being held prisoner. Aleksandr won't let me contact anyone or leave the estate until he finds the man who killed his brother. I had to sneak this call without him knowing about it. Have you heard anything at work about the murder?" I chew on my bottom lip, pacing in front of the bed.

"I haven't gone to work. Dimitri said it was safer if I lay low until this was over. He said the killer might find out we're sisters and come after me to get to you. Can I be honest, sis? I don't feel very safe. This is the mafia we're dealing with. I'd rather figure out how to get you out of there so we can get out of the city until this blows over."

I hear the concern in her voice and decide she's right. I need to get out of this house and meet up with Sandy. "We can go to San Francisco and stay with Luke. I know he'll help us hide for a while."

"That sounds like a plan, but you have to figure out a way to get out of there first," Sandy whispers into the phone.

"I'll figure it out and call you back tomorrow with the details. Please stay safe."

"You too, sis," Sandy says, ending the call.

I rush over to Sasha and give her back the phone. "Thank you, Sasha, thank you so much. Now go and put the phone back. Hurry!" She gives me a quick hug and then scurries out of the room.

Taking a seat on the bed, I cradle my stomach. We have a plan, but now I must find a way out. I silently pray that I will figure it out by tomorrow.

### Chapter 14

Aleksandr

The scent of fresh paint mingled with the faint aroma of cigar smoke lingered in the air as I gathered my senior vors for a meeting in my art gallery. These are my most trusted men, my inner circle. It has been a long time since I called the council to discuss Bratva business. The low murmur of their voices echoed through the spacious gallery, each of them understanding the importance of this meeting.

“We’re ready,” Dimitri announces. The room goes silent, and all eyes are fixed on me.

“I’m sure you’ve all heard about Andrey,” I begin, anger simmering in my chest. “He was one of my most trusted vors and my cousin. His death will not go unavenged.” I hold up my glass of whiskey, and my men follow, honoring Andrey. The weight of his loss hangs heavy in the air, a shadow that darkens the gallery’s distinguished ambiance.

“I have contacted Denis and reviewed the surveillance footage. Last night, four men broke into the gallery, injuring two of the guards and killing Andrey. This was a targeted attack, and we have identified the men as part of the San Francisco Yakuza, led by Haruto Adachi.” Just saying the name leaves a sour taste in my mouth.

“His men have stolen six paintings. There was more than three million dollars of heroin hidden inside the frames.” My anger morphs into a full-blown firestorm. “Adachi has been a thorn in my side since my trip to San Francisco, and now he

strikes at the heart of the Avilov empire!” I slam my fist on the table visualizing Adachi’s smug face.

“He seeks to challenge us,” Dimitri says, his voice tight with restrained rage. “To seize control of our territory since you denied him a piece of it.”

The vors nod grimly in agreement. “He’s a thief and a coward,” one of the men calls out. “Slice his throat and be done with it,” another mutters.

“He wants to control distribution from New York to San Francisco with or without your approval,” Anton chimes in.

“Adachi has made a grave mistake, one that he will soon come to regret,” I mutter, my voice a cold whisper. “I will show him the price of betrayal.”

Directing my full attention to my vors, I formulate a plan. “I want all of our men tracking down the Yakuza scum that dared to enter these walls. Contact our network of informants and spies in the city. Their eyes and ears must be everywhere, scouring the streets for any whispers or murmurs that might lead us to Adachi’s men.” They pull out their cell phones and begin shooting off text messages.

“Dimitri, you will contact our connections in the underworld. Offer them a generous reward for any information leading to the whereabouts of the stolen paintings and Adachi’s men. So far, they have proven to be cunning and elusive, but that ends now.”

“Da, pakhan. “ Dimitri’s phone rings, and he steps away to answer the call. After a brief conversation, he returns to the table. “It was Denis,” he announces. “He will discreetly leverage his contacts in the police department to access their resources and help us track down Adachi’s men.”

“That’s good, but he can do more. Call him back and tell him I want him to plant false leads and rumors that will be spread around the criminal network. Maybe we can draw Adachi’s men out of hiding by dangling bait in front of them.” A cruel, vicious smile spreads across my face. “And when they least expect it, we’ll strike. Then I’ll find Adachi and cut off his head.”

A dangerous glint flickers in my eyes as my plan is set in motion. Each calculated step, each deliberate move, will bring me closer to hunting down Adachi’s men and ensure that justice is served with ruthless efficiency. In the world of the Bratva, loyalty is everything, and betrayal is met with a fate worse than death.

I end the meeting and listen to the echoes of footsteps fade into the distance. Dimitri follows me into my office and closes the door behind him. “ Brat , we have a lot of shit on our plates right now.” Going to the small bar, he pours a glass of vodka and then sits on the black leather sofa. “The Yakuza, Mikhail’s killer, and Talia...how are you handling all of this?”

If Dimitri was anyone else who dared to question me, I’d put a bullet in his chest to prove I was in control. But I know he’s asking as my brother, not as my second-in-command. “I can handle it,” I assure him. “We’ll find Adachi’s men and the drugs. And then I’ll find Adachi.” Loosening my tie, I cross the room and pour whiskey into a crystal glass. Relishing the way it burns my throat, I pour another.

“And what about Talia? How are you handling her being here...being in the mansion?” He tries to cover his smirk by taking a sip from his glass.

“The only reason she is in the mansion is so I can protect her until we find Mikhail’s killer. She’s the only witness.” I try to sound convincing, but I know Dimitri can see right through me.

“Really? You could have sent her to the hotel with her sister for protection. Is there

any other reason you insisted she stay in the mansion?" His eyebrow raises in question, and he no longer hides his smirk.

"What have you heard?" I ask, steepling my fingers in front of my face.

"I might have heard you had her begging you to fuck her in your office," he replies, sucking on his front teeth. "Are you protecting her with your cock?"

His guttural laughter frays on my nerves. What the hell does he know? I fucked her, so what. It didn't mean anything. I fuck many women. Although Talia is the only woman I've fucked since that night in San Francisco, but I'm not telling him that. "What I do in my office is my business. And who I fuck is my business."

"Of course, brat," he says, his smirk still firmly planted.

"What's happening with the sister, Sandy?" I question, attempting to change the subject.

"She's safe. We have men watching her and another man watching the apartment. If anyone suspicious is spotted, I'll be notified immediately." Dimitri glances at his watch and then stands. "I'm going to stop by Echo later and see if I can get more information on Lupani's men. Why don't we go get some dinner first? I'll call Trattaro's and reserve a table."

"You go," I insist. "I have work to do." I'd rather stay here and work than go home and bump into Talia. I don't know what it is about that woman, but she's gotten under my skin, and I don't like it.

"I'll call you if I find anything out." Turning on his heels, Dimitri leaves the office.

Closing the laptop, I go to the bar and pour another glass of whiskey. I can't

concentrate with thoughts of Talia bombarding my mind. This is going to be a long night.



## Page 15

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 3:12 am*

### Chapter 15

Talia

“Miss, are you decent,” Nikolai calls out from the other side of my bedroom door.

“Yes, come in,” I reply.

Opening the door slowly, Nikolai peeks his head into the room. “It is time for dinner. You come with me now,” he tells me in his heavy Russian accent.

He’s a good-looking man with shoulder-length caramel-colored hair and blue eyes. He doesn’t appear much older than me, and I wonder how he got the scar on his face. It’s a jagged line that runs from the outer edge of his left eye to the middle of his cheek. I don’t realize I’m staring at it.

“You want to know what happened?” he asks, pointing to his scar.

My cheeks flush pink as I look away quickly. “Oh...no...I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to stare.”

“I tell you. It was a great big brown bear in Russia. I fight it, but I won.” He smiles broadly, displaying a row of gleaming white teeth.

“Oh my!” I gasped in surprise. “A bear?”

“It is now a rug in my brother’s cabin.”

My face scrunches up at the thought, and Nikolai laughs heartily.

“Come, we go, Miss,” he says.

“Please, call me Talia.”

Nodding, he escorts me out of my room and to the dining room.

When we arrive, Sasha, Maxim, and Olga are seated at the large ornate wood table. Aleksandr is noticeably absent. Nikolai takes a seat in the corner of the room, opening a newspaper.

“Talia, join us,” Olga insists.

“Sit next to me!” Sasha blurted, patting the empty seat next to her.

“Thank you, Sasha. I’d be delighted.” I sink into the plush velvet cushion of the chair and admire the brass chandelier polished to a gleam. The table has exquisite china dinner plates rimmed in gold, delicate crystal glasses, and polished silverware. A crystal vase in the middle of the table holds vibrant flowers. Sitting at this grand table in this lavish mansion highlighted the stark differences between my life and the lives of the Avilov family.

“Have you seen the greenhouse?” Maxim asks, watching me admire the beautiful flowers.

“No, not yet, but I’d love to. I’ve always loved flowers,” I reply quietly.

“It’s a jungle!” Sasha exclaims. “I like to hide from Uncle in there. He never finds me when we play hide-and-seek.” She giggles while spinning a shiny spoon between her fingers.

“Sasha, your manners,” Olga reprimands.

“Sorry,” Sasha whispers, her lips turning into a frown.

“My favorite plant in the greenhouse is the Venus flytrap,” Maxim says enthusiastically. “Uncle lets me feed it bits of meat. It’s so cool when the plant snaps shut!”

“It sounds like your uncle is a cool guy.” I smile, picturing Aleksandr playing hide and seek with the children.

“He knows all the plants,” Sasha chimes in. “He’s teaching me their names.”

Their fondness for Aleksandr was evident in every word they spoke. Clearly, he played a significant role in their lives, one that went beyond just being their guardian.

Warm, fuzzy thoughts of Aleksandr crept into my mind. Stop it. I shouldn’t be thinking anything about Aleksandr. I’m trying to figure out a way to flee this place, which confirms I’m a prisoner here. In this mansion. With these lovely children. And sweet nanny. And delicious food. And a closet full of gorgeous clothes. It doesn’t sound so bad when I say it in my mind. But the fact is that I can’t stay here. I can’t stay caught up in Aleksandr’s criminal empire. I must protect myself and my baby. Our baby. I wonder what type of father he would be?

Mentally bitch slapping myself, I try to concentrate on Maxim and Sasha’s banter and push all thoughts of Aleksandr to the back of my mind. Sasha proudly shares stories of her adventures in the mansion’s extensive gardens, and Maxim is stating facts about carnivorous plants.

“Dinner is served,” Abram announces, placing trays of meats and vegetables on the table.

The scent of savory meat blankets the table, and my stomach flips. It feels like the sandwich I ate earlier is trying to escape.

“Are you feeling well, Talia?” Olga looks me over as if trying to pinpoint the cause of my ailment.

“Yes, I’m fine,” I lie. A bead of sweat trickles down my forehead. Taking a sip of water, I wipe the sweat away inconspicuously. “What else do you do with your uncle?” I ask the children in my lame attempt to get Olga’s attention off me.

“I like to go fishing with him,” Maxim says. “He taught me how to bait the hook so the worm doesn’t fall off. And I like his boat.”

“I like it when Uncle takes me to the park to ride the carousel,” Sasha proclaims. “My favorite is the white horse with the rainbow-colored tail.” She takes a bite of meat and then tries to hide the peas underneath the potatoes.

I hide my amusement and stare at the food on my plate. I know I have to eat something to keep Olga’s suspicions at bay, but I can’t bring myself to take a bite. I casually move the food around on the plate with my fork and try to keep the conversation going. “Spending so much time with your uncle must be nice.”

“He’s the best,” Maxim says, glancing at me with a small smile. He took care of us after Mama died, and now he’s letting us live here.”

My heart warmed at the mention of their late mother. It had only been two years since she passed away, causing Mikhail’s spiral into depression, leaving Aleksandr to shoulder the responsibility of raising these children.

“The children are very fortunate,” Olga states. “Mr. Avilov loves them very much.”

“Did you like riding the carousel when you were a kid?” Sasha asks innocently.

Memories of my childhood flood my mind. Some bad and others worse. The only good memories I have are with Sandy. “I never rode a carousel,” I reply hesitantly.

“Never? Never ever?” Sasha’s eyes are round in disbelief. A carrot hangs off the end of her fork, hovering in front of her mouth.

“No, never. I didn’t get to do many fun things as a kid.” Three pairs of eyes are glued to me, making me highly self-conscious. Turning my eyes to my plate, I contemplate taking a bite of food. Against my better judgement, I stab a piece of meat and place it in my mouth. This would be the best dinner I’ve ever eaten if I wasn’t having such horrible morning sickness.

“Less talking, more eating,” Olga says. “And don’t think I don’t see you hiding your peas.” She points to Sasha’s plate, trying to be strict but hiding the amused gleam in her eyes.

A wave of nausea washed over me, suddenly overwhelming the rich aromas of the food. Slowly placing the fork on my plate, I made an excuse of being full from the sandwich I had eaten earlier and stood to leave the table.

“Talía, are you sure you’re feeling alright?” She studied me with a keen gaze, her eyes narrowing slightly.

“I’m fine, Olga, really,” I assured her forcing a smile. “Just not very hungry.”

She wasn’t convinced. Olga was more perceptive than most, and I feared she’d find out I was pregnant.

“Your face is awfully pale. Perhaps you should see a doctor, just to be safe,” Olga

remarked.

“No!” I half screamed in panic. “No...I’ll be fine. I’m just going to lie down for a bit,” I say, lowering my voice.

The mention of a doctor sent ripples of panic through my core. The last thing I need is for anyone to find out about the baby, especially Aleksandr. But Olga’s concern was genuine, and I couldn’t dismiss it entirely.

“I promise, Olga, it’s nothing serious,” I insist, trying to sound convincing.

She nods slowly, although her expression is still wary. Olga knows more than she lets on, and I can’t afford to let her suspicions grow.

Excusing myself from the table, Nikolai escorts me to my room. Sitting alone on the bed, the weight of my predicament settles heavily upon me. My mind raced with worry, questions swirling around like a whirlpool. Would Aleksandr ever want more than this life of danger and secrecy? Would he ever want me in his life? Could he embrace being a father to the baby I carry? My mind could only think of one answer: no to everything.

As exhaustion crept in, I curled up on the plush bed, resting my hand protectively over my stomach. Sleep eluded me as my thoughts continued to race about a man whose very presence both terrified and fascinated me.

### Chapter 16

Aleksandr

The mansion was draped in shadows when I finally returned home. As I drove my SUV through the security gate, I could feel the weight of the day's events hanging heavily on my shoulders. Stepping through the door, I shed my coat and removed my tie with a sigh of relief. The usual buzz of activity in the mansion had quieted down for the evening, giving my thoughts free rein to echo through the still air.

My mind replayed the scenes from the club and the art gallery in an unending loop. There's no way I'll be able to sleep. My stomach rumbled, having skipped dinner tonight. Instead of waking up Abram, I crept into the kitchen to cook something to eat. Mama taught me how to cook her favorite meals when I was young. Our special time together was when Dimitri was out chasing girls, and Mikhail was playing cards with Otets.

The kitchen was dimly lit, the soft glow of the stove casting a warm light across the room. Filling up a pot with broth, I stirred it slowly, adding spices and chicken. Lost in my thoughts, a light noise pulled me back to the moment. Talia emerged from the hallway, startled by my presence at the stove. She looked weary, and the color washed out of her face.

"Oh, hi," she whispers. "I didn't know you were here." Her eyes meet mine briefly before flickering away. "I just needed a snack," she says softly, moving to the cabinet and reaching for a box of crackers.

“Mmm, that smells wonderful,” she murmurs, passing by the stove to sit at the counter. “I didn’t know you could cook.”

“Now you know,” I reply curtly.

Talia shakes her head, releasing an agitated sigh. “I’m not the enemy, Aleksandr.” She stands to leave, but I catch her by the wrist and sit her on the stool.

“Stay.” I ladle the soup into a bowl and place it before her.

“Thank you,” she replies politely. I watch her plump lips as she blows on a spoonful of hot soup. My cock stirs in my pants, and I sit across from her to hide my forming erection. Even weary, she’s the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen.

Glancing up at me, she opens her mouth to say something, then hesitates. “Is everything alright?” I ask, my voice laced with genuine concern.

Her words tumble out in a rush, tinged with anxiety. “I... I want to help find Mikhail’s killer, but I don’t know where to start. And I can’t shake this feeling of being unsafe for Sandy and myself.” She stares at her soup, chewing on her bottom lip.

My heart clenches at the vulnerability in her voice. I won’t let anything bad happen to her. She’s mine to protect. Where did that come from? My mind questions the feeling of possessiveness that is sucking the air out of my lungs. This feeling is something I’ve never experienced before, and it takes me off guard.

Wanting to reassure her, I reach across the counter and gently place my hand on hers. “We’ll figure this out, Talia. You’re safe here. No one can touch you within these walls.”



Her gaze lifted to meet mine, uncertainty etched in her features. “And what about Sandy?”

Releasing her hand, I reassure her. “Sandy is safe. My men are guarding her.”

“How will we find Mikhail’s killer?” she asks, her eyes filled with determination and fear. “What’s the plan?”

“I have eyes and ears on the club and your apartment. I know he is part of the Lupani family circle. Someone will talk, and we will find out who he is. When we do, I will gut him.”

She nods slowly. “Okay,” she murmurs, although her eyes don’t reflect my confidence.

The tension between us is palpable as we sit quietly across from each other, eating soup. When Talia is finished, she puts the bowl and spoon in the sink.

“Thank you, Aleksandr.” She turns to leave, but I don’t want her to go.

“Come outside with me. We can sit by the pool for a bit.” Hope rises in my chest that she will accept my offer.

“Alright,” she says hesitantly.

After clearing the table, I lead her outside to the pool area. The night air was cool against our skin. I wrapped a soft blanket around her before pouring two glasses of wine. I offered her one, but she declined—an unusual choice that did not escape my notice.

Her shoulders slump slightly as she settles onto a chaise lounge, the world’s weight

seeming to press down on her. Without thinking, I move behind her, my hands instinctively finding their way to her tense neck and shoulders.

My touch is gentle yet purposeful. As my fingers work their magic, kneading away the knots of tension, Talia lets out a soft sigh. Her long, silky hair shines underneath the moonlight as I tangle my fingers in it. I gently tilt back her head and pepper soft kisses along her smooth neck. My hands travel from her shoulders to her waist, lifting her up and turning her around to face me. She let out a soft gasp, then stills entirely in my arms.

Her eyes find mine as anticipation builds between us. Her body melts into mine; her soft curves are against my hard lines. She's so beautiful, staring up at me with her hazel eyes. So vulnerable in my arms. I have no right to want this woman...to want to own her...but I can't stop myself. My lips find hers, and I steal a kiss, forcing my tongue inside her mouth to savor every inch of her perfection. I swallow her gasp as I greedily take more of her, kissing her deeply until she's gasping for air.

She's mine . The beast inside me rears up, pushing me to show her who she belongs to. I strip the blanket off her, and she moans into my mouth. "I need to be in you, Talia. I need to bury my cock deep inside your pussy and mark you with my cum."

"Yes...yes, Aleksandr...please..." she whimpers, her fingers clawing at my shirt.

Sliding my hands under her ass, I lift her up, wrapping her legs around my waist. I carry her to the daybed, placing her on her back. She sits up quickly and tugs at my belt. An internal fire ignites in my core as she undresses me. Her pupils are blown wide with desire.

I swallow hard as she runs her fingertips lightly over the dips and valleys of my abs down to my cock. It's thick and heavy in her hand. Nibbling on her bottom lip, she smiles coyly, then sucks my cock into her warm, wet mouth.

“ Fuuuuck, “ I groan. She giggles around my cock, running her tongue along the shaft. She swirls her tongue in circles over the tip, teasing me, until I wrap her hair around my hand and thrust my cock deep into her mouth. I pull back as she gags slightly. “Too much,” I ask.

In response, she reaches behind me, grabs my ass, and pushes my cock deep into her mouth. Opening her throat inch by inch, she sucks me in until my balls are pressed against her plump lips. She feels so fucking good; her lips, her tongue, her silky hair in my hand. I feel like my balls are going to erupt, so I pull my cock out of her mouth. Trailing her tongue over her lip, she gazes at me with fire behind her eyes.

Grabbing her wrists, I stand her up to switch places with her. Standing her between my legs, I slowly strip off her clothes. Her supple breasts bounce lightly when I unhook her bra. Her pebbled nipples are begging to be sucked on. Admiring her beauty, I run my hands up her toned legs. Hooking my index fingers into the waistband of her panties, I slide them down to her ankles. She steps out of them, parting her legs slightly and cupping her pussy. That little tease.

“My turn, my dirty little kiska.”

### Chapter 17

Talia

Aleksandr's words sounded like a threat and a promise, and it was just what I needed to hear. My pussy is already wet, and his silky-smooth voice has me teeter-tottering on the edge of an orgasm. I never thought it was possible to cum from words alone, but it might happen tonight.

Spinning me around, he bends me at the waist over the daybed. I'm leaning on my forearms when he pulls my ass into the air and spreads my legs apart. I'm already imagining his thick cock sliding into my pussy, stretching me open, when he shocks me by running his tongue up my slit. This is new. I'm not a prude, but it's safe to say my sexual interactions have been a bit bland until Aleksandr.

His smooth tongue runs up and down my slit, making me weak in the knees. He pulls open my slit with his fingers, dipping into my pussy with his tongue.

"Ohhhh..." I can't control my moans as he dives deeper with his tongue. Replacing his tongue with a thick finger, he fucks my pussy slowly. My core tightens with anticipation.

"Faster..." I beg. His throaty chuckle makes my pussy even wetter.

"You want more?" He asks, pushing in a second finger.

"Yes, yes, just like that." He fucks me faster with his fingers, making my pussy

impossibly wet. I feel an orgasm building in my core as I push my pussy deeper onto his fingers. Instead of continuing to fuck me, he pulls his fingers out and shoves them into his mouth.

“You’re so sweet, kiska. Sweeter than honey on my tongue.” Squatting down, he wraps his lips around my clit, flicking it with the tip of his tongue. He alternates between sucking and licking, making my belly clench.

“Oh God, yes,” I murmur. Just then, he shoves two fingers into my pussy, fucking me hard and fast while his mouth works my clit. My toes curl as I feel myself getting closer to the edge. When he adds a third finger, my pussy clamps down, pushing me over the sweet edge of an orgasm.

“Yessss!” I cry out. He pulls his fingers out and continues sucking on my pussy until my body stops quivering. I go limp, falling face-first onto the daybed.

Blanketing my body with his, he brushes my hair away from my face. “We’re just getting started, kiska,” he whispers. Rolling me onto my back, he stands between my legs, stroking his cock.

“Mmmm, more,” I purr, dipping my finger into my sopping-wet pussy.

“You want more, baby?” He presses the tip of his cock to my slit.

“Yesss, more,” I hiss.

“You’re my greedy little kiska,” he teases. “You want me to fuck you hard?”

He rolls my nipples between his thumb and forefinger, rubbing his cock against my slit but not penetrating. He’s driving me insane with need, and I wiggle beneath him, trying to get him to fuck me. “Aleksandr, please...” I whine, reaching for his cock.

With one hand, he grabs both my wrists and pins them above my head. “Not until I say so.” He sucks my nipple into his mouth and continues teasing me with his cock. Now, my arousal is dripping down my legs. “Aleksandr! Please ...fuck me...”

Before I can say another word, his lips crash down on mine, and he drives his cock deep inside me. He smooths his hands down my arms, cupping my breasts. With each thrust of his cock into me, he squeezes my breasts. There is a steady rhythm of thrusting and squeezing as he nuzzles my neck, nibbling his way down to my breasts.

I am filled to the brim as his huge cock continues to stretch me open. Settling his hands on my hips, he holds my lower body steady as he picks up the pace. His thrusts are faster and harder now, frenzied like a wild animal. I hold onto his arms with a silent scream stuck in my throat. My core tightens as my pussy clamps down on his cock.

“Cum with me, Talia,” he groans, thrusting so hard into me I think he might break me in half. Closing my eyes, I shudder as an orgasm rips through me. At the same time, streams of warm cum fill me up.

Aleksandr collapses on top of me but is careful to keep his weight on his forearms so he doesn’t crush me under his large frame. Stars dance behind my eyes as I enjoy the aftershocks of my orgasm.

Eventually, he rolls off me, pulling on his boxer briefs and getting dressed. I’m still lying there, my body limp, as his cum drips out of me. “Um...can I get a tissue or napkin?” I ask, a blush tinging my cheeks.

Without saying a word, he grabs some napkins from the pool bar. Instead of handing them to me, he spreads my legs apart and cleans me up himself. He’s gentle yet quick as I lie there in awe, watching him. When he’s finished, he leans over me, kissing me tenderly on my mouth. Then he hands me my clothes so I can dress.

I shiver in the night air, already missing the warmth from Aleksandr's body on top of mine. He puts the blanket around my shoulders and pours whiskey into a crystal glass.

"Would you like a drink?" he asks.

"Just a glass of water."

He eyes me suspiciously but doesn't say anything. I contemplate telling him about our baby while I sip the water. He has a right to know, but does he want to know? And what if I tell him, and he tries to force me to get rid of it or give it up for adoption? I will never do that. Nothing will separate me and my baby. I know what it's like to grow up without parents, without love. My baby will be loved abundantly.

Aleksandr sits behind me on the chaise lounge, wrapping his strong arms around me. "Are you cold, kiska?"

I shake my head no, allowing his warmth to wrap around me like a cashmere scarf. Why does it feel so right when he's with me? My thoughts wander to a fantasy of us cradling our baby together, a happy little family. Snap out of it! He'll never want a family with me. He already has two children he's taking care of.

I'm torn between feeling like I belong with him and knowing I must escape the mansion and go to San Francisco with Sandy. It's the best thing I can do to stay safe and keep my baby and Sandy safe. Aleksandr will find Mikhail's killer with or without my help, so he doesn't need me to stick around.

"I'm feeling a bit wiped out. I should get to bed," I tell him, stifling a yawn.

"I will take you." Before I know what's happening, he scoops me in his arms and cradles me to his chest.

“I can walk,” I giggle, feeling awkward letting him carry me.

“Why walk when I can carry you?” Aleksandr smiles at me, and I melt in his arms. Moments like this make it difficult for me to want to leave the mansion—to leave him.

Snuggling into his neck, his scent of cinnamon and cloves engulfs me. He carries me into the house, up the stairs, and to my bedroom. Laying me gently on the bed, he covers me with a blanket and then kisses me sweetly on the head.

“Good night, kiska . Have pleasant dreams.“ He turns off the light and closes the bedroom door behind him.

I lie there staring at the door. The room feels empty and cold without Aleksandr. I pull the blanket up to my neck and wrap it tightly around my body. I want so badly to tell him about the baby and my feelings for him, but I’m scared—too scared to consider ever telling him. Tomorrow, I will figure out a way to leave the mansion.



### Chapter 18

Aleksandr

Sleep eludes me tonight, just like every night since Mikhail's death. The weight of vengeance hangs heavy on my shoulders, and Talia's unexpected presence complicates matters further. She's a means to an end, a bargaining chip until I find Mikhail's killer. But my heart, traitorous as it is, yearns for something more with her—a connection I dare not entertain.

Curbing the need to go to Talia's room, I slip out of bed and go to the office, seeking solace amidst the papers and shadows that fill the space. She has gotten under my skin like no other woman ever has. I thought I could forget her. I thought I left her behind in San Francisco. But as luck would have it, she wound up in my city, my mansion, and my life. Pouring a glass of whiskey, I ask myself if it really is luck or if I manifested her here. I've thought about her every day since I left San Francisco.

The ringing of my cell phone distracts me from my thoughts. Reading the name on the display, I see it is Dimitri.

"Tell me you have good news."

"I have good news and bad news. Which do you want to hear first?" Dimitri replies.

"Give me the bad news."

"I didn't get any new information about Mikhail's killer. But we did find Adachi's

men. Two of them escaped, but we caught the third little fucker. He's bound and gagged in my trunk."

Finally. "I'm glad to hear our plan worked. Take him to the dungeon," I command over the phone, my voice low and unwavering. "I'll meet you there in an hour." The dungeon is a relic of our darker past, buried deep in the mansion's basement. It's a special place where I get information from people unwilling to share it.

An hour later, I descend the stairs into that cold, stone-walled chamber. The captive's eyes widen with fear as I enter. Interrogation is an art, one that demands precision and patience. But tonight, my patience wears thin.

Adachi's man is tied to a chair in the middle of the cold room. There are no windows and only one door at the top of the staircase. The only illumination comes from a single light fixture hanging over the chair. Old, dried blood splatters stain the walls and floor. A steel table is flush against the wall in the corner of the room. Instruments of torture are laid out neatly on the table.

Pulling out my gun, I push the barrel against the captive's forehead. He blinks rapidly, focusing on the gun between his eyes. "Do you know who I am?" I ask.

"Y-yes," he sputters.

"If that's the case, then you'll know I'm a man of few words. Tell me where my drugs are."

"I-I don't know," the captive lies.

His wide-eyed stare bounces wildly between me and Dimitri. I push the gun harder against his forehead.

“I swear!” he squeals. “I don’t know where they are!”

I pull the gun away from his forehead and strike him with the butt. He spits out blood and a tooth.

“Talk,” I instruct.

“Adachi doesn’t tell us anything. I don’t know where he’s keeping the drugs.” He coughs, and blood dribbles down his chin.

“Wrong answer.” I point the gun at his foot and pull the trigger. He howls in pain as blood pours out of the bullet hole.

“It would be in your best interest to tell us everything you know,” Dimitri advises in his thick Russian accent. He leans against the wall, lights a cigarette, and then passes it to me. I take a long drag of it, blowing smoke in the captive’s face. He coughs a few times, shaking his head no.

“I d-don’t, don’t know anything,” he insists.

Clearly, I’m going to have to get creative. I slowly roll up the sleeves of my silk dress shirt. I know this man knows where Adachi has my paintings and drugs. He was one of the men seen on the gallery surveillance video from the night of the robbery. He was one of the men that killed Andrey.

Anger engulfs me as I launch myself at him, punching him over and over again until my knuckles bleed. After I feel the bone in his nose crunch under the weight of my fist, I back off. Grabbing a rag from the metal table, I wipe the blood off my hands.

“Tell me what I want to know, and I won’t kill you.”

His left eye is swollen shut, his nose is broken, and his front teeth are lying on the stone floor. Looking up at me with his one good eye, he shakes his head no, spitting a mouthful of blood onto the floor.

“I...I can’t. Adachi will kill me,” he mutters.

I casually run my finger along the shiny metal instruments on the table. Selecting a thin, long knife, I walk over to him and jam the blade into his thigh. He cries out, his shrill screams echoing through the dark room. Pulling the knife out of his thigh, I wipe the blade clean with a rag.

“If you don’t tell me, you won’t have to worry about Adachi killing you.” I thrust the knife into his other thigh and watch as he chokes on his own screams.

“Y-you w-won’t kill me?” he questions.

“No, I won’t kill you if you give me the location.” I stare at him, flipping the shiny blade as he contemplates his options.

After a long silence he speaks up. “Everything is at a warehouse near the 79th Street marina. It’s next to Flagan’s Fish Market.”

I put the knife back on the steel table and roll down my sleeves. “I’m done here,” I tell Dimitri.

Dimitri pulls out his gun and points it at the captive.

“Wait!” the man screams, his good eye round with terror. “Y-you said you w-wouldn’t kill me!”

“Correct. I’m not going to kill you. Dimitri is.” I turn my back on him and ascend the

stairs. As I reach the top step, I hear the muffled sound of Dimitri's gun shooting a bullet. "Have someone clean up this mess, then meet me in my office in half an hour."

"Da," Dimitri replies.

I strip off my bloody clothes and step into the shower, washing away the evidence. I stand in the steady stream of hot water as thoughts of Talia consume me. My cock hardens at memories of her tongue sliding up and down on the shaft. Thinking of the way she swirls her tongue around the tip has my cock at full erection. I can't stop thinking about her. All I want is to go to her room, climb into her bed, and bury my cock deep inside her. She's everything I want in this life, but precisely what I can't allow myself to have.

I rub soap over my body and fantasize about Talia being here with me. I think about how I would lather sweetly scented shampoo in her long chocolate locks and meticulously clean every inch of her luscious body. Picturing her in my mind makes my cock throb and my balls tighten. Images of fucking her by the pool possess me. Grabbing hold of my cock I pull and tug, jerking off to the images of Talia in my mind. Remembering how she looked as she fell apart around my cock pushed me over the edge. I release stream after stream of cum until my balls are depleted.

Rinsing off, I step out of the shower and dry off with a fluffy towel. I pull on a black v-neck t-shirt and grey jogging pants before running my fingers through my damp hair.

Leaving the bathroom, I go to the office, where Dimitri is waiting for me. He's already poured himself a glass of vodka and is seated on the sofa.

"What's the plan?" he asks as I sit in the leather chair behind my desk.

Steeping my fingers in front of me, I lean back in the chair. “We need to be smart about this. I don’t want Adachi to get tipped off that I know where the drugs are. Take a small number of men with you to scout out the warehouse. You need to find out what kind of security he has and how many men are there. Then, we can work out a plan to retrieve the paintings and drugs.”

“I’ll go there tomorrow and report back to you.” He finishes his drink, setting the empty glass on the low table before him.

“Any word on Sandy or her apartment?”

“Sandy is safe at the hotel. She hasn’t gone to work. Our man guarding the apartment said no one suspicious has been there.” Dimitri stands and crosses the room to the bar, pouring another drink. “How are you doing?” he asks.

I know he’s referring to Talia, but I don’t want to discuss it. “I’m fine,” I lie.

Dimitri raises his eyebrows in surprise. “Really, brat ? From what I hear, you can’t seem to stay away from her. Do you have feelings for this woman?”

“Feelings?” I scoff. “I don’t do feelings. Fucking is purely physical. You know this.” I glance down at the papers on my desk, shuffling them around to avoid his perceptive gaze.

“No one would blame you if you do have feelings for her. It’s time you find a good woman and have an heir.” Finishing the second drink, he places the glass on the bar.

“I don’t have feelings for Talia. She’s only here so I can protect her until she identifies Mikhail’s killer,” I reply adamantly.

Dimitri sighs and shakes his head. “Whatever you say, brat . Try to get some sleep.

I'll call you tomorrow." With that said, he leaves the office.

I pass by Talia's door on my way back to my bedroom. Putting my ear to the door, I listen for any sounds of movement. There's nothing but silence. I'm tempted to go in and wrap her up in my arms, but that is a temptation I cannot afford.

I stand there, inches from the polished wood, imagining her on the other side, sleeping soundly or perhaps haunted by her own demons. My resolve hardens, and with a sigh, I turn away.

Alone in my room, I sit at the edge of the bed, my thoughts a tumultuous sea. The night is filled with regrets and desires that cannot be. Tomorrow will come with its own battles, and tonight, I will wage war against the shadows of the past in solitude.

### Chapter 19

Talia

The morning light filtered through the kitchen window as I sat at the table. Nikolai sat in his usual place in the corner of the room. He picked up a newspaper and looked over the black-and-white print while sipping coffee.

“Good morning,” Abram greeted. “Would you like a cup of coffee?”

“Yes, thank you,” I replied, comforted by his grandfatherly demeanor. I barely slept last night, consumed by my thoughts of Aleksandr and the baby. I need to speak with Sandy. I told her I would figure out how to escape the mansion, but now I have second thoughts. Maybe there’s a chance that Aleksandr will be happy about the baby. Maybe we can be together. And maybe pigs can fly. I know it’s a long shot, but don’t I owe it to my baby to have their father in their life?

I grew up without a father, and I don’t want that for my baby. My father was killed in prison when I was three years old. I don’t remember him, but I went to the library years ago and found newspaper articles about him. He found out my mother was having an affair with the next-door neighbor. When he confronted the neighbor, they got into a fight, and my father beat him to death. He went to prison and was killed by another inmate not too long after that.

The neighbor’s wife accused my mother of being the reason that she lost her husband, and her son lost his father. She was able to turn most of the people in town against my mother, which led my mother to start taking drugs. Between the betrayal of my



father and the guilt of the neighbor being killed, she became a full-blown addict. She died of an overdose when I was five years old.

I know what it's like to grow up without parents and be bounced around from foster home to foster home. I want my baby to have the life they deserve-full of love and contentment.

As I dwelled on memories, Abram placed a plate of scrambled eggs and fruit before me. Then he brought me a cup of freshly brewed coffee. They sure do treat me nicely for being locked up in this mansion.

"Thank you, Abram. It smells delicious."

"I'm glad to see you're feeling better today." He smiles kindly and then leaves me to enjoy my breakfast.

The tranquility of this moment was interrupted by a faint rustle that drew my attention. Turning my head, I found Sasha standing at the kitchen entrance. She held out Alyce's cell phone with a mischievous grin playing on her lips. Tucking it into her pants pocket, she waltzed into the kitchen.

"Good morning, Sasha," Nikolai greeted. "Are you behaving this morning?" He winked, causing her to giggle.

"I always behave," she replied firmly. "Except when I'm getting into trouble!" She grins from ear to ear and plops down in the empty seat next to me.

"Whatcha eating?" she asks, licking her lips.

"Eggs and fruit. Would you like some?" I push the plate in front of her. She picks out a juicy strawberry and takes a big bite.

“Mmmm, that’s good,” she says. Strawberry juice dribbles down her chin as she takes another bite. “I have something to show you in your room,” she says, blinking and patting her pocket.

“Why are you blinking?” I whisper.

“I’m winking at you,” she whispers back.

“Ohhh, I see. We’ll go to my room as soon as we finish eating.”

Abram places a plate of scrambled eggs and bacon in front of Sasha. She shovels the eggs into her mouth, chewing and swallowing quickly. After a few bites, she puts the fork down. “I’m finished,” she announces, jumping up from her seat.

Grabbing me by the hand, she pulls me to my feet. “Come on, let’s go!” she whisper yells.

Nikolai follows us back to my room. Sasha puts her hand out and stops him in the doorway. “No boys allowed,” she declares.

He nods and leaves us to enter the room without him. Pulling the cell phone from her pocket, she thrusts it into my hand. “Here, you can call your sister now.”

“Sasha, you shouldn’t have taken the phone. You can get into big trouble with your uncle.”

“But you need to call her so you don’t worry,” she says, frowning.

Squatting down, I give her a hug. “Thank you for being so kind. But this is the last time I want you to take Alyce’s phone.”

“Okay,” she says, jumping onto the bed.

I dial Sandy’s number and wait for her to answer.

“Talía?” Sandy’s voice came through the line, filled with urgency.

“Sis, what’s wrong?” I ask, my heart sinking with dread at the tone of her voice.

“Our apartment was broken into and ransacked, although nothing was taken. I’ve called the police, but they can’t do much without evidence,” Sandy explained, her voice tight with worry.

My stomach clenched. “Are you okay? Where are you?”

“I’m at the hotel now. Dimitri took me to get some of my belongings from the apartment. He insists that I stay at the hotel for my own safety. Have you figured out a way to sneak out of the mansion?”

I hesitate before I reply. “Not yet, but maybe I should tell Aleksandr about...” I pause, glancing at Sasha. “About the bun I have cooking.”

“You mean about the baby? Why can’t you say it? Is someone there with you?” Sandy rambles.

“Aleksandr’s niece, Sasha, is here with me,” I reply, smiling at the little blonde girl hiding beneath the bedcovers.

“Do you think it’s the right time to tell him? An awful lot is going on, and I think staying with Luke in San Francisco is the safest thing we can do. I mean, Aleksandr won’t even let us be together.” Sandy sighs heavily, her frustration evident.

“I’m not sure what to do. I can talk to him again about letting you stay here. I miss you terribly.”

“Okay, see what he says. But don’t get stressed out with worry. It’s not good for you or the baby. Besides, I’m safe enough. Aleksandr has men guarding me twenty-four hours a day. I am concerned about the apartment, though. If I don’t return to work or get some money to pay the rent, we’ll lose it.”

I can hear Sandy pacing around in the hotel room. “Okay, sis. I’ll call you back tomorrow. In the meantime, please be careful. If anything happened to you...” My voice cracks as the thought of losing Sandy sends chills up my spine.

“I’ll be okay, sis. Take care of yourself and the baby,” Sandy reassures me, though I can hear the strain in her voice.

I’m left trying to figure out what to do. Do I tell Aleksandr about the baby? Do I ask him to allow Sandy to come stay here with me? Do I forget all that and figure out how to get out of the mansion so we can go to San Francisco?

Before I can fully consider it, Sasha pops out from under the covers and jumps on me, hugging me tightly.

“It’s okay,” she says, her face buried in my neck. “Uncle is the best. I’m sure he’ll let your sister stay here. He won’t want you to be sad.” Pulling away, she looks at me intently while cupping my face in her tiny hands. “Uncle loves you,” she whispers.

I feel like I just got sucker punched in the gut. “What...what do you mean?” I question.

“He looks at you the way Otets used to look at Mama. That means he loves you, silly.” Sasha giggles and wiggles out of my arms.

She takes the phone from my hand and sticks it into her pants pocket. “I’m going to sneak it back into Alyce’s room.” She disappears quickly, leaving me there, wide-eyed and open-mouthed, like a fish out of water.

He loves me? Kids say the darndest things.

I gather my thoughts, knowing I need to decide what to do. Before long, Nikolai appears, informing me that Aleksandr wishes to see me in his office.

My nerves flutter as I follow Nikolai through the halls to Aleksandr’s office. I find both him and Dimitri waiting inside.

“Talía, come in,” Aleksandr beckons, his expression unreadable.

“Good morning,” I greet, attempting to keep my composure despite the weight of the situation.

Aleksandr gestured for me to sit, his gaze probing yet reassuring. “I have something to tell you, but before I do, I want you to know that Sandy is alright.”

I take a deep breath, waiting for him to continue. His phone rings, interrupting him.

“I’m sorry, I have to take this.” Aleksandr steps out into the hallway to speak to the caller.

Chewing on my lower lip, I debate telling Dimitri I already know about the apartment. He’ll want to know how I received this information, and that’s a problem. Convincing myself that it’s now or never, I tell him.

“Dimitri,” I begin nervously, “I know about the apartment. I know someone broke in and ransacked it.”

“Hmmm, and how did you find this out?” he ponders, walking around the desk to stand before me.

“Well...let’s just say I got my hands on a cell phone and called Sandy. But in my defense, Aleksandr hasn’t let me contact her at all! And she’s my sister . I needed to know she was okay. And he just wouldn’t listen to reason...” I shrink in my seat, waiting for the backlash.

After a moment, he leans on the desk, crossing his arms in front of him. “I understand,” he replies coolly. “What did she tell you?”

I relax my shoulders and relay what Sandy told me. “She said she called the police, but they can’t do anything about it without evidence of who broke in. She said the apartment was torn apart, but nothing was taken.”

“I took her to the apartment to gather some belongings. Unfortunately, we don’t know who broke in. We assume it was Mikhail’s killer.” He cracks his knuckles, then paces in front of the desk with controlled anger. “Sandy is safe at the hotel. We have a crew cleaning up your apartment and installing security locks.”

“I want to see her. Will you please speak with Aleksandr? He won’t listen to me.”

“ Da , I will speak with him, but I make no promises.”

Dimitri steps into the hallway, leaving me alone in the office. My stomach shakes from either nerves or the baby. I’m not sure which. All I know is that I need to see my sister. Without realizing it, I rub the bird tattoo on my wrist.

A few minutes later, Aleksandr and Dimitri enter the office. Aleksandr’s brow is furrowed, and there’s a glint of frustration in his eyes. “Did Sandy tell you anything else? Anything suspicious that might have happened before the break-in?”

“No, she didn’t. She’s been at the hotel. But she did say she’ll have to go back to work soon, or she won’t have money to pay the rent on the apartment. I can’t let that happen. We need the apartment. And if it’s not safe for her to return to work, I’ll have to figure something out. Which means that you’ll have to let me leave the mansion.” I cross my arms over my chest, ready for an argument.

“Talía, this concerns me deeply,” he said, his voice low and serious. “But I need you here.”

I hesitate for a moment, steeling myself before speaking. “And I need to see Sandy. I need to see for myself that she’s safe and make sure we don’t lose the apartment.”

He regards me with surprise, then nods slowly. “Very well. I will pay the rent for the apartment and then take you to her.”

Relief washed over me, and I was grateful for his understanding. “Thank you, Aleksandr. Can we stop by the apartment first? I need to gather some of my things.”

His gaze hardens momentarily, then softens as he considers my request. “Fine.”

With a plan in motion, I returned to my room to prepare for the trip. I was determined to ensure Sandy’s safety, even if it meant confronting the unknown dangers that awaited us outside the confines of the estate.

### Chapter 20

Aleksandr

Talia's apartment felt like a fragile refuge amid the sprawling chaos of the city. Its walls seemed to pulse with tension, shadows dancing across the dimly lit rooms. My men stationed discreetly outside kept watch, their presence a muted reassurance amid the uncertainty that engulfed us. Inside, Talia moved about, gathering her belongings with quiet determination.

I watched her from the doorway of her bedroom, leaning against the frame with my arms crossed over my chest. She moved gracefully, her chocolate brown hair cascading over her shoulders as she packed. But then her steps faltered, her complexion paled, and I sensed something was wrong.

"Are you alright?" I asked, pushing off the doorframe and stepping closer.

Her response was a weak smile, a hand pressed to her stomach. "Just a bit queasy," she replied, her voice strained.

"Maybe you should sit down," I suggested, my eyes narrowing with worry.

"I'm fine, really," she insisted, though I sensed her discomfort.

Before I could press further, she excused herself, disappearing into the bathroom. The sound of retching echoed faintly through the apartment. I hesitated, then approached the closed bathroom door. "Talia?" I called out, my tone softening.



She emerged moments later, a faint flush on her cheeks. “I’m okay,” she said, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand. “Must’ve been something I ate.”

“Come, sit down,” I instructed, leading her to the sofa in the living room. “I’ll get you a glass of water.”

She sat on the sofa, pulling her legs underneath herself. “It’s amazing how quickly your crew cleaned the apartment,” she noted.

I glanced around, impressed at how neat the apartment looked. In a matter of hours, my cleaning crew had turned the ransacked apartment back into a livable space.

“I appreciate what you’ve done for me and Sandy,” she says, peeking at me from underneath her long lashes. “And I appreciate that you agreed to take me to see her.”

I nodded, sitting across from her on the sofa.

“You’re not how I expected you’d be when you told me you’re the pakhan of a Russian mafia family.” She slowly sips the water, waiting for my reaction.

“Oh? And what did you expect?” I ask casually.

“I don’t know,” she chuckles. “I expected you to be more like the mobster guys in the movies, not an uncle of two awesome little kids and a nice guy that helps clean up ransacked apartments.”

“I’m not that nice,” I reply nonchalantly.

“You’re nice to me,” she breathed quietly. Her mouth opened and closed as if she were going to say something else, but then she simply smiled.

“Let’s finish here,” I suggest, shifting the subject. She finished drinking the glass of water, and we gathered the last of her things. Taking one last look around the small apartment, she closed and locked the door behind us.

As we made our way downstairs, unease settled in my gut. Dimitri opened the SUV trunk in anticipation of loading up Talia’s belongings. I glanced around the street as the air outside crackled with a forewarning of the violence to come. When we stepped onto the sidewalk, a black sedan raced down the street, screeching to a stop next to the SUV. The dark-tinted windows of the sedan rolled down, and two guns were pointed directly at us.

“Gun!” Dimitri screamed, diving in front of me, acting as a human shield. I heard the crack of the gun and instinctively pulled Talia into my side, covering her with my body. Bullets whizzed past us as I pulled her behind the SUV.

Dimitri squatted down next to us, exchanging fire with the sedan’s assailants. My men sprang into action, pulling out their guns and rapidly firing at the sedan. Another round of bullets sprayed past us, some bouncing off the bulletproof exterior of the SUV.

My heart thumped loudly as I reached for my gun, returning fire. The sedan’s assailants were relentless, firing more bullets. Talia’s eyes widened with fear, her hand gripping my arm tightly. I cursed under my breath, my mind racing with calculations and strategies to survive this ambush.

The assailants retreated as abruptly as they had attacked, leaving us breathless and shaken amidst the chaos on the street. Sirens blared in the distance as onlookers spoke rapidly into their phones, relaying information to the police. I glanced over at Talia, her face pale, eyes wide with shock.

“Are you hurt?” I asked urgently, scanning her for injuries.

She shook her head, but her gaze faltered. “I’m fine,” she replied, her voice trembling.

Then I saw it—the dark stain spreading across her shoulder, blood seeping through her clothing. Dread washed over me, icy and paralyzing.

“Talía,” I whispered, my hands trembling as I helped her to her feet. “Get her in the car...now!” I boomed.

Dimitri jumped into action, helping Talía get into the backseat of the SUV. I slid into the seat next to her, keeping her cradled against my chest. Holding a rag against the shoulder wound, I hoped to slow down the bleeding. Her eyes were glassy and unfocused as Dimitri drove us to the mansion, unconcerned with traffic lights or the posted speed limit.

“Talía,” I whispered against her silky hair. “Stay with me, baby. You’re going to be okay.”

Her skin was cold, and her eyelids fluttered closed. I shook her gently, and her eyes opened again. She was looking at me but not focusing. “Aleksandr...” she whispered, struggling to keep her eyes open. “I...I have...have to...tell you...s-something.” Her body went limp in my arms. Bile rose in my throat as I tried to wake her up.

“Baby...please wake up.” I held her closer, willing my body heat to warm her up. “Talía?”

Her breathing was shallow, but she was breathing. “Hurry, brat .“ My voice was laced with urgency as Dimitri’s eyes met mine through the rearview mirror. I can’t lose her. He understood without having to hear the words and stepped on the gas pedal, propelling the SUV forward even faster.

The drive seemed to last for hours, although, in reality, it was less than thirty minutes. My trusted and personal physician, Dr. Daria Algorin, is on call twenty-four hours a day. She's also an attending physician at the local hospital, which works out great since she can handle medical emergencies from the makeshift hospital room in the mansion or the local hospital. Having a personal Bratva doctor on call helps to keep the police at bay and questions about our illegal activities to a minimum.

As we burst through the doors, Dr. Daria was already waiting. She took charge immediately, ushering Talia into the nearby examination room. Holding out her hand, she stopped me in the doorway.

"Stay out here," she ordered, not giving a shit that I'm the pakhan . Her lips were pulled into a thin line, and her hands were placed firmly on her hips. She stood no taller than five feet four inches, but her presence was formidable at this moment. "Dimitri, keep him out of this room. I don't need any distractions."

Dimitri nodded, then stood guard next to the door, crossing his arms over his muscular chest. "The doctor will help Talia, brat . Just give her time."

I paced outside the room, my nerves taut with anticipation. When Dr. Daria finally emerged, her expression was contemplative. "Thankfully the bullet missed any major arteries. I was able to stop the bleeding and remove the bullet, but she's going to need a lot of rest."

Relief flooded through me, but it was short-lived. Dr. Daria hesitated, then met my gaze squarely. "There's something else," she said, her tone measured. "It's a sensitive issue, and I think we should speak privately."

"Dimitri, stay here and watch over Talia," I ordered. "Doctor, we can speak in my office." Guiding her to my office, I closed the door behind us. "What is it?" I asked impatiently.

“Talía is pregnant.”

The world seemed to tilt on its axis. Pregnant. The word echoed in my mind, leaving me stunned and disoriented. “Pregnant?” I repeated my voice barely a whisper.

Dr. Daria nodded solemnly. “Yes. My educated guess is she is about two months along, but an ultrasound will be more precise.

“Did she know?” A steamy image of Talía’s naked body flashes in my mind. Fire burns in my eyes as I fantasize about gutting the bastard that got her pregnant. I wonder if it’s the asshole ex-boyfriend from San Francisco.

“I don’t know,” Dr. Daria replies. “She’s still unconscious.”

“I need to see her,” I hissed.

Dr. Daria nodded, leading me to where Talía lay, pale and fragile, on the examination table. I felt an overwhelming need to protect her and her baby. Shaking it off, I turned to leave. “Move her to my bedroom to rest.” Dr. Daria’s eyebrow lifted in surprise, but she didn’t utter a word. “Dimitri will help you.”

I left them to take care of Talía while I retreated to my office. I was determined to find out who ordered the ambush. My gut says it was Gio Lupani, but I must find out for sure. I made a few phone calls and announced that whoever brought me the information I needed would be paid handsomely.

Dimitri knocked lightly on the doorframe. “ Brat , Talía is resting in your bedroom. Olga is with her. Dr. Daria will be back to examine her again tomorrow.” He sits in the chair opposite me, running his fingers through his blonde hair and tugging at the ends. “Do you think it was Lupani who ordered a hit on Talía? Or possibly Adachi trying to take you out?”

“I think it was Lupani,” I respond, tapping my fingertips on the mahogany desk. “I made a few calls to our associates. Anyone that brings us information will be paid.” Crossing the room, I take a vodka bottle and two glasses from the bar. Setting them on the desk, I pour two drinks and hand one to Dimitri. “Call Boris. Ask him to pull the video from any street cameras near Sandy’s apartment. We might be able to identify the assailants as part of Lupani’s crew.”

“Got it. I’ll call him now.” Dimitri pulls out his cell phone but pauses before dialing.

“You might want to change your clothes. Walking around the mansion with Talia’s blood all over you will certainly frighten the children.”

I nod, leaving Dimitri alone in the office.

## Page 21

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 3:12 am*

### Chapter 21

Aleksandr

Olga sat in a chair next to the bed, watching over Talia. She had her prayer book open, mouthing prayers silently in Russian.

“How is she?” I inquired, peering at Talia resting in the king-size bed.

“She opened her eyes once but then closed them again.”

“Go take care of the children. I’ll sit with her for a while.”

Nodding, Olga patted Talia gently on the hand and then left to take care of Sasha and Maxim.

I sat in the chair for an hour, consumed with thoughts of Talia being pregnant and fuming with the need to exact revenge on the person who dared to harm her. Stretching my legs out in front of me, I stood up and began walking slowly around the room.

Talia slowly regained consciousness, her delicate features softening into awareness. Her eyes fluttered open, a mixture of confusion and fear swirling within them. Standing beside the bed, my gaze stayed steady upon her.

“Where... where am I?” Her voice was barely a whisper, raspy from sleep.

“You’re safe,” I replied evenly. “You’re in my home.”

Recognition flickered across her face, followed swiftly by alarm. Clutching her belly, she tried to sit up, then flinched in pain from her shoulder wound.

“Wait a minute, dushenka . Not so fast.” I gently guided her back onto the bed, placing my hand on her arm.

“What happened?” she asked, studying the sling on her arm.

“You were shot in the shoulder. My personal doctor took care of you. She removed the bullet and stitched you up.”

“Your doctor examined me?” she asked cautiously.

“Yes,” I said, choosing my next words carefully. “She mentioned that you’re pregnant.” I watched her closely, waiting to see her reaction. “Did you know?”

She stared down at her lap and nodded.

“When did you find out?” My tone was a mix of accusation and frustration.

“When...when I was still in San Francisco.” She refused to look at me and continued to stare at her lap.

I leaned forward slightly, my voice low and intense. “Who is the father?”

Talia hesitated, biting her lip nervously before meeting my gaze. “You’re the father.”

The revelation hit me like a truck. “Is that why you came to New York? To trap me? To force me into a relationship with you?”



“No!” she protested, her voice cracking.

“You’ve known all along you were pregnant. And you said nothing?” I spit through gritted teeth.

Tears welled in her eyes, but she refused to let them fall.

“Why are you here? Tell me!” I demand, my fists clenched.

Fear shadowed her features, but she met my eyes defiantly. “I’m here because I had to get away from Danny. He’s dangerous, and I feared what he might do.”

“Or maybe you’re running from him because he’s the father of this baby?” I scoff, unable to hide the bitterness in my tone.

“That’s not true! I ran from him because he was stalking me! He confronted me at the hotel and then trashed my apartment!” A single tear ran down her cheek as she choked back a sob. “ You’re the father, Aleksandr.”

Emotions I couldn’t name surged within me, mingling with fear and fierce protectiveness. If this is true, she is carrying my heir. “What do you want from me?!” I exploded, my control slipping.

Talia’s eyes flashed with hurt. “I don’t want anything from you. I came here to start over, to get away from Danny. Sandy and I don’t need anything from you or anyone else.” She turned away from me, focusing on a nonexistent spot on the wall.

“But you’ll get it,” I retorted, my temper flaring. “You say you’re carrying my child. That makes you my responsibility.”

Her resolve hardened. “I will raise this child on my own,” she stated, her chin lifting

defiantly.

The mere thought ignited a fierce possessiveness within me. “If this child is mine,” I declared, “you will never leave this mansion. You belong to me now.”

Talia’s shoulders sagged, and her lip trembled. “I want to call Sandy.”

“What you want is none of my concern.”

I stormed out of the room, the weight of my conflicting emotions bearing down on me. Talia’s words echoed in my mind as I paced the hallway, my fists clenched in frustration. I was bound by duty and the responsibilities of my position within the Bratva. Consumed by a tumultuous storm of desire and duty, I struggled with the realization that despite my resolve, I could not let her go. I wouldn’t let her go, not just because she was carrying my heir.

Alone in the room, Talia crumbled. Tears stained her cheeks as she realized the enormity of her predicament. She had sought refuge in New York but was entangled in a new web of complications.

The smoke from Dimitri’s cigarette curled upwards, mingling with the heavy air in my office. I leaned back in my chair, watching him closely as I delivered the news.

“Brat,” I began, my voice low and controlled, “Talia is pregnant.”

His eyes widened for a fraction of a second before his expression hardened, the gears turning behind his sharp gaze. “Pregnant?” he echoed, his tone laced with surprise and concern.

“Yes,” I affirmed, my mind already examining the implications. “She says I’m the father.”

Dimitri's brow furrowed as he absorbed this revelation. Talia, the woman I couldn't shake from my thoughts, now carried my child. The weight of it settled heavily in the room.

"What about Boris?" I continued, shifting the focus to our pressing concerns. "Did he pull the street surveillance footage?"

"Da," Dimitri confirmed, leaning forward on his elbows, his demeanor serious. "We're sifting through it, looking for leads."

"Good," I said, a flicker of ruthless determination crossing my features. "I want to know who orchestrated the attack. And I want to know who pulled the trigger."

Dimitri hesitated, his gaze lingering on me thoughtfully. "Aleksandr, there's more to this than revenge," he ventured cautiously.

I scoffed, dismissing his words. "There's only one thing on my mind right now—the safety of Talia and my child."

He shook his head, the smoke from his cigarette swirling around him like a ghostly shroud. "What about your feelings for her?"

I waved my hand dismissively, my jaw tensing. "Feelings are a luxury I can't afford."

Dimitri's eyes narrowed, but he didn't press further. Instead, he nodded once, acknowledging my resolve.

Resting my elbows on the desk, I lowered my voice. "I want Dr. Daria to perform a paternity test," I stated firmly. "I need to know for sure if this child is mine, if this is my heir."

Dimitri studied me for a moment, his expression unreadable. “Are you sure about this, brat ?” he questioned.

“I’m sure,” I replied, my voice steady.

Dimitri stood, his cigarette now a stub in the ashtray. “I’ll arrange it,” he said quietly, his gaze lingering on me momentarily.

As he left the room, I thought about Otets and the fierce loyalty to his family that got him killed. The Bratva had rules-rules I’d bent before-but this was different. This wasn’t about Aleksandr, pakhan of the Avilov Bratva. This was personal. Whoever killed Mikhail tried to kill Talia, and I will stop at nothing to protect what was mine.

## Page 22

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 3:12 am*

### Chapter 22

Aleksandr

The morning light streamed through the curtains, creating a soft glow over the room. Talia is asleep in my bed. The frown lines etched into her forehead suggest she isn't sleeping peacefully. Quietly, I tiptoed past her and ducked into the bathroom. I strip off the clothes I've been wearing since yesterday and turn the shower on. Steam fogs up the mirror as I examine the dark circles under my eyes. I didn't get much sleep last night on my office sofa.

I stepped under the stream of hot water, placing my palms on the cool tiles, allowing the water to ease the tension in my shoulders. All night, I thought about the baby, wondering if it was mine. Dr. Daria will be here soon to examine Talia, so we'll find out soon enough.

When I finished showering, I dressed in my favorite blue suit and stepped quietly into the bedroom. Talia was sitting up, examining her wounded shoulder. Her eyes narrowed when she spotted me, blazing with defiance.

"Good morning," I greeted calmly, sitting on the edge of the bed. "How are you feeling?"

"I'd feel much better if you'd let me leave this place," she huffed.

I ignored that remark, not wanting to get into an argument first thing in the morning. "Are you hungry? I can have Abram bring you something to eat."

“I’m not hungry,” she pouted, turning her face away from me.

“Talía, you must eat to keep up your strength and heal. Plus, the baby needs the nutrition.”

She peeked at me from under her long lashes. “I am a little hungry.”

I stood and walked toward the door. “Good. Abram will bring you breakfast.” Pausing in the doorway, I turned to face her. “By the way, Dr. Daria is coming this morning to examine you. And she’ll be performing a paternity test on the baby.”

“Oh no, she won’t!” she yelled. “I’m finished with you telling me what to do. This is my baby, and we’re leaving right now!” Sitting up quickly, she threw her legs over the edge of the bed. Before she could take a step, I was at her side.

“Talía,” I growled. “You’re going to get back in that bed, eat breakfast, and allow Dr. Daria to examine you.”

There is no way I’m letting this woman leave. The beast rose up in my chest, and fire burned behind my eyes. She’s mine. And she’s never leaving this mansion.

She shrunk back slightly, then squared her shoulders, leaving us staring at each other in a heated standoff. Reluctantly, she crawled back into the bed.

“Fine, I’ll let the doctor examine me, but just so we’re clear, Aleksandr, you don’t own me.”

“That’s what you think,” I replied through clenched teeth. “Nikolai!” I yelled.

Nikolai rushed into the bedroom, looking around for danger. His eyes landed on Talía, her face beet red with anger. “Pakhan? Is everything okay?” His eyes darted

from Talia to me and back again.

“Watch her,” I ordered. “She is not to leave this room until Dr. Daria gets here.”

I left them alone and stormed off to my office.

Dr. Daria finished performing the paternity test and momentarily stepped out of the room.

Talia sat on the examination table, rubbing the bird tattoo on her wrist with her thumb. “You don’t believe you’re the father,” she stated bluntly, her voice clipped with frustration.

“It could be Danny’s or any other man’s baby. We’ll know in a few days.” I straightened the cufflink on my crisp white button-down shirt, maintaining a cool exterior. The possessive beast in me decided that it didn’t matter who the baby belonged to; Talia was staying with me. But the reality is that if the baby belongs to another man, Talia will want to leave. A slow, burning rage sparked in my core at the thought of losing her.

Dr. Daria returned and examined the wound on Talia’s shoulder. I observed her movements with calculated interest, a flicker of concern tightening my chest.

“Take it easy, rest,” Dr. Daria advised, her gaze penetrating as she addressed Talia. “The wound will heal, but you’re dehydrated. Drink and eat. Stress isn’t good for you—or the baby.”

“Yes, doctor, thank you,” Talia replied gently. She cradled her stomach as I wrestled with the need to have Talia and the baby belong to me.

Pulling me aside, Dr. Daria gave me explicit instructions on how to care for Talia.

“She’s in a fragile state. She’s about ten weeks pregnant and needs to rest and stay calm. Keep her comfortable and make sure she drinks plenty of fluids. I’ll recheck her in a few days.”

“I want to remind you that no one is to know the results of the paternity test except for me. This remains confidential information.”

“Yes, of course,” Dr. Daria agreed, glancing at Talia. She left the room without another word.

“Let’s get you back to bed,” I encouraged, helping Talia off the examination table.

Talia led the way back to her bedroom and sat gingerly on the edge. Her gaze flitted restlessly around the room as I stood in the doorway. “Abram will bring you something to eat and drink. Get some rest.”

“I want to see Sandy. She needs to know why I didn’t meet her,” Talia asserted, her eyes hard as flint.

“You’re staying here,” I replied sharply, my patience thinning like paper. “For your safety.”

Talia’s hands balled into fists, her anger palpable. “Safety? This is a prison, Aleksandr!”

Her accusation stung, but I hardened myself against it. “You’re here because someone wants you dead. And the sooner we get answers about Mikhail’s death, the sooner we’ll catch the sonofabitch that killed him. That’s when you can leave.” It was a bald-faced lie. She’s never leaving me. But she is safe here, safer than she’d be anywhere else.



I turned on my heel, intent on leaving her to stew. The sound of the TV remote shattering against the wall punctuated her frustration. The scattered fragments lay in a pile at my feet. She needed to speak to Sandy to unravel the tangle of miscommunication. Her voice cut through the tension like a knife.

"I need to see Sandy," she repeated, punctuating each word.

"Sandy will understand," I replied evenly, trying to quell the tension between us.

Talia's eyes flashed with frustration, her voice tinged with desperation. "You can't keep me here forever, Aleksandr."

I took a step closer, the distance between us closing like an unspoken promise. "I'm trying to protect you, Talia."

She stared at me stone-faced, the echo of her frustration lingering in the air. Until we find Mikhail's killer, she isn't safe; the baby isn't safe. They're mine, and nothing on Earth will stop me from protecting them both.

### Chapter 23

Talia

The bedroom door opens slowly, and four pairs of eyes peek in.

“Talia?” Sasha’s voice drifts in from the doorway.

“Come in,” I greet cheerfully, sitting in bed and straightening the blanket tucked around my legs.

Sasha walks in with Maxim trailing behind her. He’s carrying a tray of food, and something smells delicious.

“We brought you something to eat,” Maxim states. He puts the tray down on the bedside table. His eyes are glued to the bandage covering my wound. “Does it hurt?” he asks curiously.

“A little, but it’ll get better.” I pat the bed, inviting them to sit. Sasha fluffs up the pillow next to me and makes herself comfortable. Maxim sits on the edge of the bed, keeping his distance.

“Did you almost die?” Sasha asks wide-eyed.

“No,” I reassure her.

“But Uncle said you got hurt really bad.” She sniffles and lays her head against my

arm.

“Yeah, we heard someone shot you,” Maxim chimes in.

“Your uncle told you that?” I asked, surprised.

“Well...not exactly. We sort of heard him talking to Abram.” Maxim glances at Sasha and back at me.

“Ahh, you were eavesdropping,” I said, smirking at him. “Your uncle was telling the truth. Someone hurt me, but I will be okay.”

“What about the baby?” Sasha whispers.

My eyebrows raised in shock. How did they know about the baby? “Oh...um...the baby will be okay.” Clearing my throat, I ask, “How did you know about the baby?”

“We heard Uncle and Nanny Olga talking,” Maxim says sheepishly.

“I see,” I say gently.

“You have to eat. Uncle told Nanny Olga it’s important for you to eat and drink so the baby can grow.” Maxim pushes the tray of food closer to me.“

I picked up the sandwich and took a big bite. “This is delicious. Did you make it?”

“No, Abram made it. And he made the soup. But I added the fruit side.” Maxim grins, proud of his contribution.

“And I added the chocolate chip cookies!” Sasha giggles. “I bet the baby loves chocolate chip cookies.”

My heart warmed at their thoughtfulness. “Thank you both so much. This really means a lot.” I gave Sasha a hug and knuckle bumped Maxim.

“Talia, where is the baby’s daddy?” Sasha inquires. Maxim looks at me intently, also wanting to know.

“He’s here. Your uncle is the baby’s father.” I hold my breath, waiting for their reaction.

“He is?” Sasha squeals, her blonde pigtails bouncing up and down from excitement.

“Yes, he is.” I instinctively cradle my stomach.

“That’s awesome,” Maxim declares. “So, the baby is our...cousin?”

“Yes, I suppose you’re right.” It hadn’t dawned on me that the children were my baby’s cousins. Safe to say, I’ve been a bit preoccupied with everything else going on. “This baby is so lucky to have you two.”

I could feel their excitement bubbling in the room as their grins stretched from ear to ear. Maxim’s eyes focus on my belly. “Is it a boy or girl?”

“I don’t know yet. I’ll find out in a few months.” Hmm, boy or girl? It doesn’t matter as long as they are happy and safe.

“I’m going to have tea parties with the baby.” Sasha claps her hands in delight.

“Tea parties? That’s boring! I’m going to teach him how to play video games.” Maxim steals a cookie from the tray, breaks it in half, and gives a piece to Sasha. She nibbles on it gleefully.

“No matter if it’s a boy or girl, the baby will love everything you teach it.” I smile warmly at the thought of my baby playing with its cousins.

“Does this mean you’re going to stay with us forever?” Sasha hugged me tightly, her face full of hope.

My smile faltered. “I don’t think I can, sweetheart,” I whispered, my mind filled with conflicting thoughts. I would love to stay here with the children, but the best thing for me and my baby is to get far away from Aleksandr Avilov.

“Why not?” Maxim asked as his eyebrows pinched together.

“It’s complicated. I would stay if I could, but I don’t know if that’s possible right now.” I squeezed Sasha, hugging her gently. “But I want to thank you both. You two are the best medicine.”

Sasha climbed off the bed, stealing another cookie from the tray. “We have to go now. We promised Nanny Olga not to stay too long so you can rest.” Holding her arms open wide, she leaned in for a hug. Maxim stole a quick hug, too.

“Thank you both. I’ll see you later.”

After the children left, I lay back on the pillows, my mind racing. I allowed myself a moment of daydreaming about what life would look like if I stayed in the mansion. My baby would have wonderful cousins, and I would have a family. We would be safe and protected. And if Aleksandr was a different man, we would be loved. But the reality is that he sees me as a burden. He doesn’t care for me at all. I’m only here to help him find Mikhail’s killer, and then he’ll discard me. I must get to San Francisco with Sandy.

With a determined sigh, I swung my legs over the side of the bed, testing my

strength. Slowly, I paced around the room, feeling the muscles strain in my limbs. I need to find a way to contact Sandy. Glancing out the window, I studied the massive estate. This isn't going to be easy. Just then, the door creaked open, and Dimitri entered.

"Why are you out of bed? Come, come, you need to rest," he tutted, getting me back into bed.

"I'm okay. I just needed to stretch my legs."

He examined the half-eaten sandwich on the tray. "You need to eat. The baby needs to eat, too."

"Is there anyone around here that doesn't know about the baby?" I asked in a huff.

"I'm not just anyone," he noted. "The baby is my blood; he needs to eat to get strong." He sat in the plush chair beside the bed, crossing his legs from ankle to knee.

"You've already decided it's a boy? Typical man," I groaned.

"Typical Russian." He let out a hearty laugh, releasing some of my tension.

"Why do you believe this is Aleksandr's baby? He doesn't even believe me."

"You have been honest since we've met. And you are trying to help us find Mikhail's killer. You have no reason to lie about the baby." His smile was genuine. "Here," he said, holding a cell phone, "call Sandy." A hint of sympathy shone in his eyes.

"Are you serious?" I sat straight up, shock plastered on my face. "Does Aleksandr know?" I asked, my voice barely a whisper.

“Yes,” he smirked. “He won’t let you leave the mansion right now; it’s unsafe. But he agreed to let you speak with her. He thinks it will help ease your mind and reduce the stress,” he explained.

I was speechless. My hands shook slightly as I took the phone from him. “Do you think he’ll let Sandy stay here with me?” Hope fluttered in my chest.

Dimitri let out a heavy sigh. “That’s not possible.”

“But I’m worried about her. What if she’s not safe? What if someone tries to hurt her because of me? I’d never forgive myself.” Horrible thoughts flashed in my mind of losing my sister, the only person that loved me. My chest squeezed tightly as panic gripped me in its icy fingers.

“Talía! Breathe...it’s okay.” Dimitri held me by the shoulders as I gasped for air. “It’s okay; everything will be okay. I will look after Sandy myself.”

He sounded so sincere and reassuring. Slowly, the panic attack passed, and my breathing returned to normal. He handed me a glass of water, which I sipped gingerly.

“I won’t let anything happen to your sister. Call her,” he suggested, nudging the phone in my hand. I looked him square in the eyes but didn’t see an ounce of deceit. I believed he would watch over Sandy. “I’ll give you some privacy,” he said, walking away.

“I’ll be quick. I’ll call out when I’m finished so you can take your phone back.”

“It’s yours now,” Dimitri said simply. “A gesture of good faith from Aleksandr.” Then he left.

My emotions were a whirlwind. Could it be that Aleksandr isn't entirely heartless? Maybe there is more beneath his harsh exterior. Relieved yet anxious, I dialed Sandy's number. Her voice on the other end was like a lifeline.

"Talía, thank goodness you're okay!" Sandy exclaimed, her voice filled with relief. "Don't ever scare me like that again!"

My eyes welled up. "Are you okay? I'm worried about you."

"I'm as good as can be. Dimitri told me that Aleksandr paid the rent for the apartment but insisted I stay at the hotel. He has a guard watching me at all times."

"I think you're safer if you come here, but Aleksandr won't let you. I'm trying to figure out how to sneak out of the mansion."

"We'll find a way, Talía. Just hang in there," Sandy reassured. "I told Dimitri I would stay at the hotel with my 'babysitter', but I'm going back to work and there's nothing he can do about it. He thought he was going to win that argument, but you know I always win. I told him I was having a severe case of cabin fever, but the truth is I have to make money so we can get to San Francisco."

"Please be safe sis! I'm not thrilled you're going back to the club, but at least I have a phone now so we can keep in touch."

"You do? How did that happen?" Sandy whispered.

"Dimitri gave it to me. He said Aleksandr doesn't want me stressed out," I laughed. "At least the children are taking my mind off of being held captive."

"Seems he has a heart after all," Sandy joked. "Tell me about the kids."



I recounted my conversation with the children, and Sandy's laughter floated through the line.

"They must be so excited!" Sandy remarked. "But we need to focus on getting you out. I'll contact Luke and make arrangements for when we get to San Francisco."

"Okay, sis. Stay safe." I reluctantly ended the call.

As I lay back on the bed, cradling the phone, a flicker of hope ignited in my chest. I can do this. I'll figure out a way to escape and get to Sandy.

### Chapter 24

Aleksandr

As I watched Olga, Sasha, Maxim, and Talia gather around the dinner table, a bittersweet ache tugged at my heart. The normalcy of this scene—a family dinner with the children and the woman I desired above all else—was shattered by the grim realities that threatened to consume us.

I kissed Sasha and Maxim goodnight, their innocent smiles briefly easing the burden on my shoulders. Talia's presence was a delicate temptation. I yearned to hold her close, to protect her from the dangers that circled us like hungry wolves. But duty gnawed at me, an unrelenting force.

"Olga, ensure Talia follows the doctor's orders," I instructed. "She needs to eat the food, not push it around the plate."

"Yes, Mr. Avilov. I will make certain she eats everything."

Talia's eyes met mine briefly before I abruptly turned away. I could not risk succumbing to the pull of emotions, not now.

Outside, Dimitri waited in the black SUV, his expression a mask of grim determination. The night sky loomed overhead as we sped through the streets to the art gallery. "What did you find out?" I inquired.

"It was Adachi's men," Dimitri revealed, his voice low and charged with anger. The

name was a curse upon my ears, a reminder of the ruthless forces that threatened our existence. “You were the target.”

“ Blyat! “ Talia’s shooting had been an attack that was meant for me. “Adachi is trying to take me out to take over distribution.”

Talia’s vulnerability ignited a fierce protectiveness within me. She was carrying a child, likely my child, that I will guard like a precious gem. The thought of her in danger because of me fueled a storm of conflicting emotions.

“Have all the vors been contacted?” I ask, licking my front teeth.

“ Da , they will meet us at the gallery.”

As we sped through the streets, my mind raced with images of Talia leaning against the car, bleeding in the streets. A fire raged within me, demanding vengeance on those that hurt what’s mine.

Arriving at the art gallery, Dimitri and I entered the dimly lit room where my senior vors awaited. Their eyes reflected the weight of their loyalty and expectations. As pakhan, my duty was to steer us through treacherous waters and maintain order in a world where chaos lurked at every turn.

They were gathered around the table, each with a drink in hand. Their suits were impeccably tailored.

I cut right to the chase. “You all know why you were called here tonight. Adachi ordered his men to take me out. We must respond, but I don’t want this to become an all-out war.”

All the senior vors spoke up at once. Their voices rumbled like distant thunder.

Opinions clashed, each vor advocating their own brand of retribution. I listened, my mind a whirlwind of strategy and consequence.

“We must confront Adachi,” one declared, his voice laden with a thirst for blood.

“No,” another countered, a seasoned tactician with eyes that held the wisdom of years spent in the shadows. “We seek diplomacy first. We can still use Adachi and the Yakuza to our advantage.”

“Send the heads of his men back to him in gift-wrapped boxes,” another vor shouted. “That will remind them not to fuck with the Avilov Bratva.”

“Dimitri, you’ve been quiet. What do you suggest?” The room went silent as I turned my full attention to him.

“It’s a delicate situation,” he began. “We must retaliate, but you need to decide if you’re ready to go to war with Adachi. We know what he wants. He wants to handle distribution. Is there a way you can make it work to our advantage?”

The decision rested upon my shoulders, a burden I carried willingly, just like my father did before me. The beast in me wants to see the blood of Adachi and the Yakuza turn the streets of New York red. But the pakhan wants what is best for the Bratva and business.

“I will set a meeting with Adachi,” I announced, my voice steady despite the storm of emotions.

Reaching out to Adachi was a dangerous gamble that could either forge a fragile peace or ignite a war that would consume us all. But as pakhan of the Avilov Bratva, I stood resolute, a beacon of strength amidst the shadows. None of the vors dared to speak out against my decision.

They nodded in acceptance of my decision, holding up their glasses. In unison, they responded, “ Da, pakhan .”

Dimitri joined me in the office after the vors went their separate ways. “It is a good decision, brat ,“ he expressed.

“Have Boris make the call to Adachi’s man. Let’s see if we can come to an agreement about distribution.”

I would navigate this treacherous path for Talia. The weight of my responsibilities was onerous, but one truth remained unwavering- I will protect her, whatever the cost.

I poured two glasses of vodka and handed one to Dimitri. “Any more information on Mikhail’s killer?”

“Not yet. We are fairly certain he is part of Lupani’s crew and we know there was an argument over money.” Lighting a cigarette, Dimitri took a long drag before blowing out smoke circles. “We haven’t identified the trigger man yet.”

“Keep asking around,” I instructed. “I need to be one hundred percent sure before going after Gio Lupani. We can’t afford a war with the Italians unless we’re positive.”

The drive home was a blur of city lights and shadows, my mind preoccupied with thoughts of Talia and the baby. How had our lives become entangled in such peril? I could not help but replay the moment she was shot, the terror in her eyes etched into my memory like a searing brand.

Dimitri’s voice broke through my thoughts. “We’ll make preparations for the meeting with Adachi. But we must tread carefully.”

I nodded, my jaw clenched with resolve. “Agreed. We cannot afford any missteps.”

Back at the mansion, the silence was suffocating. The absence of the children’s laughter, the echoing emptiness of the hallways—each corner seemed haunted by the specter of danger.

I found myself standing in front of Talia’s room, a hesitant hand poised to knock. What would I say if she opened the door? Conflicting thoughts tangled together in my mind. I need to feel her, breathe her in. Drive my cock deep into her until all the tension leaves my body. Hold her close until nothing remains except the two of us. But I could not bring myself to knock. Instead, I retreated to my study, surrounded by the trappings of power—books on strategy, artifacts from a life steeped in tradition and secrecy.

The weight of being pakhan bore down on me, and its demands were unforgiving. I had inherited this mantle of authority, but it was a crown laced with thorns, each decision a test of loyalty and strength.

As dawn broke on the horizon, casting an amber glow across the city, I stood at the window, a solitary figure against the backdrop of a waking world. The delicate balance between duty and desire threatened to unravel me.

For now, I will prepare myself for the negotiations ahead. Adachi awaited, a shadowy adversary lurking in the shadows. But as the sun rose, illuminating the path before me, I knew one thing with absolute certainty. Whatever lay ahead, I would face it with unwavering resolve for the sake of those I loved and the legacy I carried on my shoulders.

### Chapter 25

Aleksandr

A few days later, I sat by the pool, relishing the deep aroma of freshly brewed coffee. The cool morning breeze carried the distant laughter of children from the nearby table where Talia sat with Sasha and Maxim, enjoying breakfast. Dimitri approached with purpose, a man with news to deliver.

“Good morning, brat ,“ he greeted, settling into a chair across from me. “I checked on Sandy at the hotel. She’s safe.”

I nodded gratefully, setting down my cup. Dimitri handed me a green file folder. His following words piqued my interest.

“I stopped by Echo last night. The bartender had some information for us.”

Upon opening the file folder, I was greeted by the cold, dark eyes of a killer. A balding man with medium brown hair and dark brown squinty eyes stared back at me.

“That,” Dimitri stated, pointing to the photo, “is Vic Corallo. He’s been questioning the waitresses at Echo, trying to get information on Talia. Mostly, he’s been asking when she’ll be back at work.”

“Who does he work for?”

“Ah, that was what I found interesting. He is a low-ranking soldier of the Lupani

family. He reports to Tommy Lansky, one of Gio Lupani's captains."

"It can't be a coincidence that he's asking about Talia, and he's one of Lupani's guys." I placed the folder on the table and spread out the other photos. One of them shows this guy Vic with Tommy Lansky in front of an Italian restaurant Gio Lupani frequents. Another shows Vic and two unknown guys in front of an illegal gambling room that Lupani owns. "Where did you get the photos?"

"Denis pulled them from the Lupani family's police file. I confirmed with the bartender that Vic is the one he's seen hanging around Echo." Dimitri pours a cup of coffee from the insulated carafe and then leans back in his chair. "Word on the street is Vic has been a bad boy."

"I'm not surprised. What's he been doing?" I pour another cup of coffee, watching Talia interact with the children. Sasha is sitting on her lap, pouring pretend tea into a play teacup. Maxim is seated to Talia's right, showing her a video game. She is going to be a terrific mother. I daydream of her belly getting fuller and rounder, growing and protecting our baby, the heir to my kingdom. The sound of Dimitri's voice pulls me back to the moment.

"He's been playing with fire, skimming profits from one of Gio Lupani's gambling rings. He's supposed to turn over all the profits to Gio, but my sources tell me he pockets forty percent." The Italian mafia has ways of dealing with guys like Vic that are similar to how the Bratva handles guys like Vic. "If Gio finds out what's been happening, Vic will end up face down in a grave."

"Mikhail must have been mixed up in one of the gambling rings Vic hosts. Talia said she heard the men arguing about money." I run my hand down my face to control my emotions in front of the children. The desire to gut Vic and throw his remains in the Hudson River is slowly burning me from the inside out.



I motioned for Talia to join us. As I flipped through the photographs, her eyes settled on Vic, her complexion shifting from warmth to a pallor of fear. It was unmistakable—Vic was the man she had seen commit the ultimate betrayal, snuffing out Mikhail's life without remorse.

“Talia,” I addressed her gently, and a surge of protectiveness rose within me. “This man has been asking about you at Echo.”

Her distress was palpable, and my words laid bare her vulnerability. I reassured her, my voice steady. “You're safe here. Sandy is safe at the hotel and at work. I don't believe Vic knows of your connection.”

I directed my attention to Dimitri. “Increase security around Sandy. I want two men with her at all times.”

“Of course, pakhan . I will go to the hotel myself and reinforce her security detail.”

Turning back to Talia, I reminded her of the sanctuary these walls provided. “You are safe here, dushenka, “ I affirmed, my tone resolute.

Talia nodded in understanding, but the assuredness didn't quite reach her eyes. “Would you excuse me? I'm going to go lie down for a bit.”

“Of course,” I replied softly.

With a nod, she excused herself, seeking solace within the confines of her room. The weight of responsibility settled upon me—the burden of protecting my own. Vic was no longer just a name; he was a looming threat, a shadow darkening the edges of our haven.

I surveyed the tranquil pool, its waters reflecting the play of sunlight. Beneath the

calmness, danger lurked in the form of Vic—a predator on the prowl, circling, seeking his prey. His pursuit would not go unanswered.

Convincing myself that I should check on Talia, I stood before the closed bedroom door with my hand raised mid-knock. I was fooling myself and doing a terrible job at it. I wasn't here to just check on her. What I wanted was to feel her body beneath mine as I marked her with my seed, claiming her as my own. I craved her constantly, a feeling I'd never had with any other woman.

I'd only been with a woman once before discarding her. It was my way of ensuring that I didn't get close enough to a woman for her to want more of me than I was willing to give. But with Talia, once wasn't enough. One hundred times wouldn't be enough. Each time I'm with her, I want more; more time, more of her, and more ways to pleasure her. My thirst for her doesn't ever seem quenched; today is no exception.

Knocking lightly on the door, I wait anxiously for her response.

"Come in," she calls out.

Stepping into the room, I find Talia sitting on the chaise with a book on her lap. Her long, silky hair is draped down her back, and her legs are tucked underneath her. "How are you feeling?"

She smiles, but it isn't genuine. "I'm fine," she lies.

I sit at the edge of the chaise and reach for her hand. "Everything will be okay, I promise. You're safe here, and Sandy is safe. No one will harm either of you."

"I want to believe you, but..." She searches my face, her eyes narrowing. "I haven't had the best of luck with people being there for me. Besides Sandy. She's always been the one to watch out for me."

Her vulnerability tugged at my heart. I would die to protect this woman. I'd do anything to make sure she is happy and safe. But I can't tell her that. The words are stuck in my throat, and my mind is telling me that in my world, she would be a target because I care for her.

She absently rubs the small bird tattoo on her wrist that connects her to Sandy. Chewing on her bottom lip, she turns away from me, focusing on nothing in particular out the window.

Catching her chin with my thumb, I turn her face toward me. Her hazel eyes burn into me, and I can't hold back any longer. A low growl rises up in my throat. I need to be inside her right fucking now. I slammed my mouth onto hers, kissing her desperately. She gasped in shock, pulling away at first but then melting into me. She thrust her fingers into my hair, tugging at the ends, opening her mouth to allow my tongue entrance. My cock throbbed painfully, needing to be inside her tight, wet pussy.

Pushing her down onto her back, I roughly grind my cock against her, feeling the heat of her pussy through her jeans. She yanked at my shirt, frantically tugging it over my head. I dropped it onto the floor, and her shirt and bra followed. Her full breasts made my mouth water. I rubbed my thumb over her pebbled nipple, making her groan softly. Cupping her breast, I squeezed and slapped it, claiming her mouth at the same time. She arched into my hand as I feasted on her delicious lips.

I slide my hand up her chest, snaking it around her throat. Her body stilled, and her breath caught. Her hazel eyes were wide with anticipation. "Unbutton your jeans," I command, needing access to her pussy.

Her eyes flared with desire, and her fingers went to work to open her jeans. I slid my hand down her stomach and slipped it into her panties, gently rubbing her clit. Talia moaned, pushing her pussy against my hand. I sucked her nipple into my mouth as I slid my finger up and down her slit. She was so wet it made my cock strain against

my pants to be released. Fuck.

Pushing off her, careful not to aggravate her shoulder wound, I stood and slid her jeans down. Pulling them off, I dropped them on the floor with the other clothing. She lay before me bare except for a pair of black lace panties. She was beautiful and mine. The thought of almost losing her to the violence that plagued my world made me sick to my stomach. Her tiny baby bump was a reminder that I almost lost them both. I'll do anything to protect them and kill anyone that dared to harm them. They're mine, and I'm never letting them go.

### Chapter 26

Aleksandr

Ripping her panties off, she stared up at me, her eyes glinting with desperation. Leaning over her, I kissed my way from her breasts down to her stomach. Gripping her thighs, I spread her legs apart, sliding my tongue up her slit and wrapping it over her clit.

Talia gasped as I sucked and flicked her clit with my tongue. Her eyelids fluttered closed as I feasted on her sweet pussy. Spreading her thighs wider, I dipped my tongue into her, then slid two fingers into her tight pussy. She squirmed, pushing into my hand. I swirled my fingers and pushed them in even deeper.

“Yes,” she moaned, “just like that.” Her inner muscles squeezed my fingers, needing more. I slid a third finger inside her, making her eyes roll back.

“Fuck my fingers, kiska,” I demanded.

Talia obeyed, pushing her pussy onto my fingers, fucking herself deep and fast. She took what she needed while I peppered her breasts and neck with kisses. I curved my fingers, digging into the spot that made her arch her back in ecstasy. I took over, roughly fucking her with my thick fingers, sucking on her clit simultaneously.

“Oh my God!” she cried out as an orgasm burst through her. She came on my fingers, and I eagerly lapped up her sweet juices.

Pulling my fingers out of her, I stripped off my pants, freeing my aching cock. I quickly lifted her off the chaise, sat down, and slammed her onto my cock. She went still at being abruptly stuffed full with my thick cock. Words hung on her lips, but she remained silent as her pussy stretched to accommodate the girth.

Gripping her waist, I raised her up and then roughly slammed her onto my cock again. I lifted her up again and slammed her down once more.

“Aleksandr,” she moaned. “Yes...fuck me.” She slid her hands around my neck, holding on tight, being mindful of her injured shoulder.

I fucked her hard, thrusting my cock into her over and over. My balls tightened, wanting to release my hot cum into her, marking her. But I held back, fucking her hard and fast. I filled my left hand with her breast while my right stayed firmly on her waist. She had phenomenal breasts, swollen even larger from the pregnancy. Pinching her nipple, she arched her back and closed her eyes.

“Open your eyes. I want you looking at me when I fill you up with my cum.” I felt her pussy tighten and quake. A flush tinged her chest and cheeks a rosy, pink color, and her breath caught in her throat.

“I’m going to come,” she breathed. Her pussy spasmed as her orgasm tore through her. Her slick juices ran down his cock as she shivered from the aftershock.

Keeping my cock inside her, I stood, turned, and laid her upper body on the chaise. I gripped her ass and pounded into her, burying my cock balls deep. I wanted her to feel every inch, leaving no doubt about who owned her.

“Aleksandr...” she drawled, “don’t stop.” She curled her legs around my waist, gripping the chaise.

Every thrust was savage, with a desire to fuck her so deep I was afraid I might split her in half. I wanted her to choke on my cock, branding her from the inside out. Adjusting my angle, I found her sensitive spot, wanting her to come with me.

“Holy shit!” she cried out, biting down so hard on her lip she almost drew blood.

Lifting her legs up, I hooked them over my shoulders and drove my cock into her. With my thumb, I pressed, rolled, and flicked her clit, keeping pressure on it as I fucked her. Talia’s eyes sparkled with pleasure, and her pussy clamped down on my cock. She sucked in a breath as I slammed my mouth onto hers. With one last thrust, my cock exploded. Streams of hot cum filled her up. She gripped my neck as her own orgasm hit, her body shaking as her pussy milked my cock.

She melted into the chaise as I slid out of her. I was still rock hard and not finished with her yet. Lifting her up, I carried her to the bed, laying her down gently. Spreading her legs apart, I dipped my tongue into her pussy, then sucked on her clit. A surprised gasp hung in the air as I rolled her onto her stomach. I wanted all of her, and I always got what I wanted.

“What are you doing?” she questioned, looking at me over her shoulder.

I gripped her luscious ass and spread the cheeks apart, dipping my tongue into the hole. “Oh,” she panted, grasping the bedsheets. Spitting onto the hole, I plunged my finger into it. She cried out, pushing her ass further onto my finger.

“You like that, kiska ?” I pushed my finger knuckle deep, her ass squeezing it tight. I thrust a second finger into her ass, and she jolted, arching her back. Bunching her chocolate brown hair in my free hand, I replaced my fingers in her ass with the tip of my cock. “I’m going to fuck your ass, and you’re going to come again for me.”

“Yes,” she whimpered, pushing her ass against my cock.

“Good girl,” I praised. Gripping her hair, I pulled her head back, kissing her cheek. Without warning, I sank my cock into her ass, rubbing my balls on her. I spanked her ass hard enough to leave a handprint and then rocked into her. She was so tight I thought my balls would explode before I was finished with her.

Grinding my teeth, I pulled my cock out to the tip, then slammed it into her ass. Pulling it out again slowly to the tip, I waited a moment and then slammed it into her again. Over and over, I teased her until she was practically sobbing from pleasure. I released her hair, and she slumped forward onto the mattress.

I lifted her up onto her knees, keeping her chest flush against the bed. Gripping her ass, I sunk my cock into her, draping my body over hers. I fucked her ass hard, relishing her every moan and whimper.

“I-I need to come,” she begged. “P-please, Aleksandr,” she cried.

“Yes, dushenka, I’ll let you come.” Fucking her ass raw, I pounded into her. Reaching around, I rubbed her clit with my finger.

“Yessss!” she cried out, her pussy spasming around my cock.

My balls tightened as I continued to fuck her through her orgasm. Two more hard thrusts and my cum shot into her ass, marking her again. I pushed into her until my balls were empty, collapsing on top of her. Putting my weight on my forearms, I stayed in her ass until my cock went soft.

Slowly pulling out, I watched the cum drip down her thighs. A deep sense of satisfaction surged through me, knowing I marked her pussy and her ass with my seed. She belongs to me, and I will never let her go.



### Chapter 27

#### Talia

I reclined on the soft bed in my room, still enveloped in the warm afterglow of the morning's encounter with Aleksandr. His touch lingered on my skin like a promise fulfilled, and I couldn't suppress the tender smile that curved my lips as I traced the faint bruises left by his fingertips. The memory of his hands, both possessive and gentle, sent a shiver down my spine, igniting a fire deep within me.

The clock's ticking reminded me of the day moving forward, its steady beat a soundtrack to my swirling thoughts. I would love to lie here all day in post-orgasmic bliss, but Sandy expects me to figure out how to escape the mansion so we can lay low in San Francisco. The thought of our plan felt like a distant dream now, blurred by the unexpected tenderness of Aleksandr and the unsettling truth of our situation. I needed to stay sharp, but the lure of Aleksandr's presence was a potent distraction.

Before I could devise a plan, a knock on the door broke my reverie. Nikolai's voice, deep and reassuring, called out, "Talia, are you decent?"

"Come in, Nikolai." I greeted him with a sincere smile. Despite being one of my guards in this makeshift prison, he's a nice man. His presence was a strange comfort amidst the chaos.

"Aleksandr needs you. Come." Nikolai led the way to the examination room where Aleksandr was waiting.

“What’s going on?” I questioned, my eyes narrowing suspiciously as I studied his face.

“Sit,” Aleksandr ordered, pointing to the examination table. The authoritative tone in his voice left little room for argument.

“Why? What’s happening? I feel fine.” Crossing my arms over my chest, I stood my ground, ignoring how his eyebrows snapped together in irritation.

Before he could respond, Dr. Daria entered with her usual air of brisk efficiency, dressed in a pristine white button-down shirt and black pencil skirt. Her presence was calming and intimidating, a paradox that made her an excellent doctor.

“Talía,” she greeted cheerfully. “How are you feeling?”

“Hi, Dr. Daria. I’m surprised to see you here.” I couldn’t help but feel a pang of anxiety.

“I was in the neighborhood, so I decided to check on you.” She smiled softly, placing a stethoscope on my chest. “Breathe in. Good, now breathe out slowly. Good. So, tell me how you’re feeling today.”

“Well, my shoulder is slightly sore, but other than that, I feel good.” I glanced at Aleksandr sheepishly, hoping Dr. Daria didn’t see the faint bruises he left on my body this morning. The memory of how it felt when he pinned me down on the bed heated my core.

“Let’s take a look at your shoulder.” After a cursory examination of the wound, she moved on.

Dr. Daria’s gaze flickered to her notes, and the question weighing heavily on my

mind spilled out. “Is that the paternity test?” I asked tentatively.

“It is,” she replied calmly, her eyes steady and reassuring.

I watched Aleksandr closely, trying to discern any hint of anticipation. As usual, his features were a mask of controlled composure, but a flicker of emotion betrayed him for a split second.

“The test confirmed the baby’s father is Aleksandr. Congratulations,” she said, holding her hand out to Aleksandr.

The confirmation was reassurance that Aleksandr was indeed the father. I caught a fleeting glimpse of a smile tugging at his lips, quickly concealed behind his usual mask of solemnity. Relief washed over me, mingled with the lingering uncertainty of our complicated circumstances.

“Would you like to know the sex of the baby?” Dr. Daria asked expectantly.

“No,” I blurted.

“Yes,” Aleksandr remarked at the same time.

Dr. Daria chuckled. “Alright, let’s have a look, and I promise not to tell you if it’s a boy or girl, Talia.”

I held my breath as the ultrasound machine hummed softly, the screen illuminating with the delicate flutter of a heartbeat. That’s my baby. Our baby. A warm feeling rushed over me as I watched the screen. I’m going to be a mom. The thought filled a hole in my heart that I didn’t know existed.

Aleksandr caught me peeking at him from under my lashes and smiled softly. “The

baby has a strong heartbeat,” he declared. “He will be a strong Avilov heir.”

“And if it’s a girl?” I teased, my voice lightening the tension in the room.

“She will be just as strong as a boy.” He smiled brightly from across the room, his eyes shining with a rare warmth.

“The baby is healthy,” Dr. Daria announced. “Everything looks good.” She handed me a napkin, and I wiped the clear gel off my belly. Sitting up, I adjusted my clothes and waited for Dr. Daria to turn off the machine.

“Take it easy and rest. Your shoulder is healing but will take time to heal completely.” Placing her hands on her hips, she focused on Aleksandr. “Is Talia eating and drinking enough? Getting enough sleep?” she asked, sucking on the inside of her bottom lip.

“Yes, she is a very good patient, listening and following orders.” His heated gaze zeroed in on me, and I felt another blush tinging my cheeks pink.

“I’ll be back next week. Talia, call me if you need anything.” Dr. Daria gently squeezed my shoulder, excused herself, and left the room.

Aleksandr turned to me with a heated determination in his eyes. “You will stay here, with me, indefinitely,” he declared with authority.

I bristled instinctively at the presumption, pushing against his decree. “I can’t just—“

“You can, and you will. You are carrying my heir, meaning you will live here and raise the child here. That’s final.”

“You can’t force me to stay here, Aleksandr! I have a home with Sandy.” Sliding off

the table, I stomped to him, leaving barely an inch between us. My hands were balled into fists at my sides, my fingernails digging into my palms. “I am not your prisoner,” I growled, squaring my shoulders and looking him directly in the eyes.

Looming over me, he bent his head slightly. His ice-blue eyes burned into me. “You are mine . The baby is mine . This is where you belong, so get comfortable,” he ground out through clenched teeth.

Who the hell does he think he is?! Red-hot anger bubbled just below the surface of my skin. I began trembling, unable to control the desire to slap him so hard his grandchildren would feel it. Time slowed down as tunnel vision took over. I felt like I was moving in slow motion as I raised my hand to deliver the slap of the century. Halfway through, he grabbed hold of my wrist, spinning me around and wrapping his arms around me. With my back to his chest, he securely pinned my arms to my sides. Tears pricked the back of my eyes as I cursed and struggled against his hold.

“Talía, stop.” His tone was authoritative but gentler than it had been a moment ago.

“No! Let me go, you asshole !” He held me in place without much effort, his muscular build and height overpowering me. Struggling to escape his hold was futile, but I struggled anyway.

“Talía, stop.” His tone was calmer as he whispered in my ear. “You’re going to hurt the baby.”

That got my attention. I stopped struggling, but the weight of the situation was too much for me to bear. Tears stung my eyes as I choked on sobs. So much has happened, and I’m not in control of any of it. A killer is after me, I’m pregnant, Aleksandr is a mob boss, and I’m being forced to stay away from Sandy. My body went limp in his arms.

“Talía, what do you need?” he asked gently, loosening his grip on me.

Turning around, I buried my face in his chest. His simple question caught me off guard, and before I could censor myself, I blurted out the most absurd craving as pregnancy hormones took over. “Pickles and ice cream.”

To my surprise, Aleksandr chuckled—a deep, rumbling sound—dispelling the tension like a gentle breeze. “Consider it done.” He stroked my hair, kissing the top of my head.

“You’re not a prisoner here, Talía. You are the mother of my child, and I will do everything and anything to keep you safe and make you happy. This is your home now.”

I breathed deeply, appreciating Aleksandr’s gentleness.

“Come,” he encouraged, “let’s get you back to your room.”

Guiding me back to my bedroom, he fluffed up the pillows and tucked me into bed. “I’ll have Abram deliver your snack,” he chuckled.

“Can he bring enough ice cream for me and the children?” Not wanting to be alone, I hoped I could entice the children to keep me company.

“Of course, dushenka .“ Kissing me tenderly on the cheek, he ordered me to rest.

After he left, I lay there collecting my thoughts. Maybe Aleksandr is right. Perhaps I do belong here with him. He is the father of my baby, and I have no doubt he will protect us. It might be nice to have him take care of us. Besides, I can’t deny my feelings for him, as much as I’d like to ignore them. And once he takes care of Mikhail’s killer, I’ll be able to see Sandy.

Moments later, the door swung open to reveal Sasha and Maxim, accompanied by Olga.

“Look what we have!” Sasha squealed. Her face lit up at the sight of the extravagant ice cream sundaes, complete with a side of pickles. Olga placed the tray on my bedside table with a warm smile before slipping away silently.

“These look delicious.”

Sasha handed me a sundae and then took one herself, cuddling beside me on the bed. Maxim took the third sundae off the tray and got comfortable on the chaise.

“We’re going to the fancy ice cream shop soon,” Maxim declared eagerly, his eyes sparkling with anticipation.

“It’s so much fun there!” Sasha interrupted. “They have a gazillion flavors of ice cream, and you can taste as many as you want.”

“That’s not a real number,” Maxim teased. “But they do have an awful lot. Three counters full!”

“It sounds delightful.” I smiled warmly at them, my worries momentarily forgotten in the glow of their excitement. Together, we indulged in the decadent treats, the sweetness of the ice cream mingling with the tang of the pickles. This strange but oddly satisfying combination mirrored the complexity of my life. Surrounded by the innocent joy of the children and the promise of a simple pleasure like a trip to get ice cream, I savored the moment—a moment of tranquility amidst the storm brewing on the horizon.

### Chapter 28

Aleksandr

Night had fallen over the city, a cloak of secrecy and shadows draping itself over every alleyway and street corner. Dimitri and I, accompanied by two of my vors, strode into Club Echo. The air throbbed with the pulsating beat of the music. This hypnotic rhythm synchronized with the heartbeat of the city itself. Throngs of bodies moved, lost in the sound and the moment. Neon lights flickered, casting an ever-changing array of colors onto the dancers, their faces blurred with sweat and euphoria.

A familiar sense of tension coiled within me as we made our way through the sea of bodies. Crystal chandeliers hung from the ceiling, their light refracted into a thousand tiny rainbows by the smoke that hung in the air. Leather booths lined the walls, filled with patrons oblivious to the silent war waging around them.

Dimitri rang the doorbell leading to the VIP area, where a high-stakes poker game was in full swing. I ordered my two vors to wait outside, their eyes sharp for any sign of Vic. The door opened with a creak, and Joey escorted us to the gambling room. Cigar smoke hung in the air, and the click of poker chips mingled with the low murmur of conversation. The air was electric, charged with the weight of fortunes won and lost.

I scanned the room quickly, my eyes narrowing when I didn't see the one face I was looking for. The players, engrossed in their game, barely glanced up as we entered. "Where is Vic?" I demanded of Joey. "You told us he was here."



Before Joey could respond, Sam, a wiry guy with thinning hair and a twitchy demeanor, piped up. “Aleksandr, Dimitri,” he greeted with a nod, his eyes flicking around nervously. “Vic was just here but left a few minutes ago.”

“Where did he go?” I questioned my voice a growl of frustration. We were so close to getting this motherfucker, and I refused to let him slip through my fingers.

“I don’t know. He said he had to use the restroom but didn’t return.” Sam threw a few chips onto the pile in the middle of the table and then studied the cards he held, his face a mask of concentration.

I exchanged a glance with Dimitri, who nodded in understanding. “I’ll check the club,” he murmured, his voice barely audible over the background noise.

We moved back into the central area of the club, my anger mounting with every step. The crowd seemed thicker now, the music louder, the lights brighter. It was as if the club itself was mocking our efforts. As we threaded through the crowd, I spotted Sandy near the bar. She was with my man, Ivan, who watched over her as instructed.

She looked up and saw me, and her eyes widened slightly, but she masked her nerves quickly. I motioned for them to join us in a quieter corner, away from prying eyes and ears.

“Sandy,” I began, showing her the photo of Vic. “Have you seen this man tonight?”

She glanced at the photo, and I saw a flicker of recognition cross her features. “He was here earlier. I remember because he was acting all paranoid. Kept looking over his shoulder.”

“He’s dangerous,” I said, leaning in closer. “I believe he’s the man that killed my brother.”

“Oh my God,” Sandy murmured, her voice trembling. “Do you think he knows who I am? What if he comes back?” She wrapped her arms around herself, glancing anxiously around the club.

“You’re safe with Ivan,” I assured her, my tone firm. “But I don’t trust anyone in this club, Sandy. I need you to call me the minute you see him again. No one can know you’re helping us. Understand?” I glanced around the club, my eyes searching for any sign of Vic. “Ivan, stay with her at all times.”

Ivan nodded, understanding the gravity of his assignment. I gave her shoulder a reassuring squeeze. “You’ll be safe. I won’t let anyone hurt you.”

She gave me a tight smile, then glanced at Dimitri, who nodded his agreement. She held his gaze a moment before looking around the club again.

My mind raced through our next steps as I exited the club with Dimitri and my vors into the cool night air. The city was our hunting ground and battlefield, with its labyrinthine streets and hidden dangers. We no sooner got into the SUV and drove away when Dimitri nudged me and gestured subtly. “We’ve got a tail.”

I glanced back discreetly and saw a dark sedan following us at a distance. The headlights were a predatory gleam in the darkness. “Let’s take a detour,” I said quietly. “Somewhere secluded.”

We navigated the winding streets, leading our pursuers away from the bustling areas. Dimitri’s grip tightened on the steering wheel as we headed toward a deserted stretch of road by the docks. The other car followed as I had anticipated.

“Be ready,” I told Dimitri and my vors as we stopped. The air here was different, colder, with the tang of salt from the nearby sea. We stepped out, guns in hand, pointing them at the approaching car. The sedan rolled to a stop, and for a moment,

there was only the sound of our breathing and the distant hum of the city.

The car doors opened, and two men stepped out with their hands up, trying to look non-threatening. I recognized them immediately – they were Adachi's men. The tension in my chest coiled tighter, ready to strike. Two more men got out of the backseat, their guns drawn but not aimed at us.

"Relax," one of the men said. "We're not here for trouble."

Dimitri's eyes narrowed, but he didn't lower his weapon. "Then what are you here for?"

The car's back door opened again, and Haruto Adachi stepped out. As always, he was a picture of calm, his sharp suit pristine, and his expression unreadable. "Aleksandr," he said smoothly. "Let's not escalate this."

My blood boiled at the sight of him. "You tried to kill me, killed my cousin, stole from me, and shot my woman," I snarled, not lowering my gun. "You think we can just talk after that?"

Dimitri's eyes darted in my direction, but he said nothing.

Adachi raised his hand placatingly. "I'm sorry about the woman. It wasn't supposed to happen. And I'm sorry about your cousin. But we don't have to have a war, Aleksandr. Neither of us wants that. We can both profit if we work together."

Profit. Always about the money with him. I wanted to put a bullet in his skull for what he'd done, but he was right about one thing: a war would damage both our families. "Work together? You stole from me," I hissed. "You stole millions of dollars from me."

Adachi nodded slowly. "I have it on good authority you tortured my man into telling you where I'm storing the paintings and drugs. I assume you killed him once he gave you the information." Waving his hand in the air dismissively, he continued. "That's water under the bridge. I can be reasonable. I'll return it all to you – every cent - if you agree to have me handle distribution."

I sucked on my front teeth, weighing my options. The idea of putting a bullet between his eyes was still very appealing. "I might be willing to talk. We will discuss the distribution logistics when you return everything that belongs to me." Adachi grinned widely, making my stomach turn. I will never like or trust this man, but having the Yakuza on my side is good for business.

"But first, we need to settle the score."

Adachi's smile faded in understanding. He turned to one of his men and motioned for him to step forward. The man looked terrified, glancing between Adachi and me. "Give me your gun," Adachi ordered.

The man hesitated, then handed his gun to Adachi, who offered it to me. I took it, feeling the weight of the cold metal in my hand.

"This is the man that killed your cousin and shot the woman. Do what you need to do," Adachi said, his voice steady. "But remember, this will settle the score."

I aimed the gun at the man, who visibly trembled. The fear in his eyes was almost pitiable, but pity had no place here. This was about sending a message. I fired, the gunshot echoing through the night. The bullet hit the man square in the chest. His eyes widened in shock as a dark red circle appeared on his shirt.

I fired the gun again. This time, the bullet bore into his forehead, killing him instantly. The man crumpled to the ground, lifeless.

Adachi didn't flinch. He knew this was the price of our truce. "Now," he said, "can we talk?"

I handed the gun back to him, my heart still pounding with anger and adrenaline. "We'll talk," I said coldly, "when you return my belongings. But there won't be any negotiations if you cross me again."

Adachi nodded with a vile smile, and I knew he understood. This was far from over, but we had a fragile peace for now. As we returned to our vehicles and drove away, I couldn't help but think of Talia and Andrey, and the price they had paid. This was our world, where blood and betrayal were the currency, and trust was rare and precious.

Dimitri glanced at me as we drove back into the city. "You think Adachi will keep his word?"

I shook my head slightly. "Trust is a luxury we can't afford. We'll be ready for whatever comes next."

As the city lights blurred past, I knew one thing for sure: in this game of power and survival, only the ruthless would emerge unscathed. And I will always be one of them.

### Chapter 29

Aleksandr

The sun peeked over the horizon as I stood in Talia's room, watching her sleep. She looked peaceful, her face relaxed, and momentarily, I could almost forget the chaos surrounding our lives. Gently, I reached out and brushed a strand of hair away from her face. Her eyelids fluttered, and then she opened her eyes, focusing on me with a sleepy, slightly confused expression.

"Aleksandr," she murmured, her voice thick with sleep. "What time is it?"

"Early," I replied softly, sitting on the edge of the bed.

She sat up in bed, rubbing the sleep from her eyes. Cradling her stomach, she smiled softly. "I think the baby is awake, too."

Taking my hand in hers, she placed my hand on her belly. Warm feelings filled me with the knowledge that she was carrying my baby. I visualized Talia as my wife for a moment but dismissed the thought as fast as it arrived. My lifestyle is too dangerous to allow ridiculous fantasies to invade my thoughts.

Pulling my hand away, I cleared my throat, glancing out the window. "I have some news," I said, leaving the bed and sitting on the plush chair instead. "Vic was at the club last night but slipped out before we could grab him. Sandy will call when she sees him again."

“Is Sandy alright? I need to speak with her,” she stated, reaching for the cell phone on her table.

“Sandy is fine. She has round-the-clock guards keeping her safe. My man Ivan is with her now.”

“I still want to speak with her,” Talia insisted, her cheeks flushed.

“Of course,” I assured her. “But before you do, I need you to get dressed. I’m taking you out for breakfast.”

Her eyes widened in surprise. “Out? As in, leave the mansion?”

“Yes,” I said, smiling at her reaction. “I think it’s time you had a change of scenery.”

She hesitated, then nodded, a small smile on her lips. “Okay, give me a minute to get dressed.”

I watched as she climbed out of bed and crossed the room to her closet. She chose a pair of jeans, a soft, buttery yellow sweater, and her favorite black boots. There was something simple yet captivating about how she dressed, a combination of elegance and practicality that suited her perfectly.

Ducking into the bathroom, she quickly washed up and emerged looking radiant. After sliding on her jean jacket, we were ready to go. She promptly called Sandy as we walked through the mansion, reassuring herself that Sandy was safe.

Dimitri and another one of my men were already waiting by the SUV. As always, they would follow us in a separate vehicle. Protection is a constant necessity in our world.

I watched Talia from the corner of my eye as I drove to a nearby café. A soft smile appeared on her lips as she gazed out the passenger window. “I love this time of year,” she whispered. “Do you like pumpkin spiced coffee?”

“Yes,” I laughed, finding her question out of left field.

“Good, then we can be friends,” she teased.

Friends? I don’t think I’ve ever been friends with a woman. And Talia is no exception. Somehow, she has wormed her way into my heart, claiming it for herself. We continued to drive silently, my mind reeling with conflicting thoughts about this gorgeous woman beside me. What my heart wanted was in conflict with what my mind thinks is the right thing to do.

We arrived at the café, a quaint little place tucked away from the main streets. It was quiet this early in the morning, the perfect spot for a private conversation. Settling into a corner table, I ordered coffee and breakfast. Talia seemed to relax a little, enjoying the normalcy of the moment.

But as we sipped our coffee and waited for our food, I noticed her expression change. She was staring at a man across the café, her face growing pale.

“Aleksandr,” she whispered, her voice trembling. “That man... I’ve seen him at the club.”

I followed her gaze and immediately recognized the man. Tommy Lansky, a captain in the Italian mafia. Two of his men stood guard behind him, their eyes scanning the room.

“You’re safe, Talia,” I said firmly, placing my hand over hers. “He’s here to talk, nothing more.”



Her eyes narrowed in suspicion, flicking from Tommy to me and back again. Placing her hands in her lap, she leaned back in her seat, squaring her shoulders.

Tommy noticed us and made his way over to our table, his men following close behind. He pulled out a chair and sat down, a slight smirk on his lips.

“Aleksandr,” he said in a smooth, confident voice. “And this must be the famous Talia. I’ve heard a lot about you.” He held his hand in greeting, but Talia just stared at it.

She glanced at me, uncertainty in her eyes. I gave her a reassuring nod. She quickly shook Tommy’s hand and then folded her hands in her lap again.

“Tommy,” I began, leaning forward slightly. “Talia was at Club Echo the night my brother was killed. She saw and heard things that you need to know.”

Tommy’s expression grew serious. “Go on.”

Talia took a deep breath, her hands trembling slightly. A drop of sweat trickled down her forehead. “I was working that night and saw Vic and Mikhail alone in a room. They were arguing about money, gambling money, I think. Vic was furious, accusing Mikhail of owing him money. Vic asked Mikhail if he thought Mr. Lupani was his private wallet. Then he told Mikhail if he didn’t pay up, he’d add more money to the owed amount.” She cleared her throat, took a sip of water, and then continued. “That’s when it got violent... and Vic pulled out a gun.”

She paused, her eyes distant as she relived the memory. “He shot Mikhail.”

Tommy listened intently, his face unreadable. When Talia finished, he nodded slowly. “I’ve had my suspicions about Vic for a while now. Stealing the gambling money... It fits.”

He turned to me, his expression hardening. “Aleksandr, I’m sorry for what happened to your brother. You have my blessing to deal with Vic as you see fit. He has crossed the line, and there will be no interference from me or Mr. Lupani.”

“Thank you, Tommy,” I said, feeling relieved. “Do you know where he is?”

Tommy nodded. “He’s been hanging out at a place downtown, a run-down warehouse near the docks. Be careful, Aleksandr. Vic is dangerous, and he’s desperate.”

I looked at Talia, her face pale but resolute. “We’ll take care of it,” I said, shaking Tommy’s hand.

Tommy stood up, his men falling in behind him. He left us in a silence that felt heavy with unspoken words. I turned back to Talia, staring at her coffee, her hands still trembling.

“Are you okay?” I asked gently.

She nodded, but I could see the fear in her eyes. “I just... I didn’t expect to see him here.”

I reached across the table and took her hands in mine. “We’ll get Vic and make him pay.”

She looked up at me, her eyes filled with determination. “I know. I trust you, Aleksandr.”

I felt a flicker of hope for the first time in a long while. We finished our breakfast in relative silence, the gravity of the situation hanging over us. When we left the café, Dimitri and my vor fell into step behind us, their presence a reminder of the constant danger surrounding us.

As we drove back to the mansion, I couldn't help but think about the events that had brought us to this point: the betrayal, the violence, the loss of Mikhail. It all seemed like a nightmare, but it was our reality. And now we had a chance to set things right.

When we arrived at the mansion, I escorted Talia to her room. She needed to rest, for her sake and the baby's. I kissed her forehead gently.

"Get some sleep," I whispered.

She nodded, her eyes heavy with exhaustion. "Be careful, Aleksandr."

"I will," I promised, watching as she lay down and closed her eyes.

I found Dimitri waiting for me in the hallway. "Is everything okay, brat," he asked.

Feeling a surge of adrenaline, I nodded. "It's time to end this."

Vic will learn that betrayal comes with a heavy price. And I will ensure that Talia is safe and Mikhail's death is avenged, once and for all.

### Chapter 30

Talia

That evening, after a long day of trying to keep my thoughts and emotions at bay, I decided to call Sandy. The familiar routine of our conversations had always been a source of comfort, an anchor in the chaotic sea that my life had become. I needed her steadying presence now more than ever, especially after everything that had happened.

I picked up my phone and dialed her number. The line rang a few times before she answered, her voice comforting as always. “Sis, how is everything? Are you okay?”

“Yes, but...” I began, hesitating for a moment before letting the words spill out in a rush. “Aleksandr took me to breakfast at a nearby café, and this guy Tommy showed up.”

There was a brief pause on the other end, and then Sandy’s concern came through loud and clear. “Tommy? Who is he, and why was he there?” she demanded.

“Tommy is in the Italian mafia. The same family that Vic is associated with.” I paused, sucking in a deep breath.

“What?!” Sandy screamed. “Why the hell was he there? And where was Aleksandr?”

“It’s okay, sis,” I assured her. “Please, calm down.”

Sandy took a few deep breaths. “Fine,” she hissed through her teeth. “I’m calm. Tell me what happened.”

“Tommy is Vic’s superior. I told him what I saw and heard the night Vic killed Mikhail. Tommy gave Aleksandr his blessing to deal with Vic any way he sees fit.”

“Does that mean what it sounds like?”

“Yes, exactly what it sounds like. Aleksandr swore he’d take care of Vic, and then we’ll be safe, sis. We won’t have to go to San Francisco.” I smiled softly at the thought of being able to see Sandy again. I desperately needed one of her sisterly hugs.

“Let’s hope he gets to Vic sooner than later. I’m ready for us to go back home and get back to our lives.” Sandy released a slow breath. “I’ve been keeping my eyes open at the club, but there hasn’t been any sign of him so far.”

“Who is guarding you now?” I asked out of sheer curiosity.

“Ivan was with me earlier, then Boris, and now Dimitri.”

If I wasn’t mistaken, I could hear Sandy smile when she said Dimitri’s name.

“Dimitri, huh? Why does it sound like you’re smiling?”

“What...um...I’m not, cut it out!” Sandy giggled. “He’s nice, that’s all.”

“Mmhmm. Nice and attractive,” I teased.

“He’s a very good-looking man,” Sandy admitted. “I like talking to him when he guards me.”

“Well, maybe when this is all over, you can go on a date,” I suggested.

“I don’t know, sis. I don’t see him being in my life when this is all over.” Sandy sighed quietly.

“You never know where it can lead. For example, Aleksandr knows he’s the baby’s father.” My heart skipped a beat, and I held my breath, waiting for her response.

There was a pause on the other end of the line, the silence heavy with anticipation. The reality of those words still felt surreal, like I was living in some kind of dream.

“Whoa,” Sandy exhaled, the surprise evident in her voice. “How did that come out?”

“It was inevitable,” I said, trying to keep my voice steady. “Dr. Daria found out when she examined me after I was shot. She told Aleksandr, and he insisted on a paternity test. The results were positive; he’s definitely the father.”

Sandy was silent for a moment, processing this new information. “And how’s he taking it?”

I hesitated, trying to put my chaotic thoughts into words. “Surprisingly well. He’s been... supportive. Caring, even. It’s confusing.”

“Confusing how?” Sandy’s tone was gentle yet probing, encouraging me to open up.

“I don’t know,” I admitted, gripping my hair in frustration. “He’s this powerful, intimidating man, head of a Russian mafia family, and yet... he cares for the children and looks out for me. Family is everything to him. He’s insisting I stay here and raise the baby here with him.”

Sandy’s voice took on a knowing lilt. “Sounds like someone’s falling for the big bad

mafia boss.”

I rolled my eyes, even though she couldn’t see it. “It’s not like that, Sandy. I just think it might not be a bad idea to have the baby’s father around.”

“Sure, Talia. Keep telling yourself that.” She laughed softly, but I could hear the concern in her voice. “Just be careful, okay? Mafia life isn’t easy or safe, as you already found out.”

“That’s true,” I said, trying to sound more confident than I felt. “But, I’m safe here. Sis, thanks for always being there for me and understanding.”

“Always,” Sandy promised, her voice filled with warmth. “Take care of yourself and that baby. We’ll sort everything out once you’re out of mortal danger.”

“I love you, sis. Be safe.”

We ended the call, but her words lingered in my mind, stirring up a tempest of emotions. Was I falling for Aleksandr? It seemed ridiculous, yet the thought wouldn’t leave me. I knew the darkness that surrounded him, the danger that came with his world. And yet, the way he cared for those close to him, the way he was with the children, tugged at something deep within me.

Unable to quiet my restless thoughts, I wandered down to the kitchen, hoping a snack might distract me. The mansion was eerily quiet at this hour; the only sounds were the distant hum of the refrigerator. The grandeur of the place still took my breath away, the luxurious furnishings, the intricate details in the woodwork, the opulence that seemed to ooze from every corner.

On the way back to my room, I passed by Aleksandr’s office and noticed the door was slightly ajar, the light spilling out into the dark hallway. I paused, drawn by the

low murmur of his voice from within.

“Vic wasn’t at the warehouse near the docks,” Aleksandr was saying, his tone clipped and hard. “And he hasn’t been there all day or night.”

I pressed closer, my heart pounding in my chest. The hallway seemed to grow colder, the shadows darker, as I strained to hear more.

“I don’t care what it takes,” he continued, his voice seething with anger. “Speak with Tommy again. Turn the city inside out. Anton, do whatever you have to do to find him.”

The call ended, and I stood there, frozen. A shiver shot down my spine. It was clear that Aleksandr wouldn’t stop until he got his revenge.

Gathering my courage, I knocked lightly on the door, and after a moment, he called, “Come in.”

I pushed the door open and stepped inside. Aleksandr was pouring himself a glass of vodka. He glanced up, his eyes softening when he saw me. “Can’t sleep?”

“No,” I admitted, feeling a bit foolish. “Just needed a snack. I am eating for two,” I chuckled.

He gestured towards the chair across from him. “Join me?”

I nodded, sitting down as he poured me a glass of club soda. The office, filled with dark wood and heavy leather furniture, was a stark contrast to the rest of the mansion. It commanded respect, a reflection of the man who occupied it.

We sat in silence for a moment, the weight of unspoken words hanging between us. I



could feel the intensity of his gaze, the way his eyes seemed to pierce through my defenses, uncovering truths I wasn't ready to face.

"Tell me about your family," he said suddenly, his voice gentle yet commanding. "You told me both your parents died. How did that happen?"

I took a shaky breath, feeling the old wounds ache as I began to speak. "My father went to jail when I was three years old. He killed our next-door neighbor, who was having an affair with my mother. I guess he couldn't handle the betrayal." Taking a sip of the club soda, I paused, reflecting on my memories. "I don't remember much about him, but I have a photo of him and my mother. I have his eyes."

"How did he get killed?" Aleksandr inquired.

"I read in a newspaper article that he got killed in jail in a fight with another inmate. I collected newspaper articles about him when I got older. That's the only reason I know anything about what happened."

Aleksandr's expression was unreadable, but I could see the intensity in his eyes, a flicker of something that looked almost like empathy. "And your mother?"

"She overdosed on drugs two years after my father was arrested," I said, my voice breaking slightly. The memories were like shards of glass, cutting deep with every word. "It was just too much for her to handle. The neighbor's wife accused my mother of being the reason that she lost her husband, and her son lost his father. She was able to turn most of the people in town against my mother, which caused my mother to become an addict."

"I'm sorry," he said softly, and for a moment, I saw a flicker of vulnerability in his eyes. "How did you manage after that?"

“I went into foster care,” I said, trying to keep my voice steady. The foster system had been a nightmare, a series of homes that felt more like prisons than sanctuaries. “Then I met Sandy in the last home I was placed in. She became my best friend and my family. We lived together in an apartment before she moved to New York.”

“And your past relationships?” His question was gentle, yet I could feel the weight behind it, the need to understand.

“I didn’t date much,” I admitted. “Not until I met Danny.”

Aleksandr’s eyes darkened slightly at the mention of Danny. “Why did you run away from him?”

I clammed up, the memories too raw to revisit. “He wasn’t a good guy,” I said finally, my voice barely above a whisper.

He didn’t press for more information, sensing my reluctance. Instead, he just nodded. “You’re safe here,” he said softly. “No one will hurt you.”

I looked at him, seeing the promise in his eyes. For a moment, I allowed myself to be sucked into the fantasy of being in a relationship with Aleksandr and living here with him and our baby as a family instead of having an obligation to be his heir’s mother. “Thank you,” I said, my voice filled with fleeting hope.

He nodded, taking a sip of his whiskey. “Get some rest,” he said. “You and the baby need it.”

I stood up, feeling a strange mix of emotions swirling inside me. There was so much about Aleksandr that I didn’t understand, so many layers to the man who was now such a significant part of my life. As I returned to my room, the mansion’s grandeur seemed to close in on me, the walls heavy with secrets.

In my room, I lay down on the bed, my mind racing. There was so much to process, so many conflicting emotions. Could we really have a life together with our baby? Could there be a future for us?

I closed my eyes, trying to silence the doubts and fears. But even as sleep claimed me, Aleksandr's image lingered in my mind, his eyes haunting me, his presence a constant, inescapable reality. I couldn't shake the feeling that my life was about to change in ways I couldn't yet comprehend, and I wasn't sure if I was ready for it.

### Chapter 31

Aleksandr

The morning light danced across the kitchen counter as the rich scent of freshly brewed coffee filled the air. I stood at the stove, flipping pancakes with one hand while stirring a pot of scrambled eggs with the other. The rhythmic clinking of utensils and the gentle hiss of the stovetop were a soothing backdrop to the laughter of Sasha and Maxim, who sat at the island counter, eagerly awaiting their gourmet breakfast.

“Uncle, may I have extra strawberries on my pancakes?” Sasha asked, her green eyes sparkling with excitement. Her long blonde hair framed her cherubic face, and she bounced in her seat, unable to contain her enthusiasm.

“Of course, printsessa,” I replied, ruffling her hair gently. Her smile widened, and I felt a familiar warmth in my chest. Maxim, her older brother, watched with an expectant look.

“And don’t forget the whipped cream for me!” he added, his voice brimming with anticipation. His dark hair and serious expression mirrored my own, a constant reminder of the legacy of the Avilov family.

I laughed, feeling a rare sense of peace and contentment. These moments, cooking breakfast for the kids, were the few times I felt normal, far removed from the darker parts of my life. I carefully arranged the pancakes on plates, adding generous helpings of strawberries and whipped cream, ensuring every detail was perfect.

As I placed the plates in front of Sasha and Maxim, Talia wandered into the kitchen, her hair tousled from sleep. She wore pink pajamas and fluffy pink slippers. Her presence immediately brightened the room. My heart tightened in my chest as I watched her sit at the table, her beauty understated yet captivating.

“Good morning,” she said, her voice soft and warm. “That smells amazing.”

I walked over with a plate of food and set it in front of her. “Sit and enjoy. You need to eat, doctor’s orders,” I said, placing my hand on her small but noticeable baby bump. Her eyes met mine, and a tender smile spread across her face, an unspoken bond between us solidifying in that moment.

We all ate together, the room filled with clinking forks and cheerful chatter. Sasha and Maxim regaled us with tales of their latest adventures, their faces animated with youthful exuberance. Talia and I exchanged amused glances over their heads, our connection deepening with every shared look and quiet laugh. It was a perfect morning, one I wished could last forever.

Eventually, Olga came in to usher the children off to their studies. They groaned in protest but obediently followed her out of the kitchen, their footsteps fading down the hallway. I turned to Talia, brushing a strand of hair away from her face, my touch lingering.

“I have to go out for the day,” I said, my voice tinged with reluctance. “I want you to take it easy and relax. If you need anything, let Abram know.”

She nodded, chewing on her lower lip. “Be careful, Aleksandr.”

I took one last look at her before I grabbed my coat and left the house with Anton. The drive to the art gallery was short, but my mind was already shifting gears, preparing for the business ahead. The cityscape blurred past the passenger window, a

mix of old-world architecture and modern high-rises, a testament to the duality of my life.

When we arrived at the gallery, Dimitri was waiting. The tension was palpable, and I could tell he was on edge. The air was thick with the scent of paint and varnish, mingling with the underlying unease that came with our line of work. Haruto Adachi was due to arrive any minute, and the stakes were high.

We didn't have to wait long. Adachi arrived, flanked by his men, carrying the paintings and the drugs he had stolen from me. His expression was inscrutable, a mask of calm that betrayed nothing. Still, his eyes showed a glint of respect as he handed over the goods.

"I believe these belong to you," Adachi said, his tone even, each word meticulously measured.

I nodded, taking the paintings, their weight a tangible reminder of our fragile alliance. "Now, let's discuss our arrangement."

Anton led Adachi and his men to a private room in the gallery. They sat at the table across from us, scrutinizing our every move. Dimitri poured whiskey into the crystal glasses before each man, then sat in the seat to my right. His fingers danced across the butt of the gun tucked into the waist of his pants. His face was emotionless, but his eyes were focused, ready for anything.

I cleared my throat, folding my hands on the table before me. "I agree to have you handle distribution from New York to San Francisco."

Adachi grinned widely. "I knew you would come to your senses. Having the Yakuza on your side is a smart move." He visibly relaxed, holding up his glass. "To our new arrangement," he said, sipping whiskey. The rest of us followed, sipping our drinks.

Adachi and the Yakuza would handle the distribution of our drugs, hidden within the artwork, from New York to San Francisco. It was a lucrative arrangement, promising significant expansion and profits, but I couldn't shake the feeling that Adachi had his own agenda, shadows lurking behind his composed exterior.

After he left, I turned to Dimitri and Anton, the gravity of the situation settling in. "Keep a close eye on Adachi. I don't trust him."

Dimitri nodded, his expression serious. "What about Angelo Carvallo? Are we keeping him on for the New York area?"

"Da," I replied, my tone firm. "But only for New York. We must have a backup in case things go badly with Adachi."

After leaving Dimitri and Anton in the gallery, I settled into my office and worked for the remainder of the day.

Satisfied that the day's business was concluded, I returned to the mansion. The sun was beginning to set, casting long shadows across the grounds.

As I walked through the mansion, I found Talia lounging by the pool, a soft blanket draped over her shoulders. My eyes were drawn to her tiny baby bump, and a possessive feeling surged. She was mine, and so was our baby.

I walked over and sat beside her, resisting the urge to rest my hand on her belly. The autumn air was cool as the sun slinked past the horizon. "How are you feeling?" I asked, my voice husky with emotion. The vulnerability of the moment was uncharacteristic but unavoidable.

She smiled, placing her hand on her belly. "I'm feeling good. The baby is behaving today. I haven't had any morning sickness."

“Good,” I said. She was so beautiful. A fire ignited in my core, my need for her palpable. I wanted to show her off as much as I wanted to bury my cock deep inside her. “I’m taking you out for dinner tonight.”

Her eyes sparkled with excitement. “I’d love that.”

“Go get ready,” I instructed.

A little while later, Talia came down the stairs wearing a stunning red dress and heels. She looked breathtaking, and I felt a surge of desire as I took her in. Her dress clung to her curves in all the right places, the deep red complimenting her golden skin. She moved with a grace that took my breath away, each step a testament to her strength and elegance.

“You look beautiful,” I said, holding out her coat. She slipped it on and then took my hand. I led her to the car, opening the passenger door. “Are we going alone?” she asked curiously.

“Anton and Ivan will be following in a car behind us.”

“Where is Dimitri tonight?” she asked, sliding into the passenger seat.

“Dimitri is guarding Sandy.” I noticed her smiling as I got into the driver’s seat. “Something I should know?” I questioned, a smile playing on my lips.

“No, nothing,” she lied, biting her lower lip to keep from giving away her secret. My eyes were drawn to her mouth, wanting to bite and suck on her plump lips.

The evening air was cool, a gentle breeze whispering through the trees as we drove towards the city.



Placing her hand on mine, she leaned over and kissed me on the cheek. “Thank you for taking me out. I needed this.” She sat back in her seat, but her gaze bore into me.

Slowly pulling the SUV to the side of the road, I signaled for Anton to stop his car behind me. Pulling out my cell phone, I sent him a message. Then I unbuckled my seatbelt, and unbuckled Talia’s.

“What are you doing?” she asked, confused.

I brought my lips down on hers, kissing her roughly. “I’m going to fuck you now,” I breathed against her plump lips. “Your pussy belongs to me.”

### Chapter 32

Talia

The shock of his lips on mine sent a shiver down my spine. I let out a whimper as he opened my mouth wider and slid his tongue across mine. His kiss was demanding, and I melted into him. My hands slid around his neck, and his fingers tangled in my hair, keeping me right where he wanted. His musky scent tingled my senses, and my panties became wet with arousal.

He slipped his hand underneath my dress, his fingers smoothly gliding up my thigh. Cupping my pussy with his hand, his lips trailed my neck to my collarbone. Hooking his fingers into the plunging neckline of my dress, he pulled it down, freeing my breasts.

“Beautiful,” he breathed, circling the nipple on my right breast with his tongue. Shocks of excitement spread through my core. He sucked the nipple into his mouth while massaging my left breast with his free hand.

“Aleksandr,” I moaned, needing his cock inside me.

Switching to my left breast, he sucked and pulled on my nipple with his lips and tongue. At the same time, he pushed aside my panties, sliding his finger up and down my slit.

“You’re so wet, kiska ,“ he growls, circling my clit with his finger. In one swift movement, he pushed two fingers into my pussy. I gasped as he pushed them in

deeper, twisting them until he hit the spot that makes me throw my head back and scream.

“Oh my God, yessss!”

He kisses me fiercely as he drives his fingers in and out of my pussy, faster and harder with each thrust. Goosebumps cover my skin, and I muffle another scream. My core spasms, and my pussy tightens around his fingers.

“Yes, Talia, come for me,” he demands. He shoves a third finger in my pussy and presses the heel of his palm against my clit. Faster and deeper, he thrusts his fingers into me. Stars dance behind my eyes as my pussy spasms.

“Yess!” I cry out as an orgasm hits me like a freight train. I fall apart around his fingers, my juices flowing over his hand and down my thighs.

He doesn’t give me a chance to come down from my high. He unzips his pants and frees his rock hard cock. Ripping my panties off, he lifts me up by my waist and impales me balls deeps onto his cock.

“ You’re mine ,“ he growls, wrapping his arms around my body and pinning me in place.

My body jerks involuntarily at the fullness of his thick, long cock, stretching my pussy open. Lifting me up a few inches, he slams me back down again. My breasts bounce and jiggle as he lifts me up and slams me down over and over. He sucks a nipple into his mouth as he pushes his cock even deeper into my dripping-wet pussy. I groan, desperately trying to rub my clit on him as he fucks me raw. He slaps my ass so hard my mouth forms a silent O in shock.

“You’ll come when I tell you to come,” he hisses, tangling his fingers in my hair and

pulling my head back. Dragging his lips across my throat, he nips at my neck with his teeth.

“P-please, Aleksandr,” I beg. Another slap on my ass leaves it tingly and red.

“My dirty little kiska, “ he moans. “So desperate to fall apart for me.”

He fucks me at an impossible pace; I can barely catch my breath. My pussy walls constrict around his cock as I hang on the edge of an orgasm.

“Aleksandr...I n-need to c-come,” I cry out.

“Not yet,” he growls, tugging my hair until it stings my scalp. Faster and deeper, he fucks me, one hand in my hair, the other pinching and slapping my breasts. The heat builds between us as our bodies collide over and over until he gives me permission to come.

“Now, kiska! “ he commands.

An orgasm rips through me, every limb going numb with pleasure. His balls tighten and he shoots stream after stream of hot cum filling up my pussy.

“ Mine ,“ he moans, pushing his cock deep until every drop of cum is released.

My body goes limp as I lie against him, breathing heavily. My heart is pounding in my ears and his cock goes soft inside me. Cradling my face in his hands, he kisses me tenderly on the lips. My mind begins racing with fantasies of us being together as a real couple. I kiss him back passionately, but to my surprise, he pulls away, lifts me off his cock, and places me in the passenger seat.

Without a word, he zips up his pants, starts the SUV, and pulls back onto the road.

I'm sitting there in disbelief with my dress pushed up to my waist and his cum dripping down my thighs. What just happened? Once again, I feel entirely dismissed.

Ignoring any fantasy I had of us being a real couple, I straighten my dress and buckle my seatbelt. We sat in silence for the rest of the drive. My mind tries to convince me that I'm totally fine with just being his "baby mama" and fucking him, but my heart wrestles with it. I'm in love with him, and there isn't a damn thing I can do about it.

Masking my feelings, I smile brightly as we pull up in front of the restaurant. I decide to enjoy my time out of the mansion and forget how my heart longs for Aleksandr to love me in return.

Opening the passenger door, Aleksandr offers to assist me. "Thank you," I say politely, allowing him to lead me into the restaurant.

### Chapter 33

#### Talia

The chandelier glistened overhead as we entered the restaurant, a realm of luxury and tantalizing scents. Crystal droplets catch the light, casting shimmering reflections across the room, filled with the murmur of polite conversation and the clinking of fine china. Aleksandr's hand, warm and firm on my lower back, guides me through the gilded entrance, Anton and Ivan following closely behind us. The weight of his presence makes me acutely aware of every glance, every gaze upon us. I could feel the eyes of the other diners upon me, their gazes a mixture of curiosity and reverence. My dress clings to my curves, the red color as bold as the heels I'm wearing, and I can't help but wonder if the dress or the company is drawing their attention. Whispers float around us like delicate tendrils of smoke, curling into my consciousness and igniting my curiosity.

"Aleksandr," I murmur, leaning closer to him as we walk. "Why are they staring?"

The corner of his lips hiked up, his dark eyes glinting with amusement and something else I can't quite name. "They know who I am. Many are from other families, rivals, and allies alike."

"Pakhan of the Avilov family," I said, more to myself than to him. The weight of his title settled over me like a heavy, invisible cloak. The whispers grew louder as if to confirm his words. But then, Aleksandr's smile widened into a rare and genuine expression that made my heart skip a beat.

“And they’re also whispering because you are the most beautiful woman in the restaurant.” His voice was low and intimate, sending shivers down my spine.

Before I could respond, the hostess approached us with a practiced smile, her eyes lingering on Aleksandr a moment too long for my liking. “Mr. Avilov,” she said, inclining her head. “Your table is ready.”

We were led to a secluded restaurant corner, a VIP table offering privacy and a view of the entire room. The table was draped in fine linen, and a single candle flickered between us, casting a soft, golden light over our faces. As we settled into our seats, I noticed more than one envious glance cast our way. It seemed Aleksandr’s reputation and my presence created a perfect storm of curiosity and speculation.

The waitress appeared, her demeanor shifting to blatant flirtation as she took our orders. Her fingers brushed Aleksandr’s shoulder as she handed him the menu, and I felt a flare of jealousy ignite within me. But Aleksandr’s eyes never left mine, his gaze steady and reassuring.

“What can I get for you, sir?” the waitress asked, her voice dripping with honey.

Aleksandr didn’t even glance at her. “We’ll have the chef’s special,” he said, focusing solely on me. “And a bottle of your finest red wine.”

“I’ll take a club soda with a lime. Thanks.” I gave the waitress my best smile, but my eyes shot daggers at her.

The waitress’s smile faltered before she composed herself and left us to our privacy. I couldn’t help but smirk a little, pleased by Aleksandr’s unwavering focus on me.

“You look stunning tonight,” he said, his voice softer now that we were alone. “Your dress is gorgeous, but I prefer you naked.”

I felt a blush creep up my cheeks, flattered and self-conscious under his intense scrutiny. “Oh, um...thank you. You look...very handsome.”

He chuckled and reached across the table to take my hand. His fingers were strong but gentle, a contrast that intrigued me. Aleksandr was more than just a mafia boss; he was intelligent, charming, and unexpectedly kind.

“Do you come here often?” I asked sheepishly. I wanted to know if he came here often with other females.

“Yes, I frequent this restaurant,” he replied, amused.

“Oh,” my smile faltered, glancing at my hands folded in my lap. “Do...do you come here frequently with other women?” I searched his face, knowing the answer was probably yes but hoping it was no.

“You are the first woman I have taken to this restaurant. I usually come here for business reasons only.”

“Really?” Hope and anticipation bubbled, but I tried to remain casual. “I assumed you’ve taken other women here before me.”

Aleksandr’s lip ticked as a smirk appeared. “Not only are you the most beautiful woman in this restaurant, but you are also the first woman to dine with me. It seems you have piqued the interest of the other diners.”

Glancing around the restaurant, I noticed some women and men stealing looks at us. The whispering continued, and I suddenly felt incredibly self-conscious.

Reaching across the table, Aleksandr held out his hand. Hesitantly, I gave him mine. Bringing it to his lips, he kissed it gently.



“Thank you for accepting my dinner invitation.” The fire burned behind his blue eyes, heating my core and making my panties wet.

The world outside our little bubble faded into insignificance. I barely noticed the waitress placing the food on our table. It was exquisite—delicate morsels of seafood, tender cuts of beef, and vegetables prepared with a skill that spoke of a master chef. Each bite was a revelation, a symphony of flavors that seemed almost too extravagant to be real. But it was Aleksandr’s company that truly captivated me. He listened intently as I spoke, his eyes never leaving mine, and the intensity of his gaze made me feel like the only woman in the world.

But beneath his warmth was an edge, a hardness that spoke of the life he led. It was that duality that drew me to him; the light and the dark intertwined in a dangerous and intoxicating way. I admired how he carried himself, with an air of authority and confidence demanding respect.

“Any luck finding Vic?” I inquired.

“Not yet, but we will get him. This will all be over soon enough.” His face was a mask of determination, and I believed he’d stop at nothing to get Vic.

After a while, I excused myself to go to the restroom. The opulent decor of the restaurant continued into the hallway, but the further I went, the quieter it became. Gold-framed mirrors hung on the walls, reflecting the dim lighting and creating a sense of sophistication. I freshened up quickly, staring at my reflection in the mirror. The woman looking back at me was confident and alluring, but there was a flicker of something else in her eyes—uncertainty, perhaps. I shook my head, pushing the thought away, and exited the restroom.

The hallway was dimly lit, and as I walked back towards the dining area, I felt a sudden, dark presence behind me. Before I could react, a rough hand clamped over

my mouth, and I felt a prick in my neck, a needle injecting something into my bloodstream. Panic surged through me, my body choosing fight over flight.

Adrenaline coursed through my veins, sharpening my senses. I stomped down with my heel, aiming for my assailant's foot. A muffled cry of pain told me I'd hit my mark. Summoning all my strength, I reached behind me and grabbed his crotch, squeezing and twisting with every ounce of force I could muster. He howled, his grip loosening just enough for me to break free.

My vision blurred as I stumbled into the dining room, my legs feeling like jelly. I could hear Aleksandr's voice, a roar of fury cutting through the haze, but I couldn't focus on the words. The world tilted, the faces of the diners spinning in a surreal dance of concern and curiosity. The luxurious surroundings seemed to warp and distort, the rich colors and textures blending into a disorienting swirl.

Each step felt like I was wading through water, my limbs heavy and uncooperative. I reached out, trying to steady myself on the back of a nearby chair, but my fingers slipped off the polished surface. The voices around me grew louder, a cacophony of alarmed exclamations and hushed whispers. Aleksandr's figure loomed ahead, his expression full of rage and fear.

My strength waned, my vision narrowing to a dark tunnel. The last thing I saw was Aleksandr rushing towards me, his eyes wide with panic. Then, everything went black, the world dissolving into nothingness as I fell into unconsciousness.

### Chapter 34

Aleksandr

The gasps from the other diners echoed through the restaurant, slicing through the air like a knife. My heart pounded as I watched Talia collapse, her body crumpling to the floor. The restaurant, with its ornate chandeliers and richly adorned walls, suddenly felt like a cage. I dropped to my knees beside her, my hands trembling as I gently cupped her face. The golden light from the chandelier above cast a halo around her, but her face was pale, lifeless.

“Talia, wake up,” I urged, my voice raw with panic. “Please, wake up.”

My eyes scanned her body, landing on a small puncture mark on her neck. It was a tiny, almost insignificant wound, but its effect was catastrophic. I clenched my jaw, fury, and fear intertwining as I turned to shout orders at Anton and Ivan. The room buzzed with the murmur of concerned diners, their faces blurring together, their whispers growing louder.

A restaurant worker rushed over, phone in hand. “I’ve called 9-1-1. An ambulance is on its way,” she said, her voice trembling, her wide eyes filled with fear.

I barely acknowledged her, my focus entirely on Talia. I held her close, whispering words of comfort that I hoped she could hear. My hands were warm and strong, contrasting with the cold numbness spreading through her body. Time seemed to stretch, each second an eternity, until finally, the wail of sirens pierced the air, a sound that was both a beacon of hope and a harbinger of fear.

Paramedics burst into the restaurant, their efficient movements contradicting with the chaos that had enveloped the room. Their uniforms were a blur of blue and white as they quickly assessed the situation, lifting Talia onto a stretcher and securing her in place with practiced precision. My grip on her hand tightened, my eyes never leaving hers.

“She’s my wife,” I said urgently to the paramedics, my voice cracking with emotion, “and she’s pregnant. I’m coming with her.”

The paramedics exchanged glances but didn’t argue, allowing me to climb into the ambulance. I held Talia’s hand, my knuckles white with tension, as the ambulance sped towards the hospital. The city lights blurred past, a kaleidoscope of colors that matched the confusion in my mind. The siren’s wail seemed to match the rhythm of my heart, fast and erratic.

At the hospital, everything moved quickly. Nurses and doctors surrounded her, their voices blending into an incomprehensible hum, an ensemble of urgency. The bright fluorescent lights and sterile white walls were jarring compared to the restaurant’s rich, warm hues. I stayed close, reluctant to let go of her hand. A stern-looking nurse eventually ushered me out of the exam room.

“I’m her husband,” I insisted, my voice breaking with desperation and determination. “I need to be with her.”

The nurse looked at me sympathetically but stood firm. “You need to wait outside, sir. We’ll take care of her.”

My eyes blazed with frustration, but I complied, stepping back into the waiting room where Dimitri was already pacing, his footsteps echoing in the sterile corridor. We exchanged a glance, the gravity of the situation weighing heavily on us.

“What happened?” Dimitri asked, his voice low and tense, his usually calm demeanor replaced with worry.

I ran a hand through my hair, my face marked with anguish. “Someone injected her with something. There was a puncture mark on her neck.”

Dimitri’s expression darkened, his jaw clenching. “Do you think it was Vic?”

My jaw tightened, my eyes flashing with anger. “It has to be. Who else would dare?”

“Dr. Daria is here. She’ll help Talia,” Dimitri ensured.

We lapsed into a tense silence, the only sound the steady rhythm of my pacing, a metronome of barely contained rage. Dimitri tried to calm me, placing a hand on my shoulder, but it was clear that I was barely holding it together. The fear of losing Talia had taken me by surprise, and the worry about the baby was an added weight on my shoulders, a burden I could scarcely bear.

I pulled out my phone and dialed a number with trembling fingers, the device shaking in my grip. “Tommy,” I barked when the call connected. “I need to know where Vic is hiding. Now,” I growled.

Tommy Lansky’s voice cracked through the phone, the connection slightly distorted. “Aleksandr, what happened?”

“Someone attacked Talia,” I snapped, my voice a razor’s edge. “They injected her with something, and she’s unconscious. I need to find Vic.”

There was a pause on the other end of the line, the gravity of the situation sinking in. “Let me think. He could be at any of his old hideouts. He’s been flying under my radar. Word on the street is that he knows I’m aware of his disloyalty. He might be at

the warehouse on Fifth, the abandoned factory near the docks, or that cabin upstate. He's been known to use those places before. I'll have my men search all three places."

I nodded, my mind racing, each location forming a vivid picture. "Send me the addresses, and if your men find him, I need to be the first to know. Talia's life depends on it."

I ended the call, my resolve hardening like steel. "We'll find him," I said to Dimitri, my voice deadly calm. "I won't let him get away with this."

An hour crawled by, each minute stretching into an eternity, the sterile surroundings of the hospital only amplifying the tension. Finally, Dr. Daria emerged from the exam room, her expression grave, the weight of her news pressing on her visibly. Dimitri and I rushed over, our faces etched with worry, our breaths held.

"Aleksandr, we identified the drug. It's a powerful paralytic. She's stable, but we're administering an antidote through an IV. We need to keep Talia here overnight to monitor the baby and her condition."

My shoulders sagged with relief, but my eyes remained stormy, a tempest of emotions brewing beneath the surface. "Can I see her?"

Dr. Daria nodded, her eyes softening. "Yes, but only for a few minutes. She needs rest."

Dimitri and I followed Dr. Daria into the room. Talia lay on the hospital bed, her face pale but peaceful, an IV drip attached to her arm, the soft beep of the monitors a reassurance of life. I sat beside her, taking her hand in mine, my eyes filled with fear and determination, my thumb brushing soothing circles on her skin.

“I’m here, Talia,” I whispered, my voice breaking with emotion. “I won’t leave you.”

Dimitri stood by the door, his presence a silent reassurance, his ordinarily stoic expression softened by concern. His eyes met mine, an unspoken promise passing between us. We would stay by her side and protect her at all costs, our loyalty unwavering.

As the hours passed, my worry transformed into a fierce resolve, my eyes dark with determination. I would find Vic, no matter what it took. The man who killed Mikhail and dared to harm Talia would pay dearly for his actions. My eyes burned with a dangerous light, a promise of retribution that was terrifying and comforting.

Dimitri tried to get me to rest, but I refused, my gaze never leaving Talia’s face. The night dragged on, the hospital’s quiet hum a stark contrast to the turmoil inside me, each second a battle against the helplessness that threatened to overwhelm me. My mind raced, planning and calculating, my thoughts a whirlwind of strategies and scenarios. I wouldn’t rest until I knew Talia was safe and the threat was eliminated.

In the early hours of the morning, a nurse entered to check Talia’s vitals. Her movements were efficient and practiced. She gave me a sympathetic smile. “She’s doing well,” she said softly, her voice a balm to my frayed nerves. “The antidote is working. She should wake up soon.”

I nodded, my grip on Talia’s hand tightening, my eyes never leaving her face. I leaned in close, my voice a low, fervent whisper. “Come back to me.”

The nurse left the room, leaving Dimitri and me alone with Talia. The silence was heavy with unspoken fears and hopes. My eyes never wavered, and I focused entirely on her, willing her to wake up and be okay. This is my fault. I selfishly took her out of the mansion, out in the open, where Vic got to her. Guilt weighed heavily on my shoulders.

Talia's eyes fluttered, although her breathing remained even and calm. I glanced at Dimitri, our bond strengthened by the shared ordeal. We would find Vic, and we would make him pay for this. But for now, we stayed by Talia's side, our presence a shield against further harm, our resolve unbreakable.



### Chapter 35

#### Talia

I woke up in the early morning, my mind struggling to emerge from the thick fog of unconsciousness. Everything around me was a blur; the sterile white walls and the incessant beeping of machines created a surreal, disorienting environment that only added to my confusion. Panic surged as I tried to remember where I was and what had happened. A sharp antiseptic smell hit my nose, making me realize I was in a hospital. However, the details were still hazy, like dream fragments slipping through my fingers.

“Talia,” a familiar voice called softly, pulling me from the edge of panic. I turned my head slowly, my neck stiff and sore. Aleksandr was there, his face a mixture of worry and relief. He was seated beside my bed, his hand gently holding mine, his grip warm and reassuring, a lifeline in this sea of uncertainty.

“You’re safe,” he said, his voice steady and soothing. His eyes, usually so guarded, were filled with an intensity that made my heart ache. “You’re going to be okay.”

I blinked, trying to focus on his face and ground myself in his presence. “What happened?” I managed to whisper, my throat dry and scratchy, each word a painful effort.

Aleksandr’s hand tightened around mine. “Do you remember anything?” he asked, his voice gentle but urgent. “Anything at all?”

At first, everything was a muddled mess in my mind. I shook my head slowly, frustration bubbling as I tried to piece together the fragmented images. “No... I don’t...” I started, then paused, closing my eyes and concentrating harder. Slowly, fragments of memory began to surface, like pieces of a puzzle coming together.

“I remember coming out of the restroom,” I said haltingly. “And then... I was attacked. It’s all so fuzzy, but I remember fighting a man... and then everything went black.”

Suddenly, a cold dread washed over me, gripping my heart with icy fingers. I squeezed Aleksandr’s hand, my voice trembling. “The baby!” I gasped, my eyes wide with fear. “What about the baby?”

Aleksandr’s expression softened, and he leaned closer, his eyes never leaving mine. “The baby is fine, Talia. I promise.”

“What happened to the man?” I asked nervously, my voice barely more than a whisper.

“We don’t know who attacked you, but my best guess is Vic. He injected you in the neck with a paralytic,” Aleksandr explained, his voice laced with a mix of anger and concern.

My fingers instinctively flew to my neck, feeling around for evidence of the attack. “I can’t believe he did this. How did he know we were at the restaurant?”

“He must have followed us. We’ll get him, Talia,” Aleksandr said, tucking a strand of loose hair behind my ear with a tenderness that brought tears to my eyes. “Rest now. I’ll go get the nurse.”

He stood up, his movements quick and purposeful as he stepped into the hallway.

Moments later, a nurse entered the room, her demeanor calm and professional. She approached me with a reassuring smile, checking my vitals with practiced efficiency before heading out to get the doctor.

Aleksandr returned to my side, his presence a comforting anchor in the storm of my emotions. “You’re safe now,” he repeated. “I won’t let anything happen to you or our baby.”

As I tried to process everything, the door opened, and Dimitri entered the room, holding two cups of hot coffee. Steam rose from the paper cups, and the rich aroma tickled my nose, providing a small comfort amidst the chaos. “You’re awake, finally,” he teased, a smile on his lips. “You had us worried, but you’re strong. I had no doubt you’d pull through,” he said in his thick Russian accent.

I smiled weakly, appreciative of his presence here with Aleksandr. It felt like a moment of normalcy in an otherwise nightmarish situation.

Dr. Daria arrived shortly after, her kind but serious expression setting the tone for her visit. She conducted a thorough exam, her touch gentle yet precise. “The baby is fine,” she confirmed, reassuringly. “You’re both going to be okay. But we need to keep you here a little longer to monitor your condition before releasing you.”

I nodded, relief washing over me even as a part of me longed to leave the sterile confines of the hospital. The idea of staying here, vulnerable and exposed, was unsettling, but I knew it was necessary.

A little while later, the door opened, and Sandy burst into the room, her face a mix of worry and relief. Dimitri was on her tail as she rushed to my side, eyes scanning me for signs of injury. “I came as soon as I could. Are you okay? Is the baby okay?” she said breathlessly.

“We’re fine,” I reassured her, though my voice still shook with residual fear. “The doctor said everything is going to be okay.”

Sandy’s face crumpled with relief, but her expression hardened as she turned to Aleksandr. “How could you let this happen?” she demanded, her voice shaking angrily. “You were supposed to protect her!”

“Sandy,” I said softly, touching her arm. “It’s not his fault.”

She looked back at me, her deep blue eyes filled with tears. “You should come home with me,” she said, her voice breaking.

Before I could respond, Aleksandr stood up, his face a mask of controlled anger. “Sandy, let’s talk outside,” he said curtly, motioning for her to follow him into the hallway.

Sandy hesitated, glancing at me with concern, but eventually, she followed Aleksandr out of the room. I could hear their muffled but tense voices as they spoke in the hallway. I closed my eyes, exhaustion washing over me. The events of the night had left me drained, both physically and emotionally.

The nurse returned, rechecking my vitals and adjusting the IV. “You’re doing well,” she said kindly. “Rest now. The doctor will be back to check on you soon.”

Aleksandr and Sandy re-entered the room, her expression softer but still shadowed by worry. She sat down beside me, taking my hand. “I’m just worried about you,” she said quietly.

I nodded, understanding her reaction. Sandy had always protected me; seeing me in such a vulnerable state must have been hard for her. “I know,” I said softly. “But I have to stay here until the doctor says I can leave.”

She squeezed my hand gently, her eyes filled with a sisterly love. “We’ll stay as long as it takes,” she said firmly. “I’m not going anywhere.”

The fear gradually ebbed away as the hours passed, replaced by a deep gratitude for the people around me. Aleksandr’s unwavering support, Sandy’s fierce protectiveness, and even Dimitri’s quiet presence were all my anchors, holding me steady in the storm.

The hospital staff came and went, their movements a comforting routine. The beeping of the monitors, once a source of anxiety, became a reassuring reminder that I was being watched over and that every precaution was being taken to ensure my safety and the safety of my baby.

As midday light crept into the room, I felt a sense of peace settle over me. The fear and uncertainty of the night were slowly giving way to a new resolve. I would get through this. We would get through this. Together.

Aleksandr and I exchanged a look, his eyes filled with a fierce determination that mirrored my own. We had a long road ahead of us, but for now, I was content to rest, knowing that I was surrounded by people who cared for me and who would protect me no matter what.

As I closed my eyes, drifting off into a much-needed sleep, I felt deeply grateful for the man beside me, the sister who had rushed to my side, and the new life growing inside me. Together, we would face whatever came next, stronger than ever.

### Chapter 36

Aleksandr

Dr. Daria's voice echoed in my mind as I paced the sterile corridor of the hospital. "Talía is well enough to leave," she had said, her tone as clinical as the environment around us. Relief mixed with apprehension in my chest. She had pulled through the worst, but the danger was far from over.

I took a deep breath, readying myself for the confrontation ahead. Sandy stood at the end of the hall, her arms crossed and eyes fixed on the floor. I knew she wouldn't be happy with my decision, but it didn't matter. Talía was coming home with me, and there was no room for argument.

"Sandy," I called, approaching her with deliberate steps. She looked up, her eyes weary but defiant.

"Aleksandr," she replied, a hint of challenge in her voice. "What's the plan now?"

"Talía is going home with me," I stated firmly, leaving no room for negotiation. "She'll be safer at the mansion. I won't risk her being out in the open."

Sandy's eyes narrowed, concern etched into every line of her face. "You think it's safe to bring her there? With everything going on?"

"I'm going to find Vic and end this once and for all," I said, my voice hard. "Until then, the mansion is the safest place for her."

She studied me for a moment, her gaze piercing. “Do you even care about her, Aleksandr? Or is this just about the baby?”

Her question hit me like a punch to the gut. I opened my mouth to answer, but no words came. How did I feel about Talia? The answer wasn't clear, even to me. I cared for her, yes, but love? That was a different beast entirely.

“I care about her safety,” I said, skirting around the real question. “And the baby's.”

Sandy shook her head, a sad smile tugging at her lips. “You're a complicated man, Aleksandr. Just... don't hurt her. She's been through enough.”

I nodded, unable to promise more. She sighed and returned to Talia's room, leaving me to my thoughts.

Talia is the first woman that ever made me think about marriage and family. She's beautiful, intelligent, and strong. And she's carrying my baby, my heir. But I've always avoided relationships, having one-night stands with women and never being with them again. It was easier that way, given my lifestyle. Being pakhan of a Bratva family held many responsibilities. I have allies and enemies who wouldn't think twice about using the people I love against me. The thought of Talia or the baby ever getting hurt because of me was enough for me to dismiss the entire thing. I can't be in a relationship with her. The best I can do is keep her close and keep her safe.

Dimitri approached silently, his presence a solid anchor. “We need to talk about Vic,” I said, leading him to a quieter corner of the hallway. “Tommy gave me three possible locations where Vic might be hiding. I need men at all three places. I don't trust Tommy's men to handle Vic. Stake out the locations and notify me immediately when they find him.”

Dimitri nodded. “Consider it done.”

“Take Sandy to the hotel and make sure she is safe. Talia’s been through enough, and I don’t want her worrying about Sandy’s safety.”

“I’ll guarantee she’ll get there safe and sound, brat .”

I watched Dimitri leave, his strides purposeful. My mind churned with the details of our plan.

The paperwork was signed a while later, and Talia was officially released from the hospital. Despite her earlier reservations, Sandy agreed to return to the hotel under Dimitri’s watchful eye. I assured her it was for her safety, and Dimitri assured her he would keep her safe.

The drive back to the mansion was quiet. Talia rested in the passenger seat, her face pale but serene. I couldn’t help but steal glances at her, my mind swirling with unspoken thoughts.

“ Kiska ,“ I began, breaking the silence. “How are you feeling? Do you need anything?”

She turned to me, her eyes soft. “I’m just tired, Aleksandr. But I’m glad to be going home... to your home.” She choked on the words, averting her eyes to look out the passenger window.

Her words touched something deep inside me. “It’s your home, too,” I replied quietly.

“Is it, though?” she questioned wearily. “Sandy said the only reason you insist I stay in the mansion is because it’s the safest place. If my life wasn’t being threatened, and I wasn’t pregnant with your baby, I doubt I’d be in your home.”



I wanted to tell her that wasn't true. The beast in me reared up, desperate to tell her that she'll always belong to me, no matter the circumstances. Instead, I remained silent. There was too much going on in my head to say what I knew she needed to hear.

When we arrived, I helped her inside, guiding her to her bedroom and settling her on the bed.

"You need rest," I replied, avoiding her gaze. "The children will be happy to see you."

Her face lit up at the mention of Sasha and Maxim, and it struck me how much they had come to mean to her. I left her to get comfortable and went to find the children, enlisting their help making popcorn and gathering snacks. Their laughter filled the kitchen, easing the turmoil in my mind.

We brought the snacks to Talia's room, and the kids immediately climbed onto the bed, snuggling up to her as they picked a movie. Her smile was radiant, her affection for them evident in every touch and laugh. Watching them together, I felt a warmth I couldn't quite explain.

As the movie started, I lingered at the door, watching the scene unfold. Talia caught my eye and smiled a silent invitation. I hesitated, then stepped inside, settling into a chair near the bed.

The movie played on, but my attention was on Talia and the children. They were so at ease with each other, a small family within the larger chaos of our lives. Talia's laughter, soft and genuine, wrapped around my heart.

"They mean the world to me," she whispered.

“And you to them,” I replied, my voice thick with emotion.

We sat in silence for a moment, eyes locked on each other. Finally, I stood, needing to escape the feelings she stirred in me.

“I have to take care of something,” I said, my tone serious. “Stay here with the kids. I’ll be back soon.”

She nodded, understanding in her eyes. “Be careful, Aleksandr.”

“I will,” I promised, kissing her forehead. The gesture was instinctive and surprised both of us.

Leaving them to their movie, I retreated to my office, the weight of responsibility settling on my shoulders again. A message pinged on my phone, and I quickly opened it. One of my vors had spotted Vic.

I dialed Dimitri’s number. “We have a lead,” I said as soon as he answered. “Message Anton and both of you meet me at the address I’m about to send you.”

“Da , pakhan ,“ he replied without hesitation.

I sent the address and sat back. This was it. The moment I had been waiting for. Ending Vic was the only way to avenge Mikhail, ensure Talia’s safety, and end the threat that loomed over us.

But as I prepared to leave, a thought lingered in my mind. Was keeping Talia in the mansion really just about protection? Or was there something more I couldn’t admit, even to myself?

### Chapter 37

Aleksandr

The night was alive with thunder, a fitting backdrop for the storm that brewed inside me. I could feel the tension thickening the air as I stood outside the secluded warehouse in Brooklyn. I pushed all thoughts of Talia to the back of my mind to stay one hundred percent focused. Nothing was going to stop me from killing Vic tonight.

My vors were positioned around the warehouse's perimeter, their weapons ready. Dimitri and Anton flanked me as we moved silently into position. Inside, Vic and his men were blissfully unaware of the fate about to befall them. Tonight, justice would be served.

I checked my gun, the cold metal reassuring in my grip. The plan was simple: strike fast, strike hard, and leave no one standing. We had the element of surprise, and under the cover of the storm, we would be ghosts in the night. I glanced at Anton, waiting for his signal. His eyes met mine, and we were of one mind at that moment. There was no room for doubt or hesitation.

Anton raised his hand, the signal to move. We advanced silently, a deadly wave of retribution. The rain began to fall in earnest, masking our footsteps as we approached the entrance. I could feel my heart pounding from anticipating what was to come.

Ivan cut the lock on the side door of the warehouse, affording us a way in. One by one we, slipped inside, fanning out and taking cover behind piles of wooden crates. When the last of my vors was safely inside the warehouse, the first shot rang out like

a clap of thunder. Dimitri, his aim unerring, took out the guard at the main door. The rest of us surged forward. Chaos immediately erupted.

The warehouse's interior was dark, the shadows playing tricks on my eyes. Men shouted, guns fired, and the metallic scent of blood mingled with the musty air. I moved through the melee purposefully, my gun finding targets with practiced ease. Each pull of the trigger was a step closer to vengeance.

I saw Vic across the room, his face contorted in shock and rage. The man to his right spotted me, our eyes locking. He raised his gun, but I was faster. My shot took him in the shoulder, spinning him around and dropping him to the ground.

I advanced, stepping over the bodies of the fallen. In my peripheral vision, I saw movement to my left. Before I could react, a burly man jumped out from behind a crate, wielding a large knife. He snarled, pulling his arm back to swing. As the blade swept toward me, I instinctively jumped back, but not fast enough. The tip of the razor-sharp blade sliced across my chest. Searing pain flashed behind my eyes, dropping me to my knee.

Raising my gun, I squeezed the trigger, the bullet lodging in the man's chest. His eyes widened in disbelief, then glazed over as he crumpled to the ground. I pressed a hand to my chest, feeling the warm, sticky blood seep through my fingers. The pain was a dull roar, but I couldn't stop now.

Shots rang out, sharp and sudden. Bullets whizzed past me, some too close for comfort. I ducked behind a stack of crates, firing at the shadows that moved in the gloom. The air was thick with smoke and the acrid smell of gunpowder.

"Vic!" I shouted, my voice raw. "Come out and face me!"

A fleeting shadow at the far end of the warehouse caught my eye. Vic. He was

running, slipping through a side door. I ignored the searing burn in my chest and gave chase. By the time I reached the door, he was gone, swallowed by the storm outside.

I staggered back inside, breathing hard. Silence fell, broken only by the distant rumble of thunder. Dimitri and Anton were already securing the warehouse. The floor was littered with bodies, the aftermath of our deadly encounter. The battle had been won, but the war was not over.

Dimitri looked up, his eyes cold but approving. “Vic?” he asked, though he already knew the answer.

“Gone,” I spat, anger and frustration boiling within me. “But he won’t get far.”

Dimitri nodded, pulling out his phone. “I’ll call the cleaning crew. We can’t leave any traces.”

I leaned against a crate, the adrenaline starting to fade. The pain in my chest became more insistent. Anton appeared at my side, his usually impassive face showing a flicker of concern.

“You’re hurt.”

“Just a scratch,” I lied.

The cleaning crew arrived swiftly, professionals in their own right. They moved through the warehouse efficiently, erasing the signs of our violent encounter. I watched them work, and my mind was already plotting our next move. Vic had slipped through our fingers, but this wasn’t over. Not by a long shot.

As the storm raged on outside, I vowed to myself that I would hunt Vic to the ends of the Earth if I had to. This was just the beginning. The thunder roared its approval,

echoing the fury in my heart.

### Chapter 38

#### Talia

I woke up with a start, the ringing of my phone piercing the quiet stillness of the mansion. The digital clock on the bedside table blinked 2:47 AM in angry red numbers. Groggily, I reached for my phone, my heart pounding for reasons I couldn't quite place yet. The number on the screen was unknown.

"Hello?" I croaked, trying to clear the sleep from my voice.

There was a pause, then a low chuckle. "Talia," the voice drawled, sending a shiver down my spine. "I'm sorry I didn't get a chance to escort you out of the restaurant."

I sat up straight, every nerve in my body on high alert. "Vic," I whispered, recognizing the menace in his tone.

"Yes. You have quite the fire in you. I like that." His voice was oily, dripping with dark amusement.

My mind raced, recalling the incident at the restaurant. The memory of his hand over my mouth and the injection in my neck flashed in my mind. "What do you want?" I demanded, trying to keep my voice steady.

"I wanted to let you know that Aleksandr has figured out I killed Mikhail," he said casually as if discussing the weather. "So, my plans have changed. I was going to kill you, but now... now I think I'll kill Aleksandr instead. And you, Talia, you will be

my prize.”

I felt a wave of nausea. “You’re insane,” I spat.

He chuckled again. “Insanity is a matter of perspective. I’ll see you soon, Talia.” The line went dead.

I sat in stunned silence for a moment, my heart racing and my mind reeling from the threat. Then, instinct took over. I had to find Aleksandr. I couldn’t be alone, not after that call.

I slipped out of bed and padded silently to the door, careful not to make any noise. I made my way down the darkened hallways, my pulse echoing in my ears.

When I reached Aleksandr’s room, I paused, my hand hovering over the doorknob. The door was slightly ajar, a sliver of light spilling into the hallway. I pushed it open gently and stepped inside.

Aleksandr was standing by the bed, shirtless, with a long gash across his chest. He was methodically bandaging the wound, his eyebrows pinched together in concentration. My heart lurched at the sight of him hurt.

“Aleksandr,” I whispered, my voice trembling.

His head snapped up, his eyes locking onto mine. “Talia? What are you doing here?”

“I got a call,” I said, rushing to his side. “It was Vic. He... he said he’s coming for you. He wants to kill you and take me.”

His eyes darkened with anger. “That bastard,” he muttered, wincing as he tied off the bandage. “We went to the warehouse tonight where he was hiding, but he got away.”



My hands shook as I reached out to touch his chest, the rough texture of the bandage stark against his smooth skin. “Are you okay?” I asked, my voice barely above a whisper.

He covered my hand with his, squeezing gently. “I’m fine, kiska . It’s just a scratch.”

“How the hell did he get your phone number?” Aleksandr growled.

“I’m not sure. Tell me what happened tonight. I need to know.”

He sighed heavily, brushing the hair away from my face. “We were able to get into the warehouse undetected. There was a shootout, and many men died.”

“Did any of your men get killed?” I asked, chewing nervously on my lip.

“No. A few of them are wounded, but they will heal.” Hooking his finger under my chin, he tilted my face to look directly into my eyes. “Tell me exactly what Vic said to you.”

I repeated the conversation, my voice growing steadier as I recounted the details. Aleksandr listened intently, his expression grim. When I finished, he pulled me into a tight embrace.

“I won’t let him touch you,” he vowed, his voice low and fierce.

“I don’t want to be alone,” I admitted, my voice breaking. “I’m scared, Aleksandr.”

He stroked my hair gently. “You’re safe here, with me.”

The tension in my body began to ease as his warmth enveloped me. I looked up at him, our faces inches apart. His eyes softened, and we stared at each other for a

moment. Then, as if drawn by an invisible force, our lips met in a slow, tentative kiss.

The kiss deepened, a rush of heat spreading through me. Aleksandr's hands moved to my waist, pulling me closer. My fingers traced the lines of his muscles, careful to avoid the fresh bandage. He groaned softly against my lips, the sound sending a thrill through me.

Before I knew it, he was feasting on my mouth. My heart beat frantically as the world outside ceased to exist, and we lost ourselves in each other. With one hand, he pulled open his pants, freeing his cock.

I stripped off my pajamas and stood naked before him. Sliding his hands over my ass, he cupped my cheeks, pulling me into him. His long, pulsing cock pressed along my wet slit. Reaching down, I grasped him in my hand, sliding my fingertips along his shaft.

"Fuck, baby," he moaned, gritting his teeth. Sitting on the edge of the bed, he lifted me up, positioning me over his cock. The tip pressed into my pussy as he sucked on my breasts. Suddenly he dropped me, his cock spearing into me. I cried out, bracing my hands on his shoulders for balance. He gripped my waist, moving me to drive his cock in deeper. When I'm fully seated on him, he kisses me firmly on my mouth.

"Ride me," he commands, smacking my ass, getting my full attention.

I close my eyes, relishing the sensation of his balls pressing against my ass. My pussy is stretched wide, swallowing every inch of his cock. I begin impaling myself on him over and over. Wrapping his arms around my waist, he pins me in place.

"Look at me," he growls.

I open my eyes, as Aleksandr pistons in and out of me, never breaking eye contact.

Reaching between us, I touch my clit, rubbing it with my finger as he fucks me ruthlessly. My inner muscles tighten around his cock as pleasure crackles down my spine. I chase my orgasm, rolling my clit between my fingers.

Holding me tightly, he slams me down on his cock, thrusting up each time. I choke on a scream as my pussy clenches around his cock, an orgasm bursting through me. His eyes glaze as his release hits, jets of cum shooting out of his cock, filling me up.

Kissing me tenderly, he holds me until the last wave of my orgasm subsides. Gently lifting me, he slides his cock out of my pussy and then lays me on my side on the bed. Tucking me into his body, he pulls the blanket up, kissing me one last time.

“Sleep, kiska, ” he encourages.

That night, I found solace in Aleksandr’s arms, our connection a silent vow to protect each other from the darkness threatening to consume us. Whatever came next, I knew we would face it together.

Aleksandr

I awoke to the soft glow of morning light filtering through the heavy curtains of my bedroom. Talia's warmth was a comforting weight against me, her hair a dark cascade over the pillow we shared. For a moment, the world felt almost normal. Almost. I traced a finger along her cheek, admiring the softness of her skin. She stirred slightly but didn't wake, her breath steady and even. Her delicate features relaxed, and the peacefulness of her slumber seemed to mock the turmoil within me.

A part of me ached to stay there, to lose myself in the quiet peace of her presence. But peace wasn't part of my future. Especially not with Vic looming in the shadows, threatening to unravel everything. Carefully, I removed myself from Talia's embrace, moving with the practiced stealth of someone accustomed to sneaking through danger. Her warmth lingered on my skin, a reminder of what I stood to lose. I paused at the doorway, casting one last glance back at her. A tangled mix of emotions churned within me: protectiveness, longing, guilt.

The mansion was quiet as I walked the hallways to my office. It was cold compared to the warmth of my bedroom, the chill seeping into my bones. The heavy wooden desk was littered with files and a half-empty glass of vodka from the night before. I downed the rest of the vodka, the burn in my throat grounding me in the present, and then reached for my phone. I needed to speak with Dimitri about Vic. We needed a plan to end that mudak once and for all.

Dialing Dimitri's number, I waited two rings before he answered. " Brat ,“ I said when he picked up. "We need to meet. Somehow, Vic got Talia's phone number and called her."

There was a pause on the other end of the line. “When and where?” Dimitri growled, his voice thick with anger.

“In an hour at the café near the square.”

“I’ll be there,” he replied, and the line went dead.

Quietly, I walked through the hallways, checking on Sasha and Maxim before slipping back into my bedroom. Sitting on the edge of the bed, I gazed at Talia, sleeping peacefully. Despite all the wrongs I’ve done, I ended up with this beautiful woman who was carrying my baby. Brushing a tendril of hair away from her cheek, I leaned down and gently kissed her lips. Her eyes fluttered open, immediately focusing on my face.

“Good morning,” she whispered, her voice still husky with sleep.

“I’m leaving to meet Dimitri. Stay with Olga and the children today.”

Reaching out, she trailed her fingertips down my arm. “Do you have to leave?” she asked, her eyes wide and pleading.

“As much as I’d love to stay here and pleasure you all day, I need to devise a plan to eliminate Vic.”

She sat upright, her eyebrows pinched together in concern. “Please be careful. We don’t know what Vic is planning to do.”

She gripped my face gently and dragged her lips over mine, kissing me deeply. The kiss was a promise, a plea, a silent bond I vowed not to break. Pulling away, I studied her face, memorizing every detail. With one final kiss, I left to meet Dimitri.

The café was a short drive from my place. The streets were calm before the city fully

awoke, the morning light casting long shadows on the pavement. Dimitri was already there when I arrived, seated at a corner table, sipping coffee with a clear view of the entrance. He nodded as I approached, his expression serious.

“What’s the situation?” he asked once I sat down.

I filled him in on Vic’s call to Talia, my voice low but urgent. Dimitri listened, his eyes narrowing in thought, his fingers tapping steadily on the table.

“We need to hit back hard,” he said when I finished. “We can’t let him think he has the upper hand.”

A waitress wearing a bright yellow apron approached the table. “What can I get you?” she asked, smiling pleasantly.

“Coffee,” I replied curtly, eager to get her away from the table. Nodding, she spun on her heels, leaving us to our conversation.

“Let’s contact Tommy Lansky again,” I suggested. “He might have more information on Vic. And call Denis. Tell him we need to get a location on that motherfucker.”

Before we could delve deeper into our planning, my phone buzzed. Olga’s name flashed on the screen. I answered, expecting it to be a routine check-in.

“Good morning, Mr. Avilov. I don’t mean to disturb you, but the children want to go to the park,” she said, her voice slightly strained. “They’re begging to ride the carousel.”

I sighed, glancing at Dimitri. “Let them go. They need some fresh air.”

“There’s more,” Olga continued. “They want Talia to come with them. They want to ride the carousel together.”

My initial reaction was to say no. It was too risky. But then I thought about Talia. Maybe a change of scenery would do her some good after everything that's happened.

"Fine," I said reluctantly. "Talia can go. But I'm sending two of my men with you for security."

"Thank you, Mr. Avilov," Olga said, relief evident. "I think this will be good for all of them."

I hung up and turned back to Dimitri. "We need to wrap this up quickly."

We spent the next hour strategizing and refining our plan to take down Vic. When we were done, I felt a cold resolve settle over me.

Dimitri left cash on the table and messaged all our vors as we left the café to meet at the art gallery. When we arrived, they were already gathered in the back room, eager to hear the plan.

"Vic is planning to make a move," I ground out. "We're going to get to him first and end his miserable life."

I went over every detail, ensuring everyone knew their role. There was no room for error. Vic was dangerous and unpredictable. They all nodded in agreement, dispersing to get ready to take him down.

As we left the gallery, my phone rang again. Olga's name once more. A cold dread settled in my gut as I answered.

Olga's voice was a frantic scream. "They're gone! They're gone!"

My heart stopped. "What happened?" I demanded.

“They were waiting in line for the carousel,” she sobbed. “I left to use the restroom. Josh stayed with Talia and the children, and Lev escorted me.” She choked on her sobs, barely able to get the words out.

“When I returned to the carousel, they were gone!” she cried. “Lev and I looked around for them but found Josh instead. He was on the ground behind a tree. He’s dead.” She sobbed into the phone, breathing hard.

A red haze descended over my vision. “Where are you now?” I barked.

“I’m still by the carousel. Lev is speaking with the police. Please hurry, Mr. Avilov, you have to find them!”

“I will,” I vowed, my voice like steel. “Stay there. We’re coming.”

I ended the call and turned to Dimitri, fury and fear warring within me. “Vic has taken Talia and the children. Josh is dead. Call Anton and Boris. We need everyone looking for them.”

Dimitri’s expression mirrored my own rage. “We’ll get them back, brat. And when we do, we’ll cut off that bastard’s head.”

The SUV sped through the streets, my mind a maelstrom of thoughts. I can’t lose them. Not Talia, not the children. I won’t let Vic harm them.

We reached the park in record time. Olga was near the carousel, her face pale and tear-streaked. Lev was with her, on high alert. She ran to us as we approached.

“They were right here,” she cried, pointing to the empty carousel. “I don’t know what happened, but they’re gone.” She wrung her hands, sobbing.

I looked around, my mind racing. Vic had planned this too well. He knew our



weaknesses, our vulnerabilities. Somehow, he knew every step we made.

“Check the security footage,” I ordered one of my vors. “Find out how he took them.”

Minutes felt like hours as we waited for any clue, any lead. When my man returned, his face was grim.

“There’s no sign of them,” he said. “It’s like they vanished.”

Despair clawed at me, but I couldn’t afford to lose control. I needed to stay focused to find a way to get them back.

“We need to regroup,” I said to Dimitri. “Get everyone on this. We’re not stopping until we find them.”

Dimitri nodded, his jaw set in determination.

Lev was speaking with Denis, looking over Josh’s body. Josh’s gun was nowhere to be found, and his throat was cut. It seems as if Vic got the jump on him. There was no way to keep this quiet as a crowd of onlookers had already formed.

“We’ll find them,” Denis asserted. “I’ll keep the details out of the police report.”

I nodded my thanks. “We’ll handle this our way. I won’t stop hunting Vic until I get them back,” I hissed. “He fucked with the wrong family.”