



Deadly Vows (Avilov Bratva #2)

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Category: Suspense Thriller

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.

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Chapter 1

Talia

I never imagined my life would lead to this moment, huddled with Sasha and Maxim in the back of a windowless van, the cold metal floor biting through our clothes. Sasha and Maxim's wide, terrified eyes reflected my own anxiety, creating a silent chorus of dread. Just hours ago, we were at the park enjoying a crisp autumn afternoon in New York. The sound of children's laughter and the vibrant colors of fallen leaves were painting a perfect scene. But in an instant, everything had changed.

It all started innocently enough, with the children and I waiting in line to ride the carousel. Lev had escorted Olga to the restrooms, leaving Josh behind to guard us. I noticed a husky man lurking near the carousel as we waited. At first, I tried to dismiss the chill creeping up my spine, attributing it to the brisk autumn air, but his presence was unmistakable. His predatory eyes fixed on us with a frightening intensity.

I looked toward the picnic tables to get Josh's attention, but to my surprise he wasn't there. A quick scan of the area determined he was nowhere to be found. My heart pounded with anxiety as my fight-or-flight instinct kicked in. I grabbed the children's hands, leading them away from the carousel, my mind racing.

"What's wrong?" Maxim questioned, reacting to my panicked expression, his voice trembling slightly.

"A creepy man is watching us, and Josh has disappeared. Let's go find Olga and Lev," I replied, trying to stay calm. Sasha gripped my hand tightly, her tiny feet

moving as fast as possible to keep up with my quick stride.

Maxim looked around nervously, his eyes darting back and forth, trying to spot the man. “Is it the man that hurt you? The one I heard Uncle talking about?” he asked, his voice tinged with alarm.

“No,” I assured him, though my fear grew by the second. “But something isn’t right. Josh wouldn’t have taken off, leaving us alone. It’s best if we get to Olga and Lev.”

We continued to wind through the park, the colorful leaves crunching beneath our feet. Every step felt like an eternity. I glanced over my shoulder and saw the man was still following us like a dark shadow creeping closer. My palms began to sweat. The restrooms were close, I could see the building up ahead. We were almost there, almost safe.

But then, movement behind the trees in front of us grabbed my attention. My mind was screaming to run, but it was too late. Vic, the man that killed Aleksandr’s brother Mikhail, and his accomplice stepped out from behind the trees, blocking our path. The sinister gleam of their guns caught the autumn sunlight, casting eerie reflections on their faces. The husky man that had been following us moved in behind, pulling a gun from the waistband of his pants, his eyes cold and calculating.

Instinctively, I pulled the children to my sides, holding them close. Sasha clung to me, her tiny body trembling like a leaf in the wind. Maxim, however, pulled away from me, squaring his shoulders and looking Vic directly in the eyes with a defiant glare.

“What do you want from us?” Maxim demanded, his voice steady despite the fear I knew he must be feeling. He stood tall, trying to shield me with his slight frame and bravery.

“You’re brave, taking that tone with a man holding a gun. What’s your name?” Vic questioned, narrowing his eyes as he studied Maxim, his voice dripping with malevolence.

“Maxim Avilov,” he replied, his voice unwavering.

“Hmm,” Vic mused, rubbing his chin thoughtfully, a cruel smile on his lips. “This is interesting.” An evil grin spread across his face as his beady eyes looked me over, savoring the moment.

“I was only going to take you, Talia. A personal prize of sorts. But now, I’ll take these two brats with us as well. Aleksandr will surely agree to meet me unarmed to save them. And then I’ll put a bullet in his brain,” Vic declared, his voice dripping with malice.

“No!” Maxim cried out, lunging at Vic with all the fury of a cornered lion. “I won’t let you hurt him!”

“Maxim!” I screamed, grabbing hold of his jacket and pulling him back into my side. Sasha’s quiet sobs made my heart ache with helplessness. “Aleksandr’s men will be looking for us, Vic. You better leave before they get here,” I warned, trying to keep my voice as steady as possible despite the terror gripping my heart.

“I wouldn’t worry about them. One of them is already dead. The other is babysitting the old lady, and we’ll be long gone before he figures out you’re missing. Now move,” he growled, approaching us with a menacing glare. The other two men flanked us, concealing their guns but ready to use them at a moment’s notice.

I wanted to scream for help, to draw the attention of the park’s visitors, but the fear of Vic hurting the children kept me silent. My mind raced with ways to escape or to have the children escape, but every scenario seemed too dangerous. As we

approached a crowd of people near the carousel, Vic pressed the barrel of his gun into my back.

“If you make one sound or try to run, I’ll kill you and then the kids,” he threatened, his voice a chilling whisper in my ear.

We moved silently through the park. Every step took us further from safety. My heart pounded with a desperate hope that somehow, some way, we would find a way out of this nightmare.

He herded us into this van with the brutal efficiency of a wolf corralling sheep. “Stay close to me,” I whispered. “We’re going to be okay. I promise.”

Vic sat in the front with one of his men, the low rumble of their conversation barely audible over the engine’s growl. He hadn’t meant to take the kids. They were collateral damage, a means to an end. Aleksandr was his real target, and they were the bait. As for me...I don’t even want to think about what his plans are.

The van jolted as we turned off the main road, the city noises fading into silence. I strained to hear any clues about our destination, but there was only the oppressive hum of the van. I had to think of a plan to get us out of this.

“I’m scared,” Sasha whispered, her fingers digging into my arm.

“I know, sweetheart,” I said, tucking her hair behind her ear. “But we need to be brave right now. Can you do that for me? Can you be brave?”

Sasha nodded, her green eyes shining with unshed tears. Maxim held my other hand tightly, his silence more telling than any words. He was trying to be strong for me, a bravery that broke and fortified my heart.

My mind raced, searching for a way out. The van was empty except for us. Vic had taken my phone, and there was nothing to use as a weapon. We were completely at his mercy.

As the van slowed and finally stopped, I took a deep breath, steeling myself for what was to come. “Listen to me,” I said, turning to the kids. “When they open the doors, I need you to hide behind me, okay? Don’t let go of my hands.”

Their nods were the only response I needed. The back doors swung open, and bright light flooded the van.

“Get out,” Vic ordered, waving the gun to emphasize his command.

I shielded Sasha and Maxim with my body as we climbed out. The sight that greeted us was grim. It was an abandoned house with the windows boarded up and the paint peeling. To make matters worse were in the middle of nowhere.

“Inside,” Vic barked, shoving us toward the house. His accomplices followed close behind, guns drawn.

The interior of the house was just as bleak as the exterior. Dust and decay filled the air, and the faint light seeping through the cracks created long shadows on the floor. Vic pushed us into a small room without furniture except for a rickety table and a few chairs.

“Sit,” he commanded.

I guided the kids to the chairs, positioning myself between them and our captors. Vic’s eyes were dark, filled with a twisted satisfaction. He enjoyed our fear and reveled in our helplessness.

“What do you want, Vic?” I asked.

He smirked, leaning against the wall. “You know exactly what I want, Talia. Aleksandr. He’s caused me enough trouble, and now he will pay.”

“You don’t need the kids,” I said, strengthening my voice. “Let them go. You have me.”

Vic’s laughter was cold, devoid of any humor. “Nice try, but no. They’re the perfect bait. Aleksandr will come for them, and when he does, I’ll be ready.”

Sasha choked on a sob, the sound of it tearing at my heart. Maxim reached over to hold her hand, his face set in a determined scowl. I had to get them out of here.

“Please,” I begged. “They’re just children. They don’t deserve this.”

Vic’s accomplices shifted uneasily, their grips on their guns tightening. But Vic was unmoved. “Save your breath, Talia. There’s no way out of this.”

He was wrong. There had to be a way. I couldn’t let the children become pawns in this deadly game. I had to find a way to protect them, myself, and my baby.

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Chapter 2

Aleksandr

My fingers drummed against the polished mahogany desk, each tap marking the situation's urgency. The air felt thick as molasses, which made it hard to breathe, let alone think. Across from me, Olga and Lev sat with the world's weight on their shoulders. Olga's eyes were red-rimmed, her hands trembling slightly as she twisted a handkerchief. A loose strand of grey hair fell out of her usually perfect bun. Lev looked pale, his jaw clenched so tightly I feared it might shatter.

"Tell me again," I said, my voice low but with the authority of being pakhan. "Tell me everything you remember about the park."

Olga swallowed hard, her eyes darting to Lev for reassurance before she spoke. "We arrived at the park around eleven. The children were excited. Talia took them to the carousel while Lev, Josh, and I stayed nearby." At the mention of Josh, a tear rolled down Olga's plump cheek. "We didn't see anyone suspicious, Mr. Avilov. Just families and children."

Lev nodded in agreement. "It was a normal day. Nothing stood out. Josh and I kept watch, but there was nothing unusual. When I left to escort Olga to the restrooms, Josh was just a few feet away from Talia and the kids."

I leaned back, frustration gnawing at my insides. "Did you see anyone near them before you left? Anyone at all?"

Olga shook her head, tears welled up in her dark blue eyes. “No one. Just the ride operator, other children, and their parents.”

Dimitri, who had been pacing the length of the room, stopped and turned to me. His coffee-colored eyes were sharp and calculating. “We need to call Denis. He might have more information.”

I nodded, signaling Anton to get Denis on the line. Anton, the head of my security, was a man of action and few words. He embodied reliability with his tall, athletic frame and perpetually calm demeanor. He moved swiftly, dialing Denis’s number and putting the call on speaker.

“Denis,” I said as soon as he picked up. “We need an update.”

Denis’s voice crackled through the phone. “We have something. Street cameras picked up a suspicious white van leaving the park and heading upstate. We lost the trail a few miles from the city, but we’re working on it.”

“Upstate where?” I demanded, my patience wearing thin. My knuckles whitened as I gripped the edge of the desk.

“We’re not sure yet. The trail went cold. But we’re looking into all possible routes and locations.”

I clenched my fists, anger simmering just below the surface. “Keep working with Anton. I want every possible lead.”

Denis agreed, and I ended the call, returning my attention to the room. “Anton, coordinate with Denis. I want updates every hour.”

Anton nodded, already moving to his next task. I had to focus. I couldn’t let my

emotions cloud my judgment.

“Olga, Lev,” I said, my voice softer but no less firm. “You’re sure there’s nothing else? No detail too small.”

Olga shook her head, tears streaming down her weary face now. “I’m sorry, Mr. Avilov. I wish I could remember more.”

Lev placed a reassuring hand on her shoulder. “We’ll keep thinking, pakhan . If we remember anything, we’ll tell you right away.”

I dismissed them with a nod, watching as they left the room. The door closed behind them with a heavy thud, leaving me with Dimitri and my thoughts.

Dimitri approached, concern etched on his face. “What’s our next move?”

I rubbed my temples, the weight of the situation threatening to suffocate me. “We need more information. I’m going to call Tommy Lansky. He might have an idea where Vic took them.”

Dimitri nodded. “I’ll leave you to it.” He hesitated, then added, “We’ll find them, brat . We always do.”

As he exited the room, I picked up the phone and dialed Tommy’s number. It rang a few times before he answered, his voice gruff and impatient.

“Aleksandr,” he said. “What do you need?”

“Vic has Talia and my niece and nephew,” I replied, cutting straight to the point. “I need to know where he might have taken them. I have information that it is somewhere upstate.”

There was a pause on the other end, followed by a low curse. “That son of a bitch. He crossed the line. I’ll ask my men. Give me some time.”

“Hurry,” I urged. “Every minute counts.”

“If I find him first, I’ll make sure he doesn’t live to see another day,” Tommy promised and hung up. I placed the phone down, the room’s silence closing in around me. My thoughts drifted to Talia and the children. Sasha and Maxim, their innocent faces filled with joy and laughter, were now in the hands of a madman. And Talia... My feelings for her and my unborn child were complicated, a tangled web of love, desire, and something deeper, something primal.

I stood and walked to the window, staring at the sprawling estate. The gardens, usually a source of tranquility, offered no peace today. My mind raced with scenarios, each more dire than the last. I couldn’t lose them. I wouldn’t.

Hours passed in a blur of phone calls and dead ends. Anton and Denis worked tirelessly, chasing every lead, no matter how small. But the trail remained cold. My frustration grew with each passing minute, the helplessness gnawing at my insides.

Finally, as the sun slipped below the horizon, my phone rang. It was Tommy.

“Aleksandr,” he said, his voice tense. “I’ve got something. One of my men heard chatter about a cabin Vic owns upstate. It’s a long shot, but it’s our best lead.”

I grabbed a pen and scribbled down the details. “Thank you, Tommy. I owe you.”

“Just find them,” he replied, his voice softer. “And make Vic pay.”

I ended the call and immediately dialed Anton. “We have a lead. A cabin upstate. Get a team ready. We leave now.”

Anton didn't need more instructions. Within minutes, my vors were assembled and ready to move. I grabbed my coat, my mind set on one thing, bringing Talia and the children home safely.

The drive was long and tense, the silence in the car heavy with anticipation. My thoughts kept drifting to Talia, her smile, her laugh. The way she looked at me, with love and defiance. I couldn't bear the thought of her in Vic's hands.

As we neared the location, Dimitri spoke up. "We should approach quietly. No need to alert them."

I nodded, my focus narrowing to a single point. "Let's go."

We moved through the trees, the cabin coming into view. It was small and isolated, the perfect place to hide. My heart pounded as we approached.

Anton signaled for us to spread out, surrounding the cabin. I moved to the front, my gun drawn, every sense on high alert. With a nod from Anton, we moved in.

The door burst open under the force of my kick, and we stormed inside. The cabin was deserted, with nothing but dust and discarded furniture.

"It's a dead end," Anton said, his voice dripping with frustration. "No one's here."

I clenched my fists, the bitter taste of failure burning my tongue. "We need to get back. Regroup and come up with another plan."

The drive back to the mansion was even more tense than the journey out. Every second felt like an eternity, each mile a reminder of how far away Talia and the children were. I couldn't afford to waste any more time.

I called a meeting with my council. Dimitri and my vors gathered in the art gallery. The tension in the air was so thick I felt like I could reach out and grab it. The gallery, usually a sanctuary filled with masterpieces, now felt like a war room.

I stood before them, my expression hard. “We followed a lead, but it was a dead end. Vic has Talia and the children, and we have no idea where they are. We need to find them, and we need to find them fast.”

They all nodded, their faces grim. Each of them knew what was at stake.

“Everyone needs to reach out to their contacts,” I continued. “Go underground, grill our informants and anyone who might have information. I want to know every place Vic could be hiding. Every connection he has, every debt he owes.”

Dimitri stepped forward, his eyes determined. “We’ll find them, pakhan . We won’t stop until we do.”

I nodded, a fierce resolve settling over me. “Good. We start now. Anton, coordinate with Denis. Keep pressure on the police to follow any leads they get. The rest of you start making calls. I want updates regularly.”

They dispersed, each moving with purpose. I watched them go, a sense of hope peeking through the desperation. We would find them. We had to.

Dimitri stayed behind, his eyes meeting mine. “We’ll get them back, brat . Vic won’t get away with this.”

I nodded, my jaw set. “He won’t. And when we find him, he’ll pay for what he’s done.”

I looked around the gallery, taking in the paintings that had once brought me

contentment. Talia and the children were out there, somewhere, and I would move heaven and earth to bring them home. “Contact Adachi. Get the Yakuza to help us with the search.”

“Good idea. He has a far reach and a lot of men.” Dimitri pulled out his phone and made the call.

I glanced at a large painting on the wall depicting a stormy sea. It had always been one of my favorites, symbolizing the tumultuous nature of life and the resilience required to navigate it. It felt like a mirror of my mind tonight, chaotic and relentless. The need to get back to the mansion was overwhelming.

The drive was quick, and as the night stretched on, the mansion buzzed with activity as calls were made and leads were followed. I paced the halls, my mind racing. But with every passing moment, my resolve grew stronger. I settled into the office, determined to end this nightmare.

Anton lingered, fatigue shadowing his features. “Denis is pushing the police hard. They’re checking every known hideout, every lead. We’ll find them.”

I nodded, appreciating his unwavering dedication. “Thank you, Anton. We need everyone on this. Every connection, every resource.”

As dawn approached, Dimitri sat across from me, his face weary but his eyes alert.

“We need to double our efforts,” I demanded. “I won’t rest until Talia and the children are back safely. Vic will regret the day he was fucking born,” I growled.

My phone pinged with a text from Tommy: Heard more chatter. Possible location closer to the city. Will confirm.

Hope flared within me. It wasn't much, but it was something. Another lead, another chance. I showed the message to Anton and then steeled myself for the next phase of the search. Failure was not an option.

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Chapter 3

Talia

The cold, hard floor had not been kind to my back, and the rough wooden boards had imprinted on my skin. I used my jacket to cover Sasha and Maxim last night so they wouldn't freeze in the drafty room. I shifted slightly, careful not to wake Sasha, who lay nestled against me, her little body seeking warmth and comfort. Maxim was already awake, his eyes too serious for a boy his age, darting between the door and the window. The early morning light peeked through the cracks in the boarded-up window of our dreary prison.

"Maxim," I whispered, trying to catch his attention without alarming him, "come here, sweetheart."

He shuffled over, his brave facade cracking a little as he knelt beside me. I gently touched his shoulder, feeling the tension knotted in his small frame. "I need you to stay calm for Sasha. Can you do that?"

He nodded, his lips pressed into a thin line. "I will, Talia. I promise."

"Good boy," I said, forcing a smile. "Now, listen carefully. We need to find a way out of here. There's a tree outside this window. If we can get the boards off, we might be able to climb down."

His eyes widened as he glanced at the window. "But how?"

I reached over and picked up the broken leg of one of the rickety chairs that littered the room. “With this,” I said, holding it up like a makeshift weapon. “We just need to be quiet and quick.”

As I began to work on loosening the boards, Maxim stood watch, his body tense and alert. Sasha stirred in her sleep but didn’t wake. The minutes ticked by, each one a small eternity. I managed to loosen one of the boards, the rusted nails giving way with a painful creak. I paused, listening for any sounds from below. When I was sure it was safe, I continued, but the work was slow and nerve-wracking. Every noise seemed amplified in the quiet of the morning.

As I was progressing on the second board, Maxim waved his hands wildly to get my attention. I froze in place, listening for signs of movement. Heavy footsteps were on the stairs and would soon be at our door. I fixed the loose board, so no attention was drawn to it and quickly sat in one of the chairs, hiding the broken chair leg behind my back.

The door swung open with a sudden crash. Maxim jumped back just in time to avoid being hit with it. Sasha woke up, startled, scurrying backward toward the window. One of Vic’s associates, the husky one called Pete, held a food tray. Three bottles of water, plain bagels, and apples were on the tray. He dropped it on the table, glanced around the room, then retreated, locking the door behind him.

Dropping the chair leg, I picked up Sasha, cradling her in my arms. She hiccupped, sobbing quietly as I stroked her silky blonde hair. “I want to go home,” she whispered, burying her face in my neck, her arms wrapping tightly around me.

“I know, baby,” I whispered, rocking her. “I’m working on it.”

Just then, my stomach rumbled. Pregnancy cravings were nagging me, but the best I could do was eat the food Pete brought and hope it was enough for the baby. “Let’s

have something to eat,” I suggested, placing Sasha in one of the chairs.

Maxim sat down next to her and held her hand in his. “It’s okay, Sasha. We’re going to get out of here soon,” he assured her. He handed her an apple and took one for himself. We sat together quietly as we ate the meager breakfast.

Just as we finished, Vic barged in. He stood in the doorway, flanked by his two thugs. His eyes scanned the room, taking in the scene with a smirk.

“Morning, sunshine,” he drawled, his voice oily and unpleasant. “Time for a little chat, Talia.”

I felt a wave of nausea but managed to nod. “Just let me get Sasha settled,” I said, trying to keep calm.

He waved his hand dismissively. “Hurry up. I don’t have all day.”

I leaned down to whisper in Maxim’s ear. “Stay with Sasha. Keep her calm. I’ll be back soon.”

Maxim nodded, his eyes wide but determined. “I will.”

I followed Vic out of the room, my heart pounding. He led me down the creaking stairs and into a dimly lit kitchen that smelled damp and decayed. One of his men closed the door behind us, and I suddenly became very aware of how isolated we were.

Vic leaned against the counter, his posture casual but his eyes sharp. “We need to talk about your future.”

I swallowed hard, trying to ignore the bile rising in my throat. “What do you want

from me?”

He smiled a slow, predatory grin. “Straight to the point. I like that. You see, I’ve decided I will keep you for myself. Aleksandr will come for the kids, but you...you’re a different story.”

I stiffened, every muscle in my body screaming to run. “What do you mean, keep me?”

His smile widened. “You’ll see. But for now, all you need to do is behave. Do as you’re told, and no one gets hurt. Understand?”

I nodded, unable to trust my voice. He stepped closer, his hand reaching out to touch my face. I flinched but didn’t pull away. His touch was cold, and a fresh wave of nausea washed over me.

“Good girl,” he murmured, threading his thick fingers through my hair. He wasn’t a tall man, and he certainly wasn’t attractive with his balding brown hair and squinty brown eyes. I was disgusted by his hands on me, but I held still, afraid of what he’d do to the children.

His gun was on the counter next to him, and a fleeting thought of grabbing it and shooting him crossed my mind. He rubbed his thumb across my lips and squeezed my breast with his other hand. This can’t be happening. I broke out in a cold sweat as he tugged at my sweater, lifting it over my head. I wanted to fight, to knee him in his cock and flee. Memories of being groped as a child in those horrible foster homes flooded my mind. Vic’s revolting hands removed my bra, leaving me bare and vulnerable in front of him.

“You’re beautiful,” he said, grinning like a sly fox. “No wonder Aleksandr wants you for himself.” His eyes dragged from my breasts to my belly, freezing when he saw

my baby bump.

“You’re pregnant?” he asked, visibly shocked. “Who’s the father?” His eyes narrowed, and I saw he was about to hatch a heinous plan. “My ex-boyfriend,” I lied. There was no way I would tell him Aleksandr was the father. He might just cut the baby out of me to hurt Aleksandr even more than he already has.

Sucking on his front teeth, he hesitated before cuffing me behind the neck. “No matter, we’ll get rid of it after it’s born. I know plenty of people that will pay a shitload of money for a baby.”

He slammed his lips on mine, biting my lower lip and drawing blood. I dug my nails into his arms, and he let me go. “You’re going to behave, Talia, or something terrible will happen to those brats.”

He grabbed the gun off the counter and shoved the barrel into my cheek. Pulling me closer, he squeezed my breast, twisting the nipple until I saw stars behind my eyes. But I didn’t make a sound. I wouldn’t give in and let him see how terrified I was. Shoving his hand down the front of my pants, he dragged his finger through my folds. He got off on terrorizing me as he licked his lips with a deranged gleam in his eyes.

“Such a sweet pussy,” he growled, pulling his hand out of my pants. My skin crawled as he continued to look me over.

Grabbing me by the throat, he walked me backward to the table, pushing me onto my back. My hands trembled as I tried my best to stay in control, although I could feel the tears stinging the corners of my eyes. Leaning down, he sucked a nipple into his mouth, scraping his teeth along it. He squeezed and twisted my other breast roughly, continuing to suck on my nipple and lick my breast.

“Do you like that?” he asked as if I was going to answer him. I turned my face away

from him, not wanting to feel his hot, sticky breath on my cheek. Shoving my legs apart, he stood in between them, his hard cock pressing against the front of his pants. “I should show you what a real man feels like,” he threatened, pushing his cock against my pussy. His fingers tugged slightly at the waistband of my leggings. I closed my eyes, preparing for the worst, when he suddenly stopped, grabbing my chin roughly and forcing my face to his.

“Look at me!” he thundered. I opened my eyes and saw a madman looming over me. “You belong to me now, Talia,” he growled through clenched teeth. “I’m going to fuck you every day and night until I brand every part of you.”

Standing upright, he tossed my bra and sweater at me. “Get dressed,” he ordered, calling his associate, Rick, into the kitchen.

“Take her upstairs and make sure she stays put.” He stomped out of the kitchen, leaving Rick and me alone.

I slowly got off the table and got dressed. Rick’s eyes were glued to me the entire time, making me want to vomit all over the floor. When I was finished, he grabbed my arm and led me out of the kitchen.

As I climbed the stairs, I forced myself to take deep breaths to calm the storm inside me. I had to be strong for Sasha, Maxim, and the baby I carried. I couldn’t let Vic see my fear.

When I entered the room, Maxim looked up, relief flooding his face. “Are you okay, Talia?”

I nodded, kneeling beside him. “I’m fine. We need to keep working on the window,” I whispered. “We don’t have much time.”

Maxim nodded, his hands trembling but determined. Together, we continued to work on the boards, each creak and groan of the wood a testament to our desperation. Sasha sat in the corner of the room, her eyes wide and frightened.

This will work. It has to. I continued to work on the boards, determined to get us out of here and to safety. When this was all over, I'd make sure Vic got what he deserved.

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Chapter 4

Talia

Finally, the last board came loose, and a stream of cold air rushed into the room. I peered out, my heart lifting as I saw the tree within reach. “We can do this,” I whispered. “We can get out of here.”

I could hear the sound of my breath, rapid and shallow, along with the rustling of the autumn leaves. The sky was colored orange and pink, signaling the approach of evening. Maxim had been my partner in this desperate plan with his sharp mind and quick reflexes. Sasha, younger and more fragile, clung to me, her hands grasping my shirt. They were Aleksandr’s blood, and that made them targets. I had to get them out of here.

My hand instinctively rested on my abdomen, a reminder of the life growing inside me. I was nearly four months pregnant, and the fatigue was hitting me hard. I didn’t have the luxury of rest, though. We had to escape.

“Maxim,” I whispered. “Are you ready?”

He nodded, his face set in a determined frown. We had been working for hours to loosen the boards that covered the window, using anything we could find in the room—a rusty nail, a broken piece of wood, even our bare hands. Finally, the last board gave way with a creak, revealing a small opening that led to the tree outside.

“Okay, Sasha,” I said softly. “You’re going to climb out first. Just like we practiced,

remember?”

Sasha nodded, her eyes wide with fear but filled with trust. I helped her through the window, holding my breath as she reached for the nearest branch. The old oak tree with thick, gnarled branches was our lifeline. Slowly, she began to climb down, her movements cautious but steady.

“That’s it,” I whispered, my heart pounding. “You’re doing great.”

Maxim went next, his movements quicker and more confident. He paused once to look back at me, his blue eyes bright with determination. I gave him a reassuring nod before he continued his descent.

Finally, it was my turn. I squeezed through the window, feeling the rough bark against my hands as I gripped the branch. The descent was slow and nerve-wracking, every rustle of leaves sounding like a gunshot in the stillness of the evening. But we made it, all three of us, our feet finally touching the hard ground below.

I took a deep breath, my heart gripped with fear and relief. The guards were stationed at the front and back of the house, but the tree had been our salvation, allowing us to escape unnoticed. We crouched low, moving silently through the underbrush, the forest our only cover.

We moved quickly but carefully, every snap of a twig underfoot making my heart leap into my throat. The forest was dense, shadows growing longer as the sun set below the horizon. We didn’t stop, not even for a moment, the urgency of our situation pushing us forward.

My strength was waning, my steps growing heavier with each passing minute. The strain of the pregnancy was taking its toll. Just when I thought I might collapse, Maxim turned back, his eyes filled with concern.

“Talía, are you okay?” he whispered, his hand gripping mine tightly.

I nodded, forcing a weak smile. “I’m fine, Maxim. We’re almost there.” The footsteps behind us sent a jolt of fear through my body. I turned and saw one of Vic’s men emerging from the shadows.

“Run!” I screamed, pushing Maxim and Sasha ahead of me. “Run!”

We bolted, the adrenaline pumping through my veins, but I knew we couldn’t outrun them forever. I had to think of some way to keep the kids safe. The trees blurred around us as we ran, the ground uneven and treacherous.

Suddenly, Maxim stumbled, and I caught him before he fell. “Keep going,” I urged, my voice breathless. “Don’t stop.”

We burst through the edge of the woods, the city skyline visible in the distance. My mind raced, thinking of places to hide and people to trust. But time was running out. I could hear the men behind us, their shouts growing louder.

We reached a road, and I saw a car approaching. Desperation fueled my actions as I waved my arms, screaming for help. The car screeched to a halt, and the driver, a middle-aged man with kind eyes, jumped out.

“Please,” I gasped, “we need help. They’re after us.”

The man took one look at the children and nodded. “Get in. Quickly.”

We piled into the car, my heart about to burst as the engine roared to life. As we sped away, I glanced back, seeing the men emerge from the woods, their faces twisted with anger. But we were safe, for now.

The woman next to the driver twisted in her seat to look us over. “Are you hurt?” she asked concerned.

“No, thankfully. We just need to get away from here.” I pulled Sasha and Maxim into my sides and silently prayed she would help us.

She thought about it momentarily before deciding not to ask any other questions. “We’ll take you somewhere safe.”

The couple introduced themselves as Carol and Richard, their voices soothing and filled with genuine concern.

“We’ll take you to a truck stop not too far from here,” Richard said. “Do you need the police?”

“No, I don’t want the police involved. I just need to call my sister.”

“You can call her from the truck stop. I’d give you my cell phone, but the battery is dead.” Richard shook his head, chiding himself for not bringing the phone charger.

“Thank you,” I replied, my heart finally starting to slow its frantic pace. The children huddled close to me, their bodies trembling with exhaustion and fear. I held them tight, whispering reassurances.

As we drove, the forest gave way to open fields, and the sky above us deepened into a rich, velvety blue. Stars began to appear, twinkling faintly against the dark sky. Carol turned to look at us again, her eyes kind. “You’re safe now,” she said softly. “We’ll make sure of it.”

I managed a small, grateful smile. “Thank you, Carol. Thank you both so much.”

Maxim leaned forward, his curiosity momentarily overcoming his exhaustion. “Is the truck stop far from here?”

Richard glanced at him through the rearview mirror, his eyes gentle. “Not too far, son. Just a few more minutes.”

The minutes felt like hours, but before long the truck stop appeared, its bright lights flickering in the distance. Richard parked the car, and we hurried inside. The warmth and bustle of the place were welcomed after the ordeal we just endured.

I approached the counter, my voice steady but urgent as I asked to use the phone. The cashier, a burly man with a kind face, handed it over without hesitation. My first instinct was to call Aleksandr until I realized I didn’t know his number. Taking a steady breath, I decided to call Sandy. My fingers trembled as I dialed the number, praying she would answer.

After a few rings, I heard her voice, weary and filled with worry.

“Talía? Is that you?”

“Yes,” I whispered, tears springing to my eyes. “It’s me. We’re safe. We’re at a truck stop but need Aleksandr to come get us.”

“Hold on,” she said as she spoke to someone in the room. “Dimitri is here with me, and he’ll get the message to Aleksandr,” she said, her voice firm and reassuring. “Stay there. Don’t move.”

After I gave her the name of the truck stop, I hung up, turning to see Carol and Richard waiting patiently near the front door. I managed a small smile, gratitude flooding through me.

“Thank you,” I said, my voice choked with emotion. “Thank you so much.”

Richard nodded. “We’re just glad you’re safe. We’ll stay with you until your friend arrives.”

We settled into a booth, and the children huddled close to me. Carol brought over hot chocolate and sandwiches, the simple kindness filling me with more emotions than I cared to deal with. I hadn’t realized how hungry and cold we were until that moment.

Maxim took a bite of his sandwich, his round with delight. “This is really good,” he said, licking crumbs from his lips.

Carol laughed softly. “Eat up, sweetheart.”

Sasha sipped her hot chocolate, her eyes drooping with exhaustion. “Will Uncle Aleksandr be here soon?”

I brushed a strand of hair away from her face. “Yes, he will. He’s on his way right now.”

As we waited, I felt a strange sense of calm wash over me. We had made it out. We were safe. And soon, Aleksandr would be here. The thought of seeing him again, of feeling his strong arms around me, brought a sense of comfort I hadn’t felt in days.

Carol and Richard stayed close, their presence a comforting reminder of the kindness that still existed in the world. Richard spoke softly to Maxim, distracting him with stories of his own childhood. At the same time, Carol kept a watchful eye on the door, ready to alert us when Aleksandr arrived.

The truck stop bustled around us, truckers and travelers moving in and out, oblivious to the drama that had unfolded. My hand rested protectively on my growing belly, the

life inside me a reminder of the future I was fighting for.

When the truck stop's door finally swung open, I saw Aleksandr stride in, his eyes scanning the room frantically until they landed on us. I felt a sob of relief escape my lips.

He rushed over, gathering Sasha and Maxim into his arms. His eyes were filled with relief and fury. "Thank God," he whispered, his voice breaking. "Thank God you're safe."

The children clung to him, their bodies shaking with relief. His gaze softened when he looked at me, and he pulled me into a tight embrace.

"Thank you," he murmured, his voice thick with emotion. "Thank you for keeping them safe."

I buried my face in his chest as he stroked my hair. "Are you okay? Did he hurt you?"

"I'm okay," I assured him. "I just want to go home."

Hooking his finger under my chin, he lifted my eyes to his. "Let's go home," he said softly, kissing me gently.

Aleksandr thanked Richard and Carol for helping us and then escorted us to the vehicles in the parking lot. After settling the children into the backseat of the SUV, he pulled me to the side. "Can you describe the place where Vic was holding you?" he asked, keeping his voice low.

"Yes," I answered, narrowing my eyes suspiciously. I told him what the house looked like and where it was located.

“Thank you, kiska, “ he whispered, kissing my forehead. “Go home with the children. I’ll be there soon.”

“No, don’t go,” I begged, tugging on his arm.

“Everything will be alright. Lev and Nikolai will drive you home. You’re safe now,” he assured. “And I’m going to make sure it stays that way.”

Without saying anything else, he got into the car with Anton, Dimitri, and two other vors. I watched as they drove away, a chill creeping up the back of my neck.

“Talía, get in,” Nikolai urged, holding the back passenger door open. “Let’s get the children home.”

“Yes,” I agreed, wrapping my arms around myself. I took one last look at the road, then climbed into the SUV next to the children. “Let’s go home,” I said, forcing a smile for their benefit. Leaning my head back, I sent silent prayers to heaven for Aleksandr to return safely. Then I closed my eyes.

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Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:46 am

Chapter 5

Aleksandr

The engine roared beneath us as we hurtled through the night. My grip on my gun was iron-tight with the fury coursing through my veins. Talia and the children were safe now, but the mere thought of them in Vic's clutches was enough to make my vision blur with rage. Beside me, Dimitri sat in tense silence, the air heavy with the promise of violence. Behind us, Anton and two more of my vors, Sergei and Ivan, mirrored our grim determination. We were a convoy of vengeance, heading straight into the heart of darkness.

The abandoned house loomed ahead, a decrepit monument to the madness that had nearly cost me everything. As we approached, I could feel the blood pounding in my ears, a relentless drumbeat of wrath. This place would be Vic's tomb; I would see to that personally.

As we turned off the main road, the gravel crunched under the tires, a gritty prelude to the storm we were about to unleash. We disembarked in a flurry of motion, weapons drawn, senses on high alert. I curtly nodded to Dimitri, who moved forward to breach the door. The wood splintered under the force, and the door swung open with a bang.

Inside, our enemies hid in the shadows. We moved with lethal precision, our training and resolve turning the tide swiftly in our favor. Anton was a blur of motion beside me as he dispatched one of Vic's men with cold efficiency. Sergei and Ivan flanked the building, cutting off any chance of escape.

My focus was singular: find Vic. He was the architect of this nightmare, and I intended to make him pay. Room by room, we cleared the house, but with the last of Vic's men fallen, my frustration grew. Vic was nowhere to be found. I stood in the center of the wreckage, chest heaving, rage barely contained. The bastard had slipped through my fingers...again.

Anton approached, his face a mask of concern. " Pakhan , we've cleared the entire house. There's no sign of him."

I clenched my fists, the veins in my arms standing out like cords. "He's a coward," I spat. "He's always one step ahead, hiding in the shadows like the vermin he is."

Dimitri checked his phone, his brow furrowing. "No new intel from our sources. It's like he vanished."

I exhaled sharply, trying to rein in the torrent of emotions. "He can't hide forever. I'll find him, and when I do, I'll cut out his heart and dance on his grave."

As we began the drive back to the mansion, I felt the first stirrings of unease. Vic was a coward, but he was also cunning. This wasn't over. I checked my phone, a habit born of paranoia and necessity. A new message blinked on the screen, sending me a fresh surge of fury.

Vic: Sorry I didn't get the chance to kill you, Aleksandr, but I guarantee I will. And next time, I won't lose Talia. One taste was enough to know her sweet pussy would belong to me.

The words were a knife in my gut, twisting with every syllable. I handed the phone to Dimitri, my voice a deadly growl. "Pull over. Now ."

We were on a deserted stretch of road, the forest looming on either side. As soon as

the car came to a stop, I was out with my gun in hand. The first shot was wild, venting of pure rage. The second found its mark, splintering the trunk of a tree. I emptied the clip, each bullet a catharsis, a promise of retribution.

When the gun clicked empty, the silence returned. I stood there, breathing hard, the echoes of my fury fading in the night. My men waited, understanding in their eyes. They knew this was personal. They knew I wouldn't rest until Vic was dead.

Dimitri approached me cautiously. "Brat, we will find him. But we need to be smart about this. He's trying to provoke you."

I nodded, my chest still heaving. "I know. And that's why he must be dealt with. He's a threat to Talia and to our family. I won't let him get away with this."

"We'll get him," Dimitri assured. "We just need to regroup and plan our next move."

Back in the car, the drive home was a blur. My thoughts were a storm of images: Talia's face, the children's fear, Vic's smirk. By the time we reached the mansion, I was a coiled spring, ready to explode at the slightest provocation.

Inside, the house was quiet, the staff having retreated for the night. I made my way to my bedroom, the need to see Talia, to reassure myself of her safety, an almost physical ache. She lay there, a fragile figure amid my turmoil, her sleep troubled but deep.

I sat on the edge of the bed, brushing a stray lock of her chocolate brown hair from her face. She stirred, eyes fluttering open to meet mine. The relief I felt was tempered by the memory of Vic's message, a dark shadow over this moment of peace.

"Talia," I said softly, my voice rough with emotion. "Did he touch you?"

She hesitated, and for a moment, I thought she wouldn't answer. But then she sat up, her eyes meeting mine. I saw the truth there, stark and painful. "He didn't... he didn't fuck me." She looked away, fury and disgust burning in her eyes.

"Did he hurt you?" I asked, my tone dangerous.

She wouldn't look at me, instead staring at a nonexistent spot on the floor. "He...he touched me. He tried to hurt me, but I wouldn't give him the satisfaction," she spat. "He threatened to kill you and keep me for himself, fucking me every day until he marked every part of me." She choked back a sob as her fingernails dug into her palms.

The anger I had spent so long trying to control flared up again, hot and fierce. I pulled her into my arms, holding her tight as if I could shield her from the horror she had endured. "I will kill him," I vowed, my voice a low, menacing growl. "I will make him pay for every moment of fear, for every threat, for daring to touch what belongs to me."

She nodded against my chest, her body trembling. "I know you will, Aleksandr. I know."

We sat there in the darkness, the promise of vengeance a bond between us. Vic had made this personal, and I would not stop until he was nothing more than a memory, a cautionary tale whispered in fear. The night was far from over, and the fires of my fury would not be quenched until justice was served.

Sleep was elusive that night. I lay beside Talia, listening to her breathing, stewing in my anger and the burden of my promise. Every thought and emotion was a jagged edge, cutting into my resolve and sharpening it. The soft glow of the moonlight did little to chase away the darkness within me.

When dawn broke, I was already up, the restlessness driving me from the bed. I needed to move, plan, and turn my rage into action. In the study, maps were spread out before me. Vic was out there, somewhere, and I would find him.

Anton and Dimitri joined me, their expressions as grim as my own. “We need to regroup,” I ordered. “We need to find him now. ”

Anton nodded. “He can’t hide forever.”

I studied the map spread out on the table, tracing the potential routes Vic might take. “He’s smart,” I muttered. “He knows we’re coming for him. We need to be smarter.”

“We have contacts,” Dimitri said, pointing to various locations marked on the map. “People who owe us favors, people who can give us information. We just need to reach out to them.”

I nodded, considering our options. “Make the calls,” I ordered.

By evening, I was in a knot of tension that refused to be undone. I stood on the balcony, looking out over the estate, my failure heavy on my shoulders. Talia joined me, her presence a soothing balm to my troubled mind.

“We’ll find him,” she said softly, slipping her hand into mine. “I believe in you.”

I turned to her, my eyes meeting hers. “I can’t lose you, Talia. I can’t lose any of you.”

“You won’t,” she said, her voice steady. “We’re stronger than he thinks. And we’re together.”

I pulled her close, the feel of her body against mine grounding me, giving me the

strength I needed. I would find him. I would end this. And when I did, there would be no mercy. For Mikhail, Talia, the children, for everything he had taken from me, I would make Vic pay.

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Chapter 6

Talia

My body was curled into Aleksandr's, fitting together like puzzle pieces. His breath was warm on my cheek, and his hand slid down my arm, turning me onto my back. His teeth grazed my throat, and then he licked his way down to my breast, sucking my nipple into his mouth. A gasp escaped my lips as I arched my back, needing more. He flicked it with his tongue before rolling it between his thumb and forefinger.

"I need you," he whispered, still sucking my nipple. "I need to be inside you."

Aleksandr licked his way down to my navel, and my eyes fell closed. Slowly, he pulled off my panties, dropping them onto the floor. He planted feather-light kisses on my pussy, then grabbed my thighs, tilting my hips toward him. His tongue felt warm and smooth as he swiped it between my slick folds.

My fingers twisted in the sheets as he licked and ate my pussy, lapping at it and pumping his tongue in and out. He replaced his tongue with his finger, and my core tightened as friction built. Just as I was about to explode, he pulled his finger out and pushed it into my ass. He jammed his tongue into my pussy at the same time, and I shattered around him.

"Mmm, good girl," Aleksandr muttered as he lapped my juices. "Who owns this pussy?"

“You do,” I breathed, fingering his dark hair.

He knelt back on the bed, spreading my thighs further apart. His ice-blue eyes met mine, glazed over and blazing with heat and desire. I fisted his hard cock in my hand, sliding my fingers up and down the shaft.

“I need you,” I groaned, pulling him toward my pussy. I ached to feel him inside me, pushing and thrusting, tearing my pussy open.

In one thrust, he lunged balls deep, grunting as my pussy clenched around him. “Kiska,” he moaned as he thrust faster, building up to a frenzied pace.

I held onto his forearms as he plunged his cock mercilessly in and out of my pussy. “Yessss...please...I need to come,” I begged.

“No,” he growled, slowing his pace and pulling his cock out until just the tip was in. The sudden emptiness in my pussy made my back arch, a silent plea for him to keep fucking me.

“You come when I tell you to come and not a second before,” he commanded. He bent his head, sucking my breast into his mouth as he slowly slid his thick cock back into my pussy.

My mouth opened in a silent gasp as he pushed slowly in and out. His fingers dug into my hips, and before I knew what was happening, he pulled his cock out, flipped me onto my stomach, and pulled me onto my knees. Pressing my head down, he swiped his tongue up my pussy and then slid his cock between my ass cheeks.

“Is this what you want?” he teased, smacking my ass just enough for it to lightly sting.

“Yes, baby, please...fuck me,” I groaned. But instead of shoving his cock in my pussy he continued to tease my ass. “Aleksandr!” I hissed, gritting my teeth. “Don’t tease me!”

“I would never tease you, dushenka .“ With that, he shoved his cock into my pussy so hard I felt tears prick the corners of my eyes. I needed him to consume me, to own every inch of me.

“Yes! Fuck me!” I cried out as he fucked me hard and fast. My pussy fluttered around his cock as my release began to build.

Without warning, Aleksandr shoved a finger in my ass and then another. He worked my ass simultaneously fucking my pussy, stretching his fingers and thrusting them into my ass over and over.

“Oh my God,” I gasped, pushing my ass back into every thrust. Both my holes were stuffed with him, and yet I needed more. “More...” I moaned, chasing my climax that was just out of reach. “I’m so close.”

Aleksandr shoved a third finger in my ass while he reached around and twisted my clit between the fingers of his free hand. All of it combined – his cock in my pussy, fingers in my ass, and twisting my clit – made my release hit like a freight train as I cried out from pleasure. My back arched, and my pussy clamped down on his cock as stars danced in my eyes.

He didn’t stop, though, pulling his cock out of my pussy and shoving it into my ass. The pressure and size of his cock stretched it, making me squirm from the burning sensation. He leaned over me, slowly sinking it deeper and deeper.

“You’re so fucking tight,” he murmured, fisting my hair in one hand and holding himself up with the other.

Inch by inch, he buried his cock in my ass, and I felt it stretch enough to accommodate all of him comfortably.

“That’s it, relax,” he murmured, pulling my head back and sucking on my neck. He molded his body around mine as he fucked my ass slowly until I begged for him to go faster.

He pumped harder and faster, claiming my ass the way he claimed my pussy. Tightening his grip on my hair, he whispered in my ear, “Make me come, kiska. ”

I pushed back against every thrust as he fucked my ass deeper and harder. He let go of my hair and grabbed my breast, pulling me up and against his chest. His hand slid around my throat as my back pressed against his rock-hard pecs. Holding me in place, he fucked me faster and harder until my pussy spasmed around his cock.

“That’s it, kiska , come with me,“ he demanded. With one final thrust, he exploded, shooting his hot come into my ass. My core tightened as my release shot through me.

I fell face down onto the bed with Aleksandr draped over me like a blanket. He pressed small kisses along my spine and then rolled onto his side, pulling me into him. We lay together, spooning until my heartbeat slowed.

Aleksandr danced his fingertips along my arm, turning me to face him. Cupping my face gently, he kissed me tenderly. I inhaled deeply, filling my lungs with his scent. Pulling him closer, I deepened the kiss, sliding my tongue into his mouth to savor his taste. His cock pushed against me, still hard and ready.

“Do you want more?” I asked, glancing at him from beneath my lashes.

“I always want more of you,” he replied, smacking my ass.

Rolling on top of him, I slid my hand between our bodies, grasping his cock. “I want to taste you on my tongue,” I stated, licking my lips seductively. His cock jerked in my hand, and that was all the confirmation I needed.

I kissed my way from his lips to his abs while crawling backward until I was settled between his thighs. Aleksandr gathered my long hair in his hand, giving me unobstructed access to his cock. I ran my tongue from base to tip, licking the drop of pre-come that sat on the tip like a pearl.

Over and over, I licked his cock, sucking the tip in my mouth while running my fingertips over the shaft. He bucked his hips slightly, and I swirled my tongue around the head. Aleksandr groaned as I sucked his cock into my mouth inch by inch.

When his entire cock was in my mouth, I swallowed, constricting my throat, causing him to moan louder. “Yes...just like that. Fuuuck. “ I sucked him so deeply that my cheeks hollowed.

My tongue swirled and danced along his cock. He tangled his fingers in my hair and began pumping his hips, fucking my mouth. I played with his balls and hummed until he shook with the need to come.

Holding my head in place, he pumped his hips two more times before his release hit, shooting his come down my throat. “Fuck!” he cried out, pumping until he was depleted.

Pulling back, I licked my lips, crawled up his chest, and kissed him deeply.

“ Kiska , you’re going to be the death of me,” he murmured, cradling me in his arms.

“At least you’ll die with a smile,” I teased.

We held each other, enjoying the afterglow until the steady beat of his heart lulled me to sleep.

Chapter 7

Aleksandr

The sound of my fists pounding against the heavy bag echoed through the gym. Each strike was a release, an alleviation of the storm within me. Sweat dripped from my brow, and my knuckles throbbed with the intensity of my rage. The rhythmic thud of my blows was almost hypnotic. Vic killed Mikhail and had taken Talia and the children. Vic had dared to touch what was mine. He had made a grave mistake.

I paused, taking a deep breath and wiping the sweat from my forehead. The bag swung back and forth, a poor substitute for the man I wanted to destroy. My thoughts were a tangled mess of rage. I needed to find Vic. I needed to make him pay.

As I leaned against the wall, trying to steady my breathing, the door to the gym creaked open. Talia stepped inside, her presence a welcome distraction from my dark thoughts. Her eyes, filled with worry, met mine.

“Aleksandr,” she began softly. “The children are scared. They don’t want to leave the mansion.”

I felt a pang of guilt. Sasha and Maxim were too young to be caught up in this nightmare. They deserved to be children, to play and laugh without fear. But Vic’s actions had stolen that innocence from them. First, he kills their father, and then he kidnaps them. I couldn’t let him win. I wouldn’t let him put fear into my family.

I walked over to Talia, placing a reassuring hand on her shoulder. “We won’t let Vic

control us. We'll show him that we're not afraid."

She nodded, but the worry in her eyes didn't fade. "What are you planning to do?"

"We'll take the kids out," I said, my voice firm. "We'll go to the arcade and then get some ice cream. They need to see that life goes on and that they can still have fun despite everything."

Talia's lips curved into a small smile. "That sounds like a good idea. They need this."

As we made our way to the children's rooms, I couldn't help but wrestle with my feelings for Talia. She was more than just the mother of my unborn child. She was a beacon of light in the darkness surrounding me as pakhan . But admitting that to myself, let alone to her, felt impossible. I had convinced myself that keeping her at the mansion was solely for the safety of her and our child. It was easier that way.

We found Sasha and Maxim huddled together on the couch in their playroom. Olga was reading a story to them. Their faces lit up when they saw us, but the fear in their eyes was still evident. I crouched down to their level, forcing a smile.

"How about we go out today?" I asked, trying to sound as enthusiastic as possible.

Sasha clung to Maxim tighter, shaking her head no. Maxim shrugged his shoulders noncommittally.

"There's an indoor arcade not far from here, and then we can get ice cream."

Maxim's eyes widened with excitement, but he kept his face expressionless. "Can we play all the games?"

"Yes, we can play all the games," I assured him.

Sasha, always the more cautious one, looked to Talia and Olga for reassurance. Talia nodded, her smile more genuine now.

“I think that is a wonderful idea,” Olga smiled.

“We’ll all go together; even Nanny Olga will come.” I held out my hand to Sasha, hoping she’d take it. She stared at it momentarily before sliding her hand into mine.

“Okay,” she said, “but I want an ice cream sundae with whipped cream, a cherry, and sprinkles.”

“Anything you want, printsessa.” Sasha jumped into my arms, her green eyes sparkling like emeralds.

Maxim held Talia’s hand all the way to the SUV. The drive to the arcade was filled with the children’s enthusiastic chatter. Nikolai drove, and I looked at the side mirror to scan for any signs of trouble. My paranoia was at an all-time high, but I couldn’t let it ruin this day for them.

The arcade was a cacophony of flashing lights and cheerful noises. Sasha and Maxim ran from game to game with Olga, their earlier fears forgotten. I stayed close to them, my eyes continually scanning our surroundings. Talia stood beside me, a comforting reminder of why I was doing all this. Nikolai kept one eye on the children and the other eye on the crowd.

Maxim dragged me to a racing game at one point, insisting I join him. I couldn’t help but laugh at his eagerness. For a few precious moments, I was just an uncle playing with his nephew, not a man consumed by vengeance.

Maxim jumped up and down as the game ended, with a broad grin on his face. “You were so fast, Uncle! Let’s race again!”

“Of course, and this time, I’ll let you win.”

Maxim snorted and put on his game face. Sasha giggled, standing next to her brother. “You can beat him,” she encouraged, smiling from ear to ear. I turned to find Talia watching me, a soft smile on her lips.

“You’re really good with them,” she said, her voice tinged with admiration.

“They deserve better than this,” I replied, my tone grimmer than intended. “They deserve a normal life.”

“And you’re doing your best to give them that,” Talia insisted, touching my arm gently. “You’re a good man, Aleksandr.”

I wanted to believe her, but my past painted a different picture. I gave her a tight smile and changed the subject. “After this game, let’s get them some ice cream.”

The ice cream parlor was a burst of color and sweetness. As they devoured their treats, Sasha and Maxim’s faces were smeared with chocolate and whipped cream. Talia laughed, her eyes sparkling with amusement. It was a sight that warmed my heart, making me momentarily forget the dark cloud hanging over us.

As we sat at the table, enjoying our ice cream, Talia leaned close to me. “Thank you, Aleksandr,” she said softly. “This means a lot to them. And to me.”

I nodded, unable to find the words to respond. My feelings for her were a complicated mess, tangled up in my need to protect her and the unborn child. I loved her, but admitting that was a weakness I couldn’t afford.

The drive back to the mansion was quiet, the children exhausted from their fun day. As I carried Sasha to her room, her thin arms wrapped around my neck, I felt a fierce

protectiveness wash over me. I won't let anyone take away our happiness.

Once the children were tucked in bed, I was alone with Talia in the hallway. The silence between us was heavy, filled with unspoken words and unresolved feelings. She looked up at me, her eyes searching mine.

"Aleksandr," she began hesitantly, "I... I need to tell you something."

I felt my heart rate quicken. "What is it?"

She took a deep breath, her eyes never leaving mine. "I... I care about you. More than I probably should. And I know you feel the same way, even if you won't admit it."

Her words hit me like a punch to the gut. I was terrified of what that meant for us, for our future. I took a step back, trying to regain my composure.

"Talia," I said, my voice strained, "you don't know what you're saying."

She shook her head, tears welling up in her hazel eyes. "I do know, Aleksandr. I know you care about me. I see it in the way you look at me, the way you protect me. You don't have to be afraid to admit it."

I turned away, my heart pounding. "I'm not afraid. I'm just trying to keep you safe. Keep the baby safe. That's all that matters right now."

"Aleksandr," she said softly, her voice breaking my resolve, "keeping us safe doesn't mean you have to shut yourself off from us. From me."

I closed my eyes, struggling to control my emotions. "I can't afford to be weak," I hissed.

She stepped closer, her hand gently touching my back. “Loving someone isn’t a weakness. It’s a strength.”

Her words hung in the air, and I wanted to believe her. But the fear, the doubt, was too strong. I turned to face her, forcing a smile. “Let’s just focus on keeping everyone safe. That’s what’s important.”

Talia sighed, a look of disappointment flashing across her face. “Alright. But just know that I’m here for you. Always.”

I let her walk away. As I stood alone in the hallway, I made a silent vow to find Vic and make him pay for his sins until I squeezed his last breath out of him.

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Chapter 8

Talia

I closed the door to my bedroom, my sanctuary turned prison again and leaned against it with a heavy sigh. The weight of Aleksandr's words still lingered, a crushing disappointment settling over my heart. He wouldn't admit he loved me. I could feel the tears threatening to spill, but I refused to let them fall. I had cried enough for one lifetime.

Aleksandr had tried to convince me that he was keeping me at the mansion to keep me and the baby safe. I wanted to believe him, but his cold demeanor and the way he kept his emotions locked away made it hard. Was he protecting us out of duty or something deeper? I didn't know.

I crossed the room and sat on the edge of my bed, the luxurious mattress giving way under my weight. My thoughts wandered back to Danny, my ex-boyfriend. He had cheated on me and then stalked me, turning my world upside down. Trusting men had never come easy for me, especially after growing up in foster homes filled with abuse. I had little experience with love, and the glimpses I had seen were tainted by pain and betrayal.

But Aleksandr was different—or at least, I wanted him to be. I craved his love and yearned for the family I had always dreamed of. But was I fooling myself? I didn't know what to believe anymore.

Feeling the walls closing in, I grabbed my phone and dialed Sandy's number. She

was the one person who was always there for me, no matter how far away we were from each other. The phone rang a few times before she answered.

“Talía? Is everything okay?” Sandy asked.

“No,” I admitted, my voice breaking. “Aleksandr... he won’t admit he loves me. He says he’s just keeping me here to keep me and the baby safe.”

There was a pause on the other end. “Do you love him?”

“Yes,” I whispered. “At least, I think I do. And after everything that has happened, I want to believe he loves me, too, but I’m second-guessing myself.”

“Talía, what do you want from Aleksandr?” Sandy’s voice was gentle but firm.

“I want him to love me,” I said, my voice trembling. “I want him to love the baby and marry me. I want the family I’ve always dreamed of.”

Sandy sighed. “It’s not easy to love a man like Aleksandr, Talía. He’s involved in the criminal world, and men like him keep themselves closed off to love and relationships. You might have to face the fact that although it’s obvious he cares for you, he may never be the man you want him to be.”

Her words were like a slap across my face, but deep down, I knew she was right. Loving Aleksandr was like trying to hold onto a phantom.

“You’re right, sis,” I admitted. A tear slipped down my cheek as I ended the call with Sandy, feeling more lost than ever.

The night was long and restless. I tossed and turned, unable to find peace in the silence. My mind replayed Aleksandr’s words over and over, mingling with

memories of Danny and the foster homes. I wanted to believe that Aleksandr was different and capable of love. But the fear of getting hurt again was strong.

Hours ticked by, and I gave up on sleep by the time the sun peeked over the horizon. My stomach growled with hunger, the baby wanting to be fed. I slipped out of bed, put on my robe, and tiptoed downstairs, hoping to find something to eat without waking anyone. As I entered the kitchen, the aroma of freshly brewed coffee filled the air. To my surprise, Nikolai was there.

“Good morning,” he greeted me with a nod. “Couldn’t sleep?”

“Morning, Nikolai,” I replied, my voice still groggy. “No sleep for me.”

He handed me a cup of coffee, and I accepted it gratefully. “Thinking about Aleksandr?” he asked, his tone casual but knowing.

“Yes,” I admitted. “And other things.”

We stood in silence for a moment, sipping our coffee. Finally, I gathered the courage to ask, “Has Vic been found yet?”

Nikolai’s expression darkened. A storm brewed behind his blue eyes. “No, he’s still in hiding. But it’s only a matter of time before he’s found and disposed of.”

A chill crept down my spine. Murder, kidnapping, disposing of people...it was ruthless. But this was the world Aleksandr belonged to, which I was now a part of.

“I want to see Sandy,” I blurted out, needing a distraction from my thoughts. “But I don’t know how to get Aleksandr to agree to let me go.”

Nikolai considered my words. “If you can convince Dimitri, then Dimitri will

convince the pakhan . As his brother, he knows how to convince him of things.”

A spark of hope ignited within me. Dimitri was one of the few people Aleksandr trusted implicitly. If I could get him on my side, I could see Sandy and clear my head. I needed her advice, her support. I absently rubbed at the wrist tattoo connecting me to Sandy.

“Thanks, Nikolai,” I said, feeling a glimmer of determination. “I’ll figure something out.”

I took some crackers out of the cabinet and finished my coffee. As I munched on the crackers, a plan began to form in my mind. Convincing Dimitri wouldn’t be easy, but I was willing to try. For me, for my baby, for the chance of a future with Aleksandr.

When I finished eating, I made my way back to my room. The plan played out in my mind, and I knew I had to approach Dimitri carefully. I needed him to see that my request was reasonable and that seeing my sister was essential for my well-being and, by extension, the baby’s. Dr. Daria keeps saying I need to stay stress-free. After everything, including being kidnapped, I could use some chill time with Sandy.

I decided to approach Dimitri later in the day when he would be less likely to be busy. I distracted myself with various activities around the mansion. Still, my mind kept drifting back to Aleksandr and our conversation. His refusal to admit his feelings gnawed at me, but I couldn’t let it consume me. Not now.

I knew it was time when the afternoon sun began to dip behind the mansion. I found Dimitri alone in the office, going over some documents. I took a deep breath and knocked on the doorframe.

“Dimitri, do you have a moment?” I asked, trying to keep my voice steady.

He looked up from his work and nodded. “Of course, Talia. What’s on your mind?”

I entered the room and sat down across from him. “I need your help,” I began, choosing my words carefully. “I want to see Sandy. It’s been too long, and I think it would do me and the baby good.”

Dimitri’s expression remained neutral, but I could see the wheels turning in his mind. “And you want me to convince Aleksandr to let you go?”

“Yes,” I admitted, peeking at him from under my lashes. “I know it’s a lot to ask, but I need this. Sandy is my only family, and I need her support.”

He leaned back in his chair, steepling his fingers as he considered my request. “You know how protective he is of you and the baby.”

“I know,” I said, my voice softening. “But I won’t be gone long. Just a day or two. Please, Dimitri, I need this.”

He was silent for a moment before he nodded. “Alright, Talia. I’ll talk to Aleksandr. But I make no promises.”

Relief flooded through me, my smile big and genuine. “Thank you, Dimitri.”

Somehow, Dimitri convinced Aleksandr, and by evening, I was packing to visit Sandy. His agreement was reluctant, but it was a victory, nonetheless.

As I prepared to leave the following day, I felt excitement and nervousness. As I zipped up my small bag, Aleksandr entered the room. His presence filled the space, and I turned to face him, my heart pounding.

“You’ll have Dimitri and Nikolai with you,” he said, his tone firm. “And Ivan is

already with Sandy.”

“Thank you,” I replied, meeting his gaze.

He stepped closer, his eyes searching mine. “This doesn’t mean I don’t care about you, Talia. I need you to stay safe. You know that, right?”

I nodded, my throat tight with emotion. “I know.”

He gently cupped my face causing goosebumps on my arms. “Be careful,” he whispered before leaving the room.

The drive to Sandy’s apartment was uneventful, but my mind was a whirlwind of thoughts. Nikolai and Dimitri were with me, their presence reassuring yet a reminder of the world I was entangled in. When we finally arrived, Sandy greeted me with open arms, her smile warm and welcoming.

“Sis!” she exclaimed, hugging me tightly. “I’m so glad you’re here.”

“Me too,” I said, feeling a sense of peace for the first time in days. “How did you convince Aleksandr to leave the hotel and come home?”

“I told him he didn’t have a choice,” she winked.

Linking her arm in mine, she led me to the sofa. We spent the afternoon catching up, talking about everything and nothing. It was a much-needed escape from the tension building up inside me. As the sun set, we sat on the balcony with Dimitri standing guard. The brisk autumn breeze reminded me that winter wasn’t far behind.

“I talked to Dimitri,” I told Sandy, recounting the events that led to my visit. “And he convinced Aleksandr to let me come.”

Sandy smiled, a knowing look in her eyes. “You’re stronger than you think. And smarter, too.”

“I don’t feel strong,” I admitted. “I feel confused and scared.”

“That’s normal,” she said, squeezing my hand. “Just remember, you have to decide what you want and what you’re willing to accept. Aleksandr may never be the man you dream of, but if he cares for you, that’s a start.”

I nodded, her words resonating with me. The future was uncertain, but for now, I was grateful for this moment of clarity and my sister’s support.

We spent the night watching movies and eating popcorn until we fell asleep together, cuddled in Sandy’s bed.

The next morning, I woke to the sounds of silverware clinking in the kitchen. I climbed out of bed, wrapped the soft throw blanket around my shoulders, and left the bedroom. Ivan and Nikolai were sipping coffee on the sofa. At the same time, Sandy was perched on a stool, watching Dimitri fry eggs on the stove.

“Good morning,” Sandy greeted. “Are you hungry?”

“I’m always hungry,” I laughed. “It’s hard work growing a baby.”

“Sit,” Dimitri pointed to the empty stool next to Sandy.

“Smells delicious,” I groaned, licking my lips.

Leaning toward Sandy I whispered, “He’s handsome and cooks.” I lightly elbowed her in the ribs as her cheeks turned a deep shade of red.

“Cut it out,” she giggled.

Dimitri placed two plates full of delicious eggs, bacon, and toast in front of us. I devoured mine and then asked for more. When I was satisfied, I prepared to return to the mansion. Sandy hugged me tightly, whispering words of encouragement. “Stay strong, Talia. You’ll figure this out. And stay safe .”

“I will,” I promised, feeling a renewed sense of determination.

The drive back was quiet. I had a lot to think about, and decisions to make. I couldn’t change Aleksandr, but maybe, just maybe, I could find a way to navigate this complicated relationship and build the family I had always dreamed of.

As we pulled up to the mansion, I breathed deeply, ready to face whatever came next. This was my life now, with all its challenges and uncertainties, and I was determined to make the best of it for myself and the baby.

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Chapter 9

Aleksandr

Talia's return felt like a whisper of warmth in the cold expanse of the mansion. It seemed emptier without her presence, shedding light on how much she had come to mean to me. Yet, as always, I wouldn't tell her that.

The life I led demanded a certain distance, a coldness that could not be penetrated by sentiment or weakness. Even as Talia's footsteps echoed through the grand hallway, I kept my composure. I had been waiting, though I would never admit it.

"Good morning," she said softly, her voice carrying the warmth of home.

"Good morning," I replied, my tone neutral. "How was your stay with Sandy?"

"Good. It was nice to catch up," she said, a hint of hesitation in her voice. She looked at me, searching for any sign of emotion, but I gave her none. "How are the children?"

"They missed you, but they are well." I stood up from the sofa and folded the newspaper I was perusing. "Breakfast is ready in the kitchen. I need to make a few calls."

She nodded, disappointment painting her face. She went toward the kitchen while I headed to my office. The door closed behind me with a soft click, and I was once again enveloped in the cold, calculating world I had built for myself. I only wanted to

feel Talia in my arms, her plump lips against mine. I wanted to kiss her pregnant belly and make love to her as we wasted the day away in the warmth of my bed.

But that was not the future that awaited me. Vic had disappeared, slipping into the shadows like a ghost. My vors and the Yakuza were scouring the city for any trace of him, but he had gone underground. Not only was I hunting him, but his boss, Tommy, was also on his trail. Vic had made the fatal mistake of stealing from the Lupani family, and he would pay it back with his blood. He was a marked man from all sides.

Frustration gnawed at me. He continued to elude me, and each day that passed without finding him was another day of rage simmering just under the surface. I needed a distraction to take my mind off the relentless hunt.

My thoughts turned to Talia. I exited my office and found her in the kitchen, finishing her breakfast.

“Talia,” I said, and she looked up, her eyes curious. “We are going out tonight.”

“Out?” she asked, surprised. “Where to?”

“A restaurant in the city. Just the two of us,” I replied, my tone leaving no room for argument.

She nodded, a small smile tugging at the corner of her lips. “Alright. What time should I be ready?”

“Seven,” I said, already planning the evening in my mind.

The day passed in a blur of phone calls and meetings. As evening approached, I changed into a tailored charcoal grey suit, the familiar armor I wore as pakhan . Talia emerged from her room dressed in an elegant black dress, her chocolate brown hair

cascading in soft waves. Her lips were ruby red, and her eyes sparkled with excitement.

“You look beautiful,” I said, the words slipping out before I could stop them.

“Thank you,” she replied, a pink blush coloring her cheeks.

After I helped her with her coat, I escorted her to my midnight blue Maserati. She slid into the passenger seat, admiring the luxurious leather seats.

“Nice car,” she smirked, clicking her seatbelt into place.

“I only take it out on special occasions.”

“Is this a special occasion?” she questioned, her eyes wide with curiosity.

“No,” I answered curtly, starting the car.

The drive to the restaurant was quiet, and the tension between us was palpable. I had rented out the entire place, a luxurious haven with dim lighting and a view of the city skyline. It was an extravagant gesture, one that I justified as necessary for our privacy and security. But deep down, I knew I wanted to spoil her. She was my woman, whether or not I said it out loud.

The staff greeted us and treated us with the utmost respect, knowing who I was. The chef himself came out to take our orders, promising a feast fit for royalty.

I leaned back in my plush chair, savoring the luxury of the restaurant’s ambiance. The soft lighting glowed overhead, and the tables were embellished with crisp white linens and simple floral arrangements. As the first course arrived, I watched Talia’s eyes widen with wonder. The velvety lobster bisque, garnished with a drizzle of

truffle oil and a sprinkle of chive blossoms, elicited a gasp of delight from her. She dipped her spoon hesitantly, then closed her eyes, savoring each luxurious mouthful. The joy on her face was as intoxicating as the vintage champagne I was sipping, its bubbles dancing playfully in the crystal flutes.

The main course was a revelation – a perfectly seared filet mignon crowned with a decadent foie gras and black truffle reduction, accompanied by a medley of seasonal vegetables and a silky potato puree. I couldn't help but smile as Talia marveled at the presentation, her usual modesty giving way to pure, unrestrained pleasure. She tasted each element with reverence, her expressions ranging from surprise to sheer bliss.

When she tried the rich, molten chocolate fondant for dessert, its luscious core spilling out like liquid gold, her delighted laughter filled the air. For me, the evening was a celebration not just of gourmet cuisine but of sharing this extraordinary experience with Talia and watching her embrace the new extravagance.

Talia's laughter filled the room, and I was drawn to her in a way I hadn't anticipated. For a moment, I allowed myself to forget the world outside and the hunt for Vic and enjoyed the evening with her. The food was exquisite, each dish a work of art, but it was nothing compared to Talia's beauty. I considered how lucky I was that this extraordinary woman came into my life, and I knew I would never let her go.

"Tell me about your sister," I said, leaning back in my chair. "I want to know more about her."

Talia's eyes brightened. "Sandy is the complete opposite of me. She's spontaneous, adventurous, always looking for the next thrill."

"And you? Do you join her on any of her adventures?" I asked, genuinely curious.

She shook her head, a wistful smile on her lips. "No. I was always the one who stayed

behind, keeping things steady. But I lived vicariously through her stories.”

“I can see the appeal,” I admitted. “There are times when I wish I could just... escape.”

Talia looked at me, her eyes softening. “Everyone needs an escape now and then, Aleksandr. Even you.”

As the night drew to a close, I made a snap decision. Instead of returning to the mansion, I took Talia to my penthouse in the city. It was a place I rarely visited, a sanctuary away from the chaos of my life.

The city lights glittered through the floor-to-ceiling windows of the penthouse, sending a kaleidoscope of colors across the sleek modern furniture. Talia’s eyes widened as she stepped inside, her gaze sweeping over the minimalist decor, each piece meticulously chosen for its clean lines and sophistication. The leather sofas, plush velvet chairs, glass coffee table, and polished marble floor exuded an understated elegance. My collection of artworks adorned the walls, a blend of abstract strokes and vivid hues. The open space, bathed in the soft glow of recessed lighting, felt like a sanctuary above the bustling streets below.

As Talia moved closer to the windows, her reflection mingled with the cityscape beyond, creating an almost ethereal image. I watched her from the doorway, her presence adding warmth to the cold perfection of my home. She turned to me, her eyes shimmering with curiosity and desire. “Aleksandr, this place is incredible,” she breathed.

I smiled, stepping towards her, feeling the pull of her magnetism. “I thought we could use some privacy,” I replied, my voice dripping with desire.

We settled onto the white leather sofa, the city spread out like a glittering tapestry.

There was comfort in the silence, a shared understanding that words were not always necessary.

“Why did you bring me here, Aleksandr?” Talia asked, chewing on her bottom lip.

I looked at her, the vulnerability in her eyes striking a chord deep within me. “Because I wanted to,” I said simply, the truth startling even me.

She nodded, accepting my answer without question. The distance between us seemed to shrink, and the barriers I had so carefully constructed were beginning to crumble.

We talked about everything and nothing, the conversation flowing naturally. It was a side of Talia I hadn’t seen before, open and unguarded. She told me stories of her childhood, dreams, and fears, and I shared parts of my life that I had long buried.

As the night wore on, the space between us disappeared entirely. I reached out, my hand finding hers, and for the first time in a long time, I felt a sense of peace. The hunt for Vic, the vendetta that had consumed me, faded into the background. At that moment, it was just Talia and me, two souls seeking solace in each other.

“Kiska,” I said softly, breaking the comfortable silence. “There are things I haven’t told you. Things about my past, about why I am the way I am.”

She turned to face me, her eyes filled with understanding. “You don’t have to tell me anything, Aleksandr. But if you want to, I’m here to listen.”

I took a deep breath. “My father...losing him, it changed me. Made me into someone I barely recognize.”

Talia squeezed my hand, her touch grounding me. “I’m so sorry, Aleksandr. I can’t imagine how hard that must have been.”

“It was,” I admitted, my voice thick with emotion. “I couldn’t save him. I couldn’t stop it. And then I had to become the pakhan the family needed. And when Vic murdered Mikhail and took you and the children...it brought all those feelings back. The fear, the anger, the helplessness.”

“But we escaped,” Talia said, her voice steady. “You came to get us, and we’re safe now. And I know you’ll protect us.”

We sat in silence, the city lights twinkling around us. I leaned in and kissed her. It was a gentle kiss, full of unspoken desire, and when we pulled apart, I saw the same feelings reflected in her eyes.

“I don’t know what this is,” I said quietly. “But I want to find out.”

Talia smiled, a tear slipping down her cheek. “Me too.”

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Chapter 10

Talia

Aleksandr stood near the windows, admiring the city's twinkling lights with a glass of brandy. I hesitated for a moment, watching him. His back was to me, and I wondered what was going through his mind.

Placing my sparkling cider on the cocktail table, I walked forward, the marble floor cold against my bare feet. "Aleksandr," I said softly. "I need to ask you something," I continued, my heart beating faster. "About your past."

He turned to face me, his blue eyes locking onto mine with that intense gaze that always commands my attention. He said nothing at first, just studied me in a way that made me feel seen and scrutinized all at once.

"You don't have to talk about it if you don't want to," I added quickly, unsure how to approach this with him.

He leaned back against the window frame, the city's distant lights flickering across his face. "What do you want to know?" His voice was low, guarded.

I swallowed. "About your relationships... before."

The air between us stilled, and he stayed silent for a few minutes. "There were no relationships," he said, his tone flat, detached. "Not in the way you're thinking."

I took a step closer. “What does that mean?”

He slowly raked his fingers through his hair as if trying to find the right words. “It means,” he began, “that I never stayed. I’d sleep with a woman one time, and that was it. I didn’t do... relationships.”

There was no shame in his voice, no hesitation. It was a simple fact for him, something that he had accepted long ago. But for me, it was a surprise. I had expected him to say something like that, but hearing it was different.

“Why?” I asked, even though I knew. His world, his life, wasn’t built for connection. But I needed to hear it from him.

Aleksandr’s gaze flicked away for a moment toward the city outside. His jaw tightened before he spoke again, the words heavy. “Because in my world, Talia, everyone dies eventually. You get too close to someone, and they either leave or they get killed. It’s just a matter of time.”

He paused, his eyes returning to mine, and I saw something I hadn’t seen before. Fear. Not the kind of fear that comes from enemies or danger but the kind that comes from losing someone.

“That’s why I don’t... why I can’t get close. Not to anyone. Not to you. It’s not safe for you, Talia.”

I stared at him, my heart breaking a little at the admission. Aleksandr was always the one in control, always the one with the answers. But now, I realized he wasn’t as invincible as I had thought. There was a vulnerability in him, a fragility he kept hidden under layers of cold detachment and power.

But here he was, opening up to me in a way I doubted he had ever done with anyone

else. And it made me love him more.

“You don’t have to be afraid of that with me,” I said softly, taking another step closer. My hand reached out instinctively, my fingers brushing his arm. “Nothing’s going to happen to me, Aleksandr. Or the baby.”

At the mention of the baby, his eyes flitted to my stomach. I could see his turmoil, the war he was fighting between his feelings for me and the world he was trapped in.

“You can’t promise that,” he said quietly, his voice rough.

“You can’t live your whole life waiting for something terrible to happen,” I pressed gently, my voice steady despite my swirling emotions. “Aleksandr, you’ve built walls around yourself, but I’m not going anywhere. I’m here. And I’m not afraid.”

He stared at me, and for a long moment, neither of us spoke. The silence stretched, charged with everything we weren’t saying.

Finally, Aleksandr sighed, running a hand down his face. “I don’t know how to do this, Talia. I’ve never -” He stopped himself, his voice catching, and I saw the struggle in his eyes.

“I don’t know how to be with someone,” he confessed. “Not like this. Not with you.”

My heart ached for him. For the man beneath the hard exterior, the man who was terrified of what it meant to feel, to love.

“You don’t have to know everything right now,” I whispered, stepping even closer until there was almost no space left between us. “Just let yourself feel it. Whatever it is. You don’t have to shut me out. We can do this. We have to try.”

I cupped his face, my thumb brushing lightly against his jaw. “You’re not alone anymore, Aleksandr. You don’t have to be.”

For the first time, I saw his walls begin to crack just a little.

Aleksandr dug his fingers into my hair, tilting my face up as he stared into my eyes. My breath felt trapped in my throat every second I was under his intense gaze. Before I knew what was happening, his mouth was on mine, devouring me like I was the last meal he’d ever have. The kiss was forceful and passionate, and I felt like I was on fire.

He slid his tongue into my mouth, sucking and exploring while digging his hips into mine, spiking my level of arousal. Yanking on my hair, he broke the kiss, forcing my head back to look him in the eyes.

“You’re mine, Talia. And I’m going to fuck you until I brand every inch of you.” He hastily removed my clothes until I was naked and pressed up against the window. “Open your legs,” he commanded.

The glass was cold against my back, and I felt utterly vulnerable, as if the entire city could see me. But I obeyed and slowly spread my legs open. He hiked my right leg over his shoulder, and I felt the tip of his tongue swirl around my clit. My head fell against the glass as I held onto his broad shoulders.

His tongue fluttered between my wet folds, owning me with every stroke. He reached up and pinched my nipple as he sucked, licked, and fucked me with his tongue. A soft moan escaped my lips as he continued. I whimpered as his tongue licked faster and harder, making my core tighten. “I’m going to come,” I gasped.

My legs felt weak as he plunged two fingers into my pussy fucking me relentlessly as he continued to suck on my clit. I moaned, groaned, and almost sobbed, but he didn’t

let up until my climax slammed into me, shattering me around his fingers and mouth.

When my eyes fluttered open, Aleksandr was licking my juices from his fingers, my leg still hoisted over his shoulder.

“You’re so wet,” he groaned, releasing my leg. Leaning forward, he planted a kiss on my pussy and then lifted me up by the waist and carried me to the sofa laying me on my back.

He undressed quickly, releasing his long hard cock. Spreading my legs apart, he stood between them and pressed the tip against my pussy. In one long smooth stroke, he buried his cock in my pussy. I hissed as it adjusted to his size and then groaned as it clamped down on him.

As Aleksandr pounded into me, pure bliss spread through me, making me tingle from head to toe. He was wild, thrusting hard and fast, more intense than any other time we fucked. His pace was feverish, and he leaned over me, kissing me deeply as his cock pounded in and out of my pussy. The only thing I could do was hold onto him and take it.

The tension in my core tightened like a spring. “Aleksandr...” I moaned, “I’m going to come.”

“Yes, kiska , come for me.“ With one final grunt, his cock exploded in my pussy, just as my release made stars dance behind my eyes.

Aleksandr lay on top of me, panting until he released every drop of come. He brushed my hair away from my face, kissing me gently.

“I can’t feel my legs,” I giggled as he slowly rolled onto his side. Without a word, he lifted me and carried me to the bedroom, gently laying me on the bed. He slid beside

me and pulled me close, resting his chin on my head.

We lay there, silently enjoying each other, until I eventually drifted off to sleep.

Chapter 11

Aleksandr

I awoke to the soft glow of the morning light streaming through the tall windows of the penthouse. The city was coming alive beneath us, but nothing was more soothing than the warmth of Talia in my arms. Her head rested against my chest, her chocolate-colored hair a silken tangle across my skin. I lay there momentarily, savoring the rare peace, feeling her steady breaths against me. For the first time in a long time, I felt contentment. Talia stirred, her eyes fluttering open to meet mine. Her smile was sleepy. “Good morning,” she murmured.

“Good morning, kiska,” I replied, brushing a strand of hair from her face. Her beauty was mesmerizing, even in the first light of dawn. I held her tighter as if to assure myself she was real. We lay there for a few moments, the silence between us comfortable.

“Talia,” I began, my voice low, “there’s something I need to tell you.”

She looked up at me, her bright hazel eyes searching mine. “What is it?”

I took a deep breath, gathering my thoughts. “What we spoke about last night, about keeping you and the baby safe...it will always be my priority. That is why we can’t be in a relationship. You’d be a target for my enemies, and I can’t bear to have anything happen to either of you.”

Talia’s gaze softened. “I understand. But things are different now, aren’t they? We’re

already a family. You, me, Sasha, Maxim, and the baby.”

Family. The word sent a warmth through me that I hadn’t expected. I wanted that with her more than anything. But danger still loomed over us. I caressed her cheek, my thumb tracing the delicate curve of her jaw. “I want to be with you. But it’s dangerous.”

She placed a hand over mine, her touch grounding me. “We’ll face it together, Aleksandr. Whatever comes, we’ll face it together and keep our family safe.”

She was strong and brave yet kind and giving. She was perfect for me in every way. I kissed her tenderly, caught in a tug-of-war between what I should do and my selfish desires.

Reluctantly, we pulled ourselves from bed, the responsibilities of the day calling. I slipped on black sweatpants and headed to the kitchen to make breakfast. Talia followed, wrapping herself in one of my soft grey T-shirts. Seeing her like that, looking so at home, made me smile.

“What would you like for breakfast?” I asked, pulling out ingredients from the fridge. “Or should I ask what the baby would like?” I teased.

“Surprise us,” she said with a grin, perching on a stool by the counter. She tenderly cradled her baby bump, whispering sweetly to the baby.

I decided on a simple meal of scrambled eggs, toast, and coffee. As I cooked, Talia wandered around the penthouse, her eyes landing on the paintings that adorned the walls. She paused, studying them intently.

“These are beautiful,” she said, looking at me. “Who’s the artist?”

I hesitated for a moment before answering. “I am.”

“You’re an amazing artist,” she gushed. “Did you ever think about painting full-time?”

“I did,” I admitted, flipping the eggs. “When I was younger, I wanted to be an artist. But life had other plans.”

She stepped closer, her fingers lightly tracing the edge of one of the frames. “What happened?”

I sighed, turning off the stove and plating the food. “Otets was killed. Mikhail was supposed to take over as pakhan , but he couldn’t handle it after Anya died. His depression was so bad that I needed to step up. I had to take care of the children, too. So, at twenty-four years old, I became pakhan . I didn’t feel ready, but I had no choice.”

Talia’s eyes were filled with sympathy. “I’m sorry. That must have been difficult.”

“It was,” I admitted, placing the plates on the table. “I had a different vision for my life. But such is the way of the Bratva.”

We sat down to eat, the conversation shifting to lighter topics. It was easy being with Talia. She had a way of making everything seem more bearable. But our moment of peace was interrupted by the buzzing of my phone. It was Dimitri.

I answered, his voice urgent on the other end. “ Brat , we have a lead on Vic’s whereabouts. He’s hiding in the back room of a Chinese restaurant in the city.”

“I’ll meet you at the mansion. I’ll be there soon,” I assured.

I hung up and turned to Talia. “We have to go. There’s a lead on Vic.”

She nodded, worry flashing in her eyes. “Please be careful.”

“I will,” I promised. “I’m meeting Dimitri at the mansion. I need you to stay with the children to know you’re safe.” Leaning toward her, I captured her lips with mine. This woman meant everything to me, and I’ll burn down the whole fucking world to make sure she is safe.

We quickly dressed and left the penthouse. The drive to the mansion was filled with a tense silence. I hated leaving her, but I couldn’t risk her safety. Once we arrived, I ensured she was settled before heading out with Dimitri to meet Anton.

The city passed by in a blur as we drove to the restaurant. The possibility of finding Vic was electrifying. But when we arrived and stormed the back room, we were disappointed. Instead of Vic, we found a low-level thug with no useful information.

Frustrated, we returned to the mansion. I needed to see Talia to reassure myself that she was safe. I found her playing a board game with Sasha and Maxim in the playroom. Seeing them together brought a smile to my face, a rare moment .

But the moment was interrupted by the ringing of the doorbell. Abram answered, bringing in a long white delivery box addressed to Talia. Her face lit up with excitement, and she realized it was from a florist. She read the note, her face paling.

“ Kiska , what does it say?” My eyebrows snapped together as I took the note from her.

“Sorry for your loss,” she whispered, her voice trembling. She opened the box, immediately dropping it on the floor. A dozen black roses spilled out as Talia’s expression turned to horror.

“Aleksandr, who would send this? What are they implying?” She cradled her stomach instinctively, searching my face for an answer.

My blood ran cold. It was a message, a threat. Vic was taunting us. Hot fury burned through me, but I forced myself to stay calm for Talia’s sake. “Olga, take the children upstairs,” I ordered.

They wrapped themselves around Talia, giving her a comforting hug before disappearing with Olga.

“It’s Vic,” I stated through gritted teeth. “He’s taunting us.”

I took her in my arms, trying to offer comfort. “I’ll find him, Talia.”

She nodded, but I could see the fear in her eyes. This is another reminder of the danger we faced, the constant threat hanging over us like a dark cloud. But it also strengthened my resolve. I will protect her and our child, no matter what. Vic would pay for his threats in blood, and I will ensure our family’s safety.

As the day dragged on, we stayed close, finding solace in each other’s presence. I held Talia, whispering promises of protection and a future together.

The following morning, I was up early. The previous day’s events still weighed heavily on my mind, but I pushed them aside. After a quick workout to clear my head, I showered and found Talia in the kitchen eating breakfast with Olga and the children.

“Good morning,” I said, trying to sound cheerful.

“Good morning,” they replied in unison.

I kissed Talia on her cheek and then sat down next to her. “Did you sleep well?”

“As well as expected,” her smile small and tense.

Abram brought a plate of food and hot coffee, setting them down before me on the table. “Thank you, Abram.”

“I spoke to Sandy,” Talia said, eyeing me cautiously. “She thinks it would be good for us to spend time together. A little retail therapy to take my mind off things and-”

“No,” I responded immediately, cutting her off mid-sentence.

“I think she’s right. The stress isn’t good for me or the baby.” She looked at me from under her lashes, her full lips even more plump from her slight pout. “Please, Aleksandr. I need this.”

I can’t say no to her. I know she’s been through a hell of a lot lately, and I want her to have a fun shopping day with Sandy, but it’s not safe. “It’s not safe right now. You need to stay here where I can protect you.”

“I can’t live like a prisoner,” she responded, visibly upset. Her cheeks turned a deep shade of pink as she continued. “I won’t let Vic or anyone else keep me from living my life.”

“Talia, you need to stay calm,” Olga said in a steady and soothing voice. “Remember what Dr. Daria said.”

“Please, Aleksandr, I need to see Sandy,” she pleaded, placing her hand on my forearm.

“Fine. You can go, but you will take Nikolai with you.” I sighed heavily, rubbing my

aching temples.

“Thank you!” Talia jumped up from her seat, kissing me on the cheek. “I’ll call Sandy and tell her the good news.” She was smiling from ear to ear as she left the kitchen.

Pulling out my phone, I called Nikolai. “You will stay with Talia today. She is going shopping with her sister. Wherever she goes, you go. Don’t take your eyes off her.”

Ending the call, I finished my coffee, kissed the children, and then went to my office. I need to find that mudak Vic and put an end to this bullshit, once and for all.

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Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:46 am

Chapter 12

Talia

Aleksandr had finally agreed to let me go shopping with Sandy, a much-needed escape from the insanity that has been my life lately. I reached for my phone, dialing Sandy's number with eager anticipation.

"Hey, sis! Guess what?" I could hardly contain my excitement as I heard her familiar voice on the other end.

"What's going on? Why are you so happy," she teased, a hint of curiosity lacing her words.

"Aleksandr is letting us go shopping today! He even gave me his credit card and said to buy whatever I wanted. Can you believe it?" I practically squealed.

"He's not worried about Vic?" she questioned.

"He insists on sending Nikolai with us. He's still searching for Vic and doesn't want to take any chances," I explained, the gravity of the situation momentarily sobering my mood.

"That's understandable. As long as we get to spend the day together, I'm okay with it," Sandy replied, her voice resolute. "Besides, he still has guards watching over me, so I'm used to having a shadow."

We finalized our plans and decided to meet at the mansion's front gate. I hung up the phone and took a deep breath, resolving not to let the looming threat of Vic ruin this happy time in my life. I dressed quickly, opting for a comfortable yet stylish outfit of leggings and an oversized sweater, and went downstairs.

Nikolai was already waiting by the entrance, his stoic expression softening slightly when he saw me.

"Ready?" he asked, his deep-accented voice reassuring. His caramel-colored hair brushed the tops of his shoulders, and his blue eyes twinkled.

"Yes, and thank you for coming with us," I replied, grateful for his presence despite my initial reservations. "I'm sure this isn't how you want to spend your day."

"It could be worse. I could be in Russia wrestling bear." He laughed heartily, making me smile. He was tough and rough around the edges, but I could see why Sasha and Maxim loved him.

As we walked to the car, I couldn't help but feel a sense of liberation. The mansion, while luxurious and safe, had started to feel like a cage. I would taste freedom again today, for even just a few hours.

Sandy and Lev exited a dark grey SUV and walked toward us. I threw my arms around Sandy and hugged her tightly, soaking up every bit of sisterly love. Pulling apart, we slid into the backseat of a black sedan while our escorts got in front.

The drive to the shopping district was filled with animated chatter between Sandy and me. At the same time, Nikolai and Lev remained silent, their eyes constantly scanning our surroundings. I appreciated their vigilance, even if it sometimes felt a bit overbearing.

Our first stop was a baby store, its windows displaying an array of adorable outfits and toys. My heart swelled with joy as we stepped inside, the cheerful ambiance lifting my spirits even higher.

“Oh my gosh, Talia, look at these tiny shoes!” Sandy exclaimed, holding up a pair of miniature blue sneakers.

“They’re so cute! I can’t believe I’m going to be a mom,” I said, feeling excited and nervous.

“You’re going to be a great mom,” Sandy assured me, wrapping her arm around my shoulders. “And I’m going to be the best aunt!”

We spent the next hour selecting baby clothes, blankets, and other essentials. I lost track of time as we moved from one display to another, each item more adorable than the last. Nikolai and Lev trailed behind us, their presence easing the reminder of the dangers lurking outside.

After we had gathered a considerable amount of baby items, we decided to take a break and have lunch at a nearby café. The aroma of freshly brewed coffee greeted us as we entered, making my stomach growl in anticipation.

“I’ll have a decaf caramel latte and a turkey club sandwich,” I told the barista, smiling as she took my order.

Sandy opted for a cappuccino and a strawberry salad, and Nikolai and Lev ordered sandwiches. Sandy and I found a cozy table near the window while Nikolai and Lev sat at a table across from us, facing the entrance. As we sipped our drinks and enjoyed our meal, the conversation flowed easily, discussing everything from baby names to the latest gossip.

“This is exactly what I needed,” I said, leaning back in my chair and taking a deep breath. “Thank you for today, sis.”

“Of course. I’m just glad to see you so happy,” she replied, her eyes warm with affection.

We finished our lunch and continued shopping, eventually going to a women’s clothing store. As we entered, I turned to Nikolai.

“Would you and Lev mind waiting at the front of the store? We’d like to try on some clothes,” I asked, hoping he would agree.

He hesitated for a moment, looking at Lev before nodding. “We’ll be right here. Don’t take too long.”

With Nikolai and Lev stationed at the entrance, Sandy and I dove into the racks of clothes, giggling like schoolgirls as we selected outfits. It felt so ordinary, so wonderfully mundane, that I almost forgot about my troubles.

As we tried on dresses and sweaters, Sandy turned to me, a curious look in her eyes. “So, what’s going on with you and Aleksandr?”

I hesitated, unsure of how much to reveal. Sandy was my sister, and I wanted her to be happy for me. “We’re a couple now. I’m going to be staying with him at the mansion permanently.” I chewed on my lip nervously, waiting for her to respond.

Sandy’s deep blue eyes lit up with her smile. “That’s great, Talia! He better treat you right, or he’ll have me to deal with.”

“He does. He’s been amazing,” I admitted, feeling a warm glow in my chest as I thought about Aleksandr. “He wants to protect me and the baby. He wants us to be a

family.”

Sandy pulled me into a hug. “I’m happy for you, really,” she said. “You deserve all the happiness in the world.”

“You won’t feel like I’m abandoning you?” I asked nervously.

“What?” Sandy looked surprised. “Of course not. As long as Aleksandr understands I will be hanging out at the mansion with you and my niece...or nephew.” She smirked, flipping her strawberry blonde hair over her shoulder.

“I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

We continued trying on clothes, laughing, and chatting, and I cherished every moment.

By the time we finished our shopping spree, the sun was beginning to set, and a golden hue blanketed the city. The warm light reflected off the buildings, creating a mesmerizing glow that made everything seem magical. Nikolai and Lev escorted us back to the car, and we loaded our bags into the trunk. The drive back to the mansion was filled with a contented silence, each of us lost in our thoughts.

As we pulled up to the mansion, I turned to Sandy, squeezing her hand gently. “Thank you for today. I really needed this,” I said, my voice filled with gratitude.

“Me too,” she replied, her eyes sparkling with joy and a hint of sadness. “Be safe, sis.”

We hugged tightly before parting ways. Nikolai stepped forward to help me carry the bags inside. I felt a sense of peace settle over me as we walked through the mansion’s grand entrance. The day had been perfect, a reminder that there were still moments of

joy even amidst uncertainty and danger.

Once inside, I eagerly showed Sasha and Maxim the baby items and new clothes. Their faces lit up with excitement, their smiles mirroring my own feelings of hope and anticipation. Watching them, I couldn't help but think about the future. Aleksandr and I had a long road ahead of us, but I felt hopeful for the first time in a while. Our baby would be born into a family filled with love and protection, and I was determined to make sure no one would take that away from us.

Later that night, as I settled into bed, my thoughts drifted to the baby and becoming a mother. I placed a hand on my belly, feeling a sense of connection and purpose I had never experienced before. Aleksandr wrapped his arms around me, pulling me close.

"I can't wait to meet our little one," he whispered, his voice filled with wonder and love.

"Me too," I replied, a smile spreading across my face. "I think they're going to be just as amazing as their father."

He chuckled softly, pressing a kiss to my forehead. "And their mother," he added.

I cuddled into him, feeling a sense of completeness that had eluded me for so long. I was finally home, and for the first time in a long time, I felt truly happy.

Chapter 13

Aleksandr

My senses gradually came alive to the subtle fragrance of Talia's hair and the comforting warmth of her body curled next to mine. She was sleeping peacefully, her face turned toward me, her expression serene and innocent. I couldn't help but smile, a tender feeling welling up inside me as I watched her. Strands of her dark hair splayed out on the pillow, framing her delicate features. She looked beautiful, angelic even, and I wished I could stay in this moment forever, but reality was a harsh mistress.

Gently, I brushed a lock of hair away from her face, careful not to wake her. Talia had been through so much in her life; she deserved this moment of peace. I wanted nothing more than to protect her and keep her safe from all the dangers lurking in our world's shadows. Yet, to do that, I had to face those dangers head-on. Vic was still out there, hiding like the rat he was, and as long as he remained at large, Talia would never be safe.

I slipped out of bed, moving with practiced stealth. Talia murmured something in her sleep but didn't wake. I watched her for another moment, my heart heavy with the weight of what I had to do. Then, I dressed quickly, my mind shifting gears, planning the steps I needed to take today. Dimitri and Anton would be waiting for me at the gallery. We had to devise a plan to flush Vic out of hiding. It was the only way to end this once and for all.

The drive to the gallery was uneventful, and the city was quiet in the early morning.

My thoughts were consumed with strategies and contingencies, but I couldn't shake the image of Talia's peaceful face. She was my anchor, my reason for everything I did now. That bastard Vic was going to die a slow and painful death.

When I arrived at the gallery, Dimitri and Anton were already there. They greeted me with nods, their expressions determined.

"Morning, pakhan ," Anton said, handing me a cup of coffee. The gallery was still and quiet, the walls adorned with vibrant art constantly reminding me of the life I had left behind.

"Morning," I replied. Anton's perpetually calm demeanor had a slight crack in it this morning. "Any leads on Vic?"

"Not yet," I admitted, leading them to my office to talk privately. "But we need to change that. Vic won't stay hidden forever, and the longer we wait, the more dangerous he becomes."

Ever the strategist, Dimitri leaned forward, his sharp coffee-colored eyes narrowing. "We need to draw him out and make him finally show his hand. It's time to end him .
,"

I sat down, placing the coffee mug before me on the desk. "I've been thinking about that. Vic knows we're looking for him, and he won't come out of hiding unless he thinks he has no choice. We need to create that scenario, make him feel cornered."

Dimitri nodded slowly. "A trap. But we'll need to be careful. Vic's not stupid; he'll see through anything too obvious."

"Exactly," I agreed. "That's why we need outside help. I'm thinking of contacting Adachi again to get the Yakuza involved. They have resources and reach that we

don't."

Anton raised an eyebrow. "Adachi? Are you sure? The Yakuza aren't exactly known for their subtlety."

I shrugged. "They aren't, but they get results. And right now, results are what we need. Adachi doesn't want anything to disturb the distribution agreement we currently have in place. I'll let him think that the situation with Vic is threatening business unless it gets resolved quickly."

Dimitri and Anton exchanged glances, then nodded. They trusted my judgment, even if they had their reservations. "Alright," Dimitri said. "Let's do it."

I walked over to the small desk in the corner of the room, where I kept a burner phone for sensitive communications. Dialing the number, I waited as the line connected. It rang twice before Adachi answered.

"Aleksandr," his voice was smooth, calculated. "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

"Adachi," I greeted him, keeping my tone even. "I need your resources. The situation with Vic Corallo needs to end. Not only is he threatening my family, but he's also threatening the business."

There was a pause, and then Adachi's voice came through again with a hint of anger. "What do you need?"

"Vic is a slippery motherfucker, and he's managed to stay hidden. But I know he can't hide from you and the Yakuza for much longer. I want you to set a trap, so he'll feel like he has no option but to surface. Then I want him taken alive. I will be the one that gets the privilege of sending his soul to hell."

Adachi chuckled softly. "I will help you, but it comes at a price."

"I understand," I said, my jaw tightening. Fucking Adachi always trying to gain the upper hand. He already gets a percentage of my business, and now he wants more. "Just find him. We'll deal with the rest after he's dead."

"Consider it done," Adachi replied. "I'll be in touch."

I hung up, feeling relief and apprehension. The Yakuza were dangerous allies, but they were also effective. Until now, Vic has managed to slip through everyone's grasp, but now Adachi's men will search the ends of the earth to find Vic and trap him. They'll stop at nothing to snare him.

"Adachi's on board," I told Dimitri and Anton. "Now we wait."

The next few hours were tense and filled with nervous anticipation. We stayed at the gallery, going over our plan, refining details, and preparing for any possible outcome. The waiting was always the most difficult part, and uncertainty gnawed at me. I couldn't afford to fail, not with Talia's safety on the line.

By late afternoon, my phone buzzed. It was a message from Adachi.

Vic located. Sending coordinates.

I showed the message to Dimitri and Anton, who nodded in understanding. This was it. The final move.

"Let's go," I said, steeling myself for what would come.

We left the gallery, the sun setting behind us as we drove to the coordinates Adachi had sent. The address led us to an old warehouse on the city's outskirts, a perfect

place for someone like Vic to hide.

“Stay sharp,” I warned as we approached. “Vic knows he’s trapped, and he’ll stop at nothing to escape.”

Dimitri and Anton drew their weapons, and I did the same. Adachi’s men were stationed around the warehouse’s perimeter, blocking all possible escape routes. We moved silently as the three of us made our way inside. The warehouse was dark and the air smelled of rust and decay. We advanced cautiously, spreading out, with every sense on high alert.

As we turned a corner, I spotted movement. Vic. He was alone, a desperate look in his eyes as he paced in circles. The hunter was now the hunted. Signaling Dimitri and Anton, we moved in.

Vic spotted us and raised his gun, but he was too slow. A single shot rang out, and Vic crumpled to the ground.

I approached him, my heart pounding. This was the man who had threatened Talia, who had killed Mikhail, and took the children. Kicking away his gun, I looked down at him, my expression dark with revenge. “It’s over, Vic.”

“You think you won?” he hissed, pressing down on the hole in his thigh where the bullet penetrated. He winced in pain as blood seeped through his fingers. “She’ll never be safe...because of you.”

I shook my head, sucking on my front teeth. “Enjoy the last few hours of your life.” With that, I turned away, leaving Vic to his pain-filled fate.

Dimitri and Anton tied him up and threw him in the trunk of our car. Anton drove us back to the mansion and escorted Vic to the dungeon. The immediate threat was

gone, and Talia and the children were safe. But I knew this was only a temporary reprieve. Our world was full of dangers, and another Vic would always be waiting in the shadows.

I went straight to my bedroom in search of Talia. I needed to hold her and reassure her that everything was alright now. As long as I had her, I knew I could face whatever came next.

When I entered the bedroom, she was asleep, her face peaceful and serene.

I sat on the edge of the bed and ran my thumb along her plump lips. She stirred, opened her eyes, and smiled sleepily at me.

“You’re back,” she murmured, her voice filled with relief.

“I’m back,” I confirmed, kissing her forehead. “And everything’s going to be alright.”

“Is...is Vic dead?” she questioned, sitting up quickly.

“He will be,” I reassured her. “We found him in a warehouse. He’s in my custody.”

“Oh,” she replied thoughtfully, chewing on her lower lip.

“Vic is going to die a very slow and painful death. You understand that, don’t you?” I asked, searching her eyes for any sign of trepidation.

She reached out and cradled my cheek with her soft hand. “I understand.” Then she leaned forward and kissed me softly.

I tucked her into bed and kissed her once more. “I love you, Talia,” I whispered. I

couldn't deny it any longer. I loved her, and I'll never let her go.

"I love you, too," she whispered, smiling softly.

"I have to go, but I'll be back in a few hours."

She nodded and then closed her eyes to sleep.

Chapter 14

Aleksandr

I climbed down the narrow stone staircase leading to the dungeon, each step echoing with the promise of vengeance. The air grew colder and more oppressive as I descended into the bowels of the mansion. The dungeon was a relic from a bygone era, a place where countless souls had met their end. Tonight, it would bear witness to retribution—a slow, deliberate reckoning for the blood that had been spilled.

The walls were lined with iron shackles, the scent of damp stone and old blood permeating the air.

I pushed open the steel door and found Vic secured to a heavy wooden chair by his wrists and ankles. Anton stood in the corner of the dungeon, laying out tools of torture on a metal table. Hanging from the ceiling was a solitary light fixture, throwing shadows into each corner of the prison.

Vic's face was pale and sweat-soaked, his eyes darting around like a cornered rat. His balding brown hair clung to his scalp in greasy tufts, and his squinty brown eyes held no spark of defiance, only the dull gleam of desperation. He knew what awaited him, and that knowledge sapped what little strength he had left.

Anton stepped forward, his expression as cold and hard as the stone walls around us. He handed me a long, slender knife, its blade gleaming wickedly in the light. I took it, its weight comforting as I approached Vic.

“Do you know why you’re here, Vic, and not already dead?” I asked, my voice low and menacing.

He nodded frantically, his eyes wide with fear. “Aleksandr, I—“

“Silence!” I roared, the sound bouncing off the walls.

He swallowed hard, his body trembling. Good. Fear was a powerful tool, and I intended to wield it fully.

“Tell me,” I said, leaning in close, the knife hovering near his throat. “Why did you kill my brother?”

Vic’s rancid breath came in short, ragged gasps. “It wasn’t personal. I was just following orders.”

“Whose orders?” I pressed, the tip of the blade grazing his skin just enough to draw a thin line of blood.

“Tommy Lansky,” he whispered, his voice barely audible. “It was Tommy.”

I could smell the lie oozing out of him like infected puss. “Tommy? That’s funny. Tommy said you acted on your own because you’re a lying piece of shit thief,” I hissed.

“No! No, it was Tommy. He gave the order to kill your brother because he owed Mr. Lupani money. It was a gambling debt. I just did what I was told,” he stammered.

“You’re lying,” I accused, sucking on my front teeth. “In the old country, they cut out the tongue of a lying man.” In one quick motion, I sliced the blade across his cheek, crimson blood splattering the collar of his white shirt.

Vic cried out but quickly clamped his mouth shut. He vigorously shook his head no, his eyes pleading for mercy.

“I know you weren’t ordered to kill Mikhail. And I know that you are stealing money from your boss.”

I grabbed his chin, forcing the tip of the blade between his lips. Vic’s eyes bulged as he urinated on himself. The sour smell of his piss fueled me, giving me a twisted sense of satisfaction.

“You took Mikhail from me...from his children. You remember his children. The innocent boy and girl you kidnapped after killing their guard in the park.”

Vic was trembling as I slid the blade out of his mouth and jabbed it into his thigh. He cried out in pain, begging me to stop. I pulled the blade out and watched the blood pour out of the wound.

“I didn’t know,” he murmured. “I didn’t know they were his kids,” he pleaded, tears rolling down his dirt-streaked cheeks.

After wiping the bloody blade on Vic’s shirt, I placed it on the metal table. I picked up a shiny silver cigar cutter and leaned against the table.

“Tell me again what your plans were for Talia,” I growled, picking up a cigar and pushing the end of it through the round hole in the cutter.

Vic’s mouth opened and closed, but no words came out.

“Is your memory failing you? Let me help you out,” I said, slicing off the end of the cigar with the razor-sharp blade of the cutter.

“I...I didn’t...” he stuttered, horror flashing in his eyes as he realized what was about to happen.

“You told her you were going to fuck her every day and mark every part of her after you killed me.” I waltzed over to him, grabbing the pointer finger of his right hand. “Then you dared to touch her,” I accused, sliding his finger into the cigar cutter.

“No, no, no...” Vic sobbed, squeezing his eyes shut.

“Look at me!” I thundered, my voice laced with fury. Forcing his eyes open, Vic’s eyes met mine.

“You took what is mine, Vic,” I growled, cutting off his finger. His screams filled the dungeon, a symphony of agony. Each finger I cut off, each cry of pain, was a step closer to justice.

I handed Anton the cigar cutter and took a deep breath. As satisfying as that was, I needed more. More pain, more blood, more revenge.

I punched Vic over and over, beating him until my knuckles were stained red with his blood. I struck him, knocking his teeth out and busting open his lip. I hit him again and again, only stopping when his left eye was swollen shut and his face was unrecognizable.

Breathing heavily, I walked back to the metal table, picked up a small cloth, and wiped the blood from my hands. It was time to end this mudak.

I chose a dagger from the lineup of tools and plunged it into Vic’s chest, twisting it to ensure the fatal blow. His one good eye widened in shock, a gurgling sound escaping his lips as he slumped forward, the life draining from his body.

I stood there watching the light fade from his eyes. Justice has finally been served.

Anton stepped forward, placing a hand on my shoulder. "I'll take care of the body, pakhan."

Taking a deep breath, I nodded, leaving the dungeon with the echoes of Vic's screams still ringing in my ears. I felt a sense of satisfaction knowing he was no longer a threat to Talia and the children, and I prayed Mikhail could now rest in eternal peace.

The mansion was eerily quiet as I entered the master bathroom. Stripping off my blood-soaked clothes, I turned on the shower, letting the water scald my skin as it washed away the evidence of my sins.

As the crimson blood swirled down the drain, my thoughts drifted to Talia. Her beauty, kindness, and strength were the light in my darkness, the reason I believed I could be something more than a monster. She was asleep in our bed, blissfully unaware of the nightmare that had just unfolded beneath her feet. I could picture her now, her dark hair splayed out on the pillow, her delicate features softened by sleep. She was everything to me, the one person who saw beyond the brutality and loved the man hidden within.

The water began to cool, pulling me from my thoughts. I stepped out, toweling off quickly and wrapping the thick fabric around my waist. The house was still silent as I entered the bedroom, the soft glow of the bedside lamp reflecting off the rich gold accessories decorating the room. Talia lay curled on her side, her hand resting protectively over her belly. My heart swelled with emotion as I watched her, the reality of her pregnancy filling me with a sense of hope and purpose I had never known before.

Carefully, I slid into bed beside her, trying not to wake her from her peaceful

slumber. The mattress dipped slightly under my weight, and she stirred, her eyes fluttering open. “Aleksandr,” she murmured sleepily, her voice a soft caress.

“I’m here, my love,” I whispered, pulling her gently into my arms. She sighed contentedly, nestling her head against my chest. I could feel the warmth of her body against mine, the rhythmic rise and fall of her breath.

“I was worried about you,” she whispered, her voice tinged with concern.

I kissed the top of her head, inhaling the sweet honeysuckle scent of her hair. “There’s nothing to worry about. I’m here now, and I’m not going anywhere.”

Her hand rested on my chest, fingers tracing the dips and curves of my toned muscles. “Is Vic dead,” she asked hesitantly.

“He is,” I assured her.

She pressed her ear to my chest, listening to the steady beat of my heart. “I love you, Talia,” I whispered, the words baring the truth in my soul. “I never thought I could love someone like this. You’ve changed me in ways I can’t explain.”

She looked up at me, her eyes filled with a love that took my breath away. “And I love you, Aleksandr. No matter what, I’m here with you.”

I tightened my hold on her, feeling the steady beat of her heart against mine. I kissed her deeply, pouring all my love into that kiss. As we lay there, holding each other in the quiet of the night, I knew that this was the beginning of a new chapter.

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Chapter 15

Talia

Waking up slowly, I stretched out my limbs with a relief I hadn't felt in weeks. Vic was dead, and with him went the relentless fear that had gripped me. I could finally breathe again. I rolled over and saw Aleksandr watching me. His intense ice-blue eyes softened with a tenderness he reserved only for me.

"Good morning, kiska, " he murmured, his voice husky from sleep.

"Good morning," I replied, a smile tugging at my lips. "It's finally over, isn't it?"

He nodded, brushing a strand of hair away from my face. "Yes, it is. Today, we can start living again. Just you, me, our baby, and the children."

My hand instinctively went to my belly. I felt a swell of love for this man who had fought to protect me and our future.

Aleksandr sat up, the sheets falling away to reveal the muscular expanse of his chest. He leaned down and kissed me softly. "Get dressed. I have a special day planned for us."

Intrigued, I got out of bed and went to the wardrobe. I chose black leggings, a tan cashmere sweater, and black boots. Aleksandr watched me with appreciation, his gaze lingering. "You look beautiful," he said.

“And you look like you need to get dressed,” I teased.

He laughed a deep, resonant sound that made my heart flutter.

“Just a moment,” he said, pulling on a pair of trousers and a crisp black shirt. Within minutes, he was the picture of a distinguished mafia boss, exuding power and grace.

We left the bedroom and went to the private dock behind Aleksandr’s mansion. A sleek, luxurious yacht awaited us, bobbing gently in the water. Aleksandr helped me aboard, his touch firm and reassuring.

As we stepped off the deck and into the cabin, I gasped in delight. A sumptuous breakfast awaited us, laid on a polished teak table. Freshly baked flaky and golden croissants nestled in a basket beside an array of colorful fruits - ripe strawberries, plump blueberries, and juicy slices of melon. There were creamy scrambled eggs, crisp bacon, and delicate smoked salmon garnished with capers and dill. A platter of assorted cheeses sat nearby, accompanied by freshly squeezed juices and steaming cups of rich, aromatic coffee.

“This is incredible,” I said, turning to Aleksandr with wide eyes.

“I thought we should start the day with something special,” he replied, a satisfied smile on his lips.

We sat down and began to eat, savoring each bite. The croissants melted in my mouth, buttery and light, while the sweetness of the fruit balanced perfectly with the meal’s rich flavors. As we ate, we talked and laughed, the tension of the past few weeks melting away with each passing moment.

Once we were finished, the yacht easily cut through the water as we sailed around the city. The Manhattan skyline loomed ahead, majestic and sprawling. I stood at the

bow, letting the cool breeze whip through my hair, feeling a sense of freedom and exhilaration.

Aleksandr joined me, wrapping a soft blanket around my shoulders. "I thought we could use some time away from everything," he said. "Just us."

"It's perfect," I replied, leaning into him. "Thank you."

We cruised past the Statue of Liberty, her torch high, symbolizing hope and resilience. It felt like a new beginning, a chance to build a life free from the shadows that had haunted us. Aleksandr held me close, and I felt the steady beat of his heart.

After an hour on the water, we docked at a pier near a district known for its luxurious shopping. The busy streets were lined with high-end boutiques displaying a colorful array of fashion and home décor. Aleksandr took my hand, leading me into one of the most prestigious stores.

"Pick anything you like," he said, his eyes gleaming with affection.

I wandered through the store, running my fingers over soft fabrics and admiring the exquisite craftsmanship of the garments. I chose a few pieces - a stunning silk dress, a pair of elegant shoes, and a delicate necklace that caught the light beautifully. Aleksandr watched me with a smile, his pride evident.

"You're spoiling me," I said, excited and grateful.

"You deserve it," he replied, kissing my forehead.

We continued our shopping spree, visiting several more stores and adding items to our collection. Each purchase was a symbol of the life we were building together, one filled with love, security, and a touch of extravagance.

With our shopping bags in hand, we strolled to a five-star restaurant overlooking the Hudson River. The ma?tre d' greeted us with a polite nod and led us to a private table on the enclosed glass terrace. The view was spectacular - the river shimmering in the sunlight, boats gliding by in a dance of life and movement.

Aleksandr ordered for us, choosing various dishes showcasing the chef's expertise. The meal was exquisite, each bite a symphony of flavors. As we ate, we talked about our future, our plans for the baby, and the life we wanted to create.

"I want our child to grow up happy and safe," Aleksandr said, his eyes filled with determination. "All of our children. Sasha and Maxim deserve every happiness in life, and I'll do whatever it takes to make that happen."

"I know you will," I replied, reaching across the table to squeeze his hand.

After lunch, we returned to the yacht, the gentle sway of the water lulling us into a state of contentment. We sailed back to the mansion, the sun beginning to set behind us, a golden glow hovering over the city.

When we arrived home, Aleksandr led me to the bedroom, his touch sending shivers down my spine. He closed the door behind us, and I felt a delicious anticipation build. He approached me slowly, his eyes dark with desire.

"I've waited all day for this," he said, his voice a low growl.

"So have I," I whispered, my heart racing.

He kissed me, a searing kiss that left me breathless. His hands roamed over my body, leaving a trail of fire in their wake. I clung to him, lost in the sensation, the world outside forgotten.

We undressed each other slowly, savoring each touch. When we were finally skin-to-skin, Aleksandr lifted me into his arms and carried me to bed. He laid me down gently, his gaze never leaving mine.

“You’re so beautiful, Talia,” he said, his voice filled with reverence. He moved slowly, kissing me tenderly. “Spread your legs for me like a good girl.”

My pussy got even wetter as he whispers the words in my ear. I don’t think I’ve ever been this turned on. Obeying him, I spread my legs apart, anticipation building in my core. Without waiting for him to make a move, I shove my finger in his mouth, twirling it to get it super wet. Then I slide it from my neck to my pussy, rolling it over my clit.

Aleksandr watches my finger without blinking. He grasps his cock in his hand and strokes it. “Slide it in your pussy,” he demands. “Deep...I want to see you fuck yourself.”

I slide my finger into my pussy and gasp. Slowly I fuck myself, in and out, in and out. My lips part to release a soft moan. Aleksandr is mesmerized, stroking his cock without taking his eyes off me.

“Two fingers now,” he insists.

Without a word, I slide another finger into my pussy. I fuck myself a little faster, gasping at the vibrations running through my pussy. But as good as this feels, I want his cock in me. Pulling my fingers out, I slide them past his lips and into his warm mouth.

“Fuck me,” I breathe, locking gazes with him.

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Chapter 16

Aleksandr

Talia gasps as my fingers make contact with her warm pussy. Kissing her neck, she moans, her eyes fluttering open and closed.

“Aleksandr...” she begs. “Please, I need you.”

Threading her fingers in my hair, she pulled my face toward hers and kissed me desperately. I can feel her nipples harden as I taste every inch of her mouth. I cup her breast and squeeze, kneading the plump flesh in my hand.

I slid my tongue down her neck, her tantalizing taste bursting in my mouth. Sliding my hand down, I worked her clit until she wanted to cry. Her pussy throbbed and clenched as I pressed, stroked, and rubbed her clit. I dipped my finger inside, feeling how slick and wet she was.

She bucked her hips, wanting my finger to fuck her as she chased her orgasm. Instead, I pulled my finger out and slammed my cock into her in one hard thrust. Talia was teetering on the edge of an orgasm, digging her fingers into my biceps.

“Do not come,” I commanded.

“Please,” she begged.

“ Do. Not. Come. “ I commanded again. My hands closed over hers, holding them

above her head. I groaned as her pussy squeezed my cock, fluttering around it. She struggled to pull her hands free, wanting to touch me, but I held her in place.

My cock slammed into her again and again, faster and harder, pushing her closer to her release. She wrapped her legs around my waist, moaning as her pussy spasmed.

“Now. Come,” I demanded. Her spine snapped straight as she cried out, her pussy contracting around my cock. I didn’t stop fucking her as her release washed over her. She was so hot and tight it made my balls ache.

Pulling my cock out, I flipped her onto her stomach, lifted her up, and impaled her back onto my cock. She gasped in surprise, her back against my chest, as I fucked her hard and fast. I squeezed both breasts and pinched her nipples as she straddled my lap. I was so close to my release, but I wasn’t done with her yet.

Lifting her slightly, I pushed her forward until her face was on the mattress and her ass was in the air. I pressed my finger into her puckered hole while my cock fiercely fucked her pussy. She cried out as my finger plunged deep into her hole fucking it.

“Do you want more, kiska ?” I breathed.

“Yes,” she gasped. I added another finger inside her ass and reveled in the whimper that escaped her throat. For every thrust of my fingers, she pushed her ass back, forcing them in deeper. She was filled in both holes and still wanted more.

I flipped her onto her back, hooking her legs over my shoulders. “You want my cock?” I teased.

“Yes...please...” she murmured.

Pressing the tip against her ass, I slowly slid it in inch by inch until my balls smacked

her flesh. Her mouth opened in a silent gasp, and her eyes rolled back. That's when I shoved two fingers into her pussy and fucked her until she was screaming. I stretched her ass to its limit with my cock, fucking her as hard as possible.

Reaching up, she gripped the headboard to steady herself as I pounded into her mercilessly.

“ Mine, “ I growled, tunneling in and out of her holes. Talia groaned from sheer carnal bliss, and I couldn't hold back my release.

I bent forward and bit her neck as I exploded inside her. Her muscled clamped down on my cock as her release tore through her. I pumped my cock until every drop was in her ass, only pulling out when I was satisfied.

Rolling to the side, I lay next to her, my heart beating so fast I thought it would break free of my chest.

“Are you happy?” I whispered, stroking her smooth arm.

“Yes,” she mumbled, still enjoying the vibration of her orgasm. “It's been a perfect day.”

“It's not over yet,” I promised, licking my lips. Spinning her around, I lifted her up so she was lying on top of me in a sixty-nine position. Her legs fell on either side of my head, and her swollen pussy was inches from my mouth. I pulled her closer until her pussy was on my lips, savoring her sweet taste on my tongue. I licked and sucked her pussy, loving every one of Talia's moans.

She grabbed my hard cock sucking the tip into her mouth and twirling her tongue around it. Using my thumbs, I spread open her wet folds, lapping at her juices and slit. Grabbing her ass, I held her in place, wrapping my lips around her clit. She

groaned around my cock, sliding her fingers up and down the shaft as she sucked.

I plunged my tongue into her pussy, licking, probing, and nipping. “Yesss...” she moaned.

Grabbing a fistful of her hair, I pulled her head back, lifted her up by the waist and impaled her pussy on my cock.

“Fuck me,” I hissed as she began to ride me hard. I slapped her ass once, twice, three times, watching it bounce up and down. I had the perfect view of Talia’s sleek back and plump ass as she fucked me fast.

Pressing my thumb against her puckered hole, I teased her ass as she continued to slam her pussy balls deep on my cock. She arched, and her head fell back. Fisting her hair in my hand, I punched my hips up each time she slammed her pussy down.

My cock was so deep I was afraid I’d tear her apart. “Fuuuck...” I groaned, feeling my balls tighten again. Forcing her to stay still, I fucked her hard and fast until I shot my load into her, filling her pussy up with my come.

Talia cried out from her release, then fell forward onto my legs, her body covered in sweat. Lifting her off, I rolled onto my side, pulling her into me. I kissed her deeply until we were satiated. She rested her head against my shoulder as we finally drifted asleep.

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Chapter 17

Aleksandr

A quiet knock woke me from my sleep. Sasha's small, inquisitive face peeked in. "Uncle Aleksandr, are you awake?"

I smiled and beckoned her inside. "Come in, printsessa ."

She tiptoed into the room, careful not to wake Talia. "Maxim and I are hungry. Will you make breakfast?"

I glanced at the clock. It was still early, but I didn't mind. Spending time with Sasha and Maxim had become a part of my routine. "Of course. Let's make some pancakes."

Sasha's eyes lit up with excitement. She was only five years old but full of energy and curiosity. Maxim, the more serious one, was always watching out for his sister. After so much loss in their lives, I was determined to give them the family unit they deserved.

Maxim joined us as we headed downstairs to the kitchen, rubbing sleep from his eyes. "Good morning, Uncle Aleksandr."

"Good morning, Maxim. Ready for pancakes?"

He nodded, a small smile playing on his lips. I began gathering ingredients, and the

kids eagerly helped. Maxim carefully measured the flour while Sasha cracked the eggs, her small hands surprisingly adept. I thought about how much they had changed my life as we cooked. They brought a sense of normalcy and joy that I hadn't known I needed.

Talia joined us a little while later, her eyes brightening when she saw us. "Good morning, everyone."

"Hi, Talia," the kids chorused. They adored her, and she had taken to them as if they were her own. Her presence had a calming effect on all of us, and she was the reason for love and warmth that now filled our home.

Talia eagerly accepted the cup of hot coffee I gave her after I kissed her on the forehead. "Oh," Talia murmured in surprise, placing her hand on her belly. "The baby is awake," she laughed.

"My son is a morning person?" I teased.

"My daughter definitely is," Talia smirked. Grabbing my hand, she placed it on her belly. I waited in anticipation to feel the baby move.

"Wow," I whispered as Talia's belly moved like a wave beneath my hand. "That was incredible," I murmured against her lips, kissing her firmly.

"Can I feel?" Maxim asked.

"I want to feel the baby too!" Sasha whined.

"You can both feel the baby," Talia smiled. They placed their hands on her belly until they felt the baby move. Their eyes went wide with surprise.

“I can feel her!” Sasha squealed, her blonde pigtails bouncing up and down from her excitement.

“That was weird,” Maxim grimaced.

I couldn’t help but laugh. Somehow, despite all my wrongs, I was blessed with these three. My family.

“Everyone sit,” I ordered. “The pancakes are ready.”

They hurried to sit at the table. I placed a plate of pancakes in front of each of them and watched them dig in.

“Mmm, these are so good,” Talia complimented around a mouthful.

“The kids helped. I think that was the special ingredient,” I smiled.

I took my plate and sat at the table, joining them in light chatter while we ate.

After breakfast, we decided to take the kids out for the day. Talia suggested bowling, and Sasha and Maxim enthusiastically cheered. We piled into the car, and Dimitri drove us to the nearest bowling alley.

The bowling alley was bustling with activity, with pins crashing and children’s laughter filling the air. The bright lights and vibrant colors added to the fun and excitement. Talia insisted we use the rental shoes, but there was no way I was putting my feet in used shoes. Instead, I bought each of us new shoes from the retail store in the corner of the alley. I also purchased new bowling balls and matching bags.

Sasha and Maxim were eager to get started, and even Talia seemed more animated than usual. Dimitri isn’t a bowling fan but couldn’t say no to the children after they

begged him to play, too.

As we played, I marveled at the ease with which we slipped into this family dynamic. Sasha and Maxim competed to see who could knock down the most pins, their laughter echoing through the alley. Talia cheered them on, her movements graceful despite her growing belly, her face alight with joy. Dimitri did his best to curb the string of Russian curses he spewed each time he threw a gutter ball.

“Your turn, Uncle Aleksandr,” Maxim called, handing me my blue bowling ball.

I took the ball, settling its weight in my hand. I rolled it down the lane, knocking down all but one pin. The kids cheered, and Talia gave me an approving nod.

After a few games, we decided to take a break and get pizza. The kids chattered excitedly about their scores, and Talia leaned into me with a contented smile.

The pizza parlor attached to the bowling alley was lively, filled with the tantalizing aroma of melting cheese and fresh-baked dough. We found a table near the window, and the kids immediately debated which toppings to choose. Maxim wanted pepperoni, while Sasha insisted on mushrooms and olives. Ultimately, we compromised and ordered a large pizza with half pepperoni and half veggie.

As we waited for our food, I watched the kids color on their placemats, their concentration intense. Talia reached across the table and took my hand, her touch sending a warm shiver down my spine.

“You’re good with them, Talia,” Dimitri stated, nodding at the children.

“They’re the best. They make it very easy to love them,” she replied.

I looked at her and the children, my heart full of love. “They deserve the best,” I

chimed in. “You all do.”

“And you give it to us,” she assured, her hand resting on her belly. “All of us.”

The pizza arrived, a steaming masterpiece that made the kids’ eyes widen with delight. Maxim devoured his slices with gusto while Sasha carefully picked off the olives and set them aside. Talia laughed, and the sound was music to my ears.

“Uncle Aleksandr, can we do this every week?” Sasha asked between bites, her eyes hopeful.

I smiled, wiping a smudge of sauce from her cheek. “Of course, Sasha. We’ll make it a tradition.”

“Dimitri has to come, too,” Maxim insisted.

“Da . I wouldn’t miss it,” Dimitri smiled, taking a big bite of pizza.

We spent the rest of the afternoon at the bowling alley, the hours slipping by in a blur of laughter and love. When we returned to the mansion, the kids were exhausted but happy. I carried Sasha to her room while Maxim got ready for bed.

After tucking Sasha in bed, I went to Maxim’s room. Sitting up in bed, he looked at me intently. “Uncle Aleksandr, are you going to marry Talia?”

The question caught me off guard. I paused, searching for the right words. “Why do you ask?”

He shrugged, pulling the covers over his legs. “Because you love her. And she loves you.”

His simple, innocent words struck a chord deep within me. I remembered the night before when I finally told Talia I loved her. The look in her eyes when she said she loved me too was something I would never forget.

“Yes, Maxim,” I said finally. “I am going to marry Talia.”

A sleepy smile spread across his face. “Good. She makes you happy.”

“She does,” I agreed, feeling a warmth spread through me.

“Will she be our new mom?” he questioned, hope shining in his eyes.

“Of course,” I assured him. “She loves you and Sasha as much as the baby.”

Satisfied, Maxim lay down to sleep.

“Good night,” I whispered, pulling the covers up and tucking him in.

I left his room and found Talia in the hallway, her expression thoughtful. “This was a perfect day,” she whispered.

I nodded, taking her hand. “And we will have many more days like it.”

Tears glistened in her eyes, but she smiled softly. We stood a moment allowing our love and future to settle around us. It was a future I had never imagined, but now that it was within reach, I couldn’t wait to embrace it.

We returned to the master bedroom, and the house was quiet. As we lay in bed, Talia nestled against me, I thought about how far we had come. From the moment I met her, I knew she was special. She had brought light into my life, which had only grown brighter each day.

“I love you,” I whispered, my hand resting on her belly. “And I will love our child with everything I have.”

“I love you too, Aleksandr,” she replied, her voice filled with emotion. “And I know you will.”

As we drifted to sleep, I felt a sense of peace I had never known before. Knowing I had found my family, which I would protect and cherish with all my heart, was a peace. The world outside might be dangerous and unpredictable, but here, in this moment, we were safe. We were home.

Chapter 18

Aleksandr

The morning sun was bright, chasing away the shadows in my office. The papers scattered before me were a testament to the night's work—accounts to settle, shipments to confirm, and messages to send. But today, my mind was elsewhere, consumed by thoughts of Talia.

I leaned back in my chair, letting the leather cushion my weight as I ran a hand through my hair. The decision had been made, and now it was time to act. I needed advice, and there was no one better to turn to than Dimitri.

I picked up my phone and dialed his number. It rang twice before he picked up, his voice gruff with the remnants of sleep.

“Da?”

“Dimitri, I need to talk to you.”

There was a pause, a rustling of sheets, and his voice became clearer and more alert.

“What is it?”

“I want to marry Talia,” I said, the words feeling foreign yet right on my tongue. “I want to surprise her with a ring. I need your advice.”

Silence stretched between us for a moment, and then Dimitri laughed, a deep, genuine

sound.

“Finally,” he said. “I was wondering how long it would take you. It’s a great idea, Aleksandr. She deserves it, and so do you.”

I let out a breath I hadn’t realized I was holding. Dimitri’s approval meant more to me than I cared to admit.

“I’ve already arranged a private shopping experience at the jewelry store,” I continued. “I need to make sure everything is perfect.”

“Leave it to me,” Dimitri said. “I’ll take care of the details. You focus on Talia.”

I spent the rest of the morning finalizing plans, ensuring every detail was perfect. By the time Talia woke, I was on my third cup of coffee.

“Good morning,” she greeted, padding quietly into the kitchen. Her hazel eyes sparkled, and her dark hair framed her face like a halo.

“What got you up so early?” she asked, settling into the chair facing the window.

“I thought we could spend the day together,” I said, pouring her a cup of coffee and placing it before her.

“I’d love that,” she said, peeking at me from under her long lashes. “What did you have in mind?”

“Lunch first,” I said, taking her hand. “And then a surprise.”

Her eyes lit up with curiosity, but she didn’t press me for details. One of the many things I loved about Talia was her trust in me, even when she didn’t know what I had

planned.

After breakfast, Talia went upstairs to get ready. I stood by the front door, adjusting the cufflinks on my navy-blue tailored suit as I waited for her. I chose the suit carefully, wanting to look my best for this special day. A single red rose rested in my hand, a simple token of affection that I knew would bring a smile to her face.

When she finally descended, my breath caught. She looked effortlessly beautiful in her leggings, boots, and cozy sweater, which gracefully concealed her baby bump. As she approached, I couldn't help but feel a surge of warmth and admiration for my woman.

Talia's eyes immediately fell on the rose in my hand. I saw her lips curl into a soft, surprised smile that made my heart skip a beat. She looked up at me, and I could see a hint of warmth in her eyes as she took in my suit.

"You look amazing," she said, her voice full of genuine admiration.

I handed her the rose, and she accepted it with a tender laugh as if the gesture had touched her more than she expected. We headed to the car, a comfortable silence settling between us, broken only by the gentle hum of the engine as we drove to the café. The streets passed by quickly painted in a palette of autumn colors, and I glanced over at her occasionally, feeling a quiet contentment. She seemed relaxed, her hand resting on her belly, and I couldn't help but think how perfectly the day was unfolding.

We had lunch at a charming, intimate café in a quiet corner of the city. Owned by my cousin Luka, it's renowned for its five-star delicacies. The décor was as luxurious as the food. Yet, the atmosphere remained cozy, with soft lighting and the inviting aroma of delectable foods cooked in the kitchen.

We were seated at the chef's table in the back of the restaurant next to the kitchen. Talia laughed, her voice ringing like music, and talked animatedly about everything and nothing. Her joy was infectious, and I found myself grinning like a fool, hanging on her every word.

I watched her intently, trying to memorize every detail. When she laughed, her eyes crinkled at the corners, and her dark hair fell in waves around her shoulders, framing her face perfectly. "You always know how to make me laugh," I said, unable to tear my eyes away from her. She gestured with her hands as she spoke, her excitement palpable, as if she were enthusiastically painting the air.

"You make it easy," she replied with a playful wink, reaching across the table to squeeze my hand. At that moment, I knew I could stay in that café with her forever, lost in her laughter, entirely at ease in the tiny world we had created for ourselves.

After lunch, we walked hand in hand through the city, the bustling crowds and noisy streets a distant backdrop to our world. We finally arrived at the jewelry store, its grand facade gleaming in the afternoon sun.

Talia looked up at the store and then back at me, her eyes wide with surprise. "Aleksandr, what is this?"

I smiled, squeezing her hand. "A surprise, remember? Come on."

We walked to the entrance, where a security guard opened the door. Inside, the store was empty, the usual bustle of customers replaced by a quiet, serene atmosphere. The staff stood ready, their attention solely on us.

"Welcome, Mr. Avilov, Miss Martin," the manager said, bowing slightly. "We are honored to have you. Please, take your time."

Talia looked around, her eyes round as saucers. “Aleksandr, this is... this is amazing. But why?”

“Because you deserve it,” I said, leading her further into the store. “I want you to pick out something special—anything you want.”

She hesitated, looking at the glittering displays of diamonds, sapphires, and rubies. “I don’t know. This is all so much.”

“Please,” I said, turning her to face me. “Let me do this for you. You mean everything to me, Talia. I want you to have something beautiful.”

She looked at me for a long moment, then nodded, a small smile on her plump lips. “Alright.”

We spent the next hour browsing the displays, Talia admiring the various pieces. Finally, she stopped in front of a pair of delicate diamond earrings that sparkled in the light.

“These,” she said softly. “They’re beautiful.”

I smiled, signaling to the manager. “We’ll take them.”

As the manager carefully removed the earrings from the display case, I reached into my pocket, my fingers closing around the small velvet box. My heart pounded in my chest as I watched Talia try on the earrings, her reflection in the mirror stunning.

“They’re perfect,” she said, turning to face me. “Thank you. They’re beautiful.”

I stepped closer, holding out the velvet box. “There’s one more thing.”

She looked at the box, then back at me, her eyes wide with shock and something else—hope.

I opened the box, revealing the diamond ring inside. I had chosen it with Dimitri's help, and it symbolized everything I felt for her.

“Talía,” I said, my voice steady despite the whirlwind of emotions. “From the moment I met you, my life changed. You've shown me a love I never thought possible, and I can't imagine my life without you. Will you marry me?”

Tears filled her eyes, and for a moment, she was silent. Then she nodded, a radiant smile breaking across her face. “Yes, Aleksandr. Yes, I'll marry you.”

I slipped the ring onto her finger, my heart soaring as she threw her arms around me, her laughter and tears mingling in a symphony of joy.

Everything else faded away in that moment—the dangers, the challenges, the world we lived in. There was only Talía and me and the love we had found in each other.

The drive back to the mansion was quiet, each of us comfortable in our own thoughts. Talía couldn't stop admiring her ring, the large diamond catching the light and casting tiny rainbows around the car.

“I still can't believe it,” she said softly, glancing at me. “It feels like a dream.”

I reached over, taking her hand in mine. “It's real, kiska . And it's just the beginning.”

She smiled, squeezing my hand. “I love you.”

“I love you, too,” I said, my heart full. “More than you'll ever know.”

Chapter 19

Talia

Happiness has a strange way of filling up the empty spaces in your heart, making you feel like you're floating above the ground, untethered by the world's weight. That's exactly how I felt when Aleksandr proposed to me. As I lay in bed, the morning sunlight warm on my face, I couldn't help but smile. It was as if the entire world had shifted, just a little, to make room for this new chapter of my life. My heart raced excitedly as I thought about the man who had turned my world upside down.

Aleksandr. My Aleksandr.

He was already up, of course, taking care of something or another. Even in his sleep, Aleksandr was always on guard, one step ahead of everyone else. What I loved most about him was his fierce protectiveness and unyielding strength. As pakhan, he was a man who carried the weight of his world on his shoulders, but with me, he let some of that burden slip away.

I reached for my phone, the one connection I had to the world outside this fortress. My fingers hovered over the screen, and I dialed Sandy's number without thinking. She answered on the third ring, her voice still groggy from sleep.

"Sis? What's wrong? It's barely eight in the morning."

I laughed, unable to contain the bubbling joy inside me. "I have the best news! Aleksandr proposed yesterday, and I said yes!"

There was a moment of silence on the other end, and then Sandy squealed, her excitement almost as palpable as mine. “Oh my God, Talia! Are you serious? This is amazing! I can’t believe it! Tell me everything!”

I could practically see her bouncing around in her bed, her strawberry blonde hair tousled from sleep, eyes bright with excitement. Sandy was always the more animated one between us—full of life and ready to celebrate the smallest victories.

I told her everything—the way Aleksandr had taken me by surprise, the way he looked at me with those intense, ice-blue eyes that saw right through me, the way he said the words I had longed to hear. And then, of course, the ring.

“This calls for a celebration,” Sandy declared after I had finished my story. “You have to spend the day with me. We’ll do whatever you want—spa day, shopping, anything. Just you and me, celebrating your engagement!”

The idea was tempting, and I could already imagine the fun we’d have. But I didn’t want to lose the magical feeling of the moment just yet. “How about we keep it simple?” I suggested. “Lunch in the city tomorrow? Just us, catching up and celebrating.”

“Perfect,” Sandy agreed. “I’ll make the reservations. There’s this new place I’ve been dying to try. You’ll love it.”

We made our plans, the excitement in her voice matching the flutter in my chest. As we said our goodbyes, I felt a sense of contentment settle over me. It was real—I was engaged to Aleksandr, and my sister, who knew me better than anyone, was thrilled.

With Sandy taken care of, it was time to tell the children.

When Aleksandr and I found them, Sasha and Maxim were playing in the living room

with Olga. Sasha sat on the floor, her long blonde hair pulled back in a ponytail as she focused on a jigsaw puzzle. Maxim was sprawled on the couch, his attention divided between a handheld video game and whatever his sister was working on. And Olga was knitting a blanket.

They all looked up when we entered, and the children's faces lit up. I could see their love and admiration, and they looked at Aleksandr like he was their hero. And in many ways, he was.

Aleksandr gave me a subtle nod, encouraging me to share the news. I took a deep breath, my heart fluttering with excitement and nerves.

"We have some news," I began, approaching them.

Sasha's eyes went round with curiosity, and she put down the puzzle piece she held. Maxim sat up straighter, his game forgotten for the moment. Olga placed her knitting on her lap, giving us her full attention.

"What is it?" Sasha asked, her voice full of anticipation.

I smiled, glancing at Aleksandr before continuing. "Yesterday, Uncle Aleksandr asked me to marry him...and I said yes."

For a brief moment, there was silence as the words sank in. Then, like a dam breaking, the room was filled with excited chatter.

"Congratulations!" Olga gushed. "She's a fine woman, Mr. Avilov!" Olga wrapped her arms around me, giving me a big bear hug.

"Are you serious?" Sasha exclaimed, jumping to her feet. "You're going to be our mom?"

Maxim's reaction was more subdued, but I could see the happiness in his eyes. He stood up and walked over to Aleksandr, giving him a hug before turning to me. "That's great news, Talia. I'm happy for you both."

Sasha practically threw herself at me, wrapping her arms around my waist and hugging me tightly. "This is the best news ever!" she squealed. "We have to celebrate!"

"We will," Aleksandr said, his deep voice laced with warmth as he looked at the children. "How about we have a special dinner tonight?"

Maxim nodded enthusiastically. "We'll make dinner. Right, Sasha?"

Sasha pulled away from me, her eyes shining. "Yes! We'll cook! And we can make that cake you love, Talia!"

The idea of the children taking over the kitchen was both endearing and a little concerning. Still, the joy on their faces was undeniable. I glanced at Aleksandr, who was smiling at the children, pride evident in his expression.

"Alright," I agreed, laughing softly. "But Abram should help you, okay? I don't want you two burning down the kitchen."

They nodded eagerly, and I felt a wave of affection for these two wonderful children who were becoming such an important part of my life.

That evening, the kitchen was a flurry of activity. Sasha and Maxim were hard at work, with Abram overseeing the operation. The smell of roasted chicken and freshly baked bread filled the air, making my stomach growl in anticipation. I was thankful the morning sickness subsided a few weeks ago.

I stood at the doorway, watching them all with a smile. Abram was a calm presence, guiding the children with patience and care, and over the past few months, I had come to appreciate his quiet strength and dedication.

Sasha was in charge of the cake, her face scrunched up in concentration as she carefully measured the ingredients. Maxim was handling the salad, tossing the greens with a seriousness that made me chuckle.

Aleksandr joined me, slipping an arm around my waist. “They’re really trying hard,” he murmured, his voice full of affection.

“I know,” I replied, leaning into him. “They’re wonderful kids, Aleksandr. You’ve done such a great job with them.”

He didn’t say anything, but the way his arm tightened around me spoke volumes. In these quiet moments, I saw the real Aleksandr—the man who loved these children fiercely and would do anything to protect his family.

Dinner was a joyful affair. The table was filled with laughter and chatter, and the children proudly presented each dish they had prepared. The chicken was perfectly roasted, the salad fresh and crisp, and the slightly lopsided cake delicious. Olga and Dimitri asked for seconds.

Sasha and Maxim took turns sharing stories about their day, and I laughed more than I had in a long time. It was a perfect evening filled with warmth and family, and I allowed myself to believe this was how it would always be.

After dinner, we moved to the living room, where Abram had built a fire. The children were still excited, but I could see the exhaustion starting to creep in. Aleksandr and I sat on the couch, with Maxim leaning against Aleksandr’s side and Sasha curled up next to me.

“This was the best day ever,” Sasha declared, her voice drowsy as she rested her head on my shoulder. “I can’t wait for you to be our mom, Talia.”

Her words sent a warm glow through me, and I kissed the top of her head. “I can’t wait either, sweetheart.”

Maxim nodded in agreement, his eyelids drooping. “Yeah, it’s going to be awesome. And I can help with the baby.”

“I can help too!” Sasha pouted.

“The baby is going to love you both,” I assured them.

It was moments like these that made everything worth it—the challenges, the dangers, the uncertainties. For the first time in a long time, I felt like I had found a place where I truly belonged.

As the fire crackled softly in the hearth, the children drifted off to sleep, their faces peaceful. I glanced at Aleksandr, who was watching them with a tender expression. When he met my gaze, he smiled, and I knew then that we were in this together—whatever lay ahead, we would face it as a family.

After tucking the children into bed, Aleksandr and I retreated to our room. The night was quiet; the only sound was the faint rustling of the leaves outside the window. As I slid into bed, Aleksandr joined me, pulling me into his arms. I rested my head against his chest, listening to the steady beat of his heart. It was a sound I had come to associate with safety, with home.

“You’re happy?” he asked, his voice a low rumble that vibrated through me.

I nodded, my fingers tracing the outline of his tattoos. “More than I ever thought

possible. You've given me so much."

"And you've given me more than you know," he replied, his lips brushing against my forehead. "I never thought I'd find someone who could make me feel this way."

His words touched something deep inside me, and I lifted my head to meet his gaze. His eyes were intense, filled with an emotion that took my breath away. I reached up, cupping his face, and kissed him softly.

"I love you," I whispered against his lips.

"And I love you," he murmured, pulling me closer.

We fell asleep that way, wrapped in each other's arms, our hearts beating in sync. As I drifted off, I felt a sense of peace settle over me, knowing I was home.

Chapter 20

Aleksandr

There's nothing like Talia's sweet pussy on my mouth to start the morning off right. I pull her slick lips apart and gently stroke her slit with my tongue. She tilts her hips up, trying to get my tongue in deeper. My greedy kiska.

I go to work sucking, licking, swirling, and teasing, lost in her sweet taste. I slip two fingers into her pussy and clamp my mouth over her clit. I work her until she's desperate for a release. She squirms under my hold, bucking her hips. I add a third finger and fuck her hard until she shatters.

Sitting back, I lick my lips, admiring her beauty. "Good morning," I chuckle, watching her bask in the afterglow.

"Good morning," she moans, rolling her nipple between her fingers.

Sliding off the bed, I entered the en suite bathroom and turned on the shower. Going back into the bedroom, I lifted Talia, wrapping her legs around my waist, and carried her into the bathroom. We stepped into the shower, adjusting the water temperature.

Under the warm spray, I stroked and soaped her down, gently washing her. I rubbed her breasts and pinched her nipples. Sliding my hand down over her navel, I landed on her pussy, sliding my finger between her folds.

"Mmm," she moaned, pressing her hips into my hand.

Backing her against the tile, I hooked her left leg over my hip. Angling her just right, I slid my cock inside her pussy. I fucked her slowly, taking my time. Talia wrapped her arms around my neck, and I kissed her deeply while my cock slid in and out of her tight pussy. It didn't take long for her release to hit, and mine followed soon after.

Stepping out of the shower, I dried her off with a fluffy towel and wrapped her in a robe. She sat on the edge of the bed, watching me dress.

“Will you be out long?” she asked, fluttering her eyelashes.

“I'll be home by dinner,” I replied, kissing her softly. “There's a business matter I need to take care of.”

Kissing her one more time, I turned and left the bedroom, silently wishing I were fucking her instead.

The art gallery wasn't just a business. It was a carefully constructed cover, clean and sterile, the kind of place that made people feel sophisticated while they dropped obscene amounts of money on overpriced canvases. A place where no one questioned why some of the pieces never sold or why specific buyers never bothered to pick up their purchases. Beneath the gallery's polished surface, I moved millions in dirty money, stashed away drugs, and kept the bratva running.

When I stepped inside, the blonde woman at the front desk nodded. The gallery was empty this early in the morning, its pristine white walls and colorful paintings bathed in soft light. Everything about it was designed to keep people at ease, to hide the fact that beneath the art was an empire built on blood and fear.

As I walked past the main gallery, I saw one of my favorite pieces - a stark black-and-white portrait that seemed to gaze back at you, judging. It had always reminded me of how others saw me. An enigma. Cold, unreadable. I moved past it and headed

for my office at the back of the gallery.

Adachi was already there when I walked in.

He stood near the desk, his lean frame turned toward one of the floor-to-ceiling windows that framed the city skyline. He wasn't admiring the view, though. Adachi never cared for distractions. He was dressed in one of his usual tailored suits, perfectly fitted, his dark hair slicked back meticulously. When he heard me enter, he turned, his sharp features lighting up with a smile.

"Aleksandr," he greeted smoothly. "Right on time, as always."

I didn't bother with pleasantries. "You wanted to meet. I'm here."

Adachi gave me one of those smiles that never quite reached his eyes, the kind that made you want to punch him. "Let's talk business, shall we?"

I walked to the desk, lowering myself into the leather chair behind it. Adachi remained standing as if trying to establish some kind of power. Let him. The gallery was my territory, my empire. He might have had his fingers in many pies, but I made the rules here.

"It's about Vic," Adachi continued, his voice as smooth as ever.

He strolled around the room, his fingers lightly grazing the edge of one of the sculptures I kept for show. "Aleksandr, I did more than just find him. I had to dig through my network and pull some serious strings. I think we both know that kind of effort deserves a reward."

There it was.

I leaned back in my chair, watching him. “You want more money.”

He turned to face me fully now, his hands clasped behind his back. “A little more of the business. Ten percent more. Think of it as a finder’s fee for delivering Vic.”

I stared at him momentarily, letting the request settle between us. Ten percent was too much. He knew it. I knew it. And yet, here he was, pushing for it. Mudak.

“Ten percent is too much,” I said evenly.

“You wouldn’t have found Vic without me,” Adachi countered, his tone still smooth.

“Five percent more is all you’ll get,” I said, my voice sharpening. I had half a mind to put a bullet in his head. But he has proven valuable, and having the Yakuza on my side was good for business.

Adachi’s eyes narrowed slightly. I could see the calculation behind his gaze. He wasn’t used to hearing ‘no’. But this was my territory. My money. He was useful, but I refused to be bled dry.

“I’m not asking for charity,” he said after a beat. “Seven percent. You know I’ve earned that.”

I paused, letting the silence drag out just enough to make him uncomfortable. I had to give him something - it was the game we played - but it was about control. About showing him that no matter what, I was in charge.

“Six percent,” I finally said. “And nothing more. You push again, and we’re done here.”

Adachi studied me for a moment longer, weighing his options. He wasn’t stupid

enough to walk away, not when business was so profitable for him. His lips curled into a tight smile, his hand outstretched. “Six percent, then. A fair compromise.”

I didn’t smile as I took his hand, the grip firm but cold. “Good. Now we’re done.”

He nodded, the usual smoothness returning to his demeanor. Adachi turned and walked toward the door, pausing just before he left. “Aleksandr,” he said, looking back over his shoulder. “You should remember. In our world, loyalty is always negotiable.”

I watched him leave, the door closing softly behind him. The gallery was silent again, but his words lingered in the air.

I leaned back in my chair, staring out at the city. I gave him six percent today. But I knew, sooner or later, he’d want more. And that was a problem I’d deal with another day.

Chapter 21

Talia

The following day dawned bright and early, and I couldn't help but feel a sense of anticipation as I prepared for my lunch with Sandy. I chose a simple cream-colored sweater with blue jeans and tan leather boots. Aleksandr had been up since dawn, preoccupied with business, but he ensured that Ivan would drive me to Sandy's apartment.

Ivan was waiting by the SUV when I stepped outside. He gave me a brief nod, his usual stoic expression in place, as he opened the door for me. "Good morning, Talia."

"Morning, Ivan," I replied, sliding into the backseat. Ivan was the type of person who didn't speak much, but his presence was always reassuring, like a silent guardian.

As we drove to Sandy's, I tried to push aside the uneasy feeling that had settled in my stomach. Everything was supposed to be perfect now—Aleksandr had proposed, I was building a future with him, and today was just about celebrating with my sister. But something was nagging at the back of my mind, a shadow I couldn't quite shake.

When we arrived at Sandy's building, she was waiting outside, her face lighting up as she saw the SUV. She looked as beautiful as ever in dark blue jeans and a pink sweater, and her strawberry-blonde hair was pulled into a loose bun. Ivan opened the door for me, and I stepped out, greeted by Sandy's warm embrace.

"You look stunning!" Sandy exclaimed, hugging me tightly. "Congrats again! Now

let's go gossip and eat.”

“Thank you, sis,” I said, smiling as I returned her hug. “I can't wait to catch up.”

We slid into the backseat, and Ivan drove us into the heart of the city. I felt a flutter of excitement, a welcome break from the whirlwind of emotions that had been my life lately. Sandy and I chatted easily, our conversation flowing with the familiarity only sisters share. The sun shone through the car windows, bathing us in a golden light that made everything feel almost dreamlike. I could see a hint of anticipation in Sandy's eyes as we passed the city's busy streets, the world outside a blur of people and traffic. The city gradually shifted from towering glass buildings to charming boutiques and cafés lining the street near the restaurant. It felt like the perfect escape.

The restaurant was elegant, with floor-to-ceiling windows that offered a stunning view of the city skyline. As we sipped on sparkling water, the conversation drifted to Aleksandr and my engagement. Sandy was over the moon, her excitement infectious as she asked about the proposal. I told her about the moment, about how my heart had nearly burst when Aleksandr slipped the ring onto my finger. She teased me about the whirlwind romance, and then her eyes softened with concern.

“Are you ready to be a part of his world permanently?” Sandy asked. “You know it can be dangerous. Are you sure you want to bring the baby up in that world?”

“It's not the world I would have chosen,” I admitted, my hand unconsciously resting on my baby bump. “But I love him, and he loves me. And I know he'll be a wonderful father. He'll provide for us and protect us. That's all I really want.”

Sandy smiled, squeezing my hand gently. “Then you're making the right decision.”

We talked about how I was adjusting to the idea of becoming a mother, not just to my own child but also to Sasha and Maxim. The thought of taking on such a role was

nerve-wracking, but there was something so right about it, too. After all, they were already starting to feel like mine. Sandy reassured me, her words full of sisterly wisdom, as we finished our meal with a decadent chocolate dessert that seemed to melt away any lingering worries.

Afterward, Ivan picked us up and drove us back to Sandy's apartment. The ride was quieter, the contentment from our lunch settling over us. I watched the cityscape pass by, my thoughts lingering on the life I was building with Aleksandr. When we arrived at Sandy's building, it felt comforting to return to her apartment.

We stepped out of the SUV, linking arms, completely unaware that the world I had so carefully pieced together was about to be shattered.

Ivan stood by the SUV, his eyes scanning the surroundings, ever watchful. I noticed his slight hesitation when I told him to wait for us downstairs. "You sure you don't want me to come up?"

"I'm sure," I assured him. "I'll only be a few minutes. No need to worry."

He didn't argue, though I could tell he wasn't entirely convinced. "Alright, but call me if you need anything."

"Will do," I promised, turning to allow Sandy to lead us into the building.

Sandy's apartment was cozy, filled with the familiar warmth of home. I sat on the sofa, relaxing, memories of my childhood floating around in my mind. Sandy disappeared into the bedroom to grab a few things she wanted to show me.

I was so caught up in my thoughts that I didn't notice the subtle shift in the air until I heard the soft click of the front door closing behind me. I froze, a chill running through my limbs. As I stood up, my heart began to pound. My ex-boyfriend Danny

was standing in the middle of the living room.

My blood ran cold. For a moment, I couldn't move, couldn't breathe. Danny, the man I had fought so hard to escape, was here, in Sandy's apartment, his eyes cold and filled with the same cruel intensity I remembered all too well.

"Talía," he said, his voice low and menacing. "Did you really think you could hide from me forever?"

My mind raced, trying to make sense of the situation. How had he found me? What did he want? I was frozen with fear, but I forced myself to stay calm. "Danny, you need to leave. Now."

He took a step closer, his eyes narrowing. "I'm not going anywhere. Not without you."

Panic surged through me, and I instinctively backed away, cradling my baby bump. "Get out, Danny. I'll call the police."

He laughed, a harsh, bitter sound. "You think the police scare me? Do you think Aleksandr scares me? I know everything, Talía. I know where you've been hiding, and I'm here to take back what's mine."

Before I could react, Sandy emerged from the bedroom, swinging a baseball bat. "Get the fuck away from her, you psycho!" she screamed.

Danny jumped out of the way before the bat could connect with his midsection.

"Talía, get in the bedroom!" Sandy ordered.

But I couldn't move. I wouldn't move. I wasn't leaving her alone with Danny. His

eyes were wild, and I knew he would hurt her.

Sandy wasn't the type to back down easily. She stepped forward, her expression fierce, bat held out in front of her like a sword. "Get out of my apartment. Now ."

He took a step toward her, and I panicked. "Danny, just leave!" I screamed, picking up a vase and throwing it at him. My aim was good, but not good enough. It brushed his cheek just before it crashed into the wall, shattering into pieces.

With his attention momentarily distracted, Sandy swung the bat again, connecting with his right shoulder. He grimaced in pain but didn't back down. She swung again, but this time, Danny caught it before it could connect with his chest. Tugging it out of her hands, he threw it into the kitchen, out of reach.

That's when everything spiraled out of control. In a flash, Danny lunged at Sandy, his hand wrapping around her throat. I screamed, rushing forward to help her, but Danny shoved me back, sending me crashing into the coffee table. Pain shot through my side, but it was nothing compared to the terror of watching my sister struggle for air as Danny tightened his grip.

"Let her go!" I screamed, scrambling to my feet. But Danny didn't listen. Sandy's face was turning red, her hands clawing at his as she tried desperately to break free.

Driven by desperation, I grabbed a nearby lamp and swung it at his head. It connected with a sickening thud, and Danny grunted in pain, releasing Sandy as he staggered back.

Sandy crumpled to the floor, gasping for air, her hands clutching her throat. I dropped the lamp and rushed to her side, but Danny was on me again before I could even check if she was okay. His hand fisted in my hair, yanking me to my feet.

“Enough!” he snarled, his breath hot against my ear. “You’re coming with me whether you like it or not.”

“No!” I screamed, struggling against him, but his grip was unyielding. He dragged me toward the door, ignoring my pleas and attempts to break free.

“Sandy!” I called out, my voice filled with panic. But Sandy was still on the floor, barely conscious, her breath in ragged gasps.

Danny forced me through the door, out into the hallway, and through a back exit of the building into a narrow alleyway. The cold air hit me like a slap, and I knew this was my last chance. I had to escape. I had to get away from him.

I twisted in his grip, bringing my knee up as hard as I could. It connected with his stomach, and he gasped, loosening his hold just enough for me to wrench free. I bolted down the alley, my heart pounding in my chest, my boots clattering against the pavement.

But I didn’t get far. Danny was on me instantly, his hand wrapping around my arm and yanking me back. I stumbled, falling hard onto the pavement, the breath knocked out of me.

“You think you can get away from me?” Danny snarled, dragging me to my feet. “You’re mine , Talia. You’ve always been mine.”

I fought him with everything I had, but he was too strong, too determined. He hauled me toward a blue sedan at the end of the alley, throwing me in the back seat before I could even process what was happening. The door slammed shut, and I was trapped.

“No! Let me go!” I yelled as Danny climbed into the driver’s seat. His face was pure fury as he started the engine. I tried opening the door, but it was locked. I leaned back

and began kicking the window, hoping it would break.

“Shut up,” Danny snapped, pulling out a gun and pointing it at me. “You brought this on yourself. Sit back and stay still, and I won’t have to kill you.”

Terror wrapped around me as the car sped off, taking me away from everything I knew, everything I loved. I turned to take one last look at the apartment building and saw Ivan on his cell phone as he frantically climbed the stairs. Aleksandr, Sandy, the life I had just begun to build—all of it was slipping away, and I could do nothing to stop it.

Chapter 22

Aleksandr

My footsteps echoed in the cold, quiet street as I left the gallery, my mind still filled with thoughts of Talia. The way her eyes sparkled when she looked at a painting, and her lips curled into that shy smile when she felt my gaze on her. Every moment with her was etched into my mind, more permanent than any artwork hanging on those walls. She was my muse, my obsession, and more than that—she was mine.

I pulled my coat tighter as a cold breeze swept down the street. Reaching the car, I unlocked it and slipped into the driver's seat. My phone buzzed, pulling me out of my thoughts. I fished it out, glancing at the screen: Ivan.

"Ivan, what is it?" I asked, my voice sharper than I intended.

"Pakhan," Ivan's said in a strained voice. "I was waiting for Talia outside Sandy's apartment. Everything was fine until I heard a commotion upstairs. I went up and found the door open..."

My grip tightened on the phone. "And?"

"Sandy was barely conscious. She'd been strangled. She told me Danny—Talia's ex—was there. He took her. He took Talia."

Everything went cold. My pulse roared in my ears, drowning out the rest of the world. Talia... taken. By that piece of shit.

“Where’s Sandy now?” I demanded, my jaw clenched so tightly it hurt.

“With me. I wasn’t sure what else to do. She’s shaken, but she’ll be okay. She told me everything she knows about Danny.”

“Bring her to the mansion. Now.” I hung up before he could respond, rage boiling under my skin like a volcano about to erupt.

Danny. That worthless bastard. From the beginning, he’d been nothing but trouble, harassing Talia and trying to worm his way back into her life even after she’d made it clear she wanted nothing to do with him. And now, he’d dared to take her from me?

I felt the anger rising, choking me. I wanted to break something, to unleash the storm building inside me. But I forced myself to stop, to breathe, to focus. Anger wouldn’t save Talia. Only action would.

I dialed Dimitri’s number. It rang twice before he picked it up.

“Brat,” I said, trying to keep my voice steady, “we have a problem.”

“What happened?” Dimitri’s voice was calm and collected, as always.

“Talia’s ex, Danny...he took her,” I spat, the words tasting like venom on my tongue.

“I want him found. Alive or dead, I don’t care, but I need him found now.”

“Do we know where he might have taken her?” Dimitri asked all business.

“Not yet. Ivan’s bringing Sandy to the mansion. I’ll get whatever information she has, and we’ll start the search.” I paused, my grip on the steering wheel tightening into a death grip. “But Dimitri... make sure every man is ready. I want this done fast. I won’t wait.”

Dimitri didn't hesitate. "Yes, pakhan . I'll get the men on it immediately."

"Good," I muttered before ending the call.

The world felt surreal as I sat there, my mind a blur of thoughts. Of course I had enemies, but this wasn't about them, power, territory, or money. It was about Talia, and it was personal. Danny wasn't some criminal mastermind. He was a coward but desperate, and desperate men do reckless things.

I started the car, the engine revving. I stepped on the gas and flew down the street, weaving in and out of traffic, determined to get to the mansion in record time.

When I pulled into my estate's long, winding driveway, I could feel the tension in my chest like a coiled spring. Ivan would be here soon with Sandy. She would have answers-she had to.

I entered the mansion, greeted by the familiar smell of expensive leather and polished wood. Normally, the place felt like a fortress, a place of safety. But now, it felt empty. Without Talia, there was no warmth, no sense of home.

I barely had time to think before the front door opened, and Ivan walked in with Sandy, her face pale and bruised, her hands trembling as she clutched her coat. Ivan's expression was bleak, his jaw tight. He'd done his job, but I could tell he was waiting for my reaction. Waiting for the explosion.

But I was calm...for now.

"Sandy," I said, motioning for her to sit down. She did so, her movements stiff and shaky, her eyes darting around the room.

"I-I'm sorry," she stammered, her voice low. "I tried to stop him."

“I’m not blaming you,” I said, my voice quieter now but no less intense. “But I need you to tell me everything. What do you know about Danny? Where would he take her?”

She swallowed, her eyes filling with tears. “Talía fled San Francisco to get away from him,” Sandy began, her voice wavering. “They dated for a few months, but it ended badly. Danny cheated on her, and when she found out, she broke up with him. But he wouldn’t leave her alone. He tried to win her back, sending her messages and showing up at places she went. When she refused, he started stalking her.”

I felt a sharp pang of rage at the thought of Danny cornering her, forcing his way back into her life. Sandy continued, her words coming out faster now.

“He showed up at the Paradise Heights Hotel the morning after the night Talía spent with you.” Her eyes flickered up to mine as if gauging my reaction.

I said nothing, but the fury in my chest tightened.

“They had an altercation in the penthouse. He got aggressive, but she managed to get away. After that, she stayed with her friend Luke and his boyfriend Tony, hoping Danny would back off. For a few weeks, it was quiet. But he wasn’t gone. He was obsessed.”

Sandy took a shaky breath before continuing. “Eventually, Danny trashed her apartment. Completely destroyed the place. He threatened her and said she belonged to him. Talía contacted the police, but they said they couldn’t do anything since there was no proof that Danny trashed her apartment. And his text messages didn’t actually say he was going to cause her bodily harm, so they wouldn’t do anything. Talía was terrified for her and the baby, so she left San Francisco and moved to New York to escape him.”

Sandy absently rubbed the blackbird tattoo on her wrist. Talia had a similar tattoo and did the same thing when thinking about Sandy or stressed. Talia once said that it made her feel connected to Sandy. They got matching tattoos when Sandy decided to move to New York. Talia got a tiny black bird sitting on a wire, and Sandy got a small black bird with wings spread wide soaring across the sky. Sandy told Talia she'd always be with her, looking out for her, no matter where her wings took her. Looking at her current condition, she clearly fought Danny hard to keep Talia safe.

My fists tightened until my knuckles turned white. Every instinct in me screamed to hunt Danny down and gut him like a fish.

“Somehow, he found out Talia was here,” Sandy said. “He came to get her. I tried to stop him, but...” She gently rubbed the bruises on her neck, her eyes downcast.

“Do you know where he would take her?” I questioned.

“No, I don't. As far as I knew, he was in San Francisco. I don't know if he knows anyone here or has friends in the city. His last name is Lewis.”

I could feel the tension radiating from Ivan, his body poised for action, ready to move at my word. I had heard enough.

“Thank you, Sandy,” I said, standing up. “You're safe now. Ivan, call Dr. Daria. I want her to check Sandy.”

“Oh no, it's okay,” Sandy began to protest.

“I insist,” I told her firmly. “Ivan, call the doctor.”

“Yes , pakhan ,“ Ivan replied.

Sandy looked up at me, her face still etched with fear, but her eyes shined with determination. “Find her, Aleksandr. And when you do, I will need a few minutes alone with Danny...and a gun.”

Sandy was fierce. I could see why Talia clung to her in the foster homes and why they became as close as sisters. I nodded curtly, then stepped out of the room and pulled out my phone again, this time calling Denis, my cousin. He was a detective for the local police department, but he wasn't like the rest. Denis had always walked the line between law and family, understanding that blood came first. He answered on the first ring.

“ Pakhan ,“ he said, his voice brisk. “What's going on?”

“I need your help,” I said without preamble. “Talia's been taken...again.”

There was a brief silence on the other end before Denis spoke, his voice harder now. “Taken? By who?”

“Her ex. A guy named Danny Lewis. I don't have much on him, but I know he lived in San Francisco. I need you to get the police on this.”

“ Pakhan ...“ Denis hesitated. “You know how this works. If I get the police involved, this could get complicated. Do you want them interfering?”

I exhaled slowly, trying to keep my temper in check. “I don't care how you do it. Just make sure they're looking in the right places. You know what's at stake.”

Denis sighed, but I knew he understood. “Alright. I'll start a search immediately. Send me the address where she was last seen and a physical description of Danny.”

“Thank you,” I said, my voice low but sincere.

I hung up and texted him the information. Denis was good at what he did, and I trusted him to get the job done. But this wasn't a situation I could leave entirely in the hands of the police.

Dimitri was already coordinating our own search. I knew he would be thorough, ensuring every street corner was covered. Between Denis and our men, Danny wouldn't be able to hide for long.

But time was against us. And every second that passed without Talia in my arms was another second too long.

I returned to the room where Sandy was sitting, her hands folded tightly in her lap. Ivan stood nearby like a silent sentinel. She looked up as I entered, the fear in her eyes replaced with anger.

"We'll find her," I said, my voice rough but certain. "I won't stop until she's home."

I walked down the hall to my office, shutting the door behind me. How am I going to tell the children? I would have liked to keep this from them, but Sasha and Maxim would undoubtedly notice her absence.

Picking up the phone, I called Olga into the office and told her what had happened. There was no easy answer, but ultimately, we decided that telling the children was best. Olga offered to break the news to them to give me time to calm down.

That was nice of her, but I wouldn't calm down. Not until Talia was safe. Not until I made Danny pay for what he'd done. When I found him, he would wish he'd never laid eyes on her.

The hunt had begun.

Chapter 23

Talia

The car slowed as we turned down a narrow street, and I stared out the window at the rows of tiny, neat houses passing by. It was late afternoon, and the sun washed everything in a serene glow. For a moment, the world outside looked perfectly normal-quiet, suburban, like any neighborhood where kids played in front yards and families gathered for dinner. But inside the car, it was anything but normal.

I shifted uncomfortably in the backseat, my wrists bound tightly behind my back by the rope Danny had tied earlier. The bindings bit into my skin every time I moved. My body was stiff, still reeling from the altercation in Sandy's apartment. My mind was stuck on Sandy lying on the floor, barely conscious. I leaned against the window, trying to keep my breaths shallow to avoid having a panic attack.

Up front, Danny was humming to himself, his fingers drumming lightly on the steering wheel. The gun sat next to him on the passenger seat. Every time I glanced at it, my stomach twisted with fear, but I couldn't let it show. I had to stay calm and keep my wits about me if I had any hope of getting out of this alive.

"We're almost there," Danny said, glancing at me in the rearview mirror. His smile was soft as if he thought this was some kind of romantic gesture instead of a kidnapping. "I've found us the perfect place. Just wait till you see it."

I didn't respond. I couldn't trust my voice not to tremble. Instead, I focused on the street, which narrowed into a dead-end, secluded and quiet. Only two other houses

stood along the road, both modest and well-kept, but there were no cars in the driveways, or lights on inside. My pulse quickened as we approached the last house at the end of the street.

It was a small, single-story house with white siding and a neatly trimmed lawn, just like the others in the neighborhood. From the outside, it looked so normal. Too normal. Nothing about it hinted at the horror I felt creeping under my skin.

Danny slowed the car to a stop and turned off the engine. He glanced at me again in the mirror, his eyes gleaming excitedly. “You’re going to love it here,” he said, grabbing the gun and tucking it into the waistband of his jeans before stepping out of the car.

My heart pounded like a drum as he walked around to my side, opening the door and yanking me out with a rough grip on my arm. I stumbled, but I forced myself to stay upright.

“Come on,” Danny urged, pulling me toward the house. His grip was tight and possessive. I scanned the street, hoping for some sign of a neighbor, someone who might see what was happening and call for help, but there was no one. The other houses were silent, their blinds drawn. The whole street felt deserted.

As we reached the front door, Danny fumbled with the lock, still holding me tightly with one hand. The door creaked open, and he shoved me inside, the sound of the lock clicking behind us.

The house was small and unassuming. The front room was plain, with a simple couch and a TV in the corner, and the walls were painted a dull beige. I could tell from the smell they were painted recently. But it was far from welcoming. The windows were covered by thick curtains, barely letting in any light, covering everything in shadows.

Danny shoved me toward the couch, and I fell onto it awkwardly, my bound hands making it impossible to steady myself. He stood before me, smiling as if we were just an ordinary couple settling into a cozy evening at home.

“See?” he said, his voice full of pride. “It’s perfect, right? It’s just the two of us here, away from everyone else. No one will bother us. No one can find us.” His eyes drifted to my stomach, and his smile widened. “It’s perfect for when the baby comes.”

I swallowed hard, trying to calm my voice, even as my pulse raced. “Danny, you have to understand, this baby isn’t yours.”

He cut me off, his face twisting with anger as he grabbed my neck, his grip too tight. “Don’t you dare lie to me, Talia! I know it’s mine. I know it.” His eyes flashed dangerously, the gentleness from earlier gone. “You and I...we were meant to be together. This baby is proof of that.”

I swallowed, my throat dry. “Danny, I’m telling you the truth. The baby is Aleksandr’s. He’s the father.”

For a long moment, he said nothing and stared at me with manic eyes. I could see the war raging in his mind, delusion fighting against reality. And then, without warning, he stood up, towering over me, his entire demeanor shifting to something darker, something far more dangerous.

“No.” His voice was low, almost a growl. “No, you’re lying. You’re trying to lie to me. But I won’t let you do that.” He pulled something out of his pocket, and my blood turned to ice. A knife, small but sharp, gleamed in the low light.

I froze, my words catching in my throat.

“You’re not taking my baby away from me,” he hissed, stepping closer, the blade glinting as he raised it. “I’ll cut it out of you if I have to. I won’t let you run back to Aleksandr with my child.”

A strangled sob escaped me as I instinctively turned my back toward him, trying to protect the life inside me. My mind raced, screaming at me to stay calm, to think of something-anything-that could stop this from escalating.

“Danny, please,” I whispered, my voice trembling. “Please don’t hurt me. Don’t hurt the baby.”

He loomed over me, his chest heaving with labored breaths. His eyes were glazed, the knife still poised in his hand. I realized then that reasoning with him wasn’t going to work. I had to play along if I wanted to survive. I had to make him believe.

“I’m telling the truth,” I whispered, my voice shaky but soft. “Danny, I—“

He cut me off with a growl, stepping closer to me. “Stop lying to me,” he hissed.

“Okay,” I said quickly. “Okay, Danny. You’re right.”

His green eyes bore into me, his breath ragged, searching for any hint of deceit. I swallowed, forcing the words out.

“I was just scared. I didn’t know how to tell you. I thought Aleksandr would be angry. But you’re right, Danny. The baby... it’s yours.”

He kept staring at me, his breathing heavy, his grip on the knife tightening as if he wasn’t sure whether to believe me. My heart raced, but I knew I had to keep going. I had to make him believe.

“I was just scared,” I repeated, my voice softer now, trying to sound sincere. “That’s why I said it was his. I didn’t want him to hurt us. I didn’t know how to protect you.”

Danny’s face softened slightly as if trying to make sense of what I was saying. “You’re telling the truth?”

“Yes,” I whispered, the lie twisting in my gut. “I’m yours, Danny. We’re going to be a family.” I held his gaze, forcing myself to stay calm, to not flinch, even though every instinct in my body screamed to run.

Finally, after what seemed like an excruciatingly long time, he lowered the knife completely, his shoulders sagging with relief. “I knew it,” he murmured, more to himself than to me. “I knew you loved me.” His eyes glistened, the madness in them simmering down into something even more dangerous - delusional happiness.

He stepped forward and pulled me into his arms, crushing me against his chest. I had to stop myself from flinching, from recoiling in disgust. His scent - sweat and cigarettes - filled my nose, making it hard to breathe. He reached around and cut the rope off my wrists and then placed the knife on the sofa.

“You’re safe now,” he whispered into my hair. “You’ll never have to worry about Aleksandr again. I’ll take care of you and the baby. We’ll be happy here.”

He grabbed my face between his hands before I could process what was happening. His mouth crashed against mine with a force that stole the breath from my lungs. His kiss was rough, almost desperate, his lips bruising mine as he poured all his twisted emotions into the act - his obsession, his possessiveness, his need to control me.

My stomach turned, bile rising in my throat as I forced myself to remain still. I had to play along, had to make him believe I wanted this, even though I wanted to grab the knife and plunge it into his chest.

Danny smiled, his thumb brushing over my bruised lips before he finally stepped back, his eyes gleaming triumphantly. He truly believed I was his now, that we were some twisted version of a happy couple.

“We’re going to be so happy here, baby,” he said, his voice soft and dreamy. “Just the three of us. No one’s going to take you away from me. Not Aleksandr. Not anyone.”

I forced a smile, my skin crawling with every second that passed. “Yes, Danny. We’re going to be happy.”

But inside, I was screaming.

Chapter 24

Talia

When I opened my eyes, I first felt cold metal biting into my wrist. The handcuff was still there, wrapped tightly around the bedpost, reminding me where I was. The room was dim, barely lit by the soft morning light. I blinked, slowly adjusting to my surroundings. I was trapped by the sterile walls, faint smell of cigarettes and gun oil that clung to everything, and the man lying next to me.

Danny.

My stomach turned at the thought of him being this close. He had kept his distance last night, sleeping beside me but not touching, like we were in a fragile truce. But it wasn't kindness or respect that held him back. It was the baby. He wouldn't dare hurt the child growing inside me, the one he thought was his.

I swallowed hard, my throat dry, and shifted slightly. The handcuff clinked against the metal of the bedpost, a tiny sound that grated on my nervous system. I couldn't move far or get up even if I wanted to. Not without waking him.

I turned my head toward Danny, watching him as he slept. His face was peaceful now, softer in sleep than when he was awake and unpredictable. His arm lay across his chest, muscles slack, his lips slightly parted. He looked almost normal. But I knew better. I knew the danger lurking beneath that calm exterior.

Last night, when he locked me to the bed, he told me it was for my own good. That

he was protecting me from myself and from making any stupid decisions. I wonder if he believed that or if it was just another twisted justification. But what scared me more was the part of him that did believe it. The part of him that saw this as love.

He didn't understand love. Not real love. Not like what I have with Aleksandr.

The thought of Aleksandr sent a sharp pain through my heart, a longing so deep it made my chest ache. I could see him in my mind, how his face lit up whenever he saw me, and how his eyes softened when he looked at the children. I could almost feel his arms around me, strong and safe, holding me tight when the world became too much. It felt like a lifetime ago, like a dream I had once lived but could no longer reach. And now here I was, in another nightmare, with no idea how to get back to him.

Would I ever get back to him?

Danny stirred beside me, his eyes fluttering open. For a moment, there was confusion in his eyes, like he didn't quite remember where he was or what was happening. Then his gaze found mine, and his face lit up with a smile as if this was just another morning between us.

"Morning," he said softly, his voice thick with sleep. He stretched, his body shifting closer, his hand brushing against the sheets between us. "Sleep okay?"

I nodded, forcing myself to return his smile, though my stomach twisted with revulsion. "Yes," I lied. I hadn't slept well at all. Every time I closed my eyes, I saw Aleksandr. I saw the life that had been ripped from me. And I saw the future I still longed for, where I was with him, raising the children, safe and far from all this.

Danny reached over and uncuffed me, the click of the metal releasing making my pulse jump. I considered running, just bolting for the door, hoping to make it out

before he stopped me. But where would I go? Even if I did manage to escape, he would find me. He always finds me.

Once I was free from the handcuff, Danny leaned in and kissed me, his lips soft but insistent, like we were an ordinary couple. I wanted to pull away, but I stayed still, let him kiss me, and let him believe what he wanted to believe. That was my survival for now, playing the part and pretending.

When he pulled back, he smiled again as if we'd just shared something intimate, something real. "You should make breakfast," he said, his tone casual. He moved away from the bed and sat down at the small table in the corner of the room, methodically laying out his gun to clean it.

The sight of the weapon made my skin crawl. I wondered if he did it as a show of power, to remind me how much control he had over me. Or maybe he just liked the feeling of it and knowing he could take a life in an instant. My life.

"Okay," I muttered, sliding out of bed and heading toward the kitchen. I moved slowly, my body stiff, and I could feel bruises forming from where the metal had pressed into my skin. I rubbed my wrist absentmindedly, trying to soothe the ache, but it was more than physical pain. The soreness was a reminder of my captivity. This is the second time someone tried to take me away from Aleksandr.

At that moment, I made a promise to myself and my baby. When I saw an opportunity to fight and try to escape, I was taking it. No matter what, I'll fight until I take my last breath.

I grabbed a pan, focusing on the simple task of making breakfast. Eggs, toast, something quick to keep Danny calm. But my mind was elsewhere, already spinning with plans and strategies. I needed to contact Sandy. I had to tell her I was alive but couldn't make it obvious.

As I cracked the eggs into the pan, I spoke, keeping my tone light and conversational. “Sandy’s probably worried about me,” I said, glancing over my shoulder to gauge his reaction.

There was a long pause...too long. I could feel his eyes on me, and the tension in the room shifting. Danny set down the gun, and the click of metal on wood made my heart skip a beat.

“Why are you bringing her up?” His voice was low and dangerous.

“I just... I don’t want her to worry,” I said quickly, trying to keep my voice steady. “She’s my sister, Danny-”

“She’s not your sister,” Danny interrupted, his voice rising angrily. He stood, pushing the chair back with a sharp screech. “She’s not even your real family.”

I swallowed hard, turning to face him. His face was flushed with irritation, his fists clenched at his sides. “Danny, she is my family. She’s all I’ve had for years. We looked out for each other. I can’t just-”

“She’s nothing!” he snapped, stepping toward me, his eyes dark as a thunderstorm. “She’s just some girl you met in foster care. You’re here with me now. I’m your family.”

I took a step back, my pulse racing. “That doesn’t mean I don’t care about her.”

“Why do you care about her?” Danny demanded, his voice rising, shaking the walls. “She’s not blood. She’s not even connected to you. You were thrown into foster care because of what your father did. He murdered someone in cold blood, Talia. Your family is nothing but killers and criminals.”

His words hit me like a blow to the chest, stealing the air from my lungs. My father. His actions had destroyed our family, shattered the life we could've had, and landed me in foster care when I was too young to understand why. And now Danny was throwing it in my face, using my past against me.

"I'm not like my father," I said. But the words felt hollow even as I said them. Because sometimes I wondered if I was. If the darkness that ran through his blood ran through mine, too. If given the chance right now, would I hesitate to kill Danny?

Danny stepped closer, his eyes locked on mine, and I briefly thought he might hit me. But then his gaze softened, shifting from anger to admiration. He looked down at my stomach, and his demeanor changed. His hand moved toward my belly, gently pressing against the swell there.

"I'm going to be a father," Danny whispered, his voice soft. He knelt, pressing his lips against my stomach, his breath warm against my skin. "We're going to be a family, Talia. You, me, and the baby. That's all that matters now."

I swallowed hard, my throat tight. "Yes," I lied. "A family." But the words tasted like ash in my mouth.

Danny stood up, his hand lingering on my stomach before he looked into my eyes again, his smile wide and sickeningly sweet. "We're going to be so happy together."

I forced a smile, nodding even though every fiber of my being screamed to run. To fight. To do something. "Maybe... maybe I can text Sandy," I said carefully, watching his face for any sign of a reaction. "Just to tell her I'm okay. That I'm happy here with you."

Danny's eyes narrowed, suspicion flickering in them. "Why?"

“Because if she thinks I’m happy, she’ll stop looking for me,” I explained, trying to sound reasonable. “If she knows I’ve chosen to stay with you, she won’t come after me. She won’t try to find me.”

He considered this, his gaze still hard, but then he nodded slowly. “Fine. But I’m watching you. Talia, one wrong word, and I’ll ensure she never finds you. Understand?”

“I understand,” I said quickly, my heart pounding.

He handed me his phone, and I typed out the message carefully, every word a risk. I had to be subtle and give Sandy a clue without Danny catching on.

Hey Sandy, I’m not coming back. I’m so happy here with Danny. We’re going to start a family. Please don’t worry about me. Everything is perfect here in our new home. It’s beautiful. I’ve always wanted a white house with a backyard in the quiet suburbs.

I hit send, praying she would get the message and show it to Aleksandr.

Danny took the phone from me and smiled, pleased with himself. “Good girl,” he said, patting my head like I was some obedient pet. Then he leaned in and kissed me again, slow and deliberate, his hand resting possessively on my belly.

“You see, baby?” he murmured against my lips. “We can be happy together. All you have to do is trust me.”

I nodded, forcing the smile to stay on my face, but inside, I was breaking. It was too much - the lies, the fear, the longing for the life I had lost - it was suffocating me.

This wasn’t happiness. This was survival. And I had no idea how long I could keep

up the act.

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Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:46 am

Chapter 25

Aleksandr

The air in my office seemed heavy and thick. My fingers traced idle patterns on the surface of the desk, the wood cold under my touch. I picked up the glass of vodka and downed it one gulp. It did nothing to quell the anger. My thoughts were consumed with Talia. The thought of her out there, lost, scared - or worse - gnawed at me, relentless and merciless. It was a constant ache, one I couldn't ignore, not for a second.

It had been two days since Danny took her. Two days since I'd slept more than two hours. Two days since we had anything to work with except the vague knowledge that Danny, that fucking lunatic, had her. Blyat! I threw the crystal glass across the room, watching it shatter into tiny pieces.

Sandy sat on the leather chair in the corner of the room. She jumped as the glass hit the wall, her coffee cup tumbling to the floor. She'd been through hell herself, surviving Danny's attempt to kill her.

Dimitri ran in, not surprised to see crystal shards strewn across the floor. "Everything okay, brat?"

I grunted in response, going to the bar and pouring another glass of vodka.

Dimitri turned to Sandy, his voice calm and steady. "The kids are playing in the living room. Why don't you go sit with them for a while?"

Sandy nodded, getting off the chair without a word. Maxim and Sasha don't know the details of Talia's kidnapping, but they know it happened. We shielded them from the worst about Danny, but kids always know when they're not being told the absolute truth. Sandy's presence has kept them calm. Maybe her being here was a way for them to feel connected to Talia.

Before Sandy exited the office, her phone pinged, and the screen lit up in her hand. She didn't move at first, as if bracing herself for whatever new disaster was waiting to spill onto the screen. But when she did look at the phone, her reaction was instant. Her face went pale, her eyes wide, and her hands shook ever so slightly as she stared at the message.

"Aleksandr..." Her voice was barely a whisper, but it instantly caught my full attention. She turned the phone toward me, her movements slow, almost hesitant, as if what she was about to share was too much to bear. "It's from Talia."

For a second, I didn't move. Time seemed to freeze as my mind struggled to catch up. I took the phone from her, my heart pounding so hard I could feel it reverberate in my ears. The message was brief, but it hit me like a sledgehammer.

The words blurred in front of me, my eyes reading them repeatedly, searching for anything that would make sense. The sharp knot in my stomach twisted, a sickening combination of dread and disbelief. It wasn't her. It couldn't be. The Talia I knew, the woman I loved, would never say something like this. Not about Danny. Not willingly.

It was a lie.

I could feel the room closing around me, the walls pressing tighter. This wasn't just a message, it was a calculated move. Talia was trying to give us a clue.

I crossed the room to show Dimitri. I handed him the phone, my voice low, but the demand was clear. “Get Anton and track it. I want to know exactly where this message came from.”

He took the phone without a word, leaving the office to find Anton. Every second that passed felt like an eternity, each measured in my heart’s frantic beats.

After what felt like hours, Dimitri and Anton entered the office. Anton’s brow furrowed with frustration. “It’s not much,” he said. “The call was bounced through several cell towers, but I can narrow it down to a five-mile radius. A suburb. White house with a backyard, she said.” He handed the phone back to me, his eyes cold and calculating. “That’s all we’ve got.”

Five miles. In a city this size, that wasn’t exactly a pinpoint. It was a wide net, but at least it was something. Better than the nothing we’ve had up until now. But Danny wasn’t an idiot. He had to know we’d be looking for her, right? Is it possible she’s still in the same location?

My mind raced through the possibilities just as Denis entered the office. “Pakhan,” he greeted, bowing his head slightly. “Tell me what you know so far.”

I quickly relayed the new information, and Denis listened intently. “I’ll get the police on it,” Denis said, his voice steady and calm, despite the urgency in his eyes. “We can access street cameras in that area. See if we catch anything. White houses in the suburbs aren’t exactly rare, but someone’s bound to have seen something.”

“Do it,” I said, the words barely more than a growl. My throat was tight, frustration gnawing at me. “The faster, the better.”

Denis nodded and stepped out of the room, his fingers typing a message quickly on his cell phone.

My mind was unable to stop racing through all the worst-case scenarios. A five-mile radius. That was a hell of a lot of ground to cover. We'll go door to door if we must, but I don't want to put Talia in even more danger. If Danny sees us coming, he could do the unthinkable and hurt her.

Anton stepped closer. "I can put more men in the area. Have them keep their eyes on the neighborhood, watching for suspicious movement. If there's something there, we'll catch it."

"Yes," I replied immediately. "But make sure they're discreet. I don't want to spook Danny and have him run or, worse, hurt Talia."

He quickly nodded, pulling out his phone to make the calls. He wouldn't rest until every inch of that five-mile radius had eyes on it. But even with all my men, there was no telling how long it would take to find her. And every minute that passed felt like a lifetime.

Sandy stood still, watching us. She hadn't said much since the message came through, but now she spoke, her voice soft but demanding. "You have to find her. You have to get her back." She absently rubbed the bird tattoo on her wrist. "She's all I have, Aleksandr." She bit her lip to keep the tears from falling.

"I will," I promised, my voice as firm as the steel in my spine. "Whatever it takes, I'll bring her home."

I paced toward the window, staring at the gardens as the sun dipped lower in the sky. The horizon seemed too far away, like Talia, just out of reach.

My phone buzzed, and I got a quick text from Denis. "We're starting the search of the camera recordings. I'll update you in an hour."

An hour. That was an hour too long. But at least we were moving. At least we had something to work with. Dimitri came to stand beside me, his posture as tense as mine, his gaze fixed on the skyline. We didn't say anything. We didn't need to.

Anton's phone buzzed, and he looked up at me. "Our men are in position. They'll monitor the area for any movement."

I nodded in acknowledgment, but the knot in my chest didn't loosen. It wouldn't, not until Talia was back, and Danny was nothing but a memory.

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Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:46 am

Chapter 26

Talia

I sit in the dimly lit living room, staring blankly at the flickering light on the ceiling. It's late, but I'm wide awake, my thoughts racing, and my body tense. The silence of the house feels like a weight crushing me. Every creak and groan of the floorboards makes my skin prickle. Danny went out to buy beer. I tried the door and the windows, but I couldn't get them to open. He must have them locked from the outside. I'm trapped.

I lean back on the couch, cradling my baby bump. I hum softly to the baby, pretending that it will keep it calm when I'm the one who has to stay calm. It's been two days since I've been held against my will in this house. I don't want to believe that at one time, I actually cared for Danny, the man capable of doing this.

The front door clicks softly, and I tense. Slow and deliberate footsteps follow, and my heart beats faster with each one. Danny walks into the room with an eerie calm, his broad shoulders filling the doorway as he looks at me with a gaze that's hard to decipher.

"Why do you look so scared?" Danny's voice is smooth as if this were normal, and he's a doting boyfriend.

I swallow hard, forcing the words. "I'm not scared."

He smirks, the kind of smirk that used to make my heart skip with excitement. Now,

it just makes me feel sick.

“Liar,” he says softly, walking closer, taking his time like a predator stalking its prey. He stops in front of me, towering over me like a giant. I can feel the heat of his body and the intensity of his green eyes as they bore into me. It’s suffocating.

To my surprise, he reaches into the grocery bag and pulls out a pint of ice cream.

“Here,” he says, handing it to me with a plastic spoon. “I know pregnant women like ice cream.” He smiles sweetly and puts the grocery bag on the table. He pulls out a beer and pops open the can, taking a big gulp.

“Why are you doing this, Danny? Why keep me here?”

He crouches down so we’re at eye level, his face inches from mine. For a moment, I feel like he can see everything inside me - every thought, fear, and desperate wish to escape this nightmare.

“You already know why.” His voice is low, dangerous. “You’re mine, Talia.”

I shake my head, refusing to let a single tear fall. “No. You keep saying I belong to you, but I don’t understand. What do you want from me?”

His jaw tightens, and I think I’ve pushed him too far. But then he lets out a breath, standing up and pacing the room, his hands running through his hair in agitation.

“You don’t remember, do you?” he says quietly, almost to himself.

“Remember what?” My voice cracks with the frustration and confusion I’ve been carrying for days. “Just tell me, Danny. Please.”

He stops before the window, staring at the dark street with his back to me. He releases a deep breath before he turns to face me again. His eyes are cold now, almost detached.

“It’s not a coincidence that we met,” he begins, his voice flat. “It wasn’t fate or some random twist of the universe. I found you. I looked for years, but I finally found you. I watched you for months before we ‘met’. I knew exactly who you were.”

His words hit me like a slap. I stare at him, shaking my head, unable to process what he’s saying.

“What... what are you talking about?” I whisper. “You’re not making any sense.”

Danny walks over to the armchair across from me and sits down, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees, his eyes never leaving mine.

“Your father killed my father,” he says, his voice cold and even. “And that wasn’t an accident. That wasn’t some mistake. It isn’t something I can ever forget.”

My heart stops. The room spins around me, and I feel like I’m going to be sick. I grip the side of the sofa to keep from passing out.

“No,” I choke out, shaking my head. “No, that’s not... that can’t be true. My father-”

“Your father murdered him,” Danny cuts me off, his voice sharp. “He beat him to death in a rage right there in the street between our houses. I was seven years old, and I watched it happen. I watched your piece of shit father kill my dad.”

The memory crashes over me like a tidal wave. I was three. I didn’t understand much then, but I remember the screaming. My mother had pulled me away, dragged me inside, but even then, I could still hear it - the horrible, sickening thud of fists against

flesh, the crack of bone.

And then... silence.

“My father was having an affair with your mother,” Danny says, his voice hard now, full of bitterness. “He thought he could get away with it. He thought he could have everything - a family, a mistress, a life without consequences. But your father found out, didn’t he? And he didn’t let it slide.”

I feel like I’m drowning, gasping for air as the past suffocates me. My entire body shakes as I try to grasp what he’s telling me. The man I thought I knew was unraveling before my eyes, and the picture that was forming was terrifying.

“My dad was no saint,” Danny continues, his voice low but intense. “But he didn’t deserve to die like that. He didn’t deserve to be beaten to death in front of his own son.”

I can’t stop the hot tears from spilling down my cheeks, and I don’t bother wiping them away. “I didn’t know,” I whisper.

“Of course you didn’t.” Danny leans back in his chair, crossing his arms over his chest. “You were a toddler. But I wasn’t. I saw everything. And after that... after your father went to prison, after everything fell apart, I promised myself that one day I would make things right.”

My breath catches in my throat as the pieces start to fall into place - the strange way Danny had seemed to know me even before we started dating, the way he always seemed so interested in my family, asking questions I didn’t think much of at the time.

“You tracked me down?” I ask, my voice trembling. “You were following me?”

Danny nods, unashamed. "It wasn't hard once I found you. I watched you for months, learned your routines, and learned everything about you. And then, one day, I 'bumped' into you at the supermarket. You remember that, don't you?"

Of course, I remember. How could I forget? The day we met felt like something out of a movie - perfectly timed and serendipitous. I had no idea it had all been orchestrated.

"You planned all of this," I cringe, the horror of it sinking in.

"Yes," he says simply, with no remorse. "Because you belong to me. You always have. You're the debt the universe owes me for what your father did."

I can't breathe. The room is spinning. "You're insane. This is insane."

Danny stands up and walks over to me, kneeling down in front of me again. He takes my chin, forcing me to look at him. His eyes are burning with something dark I can't quite name.

"I'm not insane, baby," he says softly. "I'm just making things right. And now, with you here...with our baby...it's all finally coming full circle."

I flinch at the mention of the baby, a fresh wave of fear washing over me. "You think this will make things right?" I ask. "You think keeping me here, forcing me to stay, will fix anything?"

Danny's grip tightens on my chin, and his eyes harden. "I think it's the only way," he says, his voice deadly serious. "You belong to me, Talia. You always have. And now, you always will."

I pull back, wrenching my face away from his hand, but he doesn't move. He just

stares at me, waiting, watching.

“You’re sick,” I say, my voice stronger now, fueled by a sudden surge of defiance. “You’re delusional if you think this will even the score.”

Danny’s jaw tightens, but he doesn’t say anything. He just stands up, looming over me once again.

“I’ve waited years for this,” he says quietly, his voice sharp as a blade. “Years of searching, planning, watching. You’re not going anywhere. Not now. Not ever.”

I swallow hard, the lump in my throat threatening to strangle me. How did I not see this? How could I have missed the signs, the little things that, in hindsight, should have set off alarms? The way he always seemed to know too much, his uncanny ability to be wherever I was seemingly by chance. But now, it all feels like a trap I walked straight into.

I shift uncomfortably, trying to steady my trembling hands. “I’m not staying here. I’ll find a way to leave.”

“Leave?” His laugh is cold. “You won’t get far. The doors and windows are locked. And even if you did manage to slip out, where would you go? Who would believe you? I’m not the monster you’re making me out to be. To everyone else, I’m your perfect boyfriend, the father of your child. They wouldn’t believe you if you tried to tell them the truth.”

His words twist the knife deeper. I want to scream, to yell, to run, but I feel trapped, tethered to this horror that’s suddenly become my life.

“How can you do this?” I ask, my voice breaking. “This isn’t love. It’s not even close.”

He crouches again, his eyes narrowing with an intensity that chills. “Love?” He scoffs. “This isn’t about love. This is about balance. About making things right. My father died because of yours, Talia. He was ripped away from me. And now, you’re here giving me back what I lost. I’ll be the husband and father he wasn’t.”

I shake my head, unable to comprehend the depths of his obsession. “You can’t just claim a person, Danny. I’m not some object you can own.”

His hand moves to my cheek, the gesture almost tender, but it makes me want to claw my skin off. “You don’t get it yet, do you?” he whispers. “You were always meant to be mine. You’re the one thing the universe gave me to compensate for my loss. Everything was leading up to this.”

I slap his hand away, the anger bubbling up like a volcano. “You’re wrong,” I say through clenched teeth, my words heated with raw emotion. “This isn’t justice. It’s just more violence.”

His expression flickers and something dark passes over his face. But it’s gone as quickly as it appeared, replaced with that unnerving calm.

“Maybe,” he says quietly, standing up again, looming over me like a shadow. “But it’s the only justice I know. You and the baby are mine.”

I watch him as he strolls toward the door, my heart pounding so loudly it makes my ears ring. He stops just before he leaves the room, glancing back at me one last time.

“Don’t make this harder than it has to be,” he says, his voice soft, almost pleading. “This is your life now. Accept it. It’ll be easier that way.”

And then he’s gone, the door closing behind him with a soft click. I sit there, stunned, my mind racing, trying to piece together what I’m supposed to do next. I feel like the

rug has been ripped out from under me, and everything I thought I knew has been shattered.

But one thing is crystal clear – I can't stay here. I won't.

I stand slowly, my legs shaky, my breath ragged. I have to get out. I don't know how, but I can't let him keep me here. I walk over to the window, peeking through the blinds. The neighborhood is quiet, the streets empty and dark. The house is too far from anyone else to hear me scream. It feels hopeless.

But I can't think like that. I can't let myself be defeated before I even try. Be smart, Talia.

I move around the house, checking the doors and windows, looking for any way out. But every lock is in place, and every escape route is sealed tight. It's like a cage, carefully constructed to keep me in. I think about breaking the windows but the ones I could climb out of have iron bars attached to the outside.

My breath quickens as I search for anything that could help. My eyes land on a set of knives in the wooden block on the kitchen counter. My hand trembles as I reach for one, the cool metal feeling foreign in my palm. I grip it tightly, feeling its weight, the assurance of protection, of survival.

I have to get out of here.

I glance toward the front door, but before I can make a move, I hear heavy and purposeful footsteps again. My heart skips a beat, panic rising in my throat. I hide the knife behind my back, stepping away from the kitchen as the door to the hallway creaks open.

Danny stands there, watching me. His eyes flicker down to my hand, and for a

second, I think he knows. But then he smirks, shaking his head slightly.

“Still thinking about running?” he asks, calm but amused.

I say nothing, my grip tightening on the knife handle behind me.

“Don’t bother,” he continues, walking slowly toward me. “There’s nowhere to go. Nowhere you can hide that I won’t find you. It’s just you and me, Talia. And the sooner you realize that, the better.”

I step back, trying to keep the distance between us, my mind racing with a thousand different possibilities. But none of them end well.

“Why are you so obsessed with this idea?” I ask, my voice shaking but firm. “You talk about justice, the universe owing you, but this isn’t justice. This is revenge.”

Danny stops a few feet away, his expression dark. “Revenge, justice... what’s the difference?”

“The difference is that I didn’t do anything!” I shout, my anger finally boiling over. “I didn’t kill your father, Danny! I didn’t have anything to do with it!”

“You’re his blood,” he says coldly, his eyes narrowing. “That’s enough.”

I shake my head. “No, you don’t get to punish me for his actions. You don’t get to control my life because of something that happened years ago.”

He steps closer, his voice dangerous. “I do get to control your life. Because now, you’re part of mine. And you’re carrying my baby.”

I’m shaking, my heart pounding so loudly I’m sure he can hear it. My fingers grip the

knife so tightly that my knuckles ache, but I don't let go.

"I don't belong to you," I hiss. "I never have, and I never will."

He takes another step closer, and in one swift motion, I pull the knife from behind my back, holding it out between us.

"Stay back," I warn.

Danny freezes, his eyes dropping to the blade in my hand. His expression shifts from surprise to anger.

"You don't want to do that," he says, his voice a low threat. "Put the knife down."

I tighten my grip, my heart racing. "I'm leaving," I say, my voice stronger now. "I don't care what you think or what you've convinced yourself of. I'm leaving, and you're not going to stop me."

Danny's eyes narrow, and for a moment, I think he will lunge at me. But then, to my surprise, he steps back, raising his hands slightly in mock surrender.

"Alright," he says, his voice eerily calm. "Go ahead."

I hesitate as I take a tentative step toward the door, the knife still held tightly in my hand. Danny watches me, his eyes following my every move, but he doesn't stop me.

For a second, I think I might actually make it. I might actually get out of this house, away from him.

But as I reach the door, something in his expression changes. His lips curl into a slow, cold smile.

“Run, Talia. Let’s see how far you get before I catch you. I’ll give you a head start.”

I force myself to turn the handle, open the door, and enter the cold night air. I don’t look back as I run.

Chapter 27

Talia

I bolted through the door, the adrenaline burning through my veins like fire. Every breath felt like it could be my last, each footfall a desperate attempt to escape the hell I was trapped in. The street stretched before me, dark and silent, the cold air biting at my skin as I ran.

I could feel every ounce of the baby's weight now. My belly ached from the sudden movement, the pressure of each hurried step intensifying the discomfort. But I couldn't stop. I couldn't slow down. If I did, he'd find me. And if he found me, I'd die.

I won't let him hurt my baby.

My eyes darted to the houses lining the street. Help. I needed help. Spotting the closest house, I veered toward it, my vision blurry with tears. My hands slammed against the door with desperate force.

"Help! Please!" I pounded hard, but there was no response. Panic clawed at my chest as I frantically knocked again. "Please, I need help! He's coming!"

I twisted the doorknob, but it didn't budge. Locked. A cold dread settled in my stomach as I stumbled back, glancing over my shoulder. He was getting closer. I couldn't stay here.

I bolted toward the next house, my legs threatening to give out beneath me. When I reached the second house, I nearly collapsed against the door, banging on it with both fists.

“Help me!” I screamed, my voice breaking. “Someone, please!”

Nothing. The house was dark and silent, like a tomb. I yanked at the doorknob, but it, too, was locked. My breathing hitched as I glanced back at the street. The sound of footsteps echoed behind me, relentlessly closing in. My heart thundered in my chest, desperation threatening to choke me.

“I’m coming for you, Talia.” His voice was closer now, cold and amused. He was toying with me.

I stumbled away from the house and continued running. As I neared the end of the street, I glanced over my shoulder. My lungs screamed for air. At first, there was only silence, the wind howling through the trees. But then I heard it.

Footsteps.

No. God, no.

My legs screamed as I forced myself to move faster. Every fiber of my being told me to keep running, but my body was betraying me. The pregnancy was slowing me down, and I could feel myself faltering. But I couldn’t give up now. I wouldn’t.

I turned the corner at the end of the street, spotting a yard up ahead. Maybe I’d have a chance if I could just get behind those bushes. Maybe I could lose him long enough to hide or make a run for the next block. My heart pounded with desperate hope.

I heard him as he called out to me, in a sing-song way.

“I’m coming for you, Talia.” His voice echoed in the night, taunting me.

I pushed myself harder, my cheeks streaked with tears as I reached the perimeter of the yard. My fingers brushed the tall grass as I stumbled forward. Just a little further. Just one more step.

But I didn’t make it.

An electric shock ripped through my body, blinding me with white-hot pain. I gasped, but no sound came out. My legs crumpled, my body hitting the ground with a sickening thud. The shock coursed through me, paralyzing me, my muscles locked in a brutal, unrelenting spasm.

NO!!

I couldn’t move. I couldn’t scream. The world around me spun. The ground felt cold, and I could hear Danny’s footsteps as they drew closer.

“That was fun,” he said. Kneeling beside me, he brushed my hair away from my face. “You always think you can run, don’t you? You’ll never get away from me,” he whispered into my ear.

I tried to scream, to thrash, but my body refused to respond. I could feel him lifting me, his arms wrapping around me in mock tenderness. My stomach turned at the contact, every instinct screaming for me to fight, but I couldn’t. The taser had rendered me completely helpless.

When we got inside the house, he carried me to bed. The handcuffs were hanging from the bedpost, ready to enslave me again. He laid me down carefully, like I was fragile and he hadn’t just shocked me into submission.

I felt the metal snap around my wrist, the sound of the lock clicking into place. The other handcuff followed, chaining me to the bed like some kind of animal.

“You’ll thank me for this one day,” he said, his voice soft, almost soothing as he stood over me. “You’ll realize that I did this for you...for us.”

I turned my face away. The only thing I wanted was to be free of him and be with Aleksandr, the man I loved and the father of my child.

Danny leaned closer, his breath warm against my cheek. “Get some rest. You’re going to need your strength.”

He left the room, the door shutting behind him, and I was alone again. Alone in the darkness, chained to the bed, trapped.

I closed my eyes, willing the tears to stop, willing the pain in my chest to ease. But all I could think about was the baby and Aleksandr. I prayed silently that the baby was okay after being tasered. When will Aleksandr find me? I visualized him tearing through the city with that dangerous, determined look in his eyes.

Sleep came in fits and starts, nightmares blending with reality. I dreamed of Danny’s hands on me, of the baby growing inside me, of Aleksandr’s face fading away, disappearing into the shadows.

By the time morning came, the room was bathed in pale light, and my body ached from the restraints. My wrists were raw, and my throat was hoarse from crying silently into the pillow. I had spent the night going over every moment, every missed opportunity to escape, every terrible thing Danny had whispered to me.

The door opened, and he stepped inside, his expression unreadable. He carried a tray of food, setting it down on the nightstand like this was a normal routine and I wasn’t

handcuffed to the bed. Like I hadn't tried to run from him just hours before.

"You need to eat," he said flatly. "It's not just you anymore. You've got the baby to think about."

I glared at him, my voice raspy as I spoke. "The baby? Do you know what an electric shock can do to a baby?" I hissed through gritted teeth.

"Oh, come on, it was just a little shock. We were just having some fun. The baby is fine."

My eyebrows snapped together as I gave him a death glare. "I'll never love you, Danny."

He stopped fussing with the sheets, his eyes narrowing slightly as he looked at me. He was eerily silent, and then he laughed. He actually laughed!

"I don't need your love. I've given you a chance, but you refuse to take it. And that's fine. Really, it is. Because I've realized something. Once that baby is born, I won't need you anymore."

My stomach twisted as his words sank in.

"What... what are you saying?" My voice wavered despite my best efforts to stay strong.

He smiled a twisted, hollow grin that didn't reach his eyes. "I'm saying I've been patient. I've tried to give you everything. But you don't care. So, here's what will happen - when the baby is born, I will take it. And you? Well, you won't be around anymore."

A sob caught in my throat as I shook my head. “You wouldn’t—“

“I would,” he cut me off, his tone ice-cold. “You’re nothing but a complication. But the baby? The baby’s mine. And I’ll raise it the way it should be raised. Without you poisoning it with your feelings for Aleksandr.”

I stared at him, horror coursing through me. How had I ever thought I could reason with him? How had I ever thought I could get away?

“You’ll never get away with this!” I shouted. “Aleksandr will find me, and he’ll kill you!” I thrashed against the handcuffs, kicking at Danny.

His expression hardened, the faint smile disappearing. “Maybe. But he’ll be too late. By the time he does, you’ll be dead.”

I felt the air leave my lungs, the world tilting on its axis as Danny’s threat hung in the air. He walked out of the room, leaving me there, chained to the bed, helpless and terrified.

I couldn’t let him win. I wouldn’t let him take my baby and destroy everything I loved. But I was trapped, handcuffed to the bed, powerless against this man.

As the door closed behind him, I closed my eyes, swallowing back the sobs threatening to consume me. Aleksandr will find me. He has to. Because if he didn’t, I knew I wouldn’t survive.

Time passed. My body ached from the restraints, and Danny’s threats plagued my thoughts. Every time I shifted, the handcuffs dug into my wrists, the metal biting into my skin. I thought of Aleksandr, hoping he was out there, searching for me. I refused to give up hope.

Then it started.

A sharp, stabbing pain shot through my lower abdomen, and I gasped. The pain was sudden and intense, radiating across my belly. I shifted, trying to find relief, but it only grew worse, like my insides were being twisted and pulled. Panic surged through me.

No. Please, no.

I closed my eyes, willing the pain to stop, but it didn't. Instead, it intensified, each cramp sharper than the last. My breaths became shallow and labored as I struggled to stay calm. I couldn't lose the baby.

"Danny!" I screamed, my voice trembling with fear. "Danny, help! Hurry!"

For a moment, there was no response. But then I heard his footsteps growing louder as he approached the bedroom. The door creaked open and Danny stepped inside, his face twisted with annoyance.

"What now?" he grumbled.

"I'm in pain," I said, my voice shaking. "Something's wrong with the baby. I need to go to the hospital."

Danny raised an eyebrow, clearly unimpressed. He crossed his arms over his chest, leaning against the doorframe as if I were wasting his time. "You're fine. Just rest. I'm sure you're overreacting."

I clenched my teeth as another cramp shot through me. "I'm not overreacting! It's the baby. I think you hurt the baby!"

He scoffed, shaking his head as if I were being dramatic. “You’ll be fine. Just breathe through it. Women get cramps all the time during pregnancy. You’re not going to die.”

I wanted to lunge at him and make him understand the terror that was gripping me. But the pain was growing worse, the cramps coming quickly, making it harder to think. “Danny,” I pleaded, tears stinging my eyes. “Please. I need help.”

Something in my voice must have finally registered with him. His brow furrowed, and he took a hesitant step forward, eyeing me with concern. “Wait... are you really in pain?”

I nodded as another wave of agony hit. “Yes! Please, Danny. I need to go to the hospital. Something’s wrong with the baby.”

He just stood there for a moment, staring at me like he was trying to figure out if I was faking. Then his expression shifted from annoyance to something close to fear. He glanced at my stomach, and I saw the uncertainty in his eyes.

“If something happens to the baby...” he muttered, more to himself than to me. He paced the room, running a hand through his hair. “No hospital. I can’t risk that.”

I stared at him, disbelief flooding through me. “You can’t be serious! I need a doctor!”

He shook his head, muttering as he reached for his phone. “I’ll call someone. Just stay calm.”

“What do you mean, call someone? We need to go now!” I cried, my voice rising in panic.

He ignored me, his fingers moving quickly as he dialed a number. Pain twisted through me again, and I groaned, curling in on myself as best I could with the restraints.

Danny held the phone to his ear, pacing in front of the bed. “Hey, it’s Danny. I need a favor... yeah, it’s urgent. She’s in pain, and I think it’s the baby.” He paused, glancing at me. “No, not a hospital. Do you know anyone who can handle this off the books? Yeah? Good. Get him over here.”

I was shaking with fear and anger as I listened to him arrange some kind of back-alley solution.

He hung up the phone, turning to me as anxiety shone in his eyes. “A doctor’s on his way. Just hold on.”

I groaned through another wave of cramps, my entire body tense with pain. “What kind of doctor? Who did you call?”

“Don’t worry about it,” Danny snapped. “He’s a professional. He’s just... not the type who asks questions, alright?”

I didn’t have the strength to argue. The pain was all-consuming now, and I was terrified of what was happening to the baby. All I could do was pray that whoever this shady doctor was, he could help.

It wasn’t long before I heard a knock at the front door. Danny disappeared, and moments later, he returned with a tall, thin man with a weathered face and dark, shrewd eyes. He carried a small black bag in one hand, his expression calm and businesslike.

“This is Doc,” Danny said, motioning toward the man. “He’s going to check you

out.”

Doc didn't waste any time. He walked over to the bed, glancing briefly at my restraints before setting his bag down and pulling on a pair of gloves. “How long have you been having cramps?” he asked in a monotone voice.

“About an hour,” I whispered, wincing as another cramp hit. “I was tasered,” I hissed, glaring at Danny. “Is the baby okay?”

He didn't answer right away. Instead, he gently pressed his hands against my belly, feeling for any signs of distress. His touch was clinical and cold. I watched his face, desperate for a sign that the baby was alright.

After a few minutes, he stood up and pulled out a pill bottle from his bag. “I'm going to give you something to ease the cramps. The baby seems stable, but you need to rest.”

“What is it?” I asked, eyeing the pill suspiciously.

“It's just a muscle relaxer. It'll stop the cramping and help you sleep.”

I hesitated, glancing at Danny, but I had no other choice. The pain was unbearable, and if this was the only way to make sure the baby was okay...

Doc handed me the pill, and I swallowed it dry. He nodded, zipping up his bag. “The baby should be fine, but no more shocks. Her body's under a lot of stress.”

Danny stood near the door, his face pale and tight with worry. “So, she's going to be okay?”

Doc gave a curt nod. “For now. But don't push your luck. Keep her calm and let her

rest. And lose the handcuffs. Being restrained could be adding to her stress.”

With that, Doc left, and the room fell silent again. I lay there, my body still trembling from cramps, my mind spinning. Danny unlocked the handcuffs and freed my wrists.

I closed my eyes, fighting the urge to cry. The pain was fading, but fear remained. All I could do was cling to the hope that Aleksandr would find me soon.

Chapter 28

Aleksandr

I paced the length of the room, tension wrapped around every muscle. It had been too long since Talia had gone missing, and every second felt like a year. My phone sat on the table, silent and useless. No news. No leads. No sign of her. The men I'd sent to search had come up with nothing, and it was tearing me apart. The only thing I knew for sure was that she was out there, scared, possibly hurt, and I hadn't been able to protect her.

My fist slammed against the wall, the impact jarring through my arm, but the physical pain was nothing compared to the ache in my chest. Talia was carrying my child, our child, and she had been taken by that psychopath. The thought of her being in Danny's hands, of him laying a finger on her, made my blood boil. I couldn't allow myself to imagine what he might be doing to her right now.

The phone rang, cutting through the silence. I lunged for it, answering before the second ring.

“Pakhan,” came Denis's voice on the other end. “We've got something.”

My heart leaped into my throat. “What is it?”

“I accessed the street cameras near Sany's building,” he said quickly, the sound of fingers clacking on a keyboard coming through the line. “A blue sedan was seen leaving in a hurry about five minutes after Talia was taken. I cross-checked it with

footage from the surrounding area, and the same car was spotted in a suburban neighborhood within the five-mile radius we've been searching."

I gripped the phone tighter. "How close?"

"The sedan's parked in front of a house that matches the description Talia sent in her text. I'm sending you the coordinates now. It's a quiet area, but we've got eyes on it."

"I'm on my way," I said, hanging up before Denis could respond.

I turned to Dimitri and Anton, who had been waiting, both armed and ready. They'd been by my side through every battle, loyal to the core, and I knew they were just as eager to get to Talia as I was.

"We've got a lead," I told them, grabbing my gun from the table. "Denis tracked the car to a house in a suburban neighborhood. We move now."

Dimitri nodded, his coffee-colored eyes cold and focused. "Let's find her, brat. "

Anton was already heading for the door, his jaw set with determination. We piled into the SUV, the engine roaring to life as we sped toward the location Denis had sent. The streets passed rapidly, and my mind focused on returning Talia alive and safe.

My phone buzzed again, and I answered without hesitation.

"We've got eyes on the house," Ivan stated. "The blue sedan is parked out front. No movement yet, but we're in position."

"How many men do we have there?" I asked, my grip tightening on the steering wheel.

“Six on the perimeter. We’ve surrounded the house, but we’re keeping our distance. No one goes in without your orders.”

“Hold your position. I’ll be there in twenty minutes.”

I hung up and pressed the accelerator harder. The thought of Talia being trapped in that house, possibly hurt or worse, made my stomach churn. Danny had her. He was desperate, dangerous, and unpredictable, making him lethal.

We arrived in the neighborhood twenty minutes later. It was quiet, a suburban area where nothing ever happened - until now. The streets were lined with modest houses, their facades clean and well-kept, but I could feel the electricity in the air.

My men were in place, stationed discreetly at various points along the block, their eyes trained on the white house with the blue sedan parked in front. I pulled the SUV to a stop at the end of the street. My heart was beating rapidly, but I forced my mind to stay focused. Dimitri and Anton were out of the vehicle before I even killed the engine, their guns drawn.

“ Pakhan ,“ Ivan nodded. “We’ve got all exits covered. There’s no way Danny’s getting out without us knowing.”

“We need to get her out of there,” I said, my voice low but sharp. “Alive.”

Ivan nodded. “Understood. But there’s something else. He’s seen us. One of our guys caught a glimpse of him through the window. He knows we’re here.”

“Good,” I growled. “Let him know.”

As I was about to move toward the house, my phone rang. I answered on the first ring.

“Aleksandr,” Danny’s voice came through, calm and taunting. My blood turned to ice at the sound of it.

“Where is she?” I demanded, gripping the phone so hard I thought it might crack.

Danny laughed softly, the sound chilling. “Oh, she’s right here. Safe for now.”

“If you hurt her, you mudak -”

“I don’t want to hurt her,” Danny interrupted smoothly. “But I will if you try anything stupid. I see all your men out there surrounding the house. Impressive. But if any of them come inside, I’ll put a bullet in her head.”

I clenched my jaw, my blood like acid in my veins. He had her. And he had a gun to her head.

“What do you want?” I asked, forcing myself to stay calm.

“It’s simple,” Danny said, his voice light, almost conversational. “You. I want you to come inside. Alone. No one else. If I see anyone but you walk through that door, she dies. Understand?”

I glanced at Dimitri and Anton, both tense, waiting for my next move. They could hear every word Danny said, and I could see the same fury in their eyes that I felt in my chest.

“Come in,” Danny continued. “We’ll have a little chat. You and me. But if I see even one of your men get close to this house... Well, you know what happens.”

I exhaled slowly, forcing myself to stay calm. “I’ll come in.”

Danny chuckled, clearly pleased. “Don’t keep me waiting.”

He ended the call, and I stared at the phone for a long moment. He had all the leverage. I had no choice.

I turned to Dimitri and Anton, their expressions unreadable. “He wants me to go in alone,” I said quietly. “If anyone else comes in, he’ll kill her.”

Dimitri stepped forward, his face a mask of stone. “You can’t go in there alone. He’s playing you. You know that.”

“I know,” I said, raking my fingers through my hair. “But I don’t have a choice. He has her, and if I don’t do what he says, he’ll kill her.”

Anton’s eyes were dark and calculating. “We can’t just let you walk in there blind. He’ll have you at gunpoint the moment you step through the door.”

“I know,” I repeated. “We need to play this smart. I’ll go in, but you’ll be right behind me. I’ll keep him talking, distract him. The moment he drops his guard, we take him down.”

Dimitri and Anton exchanged a look, and I could see the unease in their eyes. But they nodded, understanding that we had no other option.

“We’ll be ready,” Dimitri said.

I took a deep breath, steeling myself for what was coming. Talia was in that house, and I had to get her out. There was no room for hesitation, no time for second thoughts. This was it.

I walked toward the house. Every step felt heavier than the next. But there was no

turning back now.

As I reached the front door, I paused, my hand hovering over the doorknob. I could feel the eyes of my men on me, their weapons trained on the house, ready to strike the moment things went wrong.

I released a breath and opened the door stepping inside.

The house was quiet. The sound of my boots echoed against the hardwood floor. Every sense was heightened, every instinct screaming at me to be ready.

I moved further into the house, my eyes scanning every corner, every shadow. And then I saw him.

Danny stood in the center of the living room, holding Talia in front of him like a human shield. His arm was wrapped tightly around her throat, a gun pressed against her temple. Talia's face was pale, her eyes wide with fear, but she didn't make a sound.

"Nice of you to join us," Danny said with a smirk, his eyes gleaming with twisted amusement.

"I'm here," I said, keeping my voice steady. "Now let her go."

Danny shook his head, his grip on Talia tightening. "Not so fast. We've got a lot to talk about first," Danny said, his voice oozing with false calm as he pulled his hold on Talia. Her face was drained of color, her lips trembling, but she met my eyes. She was terrified but still alive. Still fighting.

My fists clenched at my sides as I resisted the urge to pull my gun and end him right then and there. But one wrong move, and he could hurt her, or worse. I had to keep

my cool. Talia's life and our child's life hung in the balance.

"I'm here, Danny," I said, stepping forward cautiously, my hands raised slightly to show him I wasn't holding a weapon. "Just you and me. No one else."

He smirked, clearly enjoying the power he thought he had over the situation. "You think I'm stupid, Aleksandr? I know you've got your men out there waiting. Watching."

I took another step forward, my heart hammering in my chest. "I'm here alone, just like you asked. Let Talia go."

Danny's eyes narrowed, a flicker of something dark shining in his green eyes. "You really think I'd let her go? She's mine. You don't get to take her away from me."

Talia winced as Danny's grip tightened, but she stayed silent. Her eyes never left mine, pleading without words for me to remain calm and focused.

"She's not yours," I said, my voice hardening. "She never was. You don't own her, Danny. And you're not walking out of here with her."

Danny's expression twisted into a sneer. "She is mine!" he roared. "The universe owed me for taking away my father. She's mine, and the baby is mine."

I took another slow step, inching closer to him. I could see the tension in his body, the way his fingers twitched on the gun. He was dangerous, but he was also desperate. Desperation made people sloppy.

"What do you mean the universe owed you?" I said, keeping my voice low and steady.

“Her father did it,” he spat. “He killed my father, taking everything away from me.” He backed up a step, pulling Talia with him. “I finally found her. It took years, but I found her, and she loved me. Until you came along.”

Danny pointed the gun at me, his eyes wild. I remembered what Talia said about her father killing the neighbor for having an affair with her mother. It was Danny’s father. And he searched for her for years? He’s deranged. But if I can keep him talking and keep the gun off Talia, I might have a chance to take him down.

“Why punish the girl because of the father’s sins?” I questioned.

“Punish her?” Danny bellowed. “I found her. I saved her. This is all for her,” he hissed, waving the gun around the room. “I bought this house so we could build a life together as a family.”

“Family?” I sneered. “It’s my baby she carries, not yours.”

Danny’s anger boiled over. He threw Talia onto the floor and pointed the gun at me. My eyes flicked to hers, imploring her to get away from him.

“You’re surrounded. There’s no way out of here for you, and you know it,” I continued. If I could keep his attention on me, then Talia would have a chance of getting into the other room. It was the only way I could save her.

Chapter 29

Aleksandr

Danny's eyes flitted around the room, his desperation pouring off him. "I could...I could make you take us out of here. Your men won't shoot if there's a chance they'll hurt you or Talia."

His eyes shimmered with the beginning of a plan. A weak plan, but it was enough. I took another step forward, closing the distance between us.

"And what will you do when you leave? Where will you go?" I asked quietly, my eyes locked on his.

His eyes darted between me and Talia, uncertainty creeping in. But then, just as quickly, the mask slipped back into place. His finger tightened on the trigger. "Don't come any closer."

I froze, my hands still raised in surrender. "Fine," I said, keeping my tone calm. "I'll stay right here. But I need to know your plan if I allow you to leave the house."

I could see his control slipping as sweat beaded on his forehead. He was losing it, and I needed to use that to my advantage.

"Where will you go that will be out of my reach?" I asked. "How far do you think you can run?"

His grip loosened just slightly, and his eyes flicked toward the door. But then, in a flash, his expression hardened, and I could see his finger tighten on the trigger.

“You don’t get to win!” Danny roared. “You don’t get to take what is mine!”

I jumped to the side just as the gun fired. The bullet grazed my side, and I fell to my knees.

The pain in my side was searing hot and throbbing with every breath. My knees hit the floor hard, and I gasped, trying to focus through the haze of pain. I could feel the blood, warm and sticky, slipping through my fingers as I clutched the wound. Just a bullet graze, but enough to make me see stars.

I heard Talia scream my name - raw and terrified. It cut through everything, sharper than the pain, and I forced my eyes up just in time to see her scramble off the floor. She was moving toward me, her eyes wide with fear.

“Talia, stay back!” I shouted.

Before she could take another step, Danny moved like a snake, quick and brutal. His hand shot out and grabbed a fistful of her dark hair, yanking her back against him. She cried out, stumbling into him as he held her close, the barrel of his gun pressing into her side.

My heart stopped. Every muscle in my body tensed. Danny smirked, his grip tightening as he pulled her like a rag doll, using her as a human shield. His eyes met mine, full of cruel satisfaction, as if he had already won.

I had to think fast before -

The door burst open with a violent crash, and suddenly Dimitri and Anton were there,

their guns drawn, faces set like stone. Hope flared in my chest briefly, but then Danny's smirk widened. His grip on Talia tightened, and he moved the gun from her side to her temple, the metal digging into her skin.

"Take another step, and I'll blow her fucking brains out," he snarled, his voice dark with venom.

Dimitri froze mid-step, his jaw clenched tightly. Anton's hands twitched around his gun, fury burning in his eyes. I could see every instinct in them screaming to shoot, to put a bullet in Danny's head. But they couldn't. Not with Talia in the way.

"Back off," Danny barked. "Now!"

Talia's face twisted, but she didn't make a sound. Her eyes locked with mine, filled with fear but also trust. Trust that I will fix this.

"Leave," I said, my voice low but steady. Dimitri's eyes shot to me, disbelieving.

"Brat -"

"I said leave!" I barked, a sudden surge of adrenaline pumping through me.

They hesitated, but I shook my head, forcing my gaze into theirs. Slowly, begrudgingly, they lowered their guns. They were ready to tear Danny apart with their bare hands but retreated, their eyes never leaving his. I could feel their anger and frustration, but they trusted me. They had no choice.

Danny let out a low, satisfied laugh as they disappeared through the door. The kind of laugh that made my skin crawl.

"Smart move, Aleksandr," he sneered, tugging Talia closer. "Now, get up."

I forced myself to rise, gritting my teeth. The moment I was on my feet, Danny's eyes flicked to my side, noticing the blood pooling through my shirt, and his smile widened. He liked that I was injured.

Shoving Talia forward, he pushed her toward the door while keeping the gun pointed squarely at my chest. "We're going outside," he said. "And you're going to order your men to stand down."

I nodded, my jaw clenched. There wasn't a choice. Not with the gun still trained on me, not with Talia in his grip. As we moved outside, the cold air bit into my skin. I could feel the eyes of my men, hidden in the shadows, waiting for my word. But I couldn't let them make a move. Not yet.

"Back off," I shouted, loud enough for them to hear. "Everyone, now!"

Slowly, one by one, my men retreated, disappearing into the night, leaving the street empty and silent. It was just us now - me, Talia, and Danny.

Danny shoved Talia toward the blue sedan parked in the driveway, keeping the gun trained on me. I could see how her body tensed, the fear in her every movement. I wanted to rush forward, but one wrong move, and it would be over. I had to wait. I had to be smart.

"You think you're walking away from this?" I asked, my voice low and full of barely restrained anger. I needed to keep him talking and distracted.

He laughed, a cold, mocking sound. "I don't care about walking away, Aleksandr. I just need her." He shoved Talia closer to the car, and she stumbled, her eyes wide, looking at me with something I hadn't expected - hope. She wasn't done fighting.

"Say goodbye to her," Danny sneered. "Last time you'll see her."

He turned his back slightly, just enough to open the car door. It was the opening I needed.

Everything happened in an instant. I launched myself forward, my eyes locking on the gun that skidded across the pavement. Danny saw the movement, shoving Talia hard to the side and going for the weapon, but I was closer. My fingers brushed against the cold metal just as Danny reached for it.

I felt his hand slam into mine, trying to rip it away, and the two of us fell to the ground, wrestling for control. His fists came at me fast and wild, landing blows on my ribs and side. Stars danced behind my eyes with each blow to the injury. I had to end this.

We rolled across the pavement, struggling for dominance. His elbow came up and struck me in the jaw. I flipped him onto his back, straddling him. I landed two solid blows to his face before he reached up, digging his fingers into the bullet wound.

I yelled out as agony tore through me. Danny flipped me onto my side, jumping to his feet. He stood over me, looking around for the gun. A loud crack echoed through the street before he could locate it.

Danny's body jerked violently, his eyes wide with shock. He slumped forward, his breath rattling in his chest. I watched as crimson blood stained his shirt, spreading into a perfect circle on his chest.

Talia stood behind him, her hands trembling as she held the smoking gun. She'd shot him. She had saved me.

Danny collapsed to the ground, his eyes still open. It was over.

Talia dropped the gun, her body shaking like a leaf. I staggered to my feet, the pain in

my side flaring, but I didn't care. I crossed the distance to her, grabbing her by the arms and pulling her close.

"It's over," I whispered, my voice rough and relieved. She buried her face in my chest, her body trembling against mine, and for the first time in what felt like forever, I let myself breathe.

It was finally over.

Chapter 30

Talia

The world felt like it had slowed, everything moving in fragments, pieces that didn't quite fit together. I could still hear the echo of the gunshot in my ears, the smell of gunpowder heavy in the air. My heart pounded hard against my ribcage, my breath coming out in jagged gasps. Aleksandr's arms were the only thing keeping me upright, his grip firm, steady. The warmth of his body against mine should have been enough to ground me, but nothing felt real anymore.

I killed Danny.

I looked down at my hands, fingers still trembling as though I could feel the weight of the gun, even though it had long since fallen to the pavement. My chest felt tight like my lungs couldn't pull in enough air.

"I'm not sorry," I whispered, my voice low, as if I was confessing a secret.

Aleksandr's arms tightened around me, pulling me closer. He didn't say anything. He didn't need to. He understood.

I leaned into him, resting my forehead against his chest, trying to let his solidness anchor me. "I had to do it," I said, the words spilling out in a rush, my voice still shaking. "I had to... for you."

His hand slid up to the back of my head, fingers threading through my hair, and I felt

him press his lips to the top of my head. It was a simple gesture, one that spoke more than words ever could

“Danny-” My voice caught as I said his name. It felt foreign on my lips like it didn’t belong to me anymore...like he didn’t belong to me anymore. Not that he ever really had. “When he found out I didn’t love him, I didn’t want him... He told me he was going to kill me.” I paused, swallowing hard, bile rising in my throat as I remembered the way his eyes had looked when he said those words, cold, empty. “After the baby was born.”

Aleksandr’s hold on me shifted, his body going rigid. He pulled back just enough to look down at me, his gaze dark and unreadable, though I could feel the storm brewing inside him. He didn’t need to ask me anything - he already knew.

“Danny thought the universe owed him something,” I continued, my voice stronger now, though the trembling in my body hadn’t stopped. “All those years... he searched for me. Foster home to foster home until he finally found me.” I shivered, not from the cold but from the sheer madness of it all. “All because my father is a murderer. My father killed his father.”

The realization of it all was suffocating. Danny had spent his entire life chasing me down, trying to claim me like I was some prize. And when he couldn’t have me the way he wanted...he would have killed me. He would have taken my baby as if it was his due.

“I didn’t owe him anything,” I said, my voice breaking as I finally let the truth spill out. “I never owed him anything. I’m not my father.”

Aleksandr’s hand cupped my cheek, his thumb brushing away a tear I hadn’t even realized had fallen. “You don’t have to explain anything to me, Talia.” His voice was calm and soothing. “You did what you had to do.”

I nodded, tears slipping down my face despite my effort to stop them. Everything - the past, the present - was crashing down on me all at once. Danny was dead. I had killed him. But it wasn't guilt I felt. It was a relief.

A part of me knew I should be horrified, that I should feel some sense of loss for the boy I once knew. But I didn't. I didn't feel any of it. I felt free.

Suddenly, headlights cut through the darkness as a black SUV pulled up, and Aleksandr's men poured out. Dimitri and Anton were the first to approach, their faces grim, but I could see the silent understanding in their eyes as they took in the scene. There was no judgment, no questions. Just action.

Anton knelt beside Danny's lifeless body, checking the pulse that wasn't there, his face hardening. Dimitri looked to Aleksandr for orders, his sharp gaze flicking over me for just a moment before settling back on Aleksandr.

"Take care of it," Aleksandr said, his voice low and lethal.

Within seconds, they moved like shadows, efficient and silent, erasing every trace of what had happened. There was no evidence of Danny. There was no evidence of me. I watched as they worked, numb as if the events were happening to someone else, as if I were standing outside my own body. Aleksandr kept me close, his arm around my waist, like he feared I might disappear if he let go.

"Let's go home," Aleksandr murmured, his voice soft against my ear.

Home. I nodded, allowing him to guide me to the car, his touch gentle and protective. The world around us faded as the night swallowed the scene, leaving nothing behind.

When we pulled up to the mansion, some tension finally left my body. The soft lights spilling from the windows and the warmth of the familiar structure felt like a

sanctuary. Aleksandr helped me out of the car, his hand at the small of my back, guiding me up the steps.

The door swung open before we even reached it, and Sandy was there, tears streaming down her cheeks. “Talial!” she cried, throwing her arms around me the moment I stepped inside. Her embrace was tight, almost suffocating, but it was exactly what I needed. Her tears soaked into my shoulder as she sobbed quietly, her grip on me never loosening.

“I was afraid-” she whispered through her tears. She pulled back, wiping her face with the sleeve of her shirt. “I’m so grateful you’re okay.”

“I’m okay,” I said, though the words felt thin, not enough to convey everything I felt.

From the corner of my eye, I saw Sasha and Maxim rushing toward me, their faces filled with concern. They clung to me, and I felt a lump form in my throat as I knelt to hug them. They didn’t say anything, but their tight embraces said enough. I never wanted to let them go.

Olga appeared from the hallway, giving me a quick hug. “I’m so glad you’re back.” She pulled away, looking me over. “Let me draw you a bath,” she said softly. “It’ll help.” She exchanged a brief glance with Aleksandr, who nodded in agreement.

I let her lead me up the stairs, my body feeling heavier with every step. The adrenaline that had kept me going was starting to wear off, and all that was left was exhaustion. I could barely keep my eyes open by the time Olga guided me into the bathroom, the scent of lavender filling the air as she prepared the bath.

I sank into the warm water, closing my eyes, trying to wash away the memories of the last few days, but they clung to me, refusing to let go.

Abram's voice floated in from the hallway, speaking quietly with Aleksandr. "Dr. Daria is on her way to check on Miss Talia." His tone was serious but reassuring.

An hour later, Dr. Daria arrived. She was calm and efficient as she examined me, her hands gentle as she checked me over. "You're both okay," she said with a small smile, her hand resting on my stomach. "You're strong, and the baby is fine. Nice strong heartbeat."

I nodded, but I didn't feel strong. I felt... hollow. But at least the baby was okay.

Aleksandr appeared at the door as Dr. Daria finished up. He didn't say anything. He just came to sit beside me on the bed, his presence comforting.

"I'm here," he said quietly, his hand covering mine.

And that was enough.

Chapter 31

Talia

I scooted closer to Aleksandr, needing to feel his warmth. Being close to him, touching his skin, reassured me that I was home and safe. He tucked me into his side, placing soft kisses on my cheek. I needed more.

Reaching between us, I skimmed my palm over his cock, gently trailing my fingers over his balls. He stiffened, his cock getting hard under my touch. Fisting it, I ran my thumb over the tip, teasing him. He rolled me onto my back, and my breath caught in my throat.

“Are you sure?” he asked concerned.

“Yes...I need you. I need to feel you inside me.”

Aleksandr’s mouth latched onto mine as he draped himself over me. The feel of his skin electrified my nerve endings. He palmed my breast, squeezing and pinching it. Settling his hips between my legs, he pressed his cock against my pussy.

Sliding my hands up his muscular back, I held onto his broad shoulders, spreading my legs further apart. “Fuck me,” I ordered.

Aleksandr pressed the tip of his cock between my wet folds while he sucked on my breasts. I bit my lower lip, waiting for him thrust his cock into me. Locking my legs around his buttocks, I pulled him closer, eager for him to get going.

“Greedy little kiska, “ he teased.

“Fuck me, now, “ I demanded. He reared back slightly and thrust hard, driving his cock deep. A fierce satisfaction filled me from head to toe. He was mine, and I was his. He nuzzled my neck and pressed a kiss to my throat. I arched my back, making his cock slide deeper inside me. Aleksandr let out a low groan.

His cock stuffed and stretched my pussy, pain, and pleasure mixing as it rubbed my inner walls. Each plunge was slow and sensuous, but nothing was sweet about it. His thrusts were bold and deep, massaging my G-spot.

Curling my legs tightly around him, I lifted my hips to meet every punch of his hips. He stroked my silky thigh as he fucked me. A groan ripped from his throat as my pussy clenched around his cock. The world faded away until it was just us. I could feel his heartbeat, steady and strong, matching mine as though we were two parts of the same whole.

His movements became faster, thrusting harder, and I matched each thrust, moving my hips frantically. Now he’s pounding into me, our flesh smacking as he brings me to the edge of my orgasm.

“I’m...I’m going to come,” I gasped. Tingles shoot through each of my limbs, and my core tightens in anticipation of my release. Locking my legs at my ankles, I pull him as deep as I can, wanting to feel every inch of his cock inside me.

His pace is frantic, and our eyes lock together. “Come for me,” he urges, rolling his thumb over my clit. The room explodes into vibrant colors as my release rocks through me.

“Yess!” I cry out, riding the waves of pleasure.

Aleksandr punches his hips a few more times until his hot come shoots inside my pussy.

“Fuuuck!” he growls, collapsing on top of me. His cock jerks and pulses. Slowly, he pulls it out and rolls off me onto his side.

He pulls me close, and I snuggle into him. “I love you,” he whispers.

“And I love you,” I whisper back. I closed my eyes and let all my worries go. I was safe. I was home. I was his.

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Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:46 am

Chapter 32

Talia

The smell of bacon and eggs tickled my nose before my eyes fluttered open. For a moment, I stayed still, basking in the comfort of the soft sheets and Aleksandr's familiar scent. I was home. I was safe.

My heart clenched as memories of Danny flooded back. It was still difficult to believe I was free and had returned to Aleksandr and our family.

I pushed myself up in bed, the muscles in my limbs sore. As I moved, the door creaked slightly, and Sasha's head popped in, her green eyes sparkling.

"Talia! Breakfast is ready! Uncle made all your favorites!" she said, bouncing into the room, her blonde pigtails bobbing up and down.

I smiled despite myself. Sasha's infectious energy was soothing after everything I'd been through. I swung my legs over the side of the bed and let her tug me out of the room.

The kitchen was warm and bright, sunlight streaming through the large windows at an angle. Aleksandr stood at the stove, flipping eggs like he was born to do it. His broad shoulders and rough hands moved with surprising grace. He caught my eye and grinned, his crooked smile heating up my core.

"Good morning, kiska, " he said, his voice rumbling through the room. "Sit. Eat."

Abram placed a plate of warm chocolate croissants beside the bacon, eggs, strawberries, and waffles on the table. I took a seat at the table where Sandy was already sipping coffee. She looked unusually chipper this morning despite the bruises on her neck and hands. She caught my eye and winked.

“I’ve already decided,” she announced. “We’re spending the entire day together.”

I blinked at her. “The whole day?”

“Absolutely.” Sandy’s tone left no room for argument. “After everything that’s happened, you need some fun, some girl time. And the kids, too,” she added, nodding toward Sasha and Maxim.

“Fun? What kind of fun?” I asked, feeling a little cautious. After the kidnapping, everything felt slightly surreal, like I was trying to find my balance again in a world that had shifted beneath my feet.

Sandy waved a hand dismissively. “The zoo, the aquarium, then a 50’s style diner for burgers and milkshakes. It’ll be good for you to get out. Enjoy the sunshine and cool weather. Breathe.”

I glanced at the kids, who were now staring at me expectantly.

“Can we go, Talia? Please!” Sasha chimed in, her hands clasped together like she was begging for a puppy.

Maxim simply nodded but gave me a small smile, his clear blue eyes twinkling.

My heart warmed, but I hesitated. “I don’t know... I’m not sure I’m ready for-”

Aleksandr, now standing behind me, placed his hands on my shoulders, squeezing

gently, grounding me with his calm presence.

“Go, kiska . Enjoy the day,” he said softly, his voice a low, steady hum in my ear. “You deserve it.”

I bit my lip, still feeling a tinge of reluctance, unsure I could relax. But the way the kids stared at me with their hopeful faces made me give in. Maybe a day out wasn’t such a bad idea.

“Alright,” I said finally, my heart melting under their gaze. “Let’s go to the zoo.”

Sasha squealed in delight, and Maxim’s smile grew wider. Sandy clapped her hands in triumph.

“Perfect! I’ll get the kids ready. You finish breakfast,” she said, already halfway out of the room, dragging the children with her.

I turned back to my plate, but my appetite was half gone. Aleksandr took the seat beside me, his eyes scanning my face.

“Are you sure you’re okay with this?” he asked, his voice low.

I nodded slowly, pushing a piece of egg around on my plate. “I think so. It’s just... I just need time to adjust. It’s been chaotic and traumatic since I arrived in New York. But the kids, Sandy... want me to go, and I don’t want to disappoint them.”

“You’re not disappointing anyone. You’ve been through hell, and we all just want you to heal in whatever feels right.”

His words sank in, and I released a breath I didn’t know I’d been holding.

“Thank you, my love, for everything.”

He gave me another one of those sexy smiles and leaned back, crossing his arms.

“You can thank me by eating your breakfast.”

I rolled my eyes but obediently took a bite of the croissant. It was buttery and flaky, melting in my mouth in a way almost too good to be real. Leave it to Aleksandr to make even breakfast feel like a luxury.

The zoo was alive with laughter, family chatter, and the excited squeals of children pointing out their favorite animals. Sasha tugged on my hand as we approached the lion exhibit, her eyes round as saucers.

“Look, Talia! They’re so big!” she exclaimed, bouncing on her toes.

I smiled down at her, feeling the warmth of the sun on my skin and the simple joy of being surrounded by life and family. With the kids and Sandy, I felt like I could breathe again.

Standing beside me, Maxim pointed out a huge male lion lounging lazily in the sun. “He looks like Uncle,” he said with a small grin, the corner of his mouth quirking up in a moment of humor.

I laughed. The sound felt a bit foreign but good. “He does, doesn’t he? All tough and scary, but secretly he’s just a big softie.”

“Uncle isn’t scary,” Sasha declared, looking scandalized by the very idea. “He’s nice, and I love him.”

“I think it’s safe to say we all love him,” Sandy said, linking her arm to mine.

The day passed in a haze of laughter, ice cream cones, and wide-eyed wonder. At the aquarium, Sasha pressed her face against the glass of the giant fish tank, marveling at the colorful fish swimming just inches away from her. Maxim pointed out the sharks, his fascination clear in his eyes.

Sandy kept up her usual chatter, filling the silence with light conversation and jokes. It was nice to let someone else take the reins, to just exist in the moment.

After the aquarium, we headed to the diner, a 50s-style restaurant with checkered floors, neon lights, a jukebox, and booths lined with red vinyl. The kids immediately loved the place, especially when they saw the milkshakes. Sasha ordered strawberry with whipped cream and a cherry, while Maxim opted for chocolate. Sandy and I shared a vanilla one, just as thick and creamy as I remembered from childhood.

We ate burgers bigger than our hands and laughed when Sasha tried to take a bite but couldn't fit the whole thing in her mouth. Maxim laughed the loudest.

When we left, the sky was tinted orange and pink, as the sun began to set. The day had passed so quickly, but it had been precisely what I needed. The tension I'd been holding in my shoulders had melted away. For the first time in what felt like forever, I wasn't looking over my shoulder, expecting danger.

Back at the mansion, the kids were exhausted, their excitement finally giving way to sleepiness. Sandy carried Sasha to bed while Maxim trudged up the stairs, barely managing a wave goodnight before disappearing down the hall.

I lingered in the living room, staring out the window at the darkening sky, marveling at how lucky I was. As if sensing my thoughts, Aleksandr appeared behind me. His presence was all I needed to feel completely relaxed and at home.

"I have plans for you tomorrow," he said, his voice deep and full of promise.

I turned to him, eyebrow raised. “Plans?”

He nodded, a small, secretive smile playing on his lips. “But you need to get a good night’s rest. I don’t want to ruin the surprise.”

“A surprise?” I pressed, trying to hide the excitement bubbling up inside me. “What kind of surprise?”

Aleksandr’s smile widened, but he shook his head. “You’ll find out tomorrow.”

I huffed, crossing my arms. “I don’t want to wait that long.”

“I know,” he said, his eyes glinting with amusement. “Which is exactly why I’m not telling you. I want the excitement to build up while you sleep.”

I narrowed my eyes at him, but I couldn’t hide my grin. Whatever Aleksandr had planned, it was bound to be something I’d never forget.

“Fine,” I said, throwing my arms around his neck.

“I’ll give you the moon,” he said, his voice softer and more serious. He tucked a strand of hair behind my ear. “Anything you desire, as long as you’re happy.”

His words hung in the air between us, heavy with meaning. I searched his face to find the right words to say in return, but nothing seemed adequate. So instead, I just nodded, leaning into his touch.

“I love you,” I whispered.

“I love you, too,” he whispered back.

Chapter 33

Aleksandr

My steps were brisk and purposeful. Talia was still asleep in our bed, her long, dark hair spilling over the pillow. I watched her for a few minutes before leaving, her chest's steady rise and fall calming me. She looked so peaceful, unaware of the flurry of activity outside her window.

Today was the day. The day I would make her mine in the most permanent, irrevocable way. A surprise wedding - something she would never expect. But I wanted to give her this. No, I needed to give her this. Talia deserved to be surrounded by beauty, love, and the kind of life I wasn't sure I could provide when we first met. Now, with her, Sasha, and Maxim, I could finally see our happiness.

The cold early morning breeze carried the scent of freshly cut grass as I stepped out onto the grounds. My staff had worked tirelessly since before dawn, ensuring everything was in place. I wanted perfection - nothing less would do. Talia's life had been chaotic enough before she came into mine. Today needed to be different. Today was the first day of her new life, and it had to be perfect.

"Pakhan," Nikolai greeted with a short nod. "The flowers just arrived. They're setting up in the greenhouse now."

I gave him a tight smile. "Good. Make sure they follow the plan exactly."

The greenhouse was the crown jewel of the estate, a lavish indulgence. Now, it would

be the place I take my bride. The sun would gleam through the glass ceiling as we stood beneath it, surrounded by blooms of every imaginable color - orchids, white roses, and peonies, all of Talia's favorites. I imagined her face when she saw it. I wanted to see her smile without anything clouding it.

Walking toward the greenhouse, I noticed the florists arranging the massive bouquets, the delicate white flowers like snowflakes against the lush greenery surrounding them. The entire space was transforming into Talia's dream, and I hoped I could bring it to life.

I stepped inside, breathing in the floral scent as I surveyed their work. The archway was nearly complete, draped in cascading vines of wisteria and roses. Beneath it, where Talia and I would stand, the floor was layered with soft white petals.

"Perfect," I murmured under my breath.

Nikolai was at my side again. "The reception area is almost finished as well. We've moved the furniture from the east wing and set up tables near the pool. The library has been arranged for brunch, and the staff are working on the bar."

I nodded, satisfied but restless. Everything had to be just right - not just for her but for us - for our future. I needed this moment to be flawless, a symbol of the life I wanted with Talia, where she was my equal, partner, and wife.

As we approached the east wing, I saw the transformation taking shape. The long banquet tables, covered in elegant ivory linens, were positioned near the pool. Silver candelabras gleamed in the morning sun, and crystal glasses, already polished to perfection, stood ready for the celebration. The water's reflection shimmered against the white draping, adding an ethereal quality to the setup.

But it was the library that gave me pause. It was the heart of the estate, my sanctuary.

Books lined the walls, and the rich mahogany shelves seemed to absorb the morning light. I had chosen this space carefully. It was where Talia first saw me as more than just a criminal, where we talked about life, Sasha and Maxim, and our fractured dreams. Now, it would be filled with those closest to us, witnesses to the moment we would become a family in truth, not just in name.

“Make sure the children’s area is set up by the library fireplace,” I instructed.

Maxim. The thought of him and his immediate acceptance of me as his father, made my chest tighten. He will take over the family one day as pakhan , but in the meantime, I will give him love and stability. And Sasha, my beautiful Sasha, will grow to be a strong Avilov woman.

I walked through the mansion once more, checking and rechecking every detail. The wedding dress had arrived an hour ago, a vision of lace and satin. I’d had it explicitly designed for Talia, and its form-fitting elegance was something I knew would highlight her grace and beauty. It now hung in her dressing room, waiting for her to wake up.

My hands itched with the need to be near her, to see her reaction when she realized what today was. But I had to be patient. I wanted this moment to be a complete surprise.

A strange sense of calm washed over me as I stood by the window overlooking the grounds. The past few years have been a whirlwind - taking in Sasha and Maxim, protecting Talia from the threats that followed her, and securing our future. I had been fighting for so long for my family and carving out my empire. But this was different. This was the first time I felt like I wasn’t fighting for survival or power but for something more - for love. For her.

I thought back to the night before, how her body fit perfectly against mine as we lay

in bed, the quiet words we'd shared in the dark. I told her I had a surprise planned, and she had smiled, teasing me, thinking it would be something small but typical of the life she lived now. But this was my way of showing her how much I love her and wanted this life with her, Sasha, and Maxim.

For years, I had shut myself off from this possibility. I hadn't believed I could have a family, not after everything I'd done, the blood on my hands. But Talia changed that. She changed me. She had shown me that I was capable of more than just violence, more than just control. With her, I could be a man, not just a leader...not just Aleksandr Avilov, the man feared by many, but a husband and a father.

As the morning wore on, I could hear the soft hum of the staff moving through the house, setting up the final details. Everything was in place. I could practically feel the energy building, the excitement of the moment approaching.

I checked my watch. Talia would wake up soon, and the last thing I wanted was for her to wander into the greenhouse before it was ready. I needed a distraction to keep her occupied until it was time.

"Abram," I called. "Have something brought to Talia. Breakfast, fruit, croissants, coffee. Tell her I'm handling some business and I'll be back soon."

As he hurried to carry out my instructions, I stood in the library doorway, watching as the finishing touches were made. I couldn't wait to see her walk through the greenhouse doors, her eyes wide with surprise, her lips curving into that soft smile that always undid me. Today, I would give her something she had never had - a wedding and a family that wasn't tainted by fear or uncertainty but filled with joy and love.

As the clock ticked closer to the moment, I glanced one last time at the greenhouse archway, the soft white petals blanketing the floor beneath it. Soon, she would be

walking toward me, and with her, the future I had never dared to dream of.

Today, I would become more than Aleksandr Avilov. Today, I would become hers.

Chapter 34

Talia

The smell of freshly brewed coffee and something sweet pulled me from the warmth of sleep. I blinked against the soft sunlight and lay still for a moment, letting myself enjoy the quiet. Aleksandr's side of the bed was empty - typical of him, always up before me, always busy. But this morning felt different. There was something in the air, a calmness that felt deliberate.

I stretched lazily, rolling onto my back. My eyes landed on the tray beside me, a full breakfast laid out with meticulous care. Fresh fruit of ripe berries, delicate slices of melon, and a peach that looked perfectly sweet rested beside a warm, flaky croissant. A small dish of bacon accompanied it, and the smell of coffee filled the room.

I smiled to myself. Aleksandr had said there would be a surprise today, but I hadn't expected something as simple and thoughtful as breakfast in bed. Maybe that's why it made me laugh softly. He always kept me guessing.

Just as I reached for the coffee, the door creaked open. I saw Sandy step inside, her strawberry-blonde hair catching the light as she smiled, her eyes twinkling with excitement. My sister had been with me through so much - the chaos of our childhood and the dangers that had followed us into adulthood. After everything that happened, she was here with me in Aleksandr's home... my home.

"Good morning, sleepyhead," Sandy said, her tone light and teasing. "I hope you're hungry."

I raised an eyebrow, suspicious but intrigued. “What’s all this?”

“Oh, just a little treat. You’ve got a big day ahead, sis.”

Her words sparked my curiosity even more. “Big day? What’s going on?”

Sandy just grinned, clearly enjoying herself far too much. “I’m under strict orders not to spoil the surprise. You’ll find out soon enough.”

I stared at her, trying to decipher what she was hiding. She gave nothing away, her smile only widening as she came closer, sitting on the edge of the bed.

“Eat,” she urged. “You’ll need your energy.”

The whole situation had me on edge in the best way possible. I couldn’t help but laugh softly at how absurd it all felt. Aleksandr and Sandy working together? It was like I’d slipped into some dream where everyone conspired to keep me in the dark. But knowing Aleksandr, whatever was planned would be worth the wait.

I took a few bites of fruit, savoring the sweetness of the berries and the flakiness of the croissant, but my mind was focused on the surprise. The more Sandy smiled at me with that secretive glint in her eyes, the more I wanted to know.

When I set the coffee cup down, Sandy stood, her energy contagious. “Ready for the next part?”

“The next part?” I laughed, pushing the blankets aside and sitting up. “What are you talking about?”

Without another word, Sandy moved to the closet, throwing open the doors dramatically. The sight that greeted me made my breath catch. A white wedding dress

was hanging there, illuminated by the soft morning light.

I was frozen in place, my heart hammering against my ribs as I stared at it. The dress was stunning - white lace and satin, fitted bodice, flowing skirt - like something out of a dream.

“Sandy,” I whispered, my voice catching. “What is this?”

She turned to face me, her eyes soft now, filled with love. “It’s your wedding dress. You’re getting married today.”

For a second, I couldn’t move. The room seemed to tilt slightly as the reality of her words sank in. Today. Aleksandr hadn’t just planned a surprise, he’d planned the surprise. My knees weakened, and I stumbled toward the dress, running my fingers over the delicate fabric.

“I can’t believe this,” I muttered, barely able to breathe. “Are you serious?”

Sandy nodded, grinning from ear to ear. “Dead serious. Now, hurry up. You don’t want to keep Aleksandr waiting, do you?”

I didn’t need any more prompting. I bolted from the room, the door slamming behind me as I ran through the mansion’s halls. My feet barely touched the ground as I navigated the sprawling estate, searching for him.

When I found Aleksandr standing in the library, overseeing the final touches, I didn’t even pause. I rushed toward him, throwing my arms around him before he could turn to face me. He caught me easily as if he’d been waiting for this exact moment, his arms wrapping around me, holding me tightly against his chest.

“Aleksandr!” I gasped, still breathless from running, from the enormity of what he

had done. “Is this real? Are we really getting married today?”

He pulled back just enough to look into my eyes, a small smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. “Did you really think I’d let you wait any longer? You’re mine, Talia. Today, I make that official.”

Tears sprang to my eyes, the emotion of it all overwhelming me. I couldn’t stop smiling, my hands trembling as I touched his face, as if I needed to be sure he was real, and this was happening.

“I didn’t think you could surprise me this big,” I whispered, my voice shaking with happiness.

His smile deepened, and he leaned down to kiss me softly, a promise in the simple, quiet gesture. “There’s nothing I wouldn’t do for you.”

I was still in disbelief, but there was no time to dwell on it. Sandy appeared at my side again, along with Sasha and Maxim, who stood in wonder, dressed in their finest. Sasha wore a beautiful pink dress, her blonde hair curled and bouncing as she twirled around, clearly excited. Maxim, in a charcoal gray suit, looked every bit the proud young boy he was, his face bright with joy.

“Can you believe it?” Sasha squealed, running over to hug me tightly.

Maxim followed suit, hugging me around my waist as he looked up at me. “We’re a real family now.”

Wrapping my arms around them, I hugged them back, my heart swelling with so much love I thought it might burst. “Yes, we’re a family now.”

I pulled away, my heart racing, as Sandy and I hurried back to my room to get

dressed. After my makeup was done, she helped me into the gown, carefully zipping up the back and arranging the veil, she couldn't stop smiling. I caught her reflection in the mirror, and for a moment, it felt like we were kids again, playing dress-up. But this was real. I was about to marry the man I loved, surrounded by the people I cared about most.

When I was ready, I glanced in the mirror and was in disbelief at the woman staring back at me. The dress fit like a dream, the lace and satin hugging my body in all the right places while hiding my baby bump. My hair was pinned up elegantly, soft tendrils framing my face, and the veil cascaded down my back, light and delicate.

Sandy stood behind me, her eyes shining with tears. "You look perfect."

I turned to her, my heart full. "I couldn't have done any of this without you. You've always been my rock."

She hugged me tightly, and for a few minutes, we stood there, wrapped in the silent understanding only sisters can share.

When we made our way to the greenhouse, I was ready. The sun shone through the glass ceiling, blanketing everything in a warm, golden light. The entire space had been transformed into something magical. White roses, orchids, and peonies surrounded us, their scent filling the air. Vines of wisteria hung from the archway, and the floor was covered in soft white petals.

Aleksandr stood at the end of the aisle, waiting for me. His blue eyes, always so intense, softened as they met mine. He looked devastatingly handsome in his tailored black suit, his presence commanding the space in a way only he could.

As I walked toward him, with Sasha and Maxim holding each of my hands, I felt like I was floating. This was it. This was everything I'd ever wanted and more.

When I reached him, Aleksandr took my hand, his thumb brushing over my skin, grounding me in the moment.

The ceremony was simple and beautiful, with Sasha and Maxim beside us. Aleksandr's family members and close contacts filled the greenhouse, their presence a reminder of the life we were stepping into but also a testament to the new one we were building together.

The vows came easily, words I didn't even have to consider. I promised Aleksandr my heart, life, and loyalty, just as he promised me. And when we kissed - when his lips met mine for the first time as my husband - I knew this was only the beginning. We were a family now, bound together by love, trust, and the future we would create for Sasha, Maxim, our baby, and ourselves.

But the magic didn't stop there. After the ceremony, we moved to the mansion's east wing for brunch, where the reception took my breath away again.

The entire area had been transformed into a lavish, luxurious wonderland. The long tables near the pool were dressed in white linens and covered with exquisite floral arrangements of peonies and roses. Crystal chandeliers had been set up in the open air, hanging over the tables, catching the sunlight and sending sparkling reflections across the water. Everything shimmered - glassware, silverware, even the pale pink champagne flutes waiting to be filled.

The aroma of sweet pastries and roasted coffee mingled with the fragrance of the flowers. Large silver platters held delicacies I could hardly name - miniature quiches, buttery croissants, smoked salmon topped with caviar, and the softest cheeses.

There was a station for fresh crepes and waffles, where a chef stood ready to prepare them to order. Baskets of berries, bowls of whipped cream, and sauces of honey and dark chocolate adorned the table, inviting guests to indulge.

I looked around at the people gathered. Aleksandr's family, close friends, and a few business associates had somehow been woven into the fabric of my life. They were all perfectly dressed, mingling with an ease that surprised me. In the corner, Sasha and Maxim played with their cousins, laughing and running around the pool, their joy infectious.

Sandy appeared beside me, handing me a flute filled with sparkling water. "Look at all this, sis. It's like something out of a fairy tale."

I took the glass, my fingers trembling slightly, and looked over the scene. It felt like a dream I never thought I'd be living. Aleksandr's world was full of danger, but here, in this moment, surrounded by beauty and love, I felt nothing but happiness.

Aleksandr came up behind me, slipping his arm around my waist and pulling me close. He kissed my forehead before whispering, "Are you happy, my love?"

I tilted my head back to meet his eyes, my heart swelling. "More than I ever thought possible."

We spent the rest of the afternoon eating, laughing, and celebrating the life we were starting together. I watched as Sasha and Maxim danced with the other children by the pool.

As I stood in Aleksandr's arms, looking out at the family we had become, I knew one thing - this was only the beginning. Our future was bright, and we would face it together no matter what lay ahead.

Chapter 35

Aleksandr

Two days had passed since the wedding, and I was still adjusting to the feel of the ring on my finger. It felt like the beginning of a life I hadn't thought I'd ever be capable of having. A family bound not by blood or duty but by love. Talia was mine now, truly mine in every way, and Sasha and Maxim were as much a part of me as my name or past. But there was more to this future than just us. The baby growing inside of Talia was another symbol of everything I wanted for us - a new start.

I'd been thinking about the nursery for weeks. I've been imagining the space, picturing how it would look. I wanted it to be perfect, not just for Talia but for our child. It had to be warm, safe, and full of light - the kind of room that could erase the darkness of the past for both of us.

As I stood outside the room that would become the nursery across the hall from our bedroom, I took a deep breath. I wasn't used to the domestic role of planning and decorating, but for Talia and our child, I would do anything.

Sasha and Maxim were just as excited as I was. When I told them the plan, their eyes lit up, and they couldn't stop asking questions about what we would do and how we would decorate. Moments like this reminded me how much had changed.

Sandy had agreed to take Talia shopping, something I was grateful for. She knew how to distract Talia and keep her away long enough for us to turn this room into something special. I trusted Sandy with that, and she understood what we were

building here better than anyone else.

“Are we painting today?” Maxim asked, his voice filled with authority. Sasha stood beside him, holding a paintbrush as if ready for battle. “You have to paint up and down with even strokes. I saw it on a YouTube video.”

I smiled at the eager look on his face. “Yes, today we paint.”

The nursery had been a blank slate until now, its walls soft off-white. But I had spent hours thinking about what colors would work best and what would make the space feel like a sanctuary for our baby. Ultimately, I had settled on a soft gray-blue, the color of a sky just after dawn, with accents of pale gold that would give the room a gentle warmth.

I stood up, looking over the supplies laid out on the floor - cans of paint, brushes, rollers, and stencils for the intricate designs I wanted to add. The furniture was already on its way - a crib, a rocking chair, and shelves that would be filled with toys and books. I could picture Talia’s reaction and how her face would light up when she saw it all come together.

“Are we going to paint clouds on the ceiling?” Sasha asked as she glanced around the room.

I nodded, impressed with her memory. “Yes. We will make it look like the baby is sleeping under the sky. What do you think?”

“I think I want clouds on my ceiling, too,” she grinned.

Sandy poked her head into the room, glancing at her watch. “Talia’s ready to go. I told her we would look at some baby furniture and clothes. She won’t suspect a thing.”

“Good,” I said, walking over to her. “Thank you, Sandy. I’ll owe you for this.”

She waved a hand dismissively. “You don’t owe me anything. We’re family. This is going to be amazing.”

With that, she left, and I could hear Talia’s laughter from the front hall, fading as she and Sandy left for their shopping trip. The moment the door clicked shut, I turned to Sasha and Maxim, who were already eyeing the paint cans.

“Let’s get started.”

Hours passed in a whirlwind of chatter and work. The soft gray-blue paint went on easily, transforming the room from something sterile into something that felt full of possibility. The kids had been more help than I’d expected. Sasha was focused, carefully painting the lower walls, while Maxim took charge of the clouds we added to the ceiling.

Each cloud was unique, some large and fluffy, others wispy and faint, blending seamlessly into the sky’s soft blue. We added a touch of pale gold to the edges, giving them a warmth that made the entire room feel bathed in sunlight, even with the curtains drawn.

As we worked, I could feel something shifting inside me. This wasn’t just a project. It was a promise. A promise that this child would grow up surrounded by love, in a home where they would be safe, where the chaos and violence of the past wouldn’t touch them. I would protect them, just like I had protected Talia, Sasha, and Maxim.

The furniture arrived in the afternoon. The crib was white, with delicate carved details along the edges. We set it on the wall across from the window. The rocking chair was deep, rich mahogany, and I could already imagine Talia sitting there, holding the baby, and gently rocking them to sleep.

Sasha placed the stuffed animals, a collection of soft, cuddly creatures that Talia had already started gathering. Maxim was determined to arrange the books on the small shelves. I couldn't help but smile at how serious he was about it, carefully organizing them by size.

When we were done, I stood back and surveyed the room. It was perfect. The soft colors, the golden light, the feeling of warmth and safety, it was everything I had hoped for.

“Do you think Talia will like it?” Sasha asked, standing beside me, her eyes wide with anticipation.

I knelt beside her, pulling her into a hug. “I think she’s going to love it.”

By the time Sandy brought Talia back, the sun had set. The kids and I were waiting in the nursery, the lights dimmed just enough to give the room a soft glow. I heard the sound of Talia’s laughter, her voice filled with the same lightness it had carried ever since the wedding.

“Aleksandr?” she called, her voice echoing through the mansion. “We’re back! You won’t believe the things we found today.”

I stepped out of the nursery and saw her as she ascended the stairs. She was glowing, her cheeks flushed, and I smiled at the sight of her. Sandy followed closely behind.

“Kiska,” I said, meeting her at the top of the stairs and taking her hand in mine. “There’s something I want to show you.”

Her eyebrows furrowed, but she followed me without hesitation, her curiosity clearly piqued. I led her to the nursery door and paused for a moment.

“Close your eyes,” I said softly.

She laughed but did as I asked, her trust in me unwavering. I opened the door, slowly leading her inside, carefully guiding her through the threshold without her peeking.

“Okay,” I whispered, my hand on the small of her back. “You can open them.”

Her eyes swept over the room, taking in the soft blue walls, the clouds on the ceiling, the crib across from the window, the carefully arranged stuffed animals, and the rocking chair in the corner. I watched her expression change from surprise to love, and it nearly took my breath away.

“Aleksandr...” she whispered, her voice breaking slightly. “This is perfect.”

I pulled her close, pressing a kiss on her forehead. “It’s for you. For our baby.”

She looked around the room again, tears filling her eyes. “You did this while I was out?”

“Sasha and Maxim helped,” I said, glancing over at the kids standing by the crib. They were watching her with wide eyes, clearly eager for her approval.

Talia moved toward them, wrapping her arms around them and pulling them close. “Thank you,” she whispered, kissing the top of Sasha’s head and ruffling Maxim’s hair. “It’s beautiful.”

The kids beamed, and a warmth spread through me, the feeling of completeness that had been growing ever since the wedding now settling firmly in my chest.

“Now,” I said, clearing my throat, “how about we celebrate?”

Talia raised an eyebrow. “Celebrate?”

I nodded. “Family movie night. I thought we could all head to the theater room. Popcorn, ice cream, the works. What do you think?”

Her smile grew, and she nodded eagerly. “I think that sounds perfect.”

We spent the evening in the theater room, curled up on the large, comfortable sofas with blankets, pillows, and enough snacks to last a week. Sandy and Dimitri joined us, the room filled with laughter and the sound of Sasha and Maxim debating which movie we should watch.

In the end, we settled on an animated film that had Sasha and Maxim enthralled, their eyes glued to the screen as they munched on popcorn. Sandy sat beside me, smiling softly as she watched the kids, while Dimitri leaned back, pretending not to care, though I could see the amusement in his eyes.

Talia rested her head on my shoulder, her hand resting on her stomach, where our child grew with every passing day. I glanced down at her, pressing a kiss to her temple as the movie played on.

This was it. This was everything I had never known I wanted - a family, laughter, love. And now that I had it, I wasn't letting it go. We were a family in every sense of the word, bound together by something far stronger than I had ever imagined.

As the credits rolled, I looked around the room. This was part of my life now, and for the first time in as long as I could remember, I was truly happy.

“We did good,” Talia whispered, her voice soft and full of contentment.

I nodded, wrapping my arm around her. “Yes,” I said quietly. “We did.”

Chapter 36

Talia

I woke up to a tightness in my abdomen, sharp and sudden, pulling me from sleep. I blinked in the darkness, trying to catch my breath. It wasn't the first time I'd felt discomfort. After all, I was nearly nine months pregnant, but this was different. This wasn't the slow, dull ache I'd grown used to. It was sharp and intense, and something told me it was time.

I turned my head toward Aleksandr, still asleep beside me, his strong arm draped over my waist. I took a deep breath, trying to stay calm, and gently nudged him.

"Aleksandr," I whispered, my voice strained as another wave of pain hit. "Aleksandr, wake up."

He stirred, blinking groggily in the dim light of the bedroom. His hand tightened around me instinctively before his eyes fully opened. When he saw the look on my face, he sat up quickly, immediately alert.

"Kiska?" His voice was low, laced with concern. "What is it? Are you okay?"

I pressed his hand against my belly, where the tension had settled again. "I think it's time."

His eyes widened, and I saw the realization dawn on him. In an instant, he was out of bed, pulling on clothes and reaching for his phone with a sense of urgency that made

me laugh, despite the pain.

“You’re sure?” he asked, glancing back at me as he dialed Dr. Daria’s number.

I nodded, clutching my stomach as another contraction hit, stronger this time. “I’m sure.”

Aleksandr’s calm, commanding voice cut through the tension as he spoke with Dr. Daria, who was already preparing to meet us at the hospital. He hung up and then turned to me, his expression filled with determination. However, I could see the excitement and anxiety swirling behind his eyes.

“We need to go now,” he said, pulling me up gently and helping me into the clothes we’d laid out weeks ago for this exact moment. “Dr. Daria will meet us at the hospital. I’ll call the others.”

I took a deep breath, trying to steady myself as I stood. My body felt heavy, and each step reminded me that the baby was coming soon. Aleksandr kept his arm around me as he led me downstairs, moving quickly but carefully as if I were something fragile that could break at any moment.

In the car, the contractions came faster, each one pulling a soft moan from my lips. Aleksandr glanced at me repeatedly, his jaw clenched as if he was trying to stay calm for my sake but was ready to burst with worry.

“Just breathe,” he whispered, squeezing my hand as we sped through the quiet streets toward the hospital. “We’re almost there.”

I nodded, focusing on my breathing, trying to ride the waves of pain. It felt surreal, like all those months of waiting and preparing had led up to this one moment, and now that it was here, everything was moving so fast.

By the time we reached the hospital, the contractions were coming every few minutes, and I could barely catch my breath between them. Aleksandr parked quickly and then helped me out of the car, his arm steady around me as we made our way to the entrance.

Sandy followed closely behind us with Sasha and Maxim, who looked nervous.

“Sis, are you okay?” she asked, her hand gently brushing my arm as she stepped beside us.

I forced a smile, even though the pain was becoming overwhelming. “I’m okay. Just...ready for this baby to be here.”

She laughed softly, but her eyes were filled with sympathy. “You’ve got this. We’re all here for you.”

Inside the hospital, everything moved quickly. The nurses settled me into a room, and Dr. Daria arrived not long after. Her calm, professional demeanor was comforting. She checked on me, speaking in soothing tones, reassuring Aleksandr and me that everything was progressing as it should.

Hours passed, though they felt like days. The pain ebbed and flowed, each contraction pulling me deeper into the rhythm of labor. Aleksandr stayed by my side the entire time, holding my hand.

Sasha and Maxim came in and out of the room, their faces peeking around the door, sometimes running in to kiss me or ask how I was doing before Sandy pulled them back out. Dimitri and Nikolai had also arrived, pacing the hallway outside, both men looking uncharacteristically anxious. Even Olga had come, checking on me frequently.

At one point, the pain became almost unbearable, and I squeezed Aleksandr’s hand so

hard that I was sure I'd leave bruises. He didn't flinch, his eyes never leaving mine, even when I cried out.

"You're doing amazing," he whispered, his voice thick with emotion. "Just a little longer."

I nodded, though I was exhausted. My whole body was trembling, my muscles aching from the strain. But I knew he was right. I could feel it, the baby was coming.

Finally, after what felt like a year had passed, Dr. Daria told me it was time to push. I gathered all the strength I had left and did as she said, bearing down with everything I had, my entire world narrowing to that one moment and goal.

Aleksandr held my hand, whispering encouragement in my ear. His voice was the only thing anchoring me to reality.

And then I heard it - a small, wailing cry that filled the room. Our baby was here.

"It's a girl," Dr. Daria said, her voice filled with warmth as she lifted the tiny, wriggling form into the air for us to see.

I sobbed, unable to stop the tears from flowing as she placed the baby on my chest. Aleksandr leaned in, his hand shaking as he gently touched the baby's soft, wet skin. She was perfect. Tiny and fragile but full of life, her cries filled the room as she nestled against me.

"Angelina," I whispered, the name slipping from my lips as if it had been waiting for this moment all along. "Her name is Angelina."

Aleksandr smiled, his eyes wet with tears he didn't bother to hide. "Angelina," he echoed softly, pressing a kiss to my forehead before looking down at our daughter with awe in his eyes. "She's beautiful. Just like her mother."

We stayed like that for a while, just the three of us, lost in the moment. Angelina's cries slowly quieted as she settled against me, her tiny hands curling into fists as she slept.

Eventually, the door opened, and Sasha and Maxim burst into the room, followed by Sandy, Dimitri, and the others. Their expressions were excited, and their eyes filled with curiosity as they crowded around the bed, eager to meet the newest member of the family.

"She's so small," Maxim whispered, his eyes wide as he peered over the edge of the bed.

"She's perfect," Sasha added, her voice full of awe as she reached out to gently touch Angelina's tiny hand.

Aleksandr smiled at them both, pride radiating from him. "Do you want to hold her?"

Sasha and Maxim nodded eagerly, and Aleksandr carefully lifted Angelina from my arms, cradling her with a tenderness I hadn't known he was capable of. He handed her to Sasha first, his large hands steady as he guided hers.

Sasha's face lit up as she held the baby, her eyes shining joyfully. "Hi, Angelina," she whispered softly, her voice full of love. "I'm your big sister."

Maxim was next, though he seemed a bit more nervous. Aleksandr helped him hold Angelina, his hands trembling slightly as he stared at her. "She's so... tiny," he murmured, but his face broke into a smile as Angelina stirred in his arms.

Sandy was next, her eyes misty as she took Angelina from Maxim and held her close. "Oh, Talia," she whispered, her voice thick with emotion. "She's perfect."

Olga and Dimitri took their turns, smiling softly as they held Angelina. However,

Dimitri tried to play it off as if he wasn't completely smitten.

I watched all of them with my heart full, overwhelmed by the love and support surrounding us. This was our family, imperfect but filled with so much love that I couldn't imagine anything better.

Finally, Aleksandr took Angelina back, cradling her in his arms as he sat beside me. He looked down at her, his expression soft in a way that I rarely saw, his eyes filled with so much love.

"She's everything," he whispered, his voice low and rough with emotion. "You've given me everything."

I leaned against him, exhausted but happy, watching as Angelina's tiny chest rose and fell with each breath. "No," I whispered back. "We did this together. She's ours."

As I sat there, surrounded by the people I loved, with Aleksandr by my side and our daughter in his arms, I knew that this was it. This was what we had been building toward all along - our family.

Angelina was the final piece of the puzzle, and now that she was here, everything felt complete.