



Forbidden Bratva Virgin (Yezhov Bratva #6)

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Category: Urban

Description: I was supposed to tame the Bratva's monster. Instead, I became his obsession.

Fresh out of college, I'm a therapist determined to make a difference.

He's Miron Yezhov—twice my age, twice as cruel, and a leader of the Bratva with blood-stained hands.

He walks into my office for anger management therapy, but he's not here to be fixed.

He's here to take control.

His icy blue eyes strip me bare. His rough hands ignite desires I've never felt.

I know it's forbidden. Therapists don't cross this line. But with him, lines blur and boundaries crumble.

I try to resist, but he's relentless. Ruthless. Possessive.

Every whispered promise of destruction feels like temptation.

And when his violent world pulls me in, I'm left questioning everything.

He's engaged to another. I'm his forbidden obsession.

But he doesn't care about the rules—Miron gets what he wants.

Will his dark love destroy me? Or will I be the light that breaks his darkness?

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“They call us liars, cheats, morally reprehensible, and still shamelessly attend our functions and revel in the benefits. It’s appalling, the blatant hypocrisy displayed by these...these certain individuals who undermine my leadership. Look at them, the bloody bastards.”

Across the room, a middle-aged woman dressed like old money and cigarettes, leaning by the grand staircase, was looking at our table. Beside her, a young journalist took mental notes, her press badge tucked between the folds of her evening gown. The woman by the staircase caught Jeffery’s gaze and raised her glass with a smile that didn’t reach her eyes.

And with a smile even less friendly, Jeffery’s acknowledgment was icier, just a gesture with the tip of his glass toward her, before he turned back to us.

A scowl pressed deep lines at the corners of his mouth, the wrinkles on his forehead making an ugly fold when he rolled his grey eyes. He chugged down the sparkling white in his glass with the speed of light and grimaced like it was a mix of whiskey and lemon.

“That’s Ambassador Ruiz,” he pointed out.

We didn’t ask, but I’d known the man for more than a decade. Long enough to know he was going to keep talking....

“She thinks we don’t know it, but she’s fucking Governor Langley. Oh, and Senator Phil. Do I pity their wives? Maybe. Sometimes.”

...and talking.

“When the lights are on, you’d see her smiling at me like an early Santa with presents in May. But when the lights go off, the bitch has a butcher’s knife hovering behind my back.”

In the midst of the music and low, chatty buzz, I took a look at him. A good look at him, past the facade of the respectable man in the Ralph Lauren Purple Label Kent suit, past the cloud of irritation and false piety he wore as a mask, till I stared at the sly bastard with a skunk for a soul.

The seasoned politician had celebrated his sixty-seventh birthday recently, but his appearance told a different story.

His eyes, which were once bright and full of life when we’d first been introduced in my office, now seemed sunken, as if a weight bore down on him. His mouth hung limp, the streaks of gray in his hair dominated the shades of brown, and his skin appeared paler than usual. He looked like an eighty-year-old ball of pale beef.

“Tomorrow....” He was still talking. “One of ‘em—could be Ruiz, or any one of them here—will likely perpetuate further falsehoods through their stupid blogs to spread the toxicity of misinformation that I’m already trying to deal with.”

I was cautious not to spill a word and instead clenched my fingers and gritted my teeth. Having Damir constantly give me the “check” with his eyes wasn’t helping, either.

113 degrees Fahrenheit.

With one thumb caressing the flute and the rest of his fingers curled around the crystal stem, Damir threw his head back to finish the last of his champagne and

chuckled dryly. “I’ve been trying to stay in my lane, but I guess I can’t help it. What’s got you so riled up? It’s your evening. You’re one of those who put this together. You should be enjoying the night.”

Maybe it’s the fact that he’s a snake.

“Just some idiots trying to cause a scandal with my personal shit from the past,” Jeffery said. Then, he quickly added, “But it’s not going to mess up anything on our end, I can assure you.”

And by “our end,” the fool meant his business with us. Of course, it wasn’t going to mess up anything. Nobody was stupid enough to cause trouble on my turf and not be prepared to face dire consequences.

Jeffery Smith was one of the big dogs in politics and had worked with us the longest—precisely fifteen years since the Bratva gained his support.

It’d been good. More sunny days than stormy clouds working with him.

He’d kept his end of the bargain, offering some level of protection, giving blind spots for operations, and covering our tracks, and we’d kept ours, giving him money’s worth for a service well done. Business had been running smoothly, and before tonight, I’d worn a huge maniacal smile on my face.

That was until a little birdie perched on my window this morning with some irritating news.

“You should feel proud, Smith. You’re accomplished, living the life others would literally kill for. Take this place, for instance. Blackwood is one of the finest five-star hotels in the state. Making a hell load of money is bound to piss some people off. But it doesn’t matter what shit others are spewing; your eyes should stay focused at all

times.”

I shared a brief look with Damir for two reasons. One, we both knew he was buttering up Jeffery on purpose. And two....

Let’s just say Damir was giving the bastard a heads-up at the temperature shift in the room because he’d been seated right there, at the other end of my desk, when that birdie perched and knew I wasn’t going to let it slide.

149 degrees now.

Jeffery scoffed. “Don’t patronize me. We’re talking about power, and you’re finding hotels fancy.”

Safe to say, the old man didn’t catch the hint flashing like a neon sign.

“I’m just saying you’re not that bad. People talk shit all the time, and some others just want to kill you. But....” Damir caught my gaze, and his brows creased slightly before he returned his attention to the pining politician. “What exactly are the people saying?”

“You haven’t seen the papers or heard the news?”

Damir shook his head, and I killed the cold retort on my tongue—a ready reply to Jeffrey’s stupid question. My patience was running thin, and I was reaching the boiling point pretty fast. The needle had crossed 170 degrees and was speedily rising toward 200.

I knew what they were saying. Damir and I both knew. We knew why there was an uproar amongst the people and what the pressure from the media had caused him to do.

But the reason for his betrayal didn't matter to me. A betrayal was a betrayal.

Jeffrey, on the other hand, looked paler than ashes when his bony fingers combed through his hair. He sighed. "They're calling me a pedophile—which I am absolutely not. I fell in love.... We were in love—"

Talk about the saddest shit I've ever heard. Tell me a man's stupid without telling me a man's stupid.

"She was turning eighteen in two years, and the plan was to keep our heads low until then. But some nosy journalist blew our cover. PR tried to contain it, and for ten years, I've been good. Somehow, it's resurfaced, and the heat surrounding it is a lot worse than before."

"What did you expect? This is the Generation Z age, where everything is blown out of proportion on social media. Different narratives, stupid hashtags. Christ, you were fucking a sixteen-year-old."

Damir didn't hide the disgust in his tone or the clear depth of darkness in his eyes. His scowl was deeper now than his reaction the first time we heard the scoop, and his tightened grip on the flute told me he wanted to break a tooth maybe as much as I did.

"Yeah, I guess you wouldn't understand...."

No shit.

Jeffery chuckled dryly and tilted his head from our view to hide the wallowing sadness in his eyes. "Some fanatics are calling me the worst of God's creation to be in the seat of power."

"But aren't you?"

Jeffery's head perked up, and Damir just about froze and then sighed.

It was the first time I'd outrightly spoken since we arrived at the shitty party—the first words I'd said to Jeffrey since the start of the evening—and I thought I saw a flicker of fear cross his eyes before he masked it with the facade of over-confidence and annoyance.

“Aren't I what?”

I inclined in my chair with a shrug. “The worst of God's creation to be in the seat of power?”

A scowl settled on Jeffery's face, and he looked offended. Anger blazed in his gaze when he leaned forward, and when he hissed in a low growl, the brewing heat in my chest might have as well passed the 212-degree mark for all I cared.

“Says the devil incarnate himself, Miron Yezhov.”

“At least I don't pretend to be some saint.” I tilted my head and kept eye contact. “And I don't fuck children, idiot. A real man wouldn't even have the thought, fucking son-of-a bitch.”

“The hell is that supposed to mean? You, Miron, know better than anyone else that in our line of work, the number of saints we have is closer to the negatives, but I try to maintain clean hands where I can.”

And I officially blew beyond the limit of a steamer.

Intense anger coursed through my veins, and it felt like a raging inferno had come alive, consuming every fiber of my being. My heart pounded in my chest, pumping adrenaline-fueled blood through my arteries like a firehouse, threatening to burst free

in seconds, and I drew in short, ragged breaths while the air thickened.

“Damir, the bottle.”

Beside me, my lieutenant sighed. “Miron, don’t.”

“The fucking bottle, Damir,” I seethed through my teeth. “I need a drink.”

Reluctantly, Damir passed the capped bottle of wine, and my fingers curled around the cold neck, waiting for that golden opportunity to pour myself a drink.

Jeffery’s eyes were on my face, with nostrils flared and his teeth gritted like a wild animal. The bastard wasn’t focused, which was good.

“Maintaining clean hands, you said? Was taking an eager jump on Victoria Clarisse’s offer one way to do that last night?”

The look of shock on his face was all the confirmation I needed to know the bastard accepted the offer to team up with the Italians—for a hefty price, of course. He would provide them with information on the Bratva’s business, open new channels for them to expand their reach, and they’d protect him and help quell the pressure from the media, erasing the problem as if it didn’t exist.

The legs of my chair noisily scraped the floor, dragging some attention as I rose to my feet.

Never had I been more pleased that I towered over someone with an intimidating height, and I relished in the sick satisfaction of knowing I was about to pass judgment on another man.

“You thought you could be the pro and play on two fields? Function under the

Familiga and Bratva coverage, and I wouldn't fucking find out?"

Jeffery opened his mouth, no doubt ready to spit some flimsy excuse I wasn't ready to hear.

But before a word could form on his tongue, I swung hard and didn't flinch when I felt the base of the bottle connect with hard skull.

Two women close by released earsplitting screams at the sight of the politician's bloodied head dropping on the table and the rest of his body growing limp.

Slowly, starting from a teasing trickle, a thick flow of crimson rolled from his head, matting the gray strands of hair to his scalp, and seeped between the fancy gold tablecloths. He lay there, eyes closed, unmoving, unconscious. And yet, I thought I didn't hit hard enough to knock him out of his body for the rest of eternity.

Damir rubbed between his eyes and sagged his shoulders, more exhausted with putting up with me than anything. But I didn't care. Not about him, the mass hysteria that suddenly erupted in the room, or the number of multiple people screaming for security at once.

Unscrewing the cap on the bottle, I tipped it over and watched the red liquid slosh over his face, creating a fine mix with the dark hue of red that pooled underneath his cheeks.

"Hypocrites irritate me, Jeffery, and I hate fucking traitors."

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“Oh, bless your heart, dear. You’re so pure and innocent and beautiful. These things happen, I’m telling you, and I’m not...I’m not crazy. My family can’t stand me. They say it’s all cooked up in my head, but it’s really not.”

Slowly, I nodded. “Right. Uh-huh.” Then, I lowered my eyes to take more notes on my iPad. “Sure, these things happen.”

An internal battle waged inside me. The thinnest thread that held me back from breaking out in a full ear-to-ear grin was the respect of my profession. One slip-up and an emotionally hurt client would ensure I received more queries than recommendation letters. I had worked too hard to let that happen. Plus, he had thirty minutes left on the clock—which wasn’t a lot of time—so I gave myself a mental scolding and regained my composure.

Client (Mr. Harold Plumley) reports feeling anxious and fearful, stating, “My cat is conspiring against me.” His voice was raised, and he exhibited agitated body language. He believes that his cat watches him closely and plots to harm him. Further exploration of these thoughts and feelings is needed.

Crossing one leg over the other, I looked up, replacing my enthused smile with a warm and genuine one. “And you’re not crazy, Harold. We’ve been through this already.”

That was always the first step after commencing the session: Reign in their sanity while you still can.

The old man shook his head worriedly, the doubt clear on his face when he said, “But

deep down, I know you don't believe me, Ms. Sinclair.”

But it was hard, was it not?

Who would instantly believe that a cat's conspiring to kill its owner?

However, behind the backdrop of the bizarre, the sadness in Harold's eyes when he spoke, his restless and fidgety fingers constantly picking at the buttons on his old charcoal black coat, and the subtle hint of resignation laced in his tone fully expressed the depth of emotional turmoil he was going through.

There was a deep fear and anxiety rooted in the very core of this man, and that fear drove him here, to me. Like his family, he felt I didn't believe him. He thought he was going crazy but still fiercely esteemed his cat as his enemy.

And above all, this man was still seated on that dull velvet green settee for one thing: help.

In the midst of the absurdity, Mr. Harold Plumley wanted help, and he'd paid my professional fees because he thought I could do something about it, even if that meant suggesting an option of exorcising the kitty.

I massaged my temple and heaved a sigh. Now, I was no miracle worker, but....

“Let's start again, shall we, Harold?” And again, for the hundredth time in less than an hour, I offered a smile. “Tell me everything. I want to know what cards your cat has got up its sleeves.”

Harold visibly brightened, like a child who'd been gifted a lollipop. Life flowed through his eyes, and he narrated his story with more vibrancy than I'd seen in a sixty-year-old man.

While he dramatically fired off tales featuring his famous cat knocking over his coffee or mysteriously leaving scratch marks on the furniture, I couldn't help the lurking thought that probed at the back of my mind.

"Uh-huh." I nodded, maintaining the plastic smile. For the next twenty minutes, it wasn't allowed to falter.

Harold was sweet and all, and I absolutely treasured each and every opportunity I had to converse with people like him. But I wasn't sure how much longer I could keep up with the quirky clients and goofy stories. If it wasn't a conspiring cat tale, then the monkeys in some continents were going extinct. Or if it wasn't either of those, then I found myself listening to unending stories of karma and curses and the lady with the hood and magic ball who was after a client's destiny.

How much was I being paid to sit through all of that?

Not enough, that's for sure.

As a certified therapist, with more than enough degrees to prove my qualification, I was much more deserving of real cases to tackle. A greater life called my name. More hard-nut cases-slash-clients were just waiting for me beyond the four walls of my current reality.

The timer on my iPad went off, jolting me back, and coincidentally, Harold concluded his narration.

I kept the iPad aside with one leg crossed over the other. "Okay, Harold, I hear you. However, we're going to try a little something different."

"Different?"

“Oh, yes. Just a tweak on your expectations. It’ll be somewhat of a test. So, I’m not going to recommend your cat to go see a priest, but I will recommend....”

I started with a list of things Harold could do, highlighting the ultimate trick: cat care.

By the time I was done, he looked skeptical, but I was positive that it would cure whatever problems the poor kitty had encountered due to his current living conditions with a frightened owner.

“Honestly, your cat might be suffering from the effects of neglect and is doing all it can to get your attention. Let’s try feeding it more often and playing, amongst the other things I mentioned, and we’ll see how that works out during our next session.”

“I’m not sure, but...whatever you say, Ms. Sinclair. Whatever you say.”

The moment Mr. Harold Plumley was up and out of my office, the smile slipped off my face, and I marched down to the program director’s office, fueled by the determination to spill my guts. Otherwise, I was going to burst, either in tears or frustration. Or maybe both.

Through the partially transparent glass walls gleaming in the light, I found her seated, her face almost buried in the screen of her computer and her fingers rapidly clicking away on the keyboard.

Three rapid knocks on the door disconnected her attention, and she raised her head. When our eyes met, a small smile settled on her red-painted lips, and she gave a curt nod, granting me permission to enter.

“Dr. Greystone. Good day, ma’am.” I shut the door behind me and momentarily got

distracted by the ambiance of her office.

It got to me every single time I stepped foot through her door—all of it. This included the lights and their immediate calming effect intentionally installed for the sake of the clients, the cool air from the air-conditioning, the stunning view of the city from the tall windows, her small touches of life with abstract landscape paintings, and a healthy green potted plant. But most of all, how it perfectly suited her. The beautiful, kind, warm, and yet no-nonsense woman who controlled the activities that went on in this building. She was a huge inspiration for me to dream of becoming a powerful and successful career woman who was well-respected by everyone.

I clasped my fingers together, composing myself and the words that would flow from my mouth while ignoring the stings of my fingernails biting into my skin.

She leaned backward on her chair with folded arms across her bosom and a tease in her grin. “We’ve talked about the formalities, Hazel.”

If I could have a look in the mirror, I knew for a fact that my cheeks and neck had the glow of a ripened cherry.

In addition to her competence and charisma, she was stunning—front-page-magazine-worthy. That sort of beauty. She had everything other women struggled to get: the perfect slender hourglass figure, blue ethereal eyes, hair that spilled over her shoulders for days, and an incredible bone structure.

At thirty-four, she didn’t look a day older than twenty-five, and I dared to rate her a solid fifteen over ten.

If she decided to ditch this profession and quit helping people, she’d land a good deal overnight in the entertainment or fashion industry. And with that commanding aura, she was sure to boss her way to the front lines.

“I’m sorry.” I cleared my throat. “Amelia.”

Chuckling, she gestured to the chair across her desk. “Have a seat and tell me how it went today with Mr. Plumley.”

Back to earth and to the real reason I came here. The weight on my chest suddenly felt heavier than it was seconds ago.

I clutched the edge of the desk, reeling my chair closer. Then, I swallowed. “Amelia, I love my job.”

“I’ll take that as an ‘it didn’t go well.’” The brightness in her eyes dimmed considerably, and she shook her head. “I knew he was going to be a handful, but I thought you’d be able to handle—”

“No, no, please. It did go well. It did.” I nearly bit my tongue. How do I tell her? “It’s just...how do I put this?”

“Put it exactly the way it is. I’m listening.”

And that was the problem: Amelia Greystone was listening. Every fiber of her being was paying rapt attention, especially with those intense eyes that bore deep into your soul, just waiting for one wrong slip-up before she could claim it.

Beads of sweat dotted the edges of my hairline, and I began to find it a bit difficult to breathe.

“I...gosh, I—I can’t continue like this.”

Phew!

There! I said it, didn't I?

It wasn't so hard, was it?

Oh, it was. And technically, I didn't say anything.

Amelia looked even more confused, and the haze clouding her features was more intimidating. "I don't understand you. You say you love your job, but you can't continue? Are you...? Is this an oral resignation?"

"God, no!" My hands flew to my chest to calm my racing heart, and I let out a nervous chuckle. "I am not quitting this job. I'm just saying I'm tired of feeling stuck on this level. Don't get me wrong; I enjoy working with the elderly and helping them overcome their traumas and...stuff. That's practically my job, right? To help them. But—"

"But?"

"Amelia, I need a challenge. It feels like I'm repeating kindergarten with each one of them that walks in through my doors with the same or similar story."

Now, I'd said it.

And Amelia heard the desperation and plea in my voice. She straightened up and ran her fingers through her hair.

"A challenge?"

"Yes, a challenge. Something more...more groundbreaking, if I must say. I need a hard nut to crack. I desire to have a real breakthrough with a person that society looks at as impossible to fix."

“And Mr. Harold Plumley isn’t challenging enough?”

Puh-lease.

“Challenging enough?” I almost scoffed in her face. “His cat’s conspiring to harm him? His cat. Some extra playtime and fish biscuits will rekindle their relationship just like that. And a few weeks ago, I had to console a client who was too scared to bring our sessions to a final close. She was scared to leave me.”

Amelia’s perfectly lasered eyebrows perked up, and I realized she was waiting for me to continue.

I sighed. “That was the problem: getting overly attached to things and people she likes. Now, imagine the extent of what I had to deal with when she started therapy. The point is, I can’t. I cannot keep up with that. Trust me, I’m ready for the next level.”

She smiled at me, and the warmth in it reminded me of my session with Harold. I shuddered. I didn’t need fake pity.

“Hazel, look. You’re fantastic. You’re great, actually. The first time I saw you, I liked you. The clients share similar thoughts....”

She was stalling; that much was clear. The real message had not been delivered yet, and that was what I patiently waited to hear.

“It’s just—”

“It’s just what?”

Amelia held my gaze, like a doctor preparing herself to deliver bad news. “You’re

young.”

“Great! Never knew being twenty-four would one day be a death sentence.”

She didn’t believe I was ready.

“No, hear me out. I’m not only referring to your age. I’ve been where you are before. I know what it feels like to believe you’re ready for something bigger. But you have to understand that these goofy lighter cases are all part of the process for you to become stronger in this field. No doubt, you’re gifted. You’ve got the instincts and the art. Sometimes, I find myself wanting to learn your methods.”

“There’s a but , isn’t there?”

Amelia exhaled through her smile. “You need more experience.”

“I have qualifications, Amelia.”

“ Experience, Hazel,” she reemphasized. “You might have the documents testifying that you’re overripe for recommendations, promotions, and whatnots, but experience speaks louder volumes. It makes your authenticity infallible. Serious cases require trust, and trust takes time.”

“And you trusted me from the first time you met me, didn’t you? You believed I could handle Meryl Peters, the woman who believed the government was watching her every move. If you didn’t, you’d have never given me that job. Or the one after that. Or the other thirty-nine jobs after that, and now, Mr. Harold Plumley.”

Dropping my pride, I scrambled closer, letting her see how much I needed this breakout. It didn’t matter that I was almost groveling on my knees; I wanted her to know that she could—

“—trust me, Amelia. You can trust me. I promise nothing and no one will be too difficult for me to handle. I’ve got this.”

To say she looked unbelieving would have been the understatement of the year, but when I watched a bit of her resolve chip off and a fierce glint of hope settle in her gaze, I remembered another thing I liked about her.

Amelia Greystone was a risk-taker.

“Fine. I won’t make any promises, but I’ll see what I can do. If you say you’re ready, I’ll take your word for it. And if you mess up, Hazel.” She shrugged. “You’re out.”

A wave of happiness hit me like a tsunami. It didn’t matter that my stubbornness and determination could cost me a job I’d worked so hard to get. Knowing she would consider my request was more than enough for me.

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“I don’t know what’s more fucked up: sitting here before a real-life judge, or watching the smirk on your face grow wider and wider.”

I peeled my eyes away from the boring brown-colored wooden structure where the judge sat tall, with her black robe draping over the bench. It was the center of attraction in the room—the center that thought it had the power to decide my fate. Such a comical relief to watch.

Meanwhile, Damir’s eyes held restrained anger when our gazes locked, and the storm in his matched the suit that fitted him perfectly. One of the many gifts I’d given him for his loyalty.

He flexed a muscle and clamped down his jaw before whispering. “Respectfully, why is any of this funny to you?”

At the left wing of the courtroom, Jeffery sat forward with a thick white bandage wrapped around his head, glaring intensely. The sight of his red, swollen face and childlike scowl was amusing. I wiggled my fingers and looked away.

“Do you see me laughing, Damir?”

If we weren’t in an ongoing court session, I just might have been wiping happy tears from my eyes.

“Fuck.” He blew out a breath. “You know what I mean. The evidence against you is irrefutable. You saw them, didn’t you? The number of eyewitnesses the prosecution had lined up, willing to testify. Miron, Christ. Jeffery is literally before the judge,

wrapped in a fucking bandage. It's even a miracle he survived that."

Disinterested, I arched a brow. "And you are, what, happy he survived?"

"Happy?" He scoffed. "I'm fucking elated."

I dismissed him with a small hovering smile, but apparently, courtrooms appeared to mess with Damir's reign over his emotions.

"Aren't you worried that things could turn south?"

Worried?

"Let me see...." I folded my arms across my chest, tilted back, and paused for a moment to ponder on his word choice.

I had to give it to him; for a man who could snap another grown man's neck in fifteen seconds and of a dozen men with his fingers on the trigger and eyes closed, he'd maintained his capacity to care about the slightest details I considered insignificant.

Linking my fingers under my chin, I shook my head, and the smirk on my face did grow wider. "No, I am not. I'm not worried about anything. For men like me— like us —the system bends in our favor."

Briefly burying his face in his hands, Damir scoffed. "Maybe, sometimes, I want your confidence. Do you know how many times I've almost shit my pants because of the possibilities?"

He was being sarcastic. My confidence had nothing to do with the way he looked at me like I was crazy. But I was used to it now; almost everyone thought I was a maniac. And maybe I was.

I patted him on the shoulder. “The day you shit your pants like a coward, pigs will fly. Save the tears, Damir. I’m not going to prison.”

“One count of aggravated assault and another for felony battery. This is a high-stakes situation. I know you’re invincible, but Jeffery knows how to pull strings.”

“Maybe. But I’m the master puppeteer.”

Damir narrowed his eyes. “Miron, you could go to prison.”

“And yet, I’m walking out of here with a slap on the wrist and nothing more. If you don’t trust me, trust that Viktor won’t mess this up.”

The best part was that Damir did trust me. Sometimes, more than he trusted anyone else in the world, including himself. He wasn’t convinced about this case but didn’t press. He knew when to drop it, and for that, he’d gained a bit of my respect.

We both leaned back, watching and waiting, when Viktor rose to his full height to address the court and present his—or rather, my— defense.

Viktor was one of the most formidable attorneys in the legal profession. Fully experienced, ruthless when he needed to be, and great at his job, with a ten-star rating—if that was permitted. And not only was he completely immersed in the knowledge of the law, he knew the buttons to push for its perfect manipulation.

So, when he brushed a piece of lint off his navy-blue suit, flexed his muscles, arranged his glasses on the bridge of his nose, and began speaking, I knew I was going to have the judge eating out of my palm in seconds.

“Your Honor.” His posh voice bounced off the imposing traditional courtroom walls, and I suppressed a smile at the sudden attention it commanded. “The prosecution

would have you believe that my client is a cold-blooded individual, devoid of remorse. But I implore you to consider the circumstances leading to this moment. My client has, no doubt, been assessed to have uncontrollable anger issues, but, as the old saying goes, ‘There is no smoke without fire.’ His explosive temper stems from a deep-rooted trauma. And with that said, kindly permit me, Your Honor, to start with the subject of Miron Yezhov’s father.”

An impact akin to the feeling of a sledgehammer crashing into the walls of my chest instantly consumed me. Just for a second, I was left breathless and reeling, like a massive unforgiving weight came crashing down, squeezing the air from my lungs and making my heart feel like it’d been punched.

“Miron?”

I glanced to my side only long enough to icily dismiss the lingering question in Damir’s raised brow and steely gaze.

At the moment, I was unsure what I had done to give my unease away— Oh, right. It was the fucking grin. Must have faded— but Damir relaxed almost immediately when I put back on the armor.

Viktor was still talking when I turned back to him.

“...and he died before his eyes. At the time, my client was only a child. I don’t intend to waste the time of this honorable court by highlighting the psychological and emotional short and long-term effects that such an incident could have on any young person when it is a known fact that we are already acquainted with. It should be expected that such a child might not function as properly as his or her peers in society. My client seated right here is an example of such a case being overlooked....”

Before attending the court session today, I'd provided Viktor with all the information and details he considered relevant for this case, and I expected that he'd use whatever he had received as a weapon for my defense. I had expected more legal-related gibberish arguments, more gavel pounding, more flipping of papers and systematic things only the lawyers understood.

What I hadn't expected was to listen to Viktor use his skills to weave a narrative of my past into present existence or feel this strange tug that pulled me back into a time I thought I had successfully buried in a capsule, never to be reminded of again.

"His death shaped him into this...this man, who is now guarded, mistrusting, and a literal representation of a short fuse just waiting to blow. Regardless, he is just a man who was deeply affected by his loss, like any other human being could be. His anger dysregulation is a defense mechanism, not malice."

About that perspective on the defense mechanism, I wasn't sure. But the judge seemed to be eating it up. Or not. Her thoughts were difficult to decipher through her stone-cold expression.

Keeping his eyes on the judge, Damir leaned into me. "You think she's buying it?"

"What in the hell is wrong with you today?" I was starting to believe he was on something that was making him extra jittery, but the problem was, Damir didn't snuff that shit. Still, his constant prodding was starting to grate my nerves. And my irritation had nothing to do with a defense mechanism.

"I don't think anything. I know I'm walking out of here without cuffs on my wrist. That's for the last time, Damir."

Message passed loud and clear.

He nodded in understanding and backed off.

“My client, as we know, is a controversial and, if I must add, powerful figure. He does understand the gravity of his explosive outbursts and has made efforts to seek improvement in anger management. I will leave my submission at that, Your Honor.”

Viktor passed me a hopeful glance before resuming his seat while the judge announced a fifteen-minute recess before she gave her judgment.

Time passed rather quickly, and we spent it in utter silence. Bothering Viktor with questions or small talk was unnecessary, while Damir, on the other hand, seemed to have gotten himself back. Having a conversation seemed to be the last thing on his mind as he sat stiffly on the chair, scrolling through his phone with the unflappable expression I was used to seeing on him.

Before long, fifteen minutes were up, and we were on our feet, rising as the judge strode in.

The moment she sat down, her eagle eyes locked me in as a target.

“Mr. Yezhov.”

Slightly caught off-guard by her forwardness of bypassing Viktor and addressing me directly, I rose to my feet. “Um, yes. Yes, Your Honor.”

“The court acknowledges the efforts you have made toward managing your temper. However, your history of violent altercations presented by the prosecution remains a matter of serious concern. While this court recognizes the psychological impact a loss like yours had on your emotional and social childhood development, it also recognizes a pattern—one that must be addressed through structured intervention. And that is why, as tough as this decision is, I am not putting you behind bars.”

Triumph.

I could feel the corner of my lips rising and a grin steadily spreading across my cheeks....

“However, you are hereby mandated to attend regular therapy sessions—”

The smirk melted off my face faster than a sheet of ice being thrown into a furnace.

“Did she say therapy?” I overheard Damir ask Viktor.

“—with a licensed mental health professional. These sessions shall occur no less than once per week for a minimum of one year. You are required to provide documented proof of attendance and progress reports from your assigned therapist or the licensed clinical center in which the therapist operates to this court on a bi-monthly basis.”

I shook my head, attempting to snap out of the trance I’d fallen into because her pronouncement couldn’t be real. Therapy ? No. No way. This center of authority had to be out of her mind to think I was going to sit on some chair to spill my guts to a complete stranger. It had to be a joke. It had to be—

“—a goddamn fucking mistake!”

The judge’s eyes narrowed to slits. “Excuse me?” Then, with lightning speed, she faced Viktor. “Mr. Reznikov, I’m going to let that outburst slide given the circumstances, but get your client under control before I change my mind and charge him for contempt of court.”

“Yes, Your Honor.” He nodded, cursed under his breath, and whispered into my ear with rapid-fire, “Miron, please. You cannot interrupt her delivery, and you most certainly cannot oppose it that way. Besides, this is the best shot we’ve got to keep

the cuffs off.”

I ignored him and stared straight into the judge’s eyes while she rattled off something about consequences.

“Failure to comply with this order—whether by missing scheduled sessions, refusing to engage in participation, or failing to submit required documentation—will result in legal consequences. Let this serve as your formal warning, Mr. Yezhov. The court expects full compliance and will not tolerate negligence or defiance in this matter. This order is issued in the interest of your rehabilitation and the safety of those around you.”

Silence reigned in the room while I was on the verge of losing my cool.

Damir saw my restraint—Viktor did, too—and the judge looked at me like she eagerly waited for the slightest reason to pronounce a prison sentence.

That spurred me to kill the temptation to smash something, and exhibiting any more lack of control over my emotions wasn’t going to help my case. There was nothing I could do at the moment but pretend to go along with it.

Talk about walking out of this place with a mere slap on the wrist. The word “therapy” was more than just a goddamn bruise on my ego.

Roughly, I sat back on my chair and finally exhaled the pent-up internal heat under my breath. “As the court fucking pleases then.”

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I switched off the lights, double-checked the locks on the windows and my desk, and was on my way out of the office when my phone buzzed in my bag. I didn't immediately answer because a nagging voice at the back of my head said it could be my mother.

There was absolutely nothing wrong with my mother's calls. In fact, she was the sweetest and most loving person I knew in the world. But, somehow, that call of affection always came at the wrong time and ended with the same question: So, when are you finally walking down the aisle?

God knew I loved her, but sometimes, she could be exhausting, and at the moment, I didn't particularly have the mental strength to go through that line of questioning.

However, the buzzing didn't stop, and I might have as well muttered some colorful words under my breath.

My goodness.

Placing the cold steel key between my lips and fisting the Chanel bag with one hand, I rummaged through its contents until my fingers tapped the soft boring green pouch protecting my phone. I pulled out the vibrating device, somewhat surprised to see Dr. Amelia Greystone flashing on the screen.

I pressed the phone between my shoulder and cheek, focusing on locking the door. "Hello, ma'am— Amelia ?"

"Are you out of the clinic yet?"

“Uh...” Looking around at nothing in particular, I dropped the key into my bag with creased brows. “No? Um, I mean, not yet. I was just locking up, but I’m still here. Is there a problem?”

At the other end of the line, I thought I heard her exhale a strangled chuckle, but I couldn’t be sure. “It’s something like that, but not what you’re thinking. I know it’s past your closing hour, but I’ll need you to make a quick stop at my office now. I’ve got something to show you.”

“Sure. I’ll be there in a sec.”

The minute Amelia disconnected the call, my mind went into a spinning mess. Different scenarios of many things that could have suddenly gone wrong started playing like a horror movie in my head, but I maintained control over my breathing and squeezed my trembling fingers into fists.

It was normal for me to feel agitated, right?

Only two days ago, I’d practically stormed into her office, saying to her face that the opportunities and cases she’d given me to handle felt like a kindergartner’s playground. I believe I’d demanded “ more serious work.” Since then, I’d neither heard Amelia’s voice nor seen her face. And the first time I actually did, after two long days, she called to say there was a problem.

Wonderful.

With a gulp, I slowly walked down the corridors. My heart was racing with the speed of a hunting cheetah, and I wasn’t feeling as confident as I had been two days before.

Approaching her office, I spotted Amelia through the glass walls, hunched over her desktop computer and a bunch of paperwork, with her hair dangling below her

shoulders. I swallowed and dropped three light knocks on the door in quick succession.

“Hazel?” she called from inside, and I turned the knob to poke my head through the gap. She offered a small smile. “Please, come in. Take a seat.”

I lowered myself onto the chair and forced my mind to relax under the pressure of the suffocating silence that followed. For a while, the only sounds in the room emanated from her fingers tapping fast and hard on the white keyboard. With her intent gaze on the screen and lips drawn in a grim line, I dreaded breaking the silence, but the suspense was threatening to kill me.

“So... Amelia, I’m truly, very sorry to interrupt whatever it is you’re doing, but I’m nervous.” I blew out a light chuckle to add emphasis and visibly relaxed when she looked up with a small smile. “I hope I’m not the one in trouble.”

“I told you already.” She plopped back on her chair, rubbing her temple with the grimace of an exhausted workaholic. “It’s nothing like that. There’s a problem, all right, but it’s one I want you to handle.”

I opened my mouth. Then, I shut it.

What?

My skin tingled as a sudden surge of electric energy coursed through my veins, like a spark igniting a flame. I felt my heart rate accelerate. Excitement and nerves intertwined, creating a thrilling blend of emotions I fought hard to contain. I hadn’t even heard her out yet, and I needed to hear the full thing before my elation got the best of me.

Masking my joy, I sat forward and proceeded with caution. “You have a problem you

want me to handle?”

It wouldn't be the first time the CEO of Prime Care Medical Center wanted me to handle a responsibility. It was my job, the exact work I was paid to do. However, it was certainly the first time she referred to such responsibility as a problem .

Amelia shifted in her chair, reached for a thin blue folder beside her computer, and handed it to me. “You wanted a challenge, didn't you? Well, congratulations, Hazel Sinclair. You've landed yourself a very tough nut to crack.”

That could only mean one thing: I was graduating from kindergarten.

I was smiling so hard that my cheekbones ached, and the buzzing sensation in my chest made me want to scream and roll on the floor with hysterical laughter. The folder in my hands felt like carrying tons of gold medals. Gold medals that belonged to me .

Before I opened the folder jacket, I inhaled a long breath of triumph. Gosh, if my mother could see me now, she would go right ahead and tell me to stop being dramatic.

Quickly, I scanned through the biographical data report of our tough-nut client, taking note of the necessary details: the client's personal information, medical, family, and social history, and additional information.

NAME: Miron Yezhov

DATE OF BIRTH (MM/DD/YY): March 12, 1984

PLACE OF BIRTH: Village of Pushkin, Leningrad Oblast, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (Saint Petersburg Oblast, Russia)

AGE: 41

Then, I flipped back to the personal information, and the client's photograph that was attached made me pause. The truth was, he looked anything but forty-one. If I had to guess, I'd have left it at thirty, or thirty-five, maybe.

The photograph was clear enough, capturing even the most minute details of the man. His eyes were like sapphires, the light blue hue as mesmerizing as the very essence of the sky. His hair was a rich, dirty honey-blond, which fell across his forehead in loose, tousled waves and framed his face, perfectly accentuating the striking angles of his bone structure. And it was the most masterful blend of elegance and rugged masculinity I'd ever seen in a human being. With his nose, straight and proud, which stood sentinel over his full lips, and the sharp definition of his jawline, honed from the finest granite, the man was a work of art. One of God's best, to be precise.

What problems could this charming creature possibly have?

"Hazel, I know you're happy about this, but...." Amelia's voice forced my eyes away from the handsome sculpt of a man to focus on her instead, and she looked worried. "This is a classified Level One folder. Being unprofessional, I'd tag it a 'Code Red.'"

Closing the folder gently, I slid it back on the table with creased brows and a shrug. "A Code Red? Isn't that a bit, I don't know, too serious a tag for a client?"

"You think I am being overly dramatic, don't you?"

My mother would have thought she was being overly dramatic. I just wondered why she seemed so stressed out by this one problem. Her reputation was a great one, and it preceded her. Prima Care was one of the best private clinics in the country. There was almost nothing and no one we couldn't take good care of.

When I didn't say anything, she misread my silence and continued with a deep sigh. "Fine. Maybe I am being over the top about this one, but that's because he's my cousin, and I have known Miron all my life. Let me tell you, he's not an easy one. It takes a lot, Hazel, and I mean a lot of patience to work and deal with him."

Ah, a relative. Family ties. That revelation was... interesting. When I looked more closely, I thought I could spot a few resemblances, other than the most obvious attractiveness that ran in their blood. But that didn't explain the conflict. Amelia wasn't saying everything, and that piqued my interest.

"Please tell me, what exactly am I dealing with?"

She dragged a hand down her face. "Anger management issues."

A forty-one-year-old with anger management issues?

I sucked in a sharp breath. I believed the picture was becoming clearer. "You're putting it lightly, aren't you?"

"Yes, Hazel, I am," she sighed. "Miron Yezhov has explosive tempers and emotional volatility. Clinically speaking, I suspect it's IED, but don't ever tell him that to his face. Please. Want to know the reason he's coming here? By court order, after he narrowly escaped jail time for one count of aggravated assault and felony battery against Jeffery Smith."

"Jeffery Smith? The politician?"

She nodded.

My eyes were as wide as saucers now, and as much as I was sure I didn't want to know—but would still find out sooner or later—I had to ask. "What did he do?"

“He thrashed the man’s head with a hundred-thousand-dollar bottle of wine at a social event.”

Goodness. He thrashed the man’s— did she say aggravated assault? Wasn’t that a charge for attempted murder?

My stomach dipped so low, and I thought I heard the healthy pounding of my heart racing in my ears. Glancing at his folder, sitting pretty on the desk, it now felt like I had been given a ton of bricks to carry. I didn’t even realize I almost forgot to breathe until Amelia waved a hand in my face.

“Hey, are you okay? You’re looking a little blue.”

“Me? Looking blue?” I laughed, but we both knew I sounded like a choking weasel.

“No, I’m good. I’m perfectly fine. It’s just that I...this is—”

“I know this will be your first time on a case like this, but don’t be—don’t be intimidated, okay? I will tell you now: He is going to be a lot of work. He will put your patience and level of intelligence to the test; that’s for sure. But one thing he won’t do is suddenly explode in your office. He knows what will happen if we send a bad report back to the court on his behavior and progress.”

Not exploding in my office? That wasn’t a promise. She couldn’t be sure of that. The man swung a bottle across another man’s head in the presence of probably a hundred others—attacking someone old enough to be my grandfather. Good Lord! It was surely a miracle he even survived to press charges.

Now, I wasn’t so sure about the joy I felt earlier when she informed me about the challenge. This wasn’t a Congratulations situation. It was more of a “Good Luck, Hazel! You’re going to need plenty of it.”

Amelia let out a long breath and shook her head, and before she said it, I saw it in her eyes—the subtle withdrawal. “Cassie will be available to shuffle. Hazel, I can take this back if you’re not—”

“I am. I am sure.” I announced it with renewed vigor, but a war still waged in my head. The war of deciding how armed and prepared I was to enter into this battle. It might have been my first Harvard-standard type of case, but I’d worked too hard to give up before even starting.

So, I was going to make sure that an opportunity like this certainly wouldn’t be my last. I was going to prove myself and make sure of it.

Rising to my feet, I gave Amelia the brightest and most encouraging smile I had ever given anyone. “I can handle this, Amelia. I said it before, and I’ll repeat it again: Nothing and no one is too difficult. I am truly grateful to you for this opportunity. I promise I won’t let you down.”

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Damir angled his head to the side, giving way to the smooth sailing of the crystal tumbler through the air until it crashed against the wall. Even the sight of the crystal shards of glass and droplets of strong whiskey scattering onto the carpet spiked my irritation.

He glanced over his shoulder, and when he turned back to me with an indecipherable expression, I narrowed my eyes at him. All it would have taken was five seconds. If he hadn't moved fast enough, if he was five seconds late, his face might have been that wall instead. Yet, he didn't flinch.

"That's the fifth one. How many more are going to suffer the same fate before you finally accept it?"

I picked up another glass, filled it, and inclined back in my chair. "Get out of my office, Damir. I don't need you to be my voice of reason, and I certainly don't need you here."

We both knew he wasn't going to leave. The man was as headstrong as a bull. Damir's eyes hardened, and the corners of his lips tightened with a frown. Cinching his denim jacket tighter, he inched forward with a determination to talk some sense into me.

"Miron, respectfully—"

He ducked, cutting the rest of his words off as I swung my arm high above his head and slammed my hands on the desk at the same time the glass crashed against the wall behind him.

Quietly, he murmured, “And that’s the sixth one,” under his breath.

“Goddamn it, Damir. Get the fuck out of my office already! Every bloody time ‘respectfully’ comes out of your mouth, you already fucking know you’re about to bloody disrespect me by saying shit. I told you already; I don’t want you to be my voice of reason. Christ! This is my shit to figure out, and I will do it by my goddamn self. I don’t need your lectures.”

“I am not here to lecture you, but we both know you’re not trying to figure anything out. The best you can do is to stop avoiding it and face the music.”

Damir didn’t shout back. The volume of his voice remained steady, and his tone was eerily calm. But I heard the silent waves of rage he held back. I saw the subtle flex of his jaw, the slow trembling of his tight fists, and the underlying secret desire to lay a solid one on me. If it were anyone else seated across from me, in that position, right now, he would have been folded up on the floor, choking in his own blood, fifteen seconds earlier.

Stretching forward again, I took my eyes off him and filled another tumbler. “Fucking leave.”

“You will go to prison, Miron.”

“Damir....” It was a warning. One that he so blatantly ignored.

“You might not care because of your ego, but it doesn’t matter how many tumblers go crashing into that goddamn wall. In case you haven’t noticed, we need you here. Scratch that. The Pakhan trusts you to take care of business here. He can’t find out you’ve gotten yourself thrown behind bars and that you’re absent from work because you failed to avoid trouble.”

“He won’t find out.” I glared. “Unless you’re about to go—”

“You know I don’t play dirty like that.”

“Then leave me the hell alone! Imagine me, therapy . Going to talk to some quack about my feelings. Fuck that. I would rather do time. What I don’t know is why you’re suddenly advocating for this nonsense. Unless you also think I have a problem that needs to be fixed.”

The sudden look in his eyes had gotten a man to piss himself once before. Damir gnashed on his teeth and tightened his fists. His control was slipping as fast as a ship losing anchor in a storm, but we knew he had a firmer grip on his emotions than I did. He wasn’t going to lash out, but he was making it clear that he wasn’t leaving my office until things went the court’s way.

“It’s not about what I think, and you know it. I know you already know this, but I’ll say it again to remind you: The stakes are high. Miron, if you don’t attend those therapy sessions, you will go to prison. No amount you offer or number of contacts you call will get you out of this one. I told you already, Jeffery does know how to pull strings, and we cannot do shit about it because he’s in the exact position to do whatever the hell he wants with the justice system. Right now, he is a victim, and that puts you in the position of bending just a little for the wrath of the law to pass over your head. Just do it this once.”

A heavy silence dropped between us, and I stared at the liquid in my glass, brooding.

If I was being honest, I knew there was no point arguing with the man, and I was sensible enough to know when I’d lost an argument. He was right; if I didn’t cooperate willingly, that judge and Jeffery would be more than happy to drag me away. As if I would ever give them the satisfaction.

I pointed at him. “I’ll give it to you: You are one goddamn persistent son of a bitch.”

Silently agreeing, he moved a shoulder. “I’ll take that as a triumphant yes.”

“No one likes a gloater.”

“Call it whatever you like.” He raised his hands. “I’m just glad you’ve made up your mind because you’re due to be there in another hour.”

I knew the sessions were fixed to commence today, and the court gave Viktor—and me—the liberty of deciding what clinic I would attend. But not once since that session have I discussed the subject with Viktor or Damir, for that matter.

I felt my eyes narrow to slits. “To be where in another hour?”

“I knew you weren’t going to bother with picking any place, so I called Amelia,” came his unmoved response.

Rage boiled over, and before I could stop myself, the tumbler went hurling over Damir’s head. The room echoed when the glass shattered against the wall, but Damir focused instead on wiping off the drops of whiskey that spilled on his jacket.

“You fucking did what?” Out of a thousand people he could contact, he chose the one person who wouldn’t fail to rub this shit on my face. “Why the hell would you do that?”

He didn’t even flinch. “Because Prima Care Medical Center is one of the best places you can receive treatment—”

“I don’t need any treat—”

“And you deserve nothing but the best. Plus, it’s a private clinic. You will get quality services there. Two, your cousin happens to be the CEO of the place, and we know she’s a badass at her job. Who better else to handle this than family? On the days you don’t show up, I’ll maybe even threaten her to tweak the reports.”

When he raised his head, there was a mischievous glint in his eyes that I wanted to rip out with my bare hands. “You, of all people, know better than anyone else that Amelia will seize this opportunity to boss me around in the name of therapy. She’s going to drink this up worse than a beer pong champion.”

“That might have happened if she was handling the sessions herself.”

“She’s not?”

He shook his head. “Her hands are full, she said. Or maybe she knows better than to cross paths with you and rub shit on your face. But she’s handing your file over to someone else.”

“And that someone else is?” I couldn’t not press.

“Still under her supervision. Come on, Miron. You have to be there soon.” He kicked back his chair, threw a glance at the mess of broken tumblers by the wall, and left my office without another word.

Ay, Goddammit.

Damir went over to Amelia’s office to sort out whatever it was that needed sorting out while someone else ushered me to the office of the other person who was handling my file.

The young man with a low cut and nervous smile opened the door and led me in, and the first thing that hit me was the warmth and serenity of the room. There wasn't much to it, but the ambiance was peaceful. The walls were painted a soothing light gray, which conveniently provided a backdrop for the rich, earthy tones that filled the space. Bright photographs of nature hung on the wall, there were two blooming flower pots stationed beside her desk, and as for the desk, it was neatly arranged, with no over-the-top pictures, awards, or shit like that.

"Miss Sinclair says you can wait here. She won't take long," I heard from behind me. The man must have been waiting for some kind of acknowledgment or expression of gratitude, and when he realized he wasn't getting any, he shut the door quietly on his way out.

I walked over to the plush green velvet chair and lowered myself with controlled disdain. Every part of me itched to leave immediately. It felt like being forced back into a nursery, except this one was coated with more mature paint. Here, I was the student, waiting for the teacher. And I couldn't remember the last time anyone kept me waiting.

Settling back into the chair, I threw an arm over the rim, ready to dig out my phone, when the door quietly clicked open, and someone else walked in. My head snapped toward the door, and our eyes locked. More like jammed.

This time around, it was a young woman with the brightest pair of hazel eyes I had ever spotted from a distance, a sharp contrast to her porcelain skin. The impact that stirred from acknowledging her presence in the room made me look way longer than I was supposed to. Smiling warmly, she adjusted her plain white shirt and smoothened a crinkle on her black pants, and instead of letting my gaze drift to the fullness of her thighs shaped by those pants, I kept my eyes on her face.

She couldn't be older than twenty and definitely had to be an intern at the clinic or a

recent college graduate. Either way, she looked too young to be of significance.

I frowned. “If you’re also here to tell me Miss Sinclair won’t take long, you can shove that information—”

“I’m her,” she rushed to say before I completed my sentence, cheeks slowly glowing cherry-red as her black court heels clicked closer to the couch. She stretched forth a hand. “I mean, it’s me. I am Hazel Sinclair, the therapist assigned to handle your file. And my sincerest apologies for keeping you waiting, Mr. Yezhov. It is a pleasure to finally meet you.”

The last time anything surprised me was more than a decade ago. I’d almost forgotten what it felt like to be startled and astonished at the same time, but this....

I ignored her small outstretched hand and looked past her soft, appealing—deceitful—features, past the luscious bundle of chestnut brown hair falling in a long ponytail down her back, the shiny red paint coating her full lips that called immediate attention, the smooth curve of her jawline, the perfectly portioned structure of her nostrils at the center of her face, and especially those eyes that could reel anyone in like a baited fish on a hook.

“You’re the therapist?” Disbelieving, I shook my head, making sure to scoff aloud. “Is this a fucking joke?”

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“Excuse me?”

I didn't mind that my smile instantly slipped off my face; what bothered me more was that I did not one hundred percent take Amelia's warnings literally. Maybe I might have gone home that night thinking that, being a part of his family, she must have thrown in more than a pinch of exaggeration when she warned about this man being a lot to handle.

Up close, he was more charming than the photograph attached to his profile, with his hair extra inches longer, his frame and presence more intimidating. He was more real.

But I clearly saw it now, all of Amelia's warnings blinking like traffic lights: the way his jaw flexed stubbornly, his thick, dark eyebrows arched, and firm-looking lips pinched into a thinner, irritated line. “I said, is this a fucking joke?”

In short, what he meant was that he thought I was a joke. Blue eyes took their time to rake my entire appearance from my head but didn't stray below my face, and they grew cloudier with undiluted indignation.

“I'm not sure I understand, but try not to be upset. Whatever your concern is, give it some time, and we will work it out.”

“Hmph.” Those blue eyes dangerously narrowed to slits, and he withdrew his arms from the rim of the chair, straightening up with his elbows on his knees. “Let's start with the most important question for the day.”

Usually, I asked the questions around here, but I knew a man like him would not want

that information to be stuck to him. Sucking a deep breath, I forced a wobbly smile on my face. “Sure. What will that be?”

“How old are you?”

I gaped and flinched, unsure of what made me take a step backward: the intensity of his very musky cologne or the blatant rudeness accompanying his question. Taking my time, trying to catch my breath, I walked toward the couch positioned a few meters ahead of my desk and felt somewhat shielded when I collapsed on the plush cushion.

How old am I?

I grabbed my iPad and opened new notes for my Code Red client, Miron Yezhov.

Okay...I was going to give it to him. We’d yet to officially commence the session, but he was the most arrogant and disrespectful client I had ever encountered. No one, absolutely no one, had ever asked me that, but this cocky peacock of a man fired the question in my face without an ounce of reservation or respect.

“I’m....” I swallowed my pride, and it felt like digesting a pack of needles. “Twenty-four.”

“Hm.” He didn’t look impressed; he just nailed his gaze on me like a fierce hawk, clearly skeptical of my youthfulness and qualifications.

And sue me, I felt insulted.

“I guessed twenty, but I doubt an extra four years change anything. Amelia referred me here to waste my time.”

Had I felt insulted before?

If yes, now I felt a thousand times worse. Why did I have to prove anything to him? He was the one on the couch. The one that needed my help—not that he would ever accept or admit that. But the public thought so.

“Sir, I can assure you that she didn’t. You might have your reservations, but I am trained and qualified to take this. Prima Care has your best interests at heart, and we are devoted and dedicated to providing quality professional services to all our clients, without prejudice or—”

“ Sir ?”

My mouth clamped shut, sealing the rest of my speech before I even had a chance to finish.

Understanding flickered in his eyes. Of course, he knew I’d gone through his file already and didn’t have to ask his age. It was part of my job. Duh.

But I didn’t mean to refer to him like that. It had accidentally slipped out, thanks to the unnecessary pressure he’d been mounting.

“What I meant to say was, Mr. Yezhov—”

“Being seventeen years ahead of you doesn’t make me old enough to be your grandfather.”

I kissed my teeth and avoided his gaze. He was intentionally trying to spite and rile me up, to justify his belief that I was too young and inexperienced to be seated before him. Regardless, I wasn’t going to give this man the satisfaction of seeing me frustrated. I told Amelia nothing would be too difficult to handle and had every

intention of delivering on my word.

If he thought he could shake me and see me quake in my boots, he had another thing coming. This was my space, my office, my territory. That meant I was in charge.

“Again, my apologies.” Crossing one leg over the other, the smile I fixed up was a lot firmer. “Time has already been spent. Let us properly begin, shall we?”

He didn’t say anything, and for the first time since I’d walked into my office to meet him, I finally had the opportunity to take charge of the conversation.

“Tell me, what do you hope to gain from these sessions?”

“What do I hope to gain? Honestly, before shit went sideways with Jeffrey, I didn’t even think I would ever need therapy. But now that I’m here, isn’t the only thing to gain peace of mind?” came his sharp retort. “Isn’t that what therapy is for?”

I didn’t bother with an answer to his sarcastic rhetorical question; I just focused on penning down the necessary observations.

“Do you believe in mantras, Mr. Yezhov?”

All the way across, I heard the vexation in his baritone when he snapped back. “Do I look like a man who believes in mantras, Miss Sinclair?”

Sighing, I rubbed the spot between my eyes and looked away from my notes long enough to tell him, “Please, I’d appreciate it if I asked the questions here. I know this process is hard for you to adjust to; it’ll take a while. But in the meantime, I’ll implore you to be cooperative, and that means you have to give straightforward

answers. Can you do that for me?”

Miron seemed taken aback, and something else flickered through his guarded eyes. We stared at each other long enough for me to spot the conflict denting his features. As quickly as it appeared, it vanished, and he still didn’t respond.

I took it as a go-ahead to move on to the next question.

“Tell me, is there anything unsettling in your life?”

One heartbeat.

Two heartbeats.

Three

Silence.

I looked up from my notes to see Miron staring outside the window, with his arms stretched out on both sides above the rim of the chair and his feet bouncing on the floor with the impatience of a man who’d rather be anywhere else but here.

I didn’t intend to, but my gaze lingered too long on the stretch of his white dress shirt across his broad chest and taut biceps and the perfect fit of his black pants against the length of his long legs.

I cleared my throat. “Mr. Yezhov?”

“No.” He didn’t look at me, but his voice sounded like it came from far away. “There’s nothing unsettling in my life. Everything is under control.”

“Okay....” Uncertain, I slowly lowered my eyes to take more notes. “That sounds great. And what keeps you calm?”

“Finally, an actual question. That’s easy: money, good sex, more money. More sex. What can I say? I’m a simple man.”

I didn’t dare raise my head, but a nagging voice at the back of my mind said he was smirking and looking straight at me. Another attempt to fluster me. In fact, I thought I could feel the heat of his stare burning a hole in the center of my head.

After scribbling, I muttered something but didn’t know it was loud enough for him to hear.

“Simple men don’t ram a hundred-thousand-dollar bottle of wine across someone else’s head and leave him writhing in his own blood.

“Are therapists supposed to be judgmental?”

Crap.

There was no anger or reservation in his tone, so if I trod carefully with my response, I could come out unscathed.

“I was not being judgmental, only stating a fact. A simple man wouldn’t do what you did, but you say you are a simple man who doesn’t believe in mantras and has nothing unsettling in his life.”

Miron lifted a brow. “And what’s your conclusion on that?” It was my turn to ignore his question. Needless to say, the animalistic growl at the back of his throat was a sign that it upset him. “Does my time here include that thing you’ve constantly been doing?”

Absentmindedly, I asked, “What thing?”

“The writing.”

“Oh. Yeah. It’s standard procedure that I take notes.” I shrugged. “I observed that you prefer being in control, and I understand that it is normal, or expected, for people in your position. Powerful people like yourself.”

“Why do I feel like you’re mincing words? That’s not everything you’d like to say.”

He was right; I was mincing. For him, it was beyond just having control; there was a dangerous obsession with power lurking behind those blue eyes. In my opinion, however, it was a mirage.

I smoothened the edges of my hair. “I only tell the client what is necessary. Unless my opinions will be relevant during sessions, I keep them at bay.”

“I see what you’re doing, trying to sound like a professional.”

“I am a professional, Mr. Yezhov, and that’s why I’m posing this question to you: Would I be wrong to say that the definition of control is more subjective than people would agree?”

Miron paused for a full minute, as if he had taken the time to think about the question before deciding I wasn’t worthy enough for an answer. The hardness in his eyes returned, and he resumed working the muscles in his jaw.

“You’re wrong for even thinking to ask me that. I’m paying thousands of dollars to be seated here. You’re the therapist; you should have the answer.”

I squared my shoulders and tipped my chin. “Again, for the remaining parts of our

session, I need you to cooperate. But since you really want to know what I think, fine, I'll tell you. In my opinion, the subject of 'control' has more to do with acceptance rather than exertion or demonstration. In other words, control starts in the mind, the simple concept of being able to restrain oneself and regulate your emotions, actions, and reactions. That brings me to this: our major goals for the sessions we'll be having."

Unenthusiastically, he circled a finger in the air, urging me to continue.

"We will focus on identifying those things that trigger your anger and explore effective anger management options."

He jerked his head to the side, brows furrowed. "That's it?"

"Yeah. That's it." I smiled. "Once you conquer your emotions, everything else will fall into place."

Miron almost stole my composure when he surprisingly sprung to his feet, forcing my head to recline when his shiny leather shoes stomped closer to my couch. Subtly, I swallowed, keeping the instant fear out of my eyes.

I was right; the man's aura was not the only intimidating thing about him. His height was imposing, standing at least six feet five inches tall, with those broad shoulders that commanded respect. He didn't even stand close, but his presence made the room feel smaller. With my heart making small staccato beats, I found it a struggle to breathe regularly, and I wasn't even claustrophobic.

"I'm leaving."

Was that all he marched up here to say? He could have as well done that from his chair without having to suffocate me with his glare—and that darn cologne.

“But...but...” Why on earth am I stuttering? “We still have ten minutes.”

“You’ve outlined the goals, haven’t you? And I believe that the first days are mostly for introductions. We’ve done that, so I say I’m leaving. I have more important shit to take care of, anyway.”

“By all means, Mr. Yezhov. The door’s right there. I’m not stopping you.”

Double crap.

In my previous history with clients, my composure was always intact, never shaken or wavering, but Code Red somehow managed to rattle my foundations and unnerve me without so much as a snap of his fingers. I was just speaking to him about control, and I’d snapped. It was an accident, but there was nothing I could do because he’d caught it; the disapproving downward turn of his lips said so.

Miron’s pupils flashed with aggression, and he slid a hand into his pocket.

Instant quiet hovered between us like weighted clouds in the heavens just waiting to pour, and while I braced myself, prepared for a display of his infamous outburst, his next words were....

“You say I’m a man who likes being in control, but you don’t really think I’m in control of anything, do you?”

... unexpected.

It felt like a bucket of ice had been tipped over my head, and I adjusted my seat, rapidly blinking my sudden embarrassment away. While racking my brain to understand why he would ask that, I opened my mouth to present a defense.

“Mr. Yezhov, my opinions—”

“Unless when necessary, are kept at bay. I heard you the first time you said it, but don’t shy away now; you were a spitfire only seconds ago. I want to hear you say it to my face. Otherwise, your qualifications and whatnots don’t mean shit if you don’t have the balls to speak your mind.”

My mouth hung open, but no words came out.

“That’s what I thought. A simple test, and you failed. Trust the qualified expert to tell her clients only shit she dug up from a textbook.” A sardonic hint of a smile pulled on his lips before he turned his back to me and stomped toward the door. “Enjoy the rest of your humid afternoon, Miss Sinclair.”

He deliberately slammed the door shut, and the bang reverberated in my chest.

Quietly, I picked up my iPad and resumed notetaking.

First observations: Miron Yezhov exhibits a strong desire for control and a need for things to go his way. He is resistant to therapy and struggles with flexibility and adapting to unexpected situations, often becoming agitated when his plans are disrupted.

Treatment Goals:

Self-Awareness

Emotional Regulation

Communication Skills

Recommendations:

Continue exploring the root causes of his need for control

Develop a personalized coping plan to manage his anger and stress

I shut off my device, melting into the couch with folded arms and my gaze on the ceiling. Frankly, I was disappointed with the outcome of today's meeting, but a sliver of hope was enough for me. That sliver of hope had stirred me to march to Amelia's office in the first place, demanding a real challenge, and I got it. Recalling the journey of how far I'd come sparked my determination not to give up.

Miron was correct when he said the first days were for introductions. The remaining days belonged to me—to show him who was the boss.

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:48 pm

I made peace with my reality a long time ago.

There was no other purpose for me than being a part of the Bratva. For what it was worth, even if my family was not the one I'd unfortunately been born into, I believed I would have been roped in with the Russian darkness somehow—like we were meant to be.

But being a part of it didn't guarantee twenty-four-seven fun or conquests. Some days were good, quiet, and smooth, and other days? Not so much. Either way, I was used to the ups and downs of the business, where things could change quickly and unexpectedly. It was like seeing different sides of the same situation every day.

Today, though, was one of those days when shit got realer, and necessity required me to get my hands dirty.

Apparently, a rising group of rogues tried to sabotage multiple shipments within and beyond the United States borders, and another idiot got caught trying to blow up one of our storehouses in Nevada, all within the same week. Fucking jackals. The Pakhan got wind of both atrocities and needed me to handle the situation.

Trust me, I did.

It took a few days and some burning of jet fuel hopping from state to state, but I always got the fucking job done.

Dealing with them was loud, messy, and fucking stressful. The Pakhan was pleased, though, and that was what mattered. I craved noise cancellation, something worthy

enough to serve as a distraction. So, when Damir got a sudden call from my brother inviting us to a small house party in California, without skipping a beat, I told the pilot to change destinations.

Now, here I was, watching the men bicker about the most profitable start-up venture. About two hours ago, Damir looked like a worn-out husband with a loose tie hanging around his neck and tired eyes that needed nothing else but good sleep. Right now, he was going at it with Axel, one of Damien's business partners, heatedly stressing his point about restaurant start-ups having more prospects.

"I didn't fucking spend thousands of dollars on the women and wine to have you guys talk about work here." My brother walked—more like waltzed—into the living room shirtless, grinning, with a full glass of what I suspected to be Vodka and beads of water running rivulets from his dark hair and down the Guardian Angel inked down his spine.

The idiot just had a shower, and the ladies were greedily feasting on the sight.

For a moment, I'd forgotten we were surrounded by half-naked dancers twirling and shaking their asses at the center of the room. The dim lighting and loud music couldn't be blamed; the conversation had been so stimulating that I, too, found myself engrossed because I sided with Damir. Restaurants were lucrative.

"The girls can wait. Money's more important," Axel piped up with his eyes burning a hole through one of the girls' barely covered ass.

The hell it was. Everyone knew the greedy bastard flocked over girls more than a shepherd to his sheep. Axel was one of the slimy ones, sly in business, and a complete ass when it came to the women. He didn't treat them right, but he never missed a chance to boast about fucking them right.

“Not right now, they can’t.” Damien lifted his glass, side-eyeing me because he knew the man irritated me. “We came here to fucking party, so party, we will.”

The men eased up, lifting their glasses to salute our special host as he cranked up the volume on the music system before settling in beside Damir on the black couch.

He patted his thighs. “Ladies, please. Over here.” And three ladies happily skipped from the center, throwing themselves into his arms. “Please, my dear men, enjoy yourselves tonight. I’ve got rooms upstairs, if you need ‘em. For tomorrow brings shitty tidings, or maybe good ones. You never really know.”

The room echoed with deep rumbles of laughter, and they relaxed after a brief air-toast. One after the other, the girls swamped each man, and the conversation died out, leaving a replacement of music, masculine grunts, and feminine giggles. I just rolled my eyes at my brother, and he smirked while groping one of the dancer’s asses. “Enjoying the view, Miron?”

I was enjoying the view, and, like the conversation about start-ups, watching each of the men have a teasing smack at the ladies, lowly groaning in satisfaction, was... provoking. I toyed with my glass, not finding the strength to bicker. “What if I am?”

One of the girls nuzzled her face between his neck, and another, a petite blonde, alternated between twerking on his groin and kissing his bare chest, and the haze in Damien’s blue eyes said he enjoyed it a bit too much. “There’s plenty of them to go round. You don’t have to keep starving. Unless you’re on a celibacy journey and didn’t think to tell me.”

I arched a brow, knowing exactly what—who —he referred to. The corner of my lips picked up with a ghostly smile. “Fuck off.”

Damien’s rough chuckle got muffled when he grabbed the blondie’s mouth and

pressed it against his own, sucking her lips with his eyes closed and a fierce eagerness plastered over his chiseled face. Between the both of us, he was the one kissing like he'd been starved for years.

Now, he was being playful, teasing those girls and whispering sweet nothings in their ears. But no one knew my brother like I did, or witnessed enough to see the true animal that lay beneath all that rouge playboy exterior. It was one of the reasons he liked lots of social gatherings. While I sought out noise cancellation, Damien preferred the noise. It kept his darkness drowned out long enough for him to just live and be free.

Taking my attention away from my brother's horniness, I stumbled on a tall, slender redhead stripping before Damir. He sat back, tumbler lifted to his lips, while she stood between his legs, grinning from ear to ear as he ordered which skimpy piece of clothing had to go next. Watching him grunt orders in Russian, which the girl surprisingly understood, was amusing. And I didn't notice the brisk movement from the corner of my eyes until I felt small hands slide onto my chest.

"If you like that, I can give you a show of your own."

I lowered my face to the intruder curled up by my side.

It was a girl with auburn hair, scattered freckles dusting her nose and cheeks, and green eyes that reminded me of emeralds; unlike the majority of girls here, she had longer legs, curvy hips, and fuller thighs. Which strangely reminded me of a certain someone .

If we were on the topic of honesty, then I was going to be honest and say that this girl was fucking gorgeous. Her warmth was enough noise cancellation for me, and the repeated motions of her fingers slipping between the buttons on my shirt made me want to rip them off and relax while she worked her magic. It was attraction and

nothing else, but I considered dropping my tumbler and giving in to the fleeting carnal desire.

“What’s your name?”

She blushed. “Genevieve.”

“You’re sure you can do that for me?” I gestured toward the girl between Damir’s legs, who was now dancing in nothing but a thong.

Genevieve nodded and pressed her palms flat on my abdomen. “I can do even better. All you have to do is say the word. Whichever way you want it, I’m down.”

I opened my mouth, but the music suddenly stopped.

Looking away from Genevieve, I found the men staring at a woman who stood by the music system with the control tightly curled in her fist. Trying to figure out when she got in here and snatched the control without anyone noticing was pointless. Her random pop-ups at the oddest hours were another thing I’d gotten used to.

I rolled my eyes when she glared at the woman in my arms, looking ready to pounce on her and rip her off with her bare hands.

“Not tonight, honey. Get your fucking paws off him.”

Genevieve raised her eyes to mine, silently asking for my permission.

All engines powered down, and I rose to my feet, turning away from the look of disappointment etched all over her face when she scrambled off the couch and moved out of sight.

Damien side-eyed me with an amused expression and twisted on the couch with the girls stuck in his arms like glue. “Talk about the angel, and she appears. Nice to see you again, Alina. For a moment, I thought you’d gone into exile.”

“Such an excellent sense of humor you have, Damien.” She flashed a smile that didn’t reach her eyes.

Ignoring my brother, Damir’s blank stare, and the rest of the men gaping at the scene, I motioned for her to follow me. “Come on.”

She threw the control at my brother, mumbled something indistinctly under her breath, and fell into step behind me.

When Damien said I was starving, he’d indirectly referred to the three months’ absence of the woman who was currently walking into an empty bedroom with me.

Alina Ivanova.

My fiancée.

And I’d gone long enough without the touch of a woman that seeing her didn’t immediately spark any interest to shift her panties. Not that I would have come around to shifting Genevieve’s either.

Flicking her raven-black hair over her shoulders, she shut the door but didn’t move away from it. I sat at the edge of the bed with my hands on my knees, and we stared at each other in utter silence until I decided to break it.

“You look good. I like the fit.”

Alina scoffed and folded her arms across her small bosom with narrowed eyes. “It’s a

dress you've seen before, a dress you bought."

"Then, I like the dress I bought. You look good in it."

"No, Miron, you don't get to pull up that acting-indifferent card with me." Alina pushed away from the door, stomping toward me, brows drawn, and her glossy lips pulled in a disapproving frown. "Baby, what is this? Why didn't you tell me Damien was throwing a party?"

I didn't have to tell her shit, and I also didn't particularly tolerate being questioned. But where Ivanova's daughter was concerned, it was pertinent that I created limited exceptions.

As a leader of another prominent Russian fraction, Ivanova earned his stripes by being quick-witted and sharp-minded and having a knack for strategic alliances, which expanded our influences. Needless to say, this solidified his position within the Bratva. For decades, he had shown loyalty to the Pakhan and, therefore, earned my respect as well.

"You mean fuck-gathering, right? Because that is what this will end up being before midnight. It isn't an actual party. You know that." I propped a pillow behind my back and pressed into it. But Alina wasn't having it.

I sighed, rubbing between my eyes. What would it take for a man to just relax around here?

"I didn't know he was throwing a party. He called in at the last minute. Happy?"

She shook her head. "Not happy, Miron."

"Goddamnit, woman." My patience was thinner than a thread, and I wanted to slam

the pillow against something to just have some fucking peace of mind. “You’ve been away for three fucking months. I’m not going to just pick up the darn phone to have you hop on a plane to California for Damien’s fuck-gathering.”

Her icy expression immediately melted into a puddle of widened eyes and puckering lips. She blew out a long breath and softly dropped on my thighs before cupping my face with both hands.

“On my father’s business, baby. I’ve been away on business. You know he wanted me there in person to monitor the cargoes. And you know I don’t like it when you get mad at me. I just...missed you, Miron. And coming here, seeing that girl curled up in your arms, made me so fucking angry, I wanted to—”

“Did you get your father to agree with the clothing line idea?”

Alina’s mouth clamped shut. “What?”

She had a jealous rage that ticked off at the slightest signal, and if I didn’t stop her from talking, that rage would have only had more fuel fed to it. I needed to take her mind off Genevieve and any other trigger that would disturb the remaining hours of my night.

“The clothing line. The last time we talked, you mentioned it. You didn’t want my help to start because your father didn’t agree. So, did you talk to him?”

“I did,” she said. “He said he’ll think about it. He’s more concerned about the wedding.”

“Okay. We’ll talk about it after the wedding, then.”

When she smiled, the light returned to her brown eyes, and something elevated in my

chest. It was a tiny flutter, like a weight lifted, ushering something even bigger—like the sudden urge to draw her closer.

Which I did.

I wrapped an arm around her waist and dragged her closer to my chest so her soft ass was pressed to my dick. In return, she wound her arms around my neck and giggled like a teenager. The warmth of her breath against my jaw and the familiar scent wafting between us made me reconsider shifting panties.

“I know what you’re doing. You’re trying to distract me.”

“Is it working?” I pressed a kiss to her jawline and the delicate curve of her shoulder blade. Soft, just as I remembered. My fingers traveled into her hair, and she shivered in my arms.

Her grin grew wider. “It is.”

“Good. Because I don’t like getting mad at you, too.”

Alina kissed my cheeks and pulled back, her happiness twinkling in her eyes, and they had never been clearer than this. There was a saying that the eyes were the windows to a person’s soul. Every time I looked into Alina’s, I knew it was true. She held back nothing. She always wore her heart on her sleeve, allowing me in, permitting me to see the immense effect I had on her—shades of her the world will never see.

Not me.

I didn’t even think I had a soul, much more a heart to bear. But she was content, knowing that, with a wedding in close view, I was locked in for her.

I brought her closer, peppering chaste kisses from her forehead to her throat. Her scent was intoxicating, stoking the embers and making me grow hot and impatient all over. The fabric of her dress was cut low, baring the smooth pumps of cleavage, and I ventured lower to graze each one with my teeth.

“I missed you.”

She arched her back, pressing her chest flush against my face, and long, slender fingernails combed through my hair, drawing a sharp breath from me.

“I missed you, too, Miron.”

There was no point asking, but I knew she’d want me to. “How did you know I was here in Cali?”

“You know I have my ways.” I agreed; she did have her ways, but I didn’t bother to press. “And coming inside was pretty easy when everyone knows you’re Miron Yezhov’s fiancée.”

“Has a nice ring to it, doesn’t it?”

Cupping her ass, I lifted her legs and spread them on either side of my thigh so that she straddled me. I didn’t have to touch between her legs; she was wet. With Alina, fucking was always easy. Sometimes, too easy.

I tipped her chin.

She bit her lip, eyes blazing ferociously with desire when she said, “It does.”

I grabbed her mouth and kissed her lips, ignoring the gloss spreading from hers to mine as I sucked each lip at a time. She molded against me, ran her fingers down my

face, moaned hungrily into my mouth, and whimpered when I pulled back.

“Make me feel good, Ali. Come on.”

“Sure.” Alina beamed from cheek to cheek and reached for my belt. “Anything for you.”

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:48 pm

Was I a genius, or was I a genius?

Christian D. Larson said, “Believe in yourself and all that you are. Know that there is something inside you that is greater than any obstacle.”

During the hardest times of my life back in college, when I nursed the dream to be one of the best therapists the world had ever seen; during the nights and days when I’d crumbled from all the pressure, wondering if that dream could ever be realized; during the moment I held my certificate in my hands, staring at the cursive letterings reflecting my name and accomplishment—through it all, I didn’t stop believing in myself and all that I knew I was. I just knew that there was something inside me that was indeed greater than any obstacle.

Maybe I was over-celebrating—if there was ever such a thing. But as I reread Mr. Harold Plumley’s report through the linked Notes on my phone, the smile on my face expanded even further.

Client : Mr. Harold Plumley

Progress :

- Mr. Plumley demonstrated significant improvement in current session. Stability in his mental health, and has mostly positive things to say about his cat.
- He reported reduced stress and increased productivity.
- Personal care habits showed notable enhancement, as well. He has also developed

an exercise routine and steadily takes his cat on walks.

Subjective Feedback:

Mr. Plumley's transformation has been remarkable. His newfound focus on pet welfare and management and self-care has greatly improved his overall well-being and productivity.

Conclusion :

Mr. Plumley's adherence to the treatment plan has yielded impressive results.

Next Steps :

A follow-up session will be scheduled in two weeks to assess continued progress and provide ongoing support.

Signature :

Hazel Sinclair

Licensed Therapist

Fun fact: I was, in fact, a genius.

All that cat needed was some good care, and... voila! Harold walked into my office today with his confidence needle spiking toward one hundred on the meter and the sweetest smile.

Despite the impressive progress report we'd gotten back in a week, Harold had a few reservations about the possibility of his cat still harboring ill feelings without fully

forgiving him for neglect. I knew it was only a matter of time before he returned to his family fully recovered. Rome wasn't built in one day.

Grinning, I locked the door behind me and multitasked between blindly walking through the corridor and forwarding some reports to Amelia's email.

I was halfway through copying a few other recipients and wrapping up the mail when my nose picked up a familiar aroma—so delicious it made my mouth water. God, they smelled so good that I could practically munch the air to taste them.

I hit send and slid my phone into my faux suede tote bag just before someone announced. "Special delivery for the beautiful lady!"

My heart literally stopped beating for a split second, and my feet stayed planted on the spot, refusing to move. When my heart started beating again, it hammered very hard and fast.

That voice.... I recognized it anywhere on the planet. That voice held the power to disarm me, weaken my knees, and give me crazy lust-filled dreams. It held the key to my heart.

And when I summoned the courage to raise my head, hoping that I wasn't imagining things...I wasn't.

He was right there, standing by the door with his arms spread, a plastic bag dangling from one hand, and that same cheesy dimpled smile that made me fall in love with him in the first place, plastered on his face.

"Nate?" If I didn't move fast, I knew I'd start hyperventilating. "Oh, my God. Nathan!"

I squealed like I was sixteen again, not minding who heard, not minding who saw, as I ran straight into his arms, teary-eyed.

My face hit his solid chest first, and I stayed there, with my arms tightly wound around his small waist, breathing him in, that perfect blend of cedarwood and musk that I loved.

“Oh, God! Babe!” He groaned into my hair, scattering my face with the most tender kisses he always reserved for me. “I’ve missed you so much!”

I pulled back to look at him, laughing and crying at the same time because he felt too good to be true.

Today was really my best day yet!

“Today’s not our anniversary. I checked. So, why— how are you even here? I can’t believe it.”

“Better believe it.” Nathan pecked my nose and wiggled the bag in his hand. “If you don’t, it means these aren’t real, too.”

I gasped. The aroma finally made sense. “Don’t tell me...strawberry jam cheesecake doughnuts?”

“Sometimes, I think you love them more than me.” The rich rumble of his chuckle almost made me lean into him again. “Fine, I won’t tell you. But they are freshly made, and I know the perfect place to devour them. Before you say anything, I have a cab waiting outside to take us.”

I’d known Nathan since I was sixteen and still hadn’t gotten used to his ability to leave me speechless. He was just the sweetest. I melted into his side, feeling my heart

soar so high that I felt like I was floating in the clouds.

“I love you, Nate.”

Knotting our fingers, he pressed his lips against my forehead. “I love you, too, cupcake.”

The perfect place Nathan thought we could devour the doughnuts was in my apartment. I wasn't complaining.

On the contrary, I took extra time in the shower to wash my hair, shave off the tiny patch from my lady parts, and bathe myself in perfume until I was partially choking and sputtering on my way to the living room where Nathan waited on the couch with his head buried in his phone.

I sucked in a deep breath and clutched the rose-gold chain around my neck. He was effortlessly handsome in that classic red and black buffalo plaid shirt and vibrant blue jeans. And that was it. He never needed anything extra to grab attention. He had the looks: dark piercing eyes, stylish taper fade haircut, and adorable dimples that added to his irresistible smile. His personality was witty and endearingly quirky, with a whole lot of heart.

That was why I was nervous. He didn't have to try too hard, but I did.

I'd picked out a short floral print dress with a v-neckline and deep-cut back, deliberately ditching a bra. With Nate, this outfit was a bold move. We'd been together for eight years now, but before now, I kept it moderate around him. Wanting to see his reaction almost had me dying inside.

Feigning innocence, I flicked my hair over my shoulder and joined him on the couch, reaching for the box of doughnuts on the centerpiece. “Hey. Did you save some for me?”

“Hey— oh. Wow. ” His eyes stayed hooked on my thighs, which were visibly exposed, before he reluctantly dragged them to my face. “You look... different .”

I stuck a doughnut between my teeth to hide a frown. “Just different? No ‘Oh, babe, you look amazing,” or “Babe, you look smoking hot?””

Nathan’s tension melted away as he ran his fingers through his hair. “You always look smoking hot, cupcake. This is just different. In a really good way.”

My cheeks burned, and I gobbled up the doughnut quickly to suppress the crimson rising on my neck. That wasn’t the compliment I expected, but from coming from Nathan, it was a compliment, nonetheless.

He didn’t say anything; he just stared at me in silence. His gaze seemed afar off, with a lingering distance I thought I imagined, as if they weren’t really focused on me. But it was mesmerizing, drawing me in with an otherworldly pull.

I tore my eyes away, picking up another doughnut. “So, what’s happening? What’s the latest with you? Fill me in. I want to know everything now that you’re here.”

Trust my boyfriend to outright blush at the smallest things. His cuteness doubled over when the pink hue settled on his cheeks. He rolled his eyes, rubbing his neck. “Well, since we talk almost every day, there’s not much you don’t know.”

“ Almost every day,” I reiterated, and his questioning glance found mine. “There was a time we talked every day, and now, we don’t.”

Nathan sobered up, scooting closer to cover my hand with his. “You know, it’s not intentional. The session’s become more intense than ever before and—”

“I know, babe.”

I smiled to reassure him because I understood.

And that was who I had been to him from the moment he moved to begin his journey in New York University School of Law—the understanding long-distance girlfriend who couldn’t wait for him to come back home, with the degree attained, of course.

Nathan and I met in high school. We started off as friends, even though I liked him from the first moment I saw him. He’d always been sweet and proper. Unlike the other boys in our class, who thought they had to run through every single girl before they earned their “I AM A MAN” badge, Nathan’s view was quite the opposite.

I liked that he was a smarty-pants, always so focused and determined. From time immemorial, I wanted to be a therapist, and he, a lawyer, and high goals always made him stand out amongst the crowd.

One night, after he walked me home from a school game, he pulled out the most beautiful necklace and asked me to be his girlfriend. I didn’t hesitate; I said yes with the loudest squeal, and I could never forget the joy I felt at that moment. I was the luckiest girl in the world to be his.

Even now, as I watched him animatedly talk about how much he was enjoying frequent basketball games on Saturdays and joining the choir in the local church, a smile grew on my face. Nathan was an amazing singer. On my eighteenth birthday, he’d showed up on the porch of our family house with a mighty bouquet of flowers and a box of my favorite doughnuts to serenade me.

The memory stirred a flood of warmth in my chest. And it also made me realize that something was missing.

Nathan was laughing now, gesticulating as he mimicked one of his professors who'd made some corporate law jokes, but that far-away gaze in his eyes had returned, like he wasn't really talking to me. I shook it off and blamed the distance we'd had between us. I'd read about it somewhere during my crying days of trying to cope without him. One of the effects of Long-Distance Relationships (LDRs) was an emotional gap between the couple.

But we were in love and willing to make it work. So, in time, we would adjust, and everything would fall back to normal.

“Why do corporate lawyers make good partners?”

I laughed, unintentionally leaning closer as I stuffed my face with another doughnut. “I don't know. You're the lawyer. Tell me.”

“Because they're always willing to merge.” I laughed, and the smile that lit his eyes made me forget all about emotional gaps and whatnot. Gently, he tucked my hair behind my ears. “Hold on, I have another one: Why did the corporate lawyer become a baker?”

I thought about it and, when nothing came, gave up with a shrug. “Because his girlfriend likes doughnuts?”

“Close.” He dropped a light peck on my nose. “It's because he kneaded the dough. Get it?”

I was full-on guffawing now, and Nathan was laughing too. Now, he was looking at me with dilated pupils and eyes flickering between my heaving chest and lips. When

he flicked his thumb at the corner of my mouth to wipe off a smudge of jam, his touch struck a match somewhere between my legs, and I felt my nipples tighten.

“You’re so beautiful, cupcake,” he rasped. And with his jaw clenching and fingers flexing, I knew he was struggling to contain himself.

I didn’t want him to. I’d missed him too much to let him go again without any action.

Confidently, I moved even closer and slid my hands up his chest with a shaky breath. He was so firm; I wanted to feel him bare beneath my palms.

“Nate.” My hand glided up to his neck, and he leaned into my touch. “You don’t know how much I’ve missed you. Seeing you again...it’s doing things to me.”

“If I didn’t think I’d go crazy without seeing you, I wouldn’t have come here.”

It was my turn to blush. “I like that the thought of me drives you crazy.”

He paused, hot eyes burning my lips. “Can I...can I kiss you?”

Nathan always asked.

“You know you can, babe.”

This time, he didn’t wait or pause to think like he usually did.

Like a bulldozer, Nathan cupped the back of my neck and smashed our lips together. He flicked his tongue against my mouth, and I parted it with a sigh, granting him permission to delve deeper. I held onto his shirt for dear life. He tasted like strawberry jam, and it made me light-headed.

My heart soared, my toes curled, and I released an ecstatic moan into his mouth. My imagination must have been playing tricks on me when Nathan groaned like an animal into mine.

This wasn't our usual sweet, soft, and chaste kisses that I was used to. It was rough and demanding. He kissed me like he wanted me, tasted me like he couldn't get enough, and held me like he wanted us to stay forever this way.

I was shivering, shamelessly burning for this man, so much so that happy tears pricked the back of my eyes. But he was still holding back, with his jaw and fingers twitching. I wanted him to unleash and just snap and....

I let my hand wander from his neck, past his chest, and down to his—w here I really wanted him.

Before I started on the belt, I splayed my palm flat and pressed on the very visible bulge between his legs. God, he was so hard and firm, I wanted to cry. He wanted me as badly as I wanted him.

My senses went on overdrive, and I detached my lips from his to suck on his neck. If he wasn't going to take the initiative, I was willing to.

I stroked him through his jeans, lifting myself from the couch to hold him in place as I kissed and sucked on every bare skin I could taste. I breathed like a panther while he murmured something, wrapped my waist with one hand, and slid the other under my very short dress. I squirmed against him, urging him to go higher.

And when his hand skimmed up my hip, I grabbed and fixed it between my parted legs.

His eyes snapped open, and he pulled back. "Hazel."

I flinched. Nathan never called me by name unless it was serious.

And it was serious.

I had not only ditched my bra; I completely disregarded wearing panties, too. So, I knew why Nathan looked at me like we'd committed the biggest atrocity in the world.

I was soaking wet.

So wet that when he pulled his hand away, I saw myself glistening on his finger—which he immediately wiped on his jeans.

I deflated like a balloon and collapsed on the couch. "I'm sorry," I forced out, but I didn't feel even a shred of remorse.

"Hazel...cupcake, you know why we can't do this." He looked as ruffled as I felt. "It's not that I don't want you. We just...can't."

I didn't look at him because if I did, I was going to burst into tears. As I said, he had the power to disarm me, and that included messing with my emotions.

"I know."

For eight years, I'd known. We never went past first base. In fact, our first kiss had been so quick, I thought the air brushed my lips.

Nathan had another very striking exceptionality: He was a devout Christian, firm and believing. And his faith didn't permit premarital intimacy. Intimacy, as in sex. He didn't know what I looked like beneath my layer of clothes, and I didn't know how big he was down there. The most I'd gotten were the mouth-watering view of his bare

chest and ripped abs on a few occasions, like when we went swimming.

And while I respected and appreciated his discipline, there were days— like today! —when I desperately wanted him to just let go. I was constantly left to deal with the pent-up sexual frustration, but I wouldn't force him to succumb to any kind of pressure, knowing how important it was to him to wait till marriage.

He pushed himself off the couch, and I felt his pitiful stare burning the side of my face.

“Don't look at me like that, Nathan. I don't want pity.”

“Hazel, it's not pity. I'm just sorry we have to stop every time. I know you want more, but I can't give it to you. Not right now.”

There was not much to say anymore; nothing particularly could clear the tension in the air unless he decided to—

“I've got to get back to my hotel now.”

To leave.

“Okay.”

His shoes ruffled the rug, and he came close, but not close enough. He pressed a kiss on my forehead. “I'll call you later, okay?”

I still didn't look at him. “Sure.”

“I love you, cupcake.” I heard him sigh before he reluctantly walked away, and when the door clicked shut, I reached for my iPad before a single tear could drop from my

eyes.

Over the years, I learned that it wasn't always advised, but it was more productive to throw oneself into work when dealing with emotional weights than to sit in a corner and spend the same time crying. Crying was good, but work was a priority.

I flipped over to my planner to run through things I needed to organize. Client sessions, group therapy, admin tasks, more client sessions, and professional development. I scrolled through the highlights under Client Sessions, and a specific schedule for Monday morning caught my eye.

Time

Client Name

Session Type

9:30 – 10:30

Miron Yezhov

Individual

A simple test, and you failed. Trust the qualified expert to tell her clients only shit she dug up from a textbook.

I scoffed, remembering just how arrogant and dismissive the man had been. He was definitely a tough nut to crack, but instead of feeling daunted, determination sparked within me. I was going to unravel the layers of him until he became bare and vulnerable enough to accept recovery.

I felt a thrill of excitement for our next session, and I took a deep breath, readying myself to face whatever Miron threw my way.

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:48 pm

I walked into the office without looking her way, my shoulders tense and hands shoved deep into my pockets. Today, the air smelled faintly of lavender and strawberry jam. I settled on the green couch, crossing a leg over the other, with my arms folded across my chest.

She sat in her usual chair, legs crossed, a Styrofoam cup raised to her lips, and her iPad resting on her lap. Discreetly, she watched me over the rim of her cup before placing it on the sidepiece.

“Good morning, Miron. How prompt of you to come in twenty minutes after the scheduled time for our session today. At least you’re here, right? So, I can’t complain. It is good to see you again.”

“Well, someone’s chirpy this—” I narrowed my eyes at her glowing cheeks and bright eyes. “What did you just call me?”

“Your name.” She shrugged and quickly jotted something on her iPad before glancing up. “Or would you prefer ‘sir?’”

I resisted the urge to scoff. This woman was full of surprises, wasn’t she? The sudden switch to her approach might have caught me off-guard, but it didn’t even put a scratch on my armor.

Damir had sent prompt reminders by nine a.m. I deliberately ignored them.

It wasn’t good to see her. It wasn’t good to be here. But I swallowed down the sharp remark forming on my tongue and moved a shoulder instead. “Whatever makes you

sleep better at night.”

Her face didn’t give away the slightest reaction. She just kept watching me, not with judgment, but with that quiet patience I found both irritating and oddly grounding. It was as if she was sending a silent message that nothing I did or said could shake her.

Well, good for her, then. I had less than an hour to be here, which made me wish the time would fly by faster.

“How was your weekend?”

My eyes couldn’t get any narrower. How was my weekend? Full of good sex, Vodka, guns, and other profanities she looked too innocent to entertain.

I circled a finger in the air. “I know you don’t really care, so skip this question and ask the next one in your manual.”

She scoffed. “Remember: cooperation. So, let’s try that again, shall we?” She straightened up, looking me in the eyes with a smile. “How was your weekend, Miron?”

I knew what she was doing—trying to exhibit control, to battle it out with me—so I knew who really was in charge here. This woman honestly thought she could subdue me. It was almost laughable.

Then, I remembered Damir’s incessant prodding and the unpleasant experience I’d had in that fucking courtroom.

I exhaled through my nose and stared at her pointy heels rather than meeting her eyes.

“Fine.”

Her lips twitched, like she knew I was lying but wouldn't call me out on it. "Fine," she repeated, letting the words settle between us. "And what made it 'fine?'"

She really didn't want to know.

I shrugged, my jaw tightening. I hated this...this slow, deliberate way she pulled at the things I tried so hard to ignore. But I was here, wasn't I? So, I gave her something.

"Didn't kill anyone."

The flutter of her lashes and subtle "hm" said she thought I was being sarcastic. If only she knew how truthful that was. The past weekend, no one died by my hand. Not yet, anyway.

She offered that smile again before facing her iPad, the one that enhanced the sunlike glow in her eyes. "That's a good start," she said.

Damn her.

"For the next question in my manual," she said, and I thought I saw her lips pull up in a smirk, "Miron, what makes you feel in control?"

Instantly, a moment of distraction scattered my thoughts. It was the way she'd called my fucking name. Mih-ron . As if she was testing the letters before pronouncing them.

Gritting my teeth, I gave her my best unimpressed stare, and she tilted her head to the side, waiting.

Today, her hair was let down in big curls, framing her face and falling below her

shoulders, and like the first time she walked through those doors, she maintained her professional outlook, dressed simply in a white shirt and navy blue pants.

Was there a reason I took note of those details?

Fucking no.

“I can’t answer that question.”

“But you can.”

“Goddammit, woman.” I rubbed between my eyes, letting them stay shut while I forced my brain to work. If I didn’t provide answers, she was just going to keep up the poking. “I don’t know, okay? Maybe it’s the respect and loyalty I receive from my... employees.”

I would have loved to see the look on Damir’s face when he heard me refer to him as that.

“Or the fear and intimidation that comes with being a boss. There are so many factors to consider here: wealth and possessions, the vast network and connections I have, my high level of intelligence, exerting influence, eliminating threats, and maintaining order. All of those things and more have the tendency to feed my control. Or it could just be making sure my drink is poured right. How about that?”

My response was supposed to be a joke, but the moment the words left my mouth, something twisted inside me. The thought lingered, clinging like smoke, refusing to fade.

“Hm.” She nodded while taking down more notes. “Did you know control is often about safety, too,” she said. “And safety requires trust. Vulnerability.”

I scoffed. “Right. Because nothing says ‘safe’ like letting people see your weaknesses.”

“You don’t think control and vulnerability can coexist?” she asked.

I opened my mouth to say something sharp, but nothing came, and she continued, allowing her gaze fleet past mine for a second, like she’d been pulled back into a memory.

“They can coexist, but there are people out there, including yourself, who don’t agree. You wanted my opinion the other day, and I’m going to give it to you. Miron, I believe that people like you cling to control to avoid feeling powerless. But that is why you’re here: to untangle the webs of confusion and work this thing out. And if you give it time, you’ll see that we will.”

Her eyes met mine, and she raised a brow. “You look like you want to say something, but you’re hesitating.”

Transiently, I faltered, and without my permission, my mind flickered to a memory I hadn’t thought about in years. I thought it lay buried and forgotten, but apparently, it still roamed in the shadows of my mind.

The memory was clear, very vivid. My father towered over me while I fought the tears in my eyes and wiped the blood off my lips; his fists were clenched, his voice like gravel as he spat words I hated to recall. The air was always so thick with tension, the kind that left bruises before and after the fists never landed.

But that was the past.

I blinked, forcing the memory away, and let out a low chuckle. “Do I?” I met her eyes, tilting my head slightly. “I think you’re imagining things.”

She didn't look convinced but didn't press. And while she jotted into her notes, I watched her closely, from the speed of her fingers on the keyboard, the intent focus she gave to the screen, and the tight pull of her lips.

For the first time since I walked into this place—even though this might have only been our second meeting—I couldn't shake the feeling that this woman was seeing through me. Not just the version of me I presented but the cracks beneath.

I wasn't sure how she'd done it, but she was swiftly penetrating like a wicked soldier on a mission.

And I hated it.

These sessions were supposed to be a waste of time, a box to check, a requirement to fulfill. But today, for the first time, I wondered if there was more to them than just a court-mandated obligation.

My phone beeped in my pocket, and her alarm simultaneously chimed. 10:30 a.m.

"Time's up," I announced, rising to my feet. "And I'm leaving."

Unlike the last time, she didn't make any sound or try to stop me. A hidden part of me might have looked forward to her gutsy response, but when it wasn't forthcoming, I found no desire to make any sarcastic remark before closing the door behind me.

No smirk, no pointed jab. Just silence.

Because somehow, my mind kept replaying her melodic voice over and over again like a broken record.

Miron, I believe that people like you cling to control to avoid feeling powerless.

And the worst part was, it sounded believable.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:48 pm

“Now, this is exactly what I needed.”

Elena laughed beside me, allowing the cool breeze to brush the bangs on her forehead. She was stunning tonight, as always. The rest of her frizzly brown hair was held up in a messy bun, and the teal dress she was wearing highlighted every inch of her full curves and enhanced the glow of her smooth olive skin.

It was funny how, years ago, we’d both been teased for being curvier than the average media-projected stereotypical girl. And it seemed now that almost every woman wanted a voluptuous figure.

Back in college, when I met Elena a few times, I yearned for how effortlessly flawless she was. Not only was she attractive, but her I.Q. and confidence levels were unparalleled, and it intimidated me to the point where I felt like I couldn’t measure up. But despite our differences, we somehow clicked, bonding over late-night pizza and study sessions.

And now, over time, we’d grown into two women who couldn’t get enough of our friendship.

“I can’t remember the last time I saw you this wild and free.”

Signaling the bartender, I rolled my eyes and moved the glass forward for a refill. “You call two glasses of Paloma wild and free? What happened to you? I thought four glasses were for beginners?”

“Hey, you know I’m still me. But you? Haze, you’re taking two shots. Two. When

was the last time you went out with me to grab so much as a bottle of water?" I didn't answer, and she gave me a curt nod. "Exactly my point."

She wasn't wrong. If it wasn't Prima Care, then home it was. I couldn't even recall the last time I went anywhere else after work, except grocery shopping. But that was one major difference between Elena and me: She was an absolute social butterfly, and I wasn't. She could walk into any place with her head held high and mingle with everyone, even if she knew no one.

Like tonight, for instance. Her call came in right after I arrived home, and all she'd said was, "A friend's throwing a party. It's a new place in town, and I'm taking you there because I really want us to check it out. No excuses. Get ready. I'll be there in ten to pick you up."

I couldn't argue; she didn't give me the time to. But despite my reluctance to admit it, I knew I needed a break from the chaos of work and thoughts of Nathan to just recharge and focus on myself.

So, I got dressed and followed Elena to The Tavern. There, Elena confessed to not knowing the actual party thrower.

Thankfully, it wasn't a high-class event, so entry was free, and we were spared any embarrassment.

Honestly, the place was cool. It still retained that new smell and buzzed with life. It stood on an open terrace, surrounded by glass railings that overlooked the city skyline.

Warm, golden string lights crisscrossed above polished wooden floors, and music pulsed through the space, a sultry jazz tune laced with a subtle electronic beat. It wasn't too loud, just enough to make me feel comfortable.

Elena and I sat at a high-top table near the edge, where the breeze carried the city's night air, cool against my skin. She leaned in, her green eyes gleaming under the lights.

"I know you, Haze. I know something's up. You know I won't try to force anything out of you, but I'm here to talk if you want."

Flashing an unconvincing smile, I swung my head back to down half of my third shot. The instant taste was smooth, a perfect balance of sweet and strong. "I'm fine."

I was trying hard not to ponder on the glaring fact that Elena and I were taking free shots at someone's party. Someone who had no idea we existed. Someone we didn't know.

"You're fine? That's fantastic! Can I interest you in some denial-based coping mechanisms?"

That tore a laugh from me, and I was close to choking on my drink. "Don't pull the therapy thing on me, Lena. I'm—"

"Fine. I know. I heard you the first time."

I fought hard not to spill my guts and empty the truckload of my worries on Elena, but my pit of frustration was full and overflowing. There was no one else I could comfortably share these things with.

I sighed, and she smiled, knowing she'd won.

"So...Nathan's back."

She gasped with joy and then looked at me funny. "That's a good thing, isn't it? Why

don't you look happy?"

"I am," I groaned, running my fingers through my hair. "I am just bubbling with so much happiness because he's closer now, at least for a few more weeks. I get to see him again, right? But lately, it just feels like...like we're off. Emotionally. Physically. It's like we're going through the motions, but something's missing."

"Ah," she tutted and took a swig from her glass. "So, you guys still aren't fucking."

Despite the chill air, heat spread around my neck. "A relationship is more than just that, Lena. There are other ways to connect, and with Nathan, you know that's not an option for us."

"But you're still not fucking. And you desperately want to fuck."

"Christ, Elena! Can you please stop using the f-word?" I mumbled. "It's triggering."

Elena leaned against the counter, stirring her drink lazily, a smirk playing on her lips. "Sounds like someone needs a little excitement." She leaned in, her voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper. "Why not explore other options?"

I scoffed, shaking my head. "Nathan and I are serious, and you know that's not how relationships work."

She took a slow sip of her drink. "Maybe. Maybe not. But one night of fun never killed anyone." Her gaze flicked across the terrace, and I followed it.

There was a guy on the move, watching us intently. Tall and sharp-looking in a plain black suit, though I couldn't make out his face from the distance.

Elena winked. "That one looks promising."

I laughed, rolling my eyes, but my stomach did a slow, uneasy flip. “You’re impossible.”

“And you’re frustrated.” She smirked. “Think about it. I need to use the ladies’ room.”

No, she didn’t. My friend was conveniently walking away to buy time for the stranger, and there was no time to yell at her. My back suddenly tingled in awareness, and my nose picked up the whiff of cologne.

The man appeared beside me and motioned to the stool Elena left vacant. “May I?”

I nodded shyly, toying with my glass while the stranger made himself comfortable. He had an aura around him, confident and dark, like a brooding knight that emerged from the shadows.

Up close, the mystery allure around him only intensified.

I found him charming. His dark eyes, thin lips, and pointy nose. The way he carried himself, the way he looked at me like I was the only person here—it was enough to make any woman feel special.

And yet, my insides twisted, a quiet unease settling in my stomach.

“Hi. I spotted you from a distance and couldn’t help but draw closer. The name’s Axel.” He held my gaze with an easy smile. “Do I have the pleasure of knowing the name of the damsel?”

I was sure my cheeks were scarlet already. Fighting hard to control myself, I mumbled, “Hazel.”

“A pretty name for a pretty lady.” Axel turned toward the bartender. “Mind if I get you a drink?”

My stomach repeatedly flipped, but I shook my head. “No, I don’t mind.”

“Great.” Axel’s smile stretched until his eyes were smiling, too. “You’re so beautiful. Has anyone ever told you that?”

Yes.

My boyfriend, to be precise, and he’s told me countless times.

A lump formed in my throat. What was I doing?

I forced a polite smile, gripping the glass a little tighter. “Excuse me,” I said, my voice smooth despite the uncertainty creeping in. “I need to freshen up.”

Without waiting for a response, I turned on my heel and made my way to the restroom. As expected, Elena was not there. She was probably on that terrace mingling with some random people.

The dim lighting and cool marble counters offered a brief reprieve from the swirling energy of the party outside. I placed my hands on the sink, exhaling slowly.

This was ridiculous.

Axel wasn’t trying to get to know me. Encouraging the conversation was only going to lead to one thing, and his eyes showed it: the lust-filled intent he had for me.

This wasn’t me.

I wasn't some naïve girl swayed by a handsome face and a charming demeanor. I had Nathan. Nathan, who had always been there, who sang the cheesiest song for me on my eighteenth birthday, who loved me and always managed to prove it.

I straightened, meeting my own reflection in the mirror. My eyes were teary, but I quickly dabbed them with my fingers to avoid ruining my makeup.

I smoothed the crinkles on my halter black dress, adjusted the sleek bun on my hair, and retouched the red lipstick before walking back out, resolved to politely dismiss the man.

Axel was still there, waiting on the stool and smiling at me with a fresh drink in hand. I tried to slow down my steps, but who was I kidding? I knew determination when I saw it, and he was determined.

I got close but didn't bother hopping back on my stool.

He handed the glass to me. "It's a negroni, and I guarantee you'll love it."

The confidence I'd mustered in the restroom fizzled out like a single flame exposed to brittle wind. Exhaling a nervous breath, I reached for the glass, and his fingertips brushed mine. The contact made my stomach churn, but I hadn't figured out how best to tell him I wasn't interested.

I was going to try, though. It was the least Nathan would expect of me: to defend what we had. So, I opened my mouth...and shut it again. Drinking up first sounded like a better idea.

What was it they said about alcohol? It gave false courage and false wisdom.

I took the glass to my lips, and...someone snatched it in a swift whoosh. "What

the—”

Everything else happened in a blur.

Not a word. No warning.

Before a protest left my mouth, in a quick motion, the negroni got tipped over Axel’s head, and my eyes widened in shock at the horror as it seeped into his hair and drenched his face.

Another shocked gasp rippled through the bar, and I started to reach out to a furious Axel to apologize, but my hands froze midair, and I held my breath when I recognized the lunatic that caused the scene.

My Level One Code Red client.

Miron Yezhov.

“Oh, my God, are you crazy!” were the first words that flew out of my mouth the second we were outside The Tavern and out of earshot.

My heart was racing so hard that I was having trouble breathing. I wanted to smack the look of indifference off his poker face until he cared.

“What the hell is wrong with you? Why on earth would you do that to another person?”

I knew I’d skipped the most important question, which was what he was doing there in the first place, because I had to know if it was really therapy he needed or special

care at an asylum.

After he'd gone ballistic by dumping a glass full of alcohol on Axel, he'd dragged me by my wrist through the ogling and murmuring crowd to the exit. But I couldn't decide which bothered me more: Axel's unwillingness to retaliate or how weirdly the party resumed like nothing ever happened after Miron whispered indistinctly into the ears of some men.

"What the hell is wrong with me ? I should be asking you that. You're the one who needs to have better taste in men."

I gaped, almost choking on my heightened annoyance. "Excuse me? "

My strappy mule heels were six solid inches, and still, I had to tilt my head far back as if I were stargazing. He towered over me, blocked out the rest of the world with his broad shoulders and rolled-up sleeves, and also had the audacity to smell so good that he could pass for something edible.

Blinded by rage, I still couldn't help but notice—and be further infuriated by—how sinfully handsome he looked tonight. The blue in his eyes was clear, sweeping from my head to toe and back to my face, and the plain curve of his lips strangely called my attention.

He sounded angry, but looked far from it. "Axel's a bastard. The only thing he can offer you is trouble. You should be thanking me."

"Thanking—" I wanted to pull my hair out and scream. This man was fully insane. So, they knew each other, but there was no valid reason to justify what he did. "Did you say I should be thanking you? For humiliating someone who didn't do anything wrong?"

I felt hot and cold at the same time.

Hot because no one else had managed in all twenty-four years of my life to rile me up as Miron did, and cold because I suddenly felt exposed before him. All my senses were on alert that I stood before him, not hidden behind the four walls of therapy, but bare, as a regular girl who could be anything else to him in this moment but his therapist.

Christ. I was losing it.

“Haze?”

I glanced over my shoulder to see Elena frantically waving me over. She looked worried, and her hair was a mess. The worried look on her face was my fault. The hair part? Definitely had someone else’s fingerprint.

However, her timing couldn’t be more perfect.

“Lena, I’m right here. Give me a sec, and I’ll be with you.”

Curling my fingers, I shot Miron a glare. “If there’s one thing you’re having from me tonight, it’s not an apology. Next time, don’t stick your nose where it doesn’t belong.”

And with that, I turned on my heels and walked away.

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:48 pm

The last light of day bled through the windows, glazing my office in a hue of deep purple and smoldering oranges. The glow stretched across the stacks of paperwork as I flipped through the latest shipment logs.

The numbers were off. Again.

I pinched the bridge of my nose, exhaling slowly. “Ruslan, tell me why the St. Petersburg shipment is short by five crates.”

The five men standing across my desk shuffled their feet and looked everywhere else but me when one of them opened his mouth to speak.

Ruslan shifted on his feet. “We had some...complications at the port, Boss. Customs was on high alert. Had to divert two crates to a safe house. The others are held up with a contact.”

My jaw tightened. I glanced up from the ledger. “And the contact?”

“Reliable. He’ll move them by tomorrow night.”

“Make sure he does.” I flicked my pen against the desk, narrowing my eyes at each of them. “And the product that already landed. Where is it now?”

“In our warehouses. Inventory checks out. No discrepancies on our end.”

Good. The warehouse on the west side needed tighter security— two shipments had been delayed, and I wasn’t about to let that become a habit.

I turned my attention to the next set of documents: cryptic business contracts, coded in a way only we understood. Weapons shipments, distribution routes, payment schedules. Every detail had to be airtight.

But my mind drifted from paperwork and business to a fiery fox in a little black dress. A dress I'd had a manic urge to rip off the moment we were alone.

Last night had been a battle. Hazel's expression haunted me to my dreams, and even now, it slammed into me like a fist to the ribs.

It wasn't the first time I dealt with an angry woman. Hell, Alina was angry about something almost all the time. But the picture of blazing hazel eyes and her locked jaw just...stuck. And knowing I was the reason for her anger rubbed on me the wrong way.

I gritted my teeth, recalling the words the wind carried in her voice.

Next time, don't stick your nose where it doesn't belong.

My hands went down on the table, and from the corner of my eye, I caught one of my men jump.

"Where's Damir?" I asked none of them in particular.

"Boss, you asked him to go figure out what delayed the Swiss-Moscow transfer."

"Hm." That, I did. Barely an hour ago, after I almost blew his head off for allowing a man to sleep on duty, which led to some of our crates being stolen. "Whenever he returns, tell him I want him to double security at the docks. If Customs is tightening their grip, someone's been talking."

I signed off on a payment order and looked up. “And if I find out who, they won’t be talking again,” I said.

Ruslan gave a sharp nod. “Understood.”

I leaned back in my chair, my fingers drumming against the mahogany surface.

“One more thing, Ruslan,” I said as the men reached for the door. “Have the Bucharest buyer wire the funds by midnight. If he delays again, we’ll collect in person.”

Ruslan nodded. “Got it, Boss.”

Alone, I exhaled slowly, rubbing my temple.

Fuck!

Her fucking glare still lingered in my head, and it was more distracting than any business problem I had faced tonight.

She had stood there, shoulders squared, chin lifted, and asked if I was crazy. She’d stood there and expressed more disappointment in my actions than anyone else ever dared to do.

The way she’d looked at me unsettled something deep in my chest. Most people bowed their heads when I spoke. They agreed, obeyed, and stepped aside. But not her.

Not fucking Hazel Sinclair.

And it bothered me.

She fucking bothered me. My therapist. How ironic!

I had expected hesitation before she lashed out. Or fear, maybe. A careful choice of words. But she had met my authority head-on and refused to back down.

Her voice came again, ringing more loudly this time, warning me to never stick my nose in her business.

I felt my face grow hot. My jaw clamped, and my hands trembled in agitation. In a flash, I was on my feet.

I grabbed my car keys off the desk, my chair scraping against the floor as I stood. This wasn't going away. Not by sitting here, stewing in it. The sooner I dealt with it, the better.

Within moments, I was out of my office, the door shutting behind me with a little more force than necessary.

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:48 pm

The sky was a mess of colors: deep oranges melting into pinks, with streaks of violet stretching across the clouds like brushstrokes on an artist's canvas. Cars rolled by, their headlights flicking on one by one, and the scenic view was beautiful to watch. But I didn't have the patience to admire.

I'd had a long day and desperately yearned for a hot bath and my soft pillows.

Cold air bit at my skin as I shifted from one foot to the other, glancing down at my phone for what had to be the tenth time.

Still no driver.

Nathan had some school-related seminar to organize three hours away from Prima Care, so he couldn't pick me up. My Lyft was supposed to be here eighteen minutes ago, and I was ready to delete the damn app off my phone.

A gust of wind sent my hair whipping across my face. I tucked it behind my ear, sighing, when the deep purr of an engine caught my attention.

I thought it was the driver.

But, since when did Lyft have AMG-Mercedes?

The black Mercedes pulled up beside me, its sleek exterior reflecting the streetlights that automatically came up. The tinted window rolled down, and I stiffened.

"I double-checked my planner to make sure you didn't have a session today." And I

wasn't bluffing. "Even if you somehow miraculously did, it's already late."

Miron kept his eyes ahead, not sparing me a glance even once. "Get in."

The nerve of him to show up here and order me around. "Thanks, but no. I have a Lyft on its way to—"

"Get inside the fucking car."

Whatever I had left to say dried up on my tongue. He didn't shout, but it was that cold, emotionless command that sent chills down my spine. It reminded me of the detached look in his eyes when he dunked Axel with alcohol and how undisturbed he was by the aftermath.

Quietly, I opened the door and got in.

He raised a brow and murmured something under his breath along the lines of "...insufferable," before he said, "Shut the fucking door, will you?"

I obeyed but clutched my bag tightly and looked straight ahead without uttering a word. This same man had whacked someone across the head with a bottle. Arguing with him didn't sound like the most reasonable thing to do while seated in his car.

We sat in silence until he decided to busy his hands with the wheel, and the car moved out of the curb in a fluid motion.

Eerie silence pressed in, thick and absolute, swallowing even the faintest sound of my breath. The fatigue that had been a constant weight all day, dragging at my limbs, vanished.

Every muscle in my body was tense and on alert.

“I said Axel meant trouble, and I meant it.”

He had spoken so suddenly, I nearly jumped out of my skin, and the deep rumble of his voice forced me to look at him. It appeared that he had more to say, so I didn't interrupt.

“You don't have eyes at the back of your head, do you? Doesn't mean others aren't watching. He has a reputation with the women, which includes having them whether they like it or not. Do you know what that means, Miss Sinclair?”

Even with his eyes locked in on the road, I still felt his stare burn me somehow, waiting intently for an answer, even though I didn't like where this conversation was headed.

“No, I don't.”

“It means he drugged your drink last night. His intentions were...not pure.” I saw a muscle tick in his jaw, and his next words flowed with venom and bitterness too immense to understand. “Men like that—men who feel like they can do whatever they want to women—fucking disgust me. And I won't just stand by and watch any stupid son of a bitch take advantage of you.”

Bile rose up my throat, and I swallowed down the disgust that churned in my stomach. Distracted by the heart-wrenching news he delivered, I didn't think to question why he felt the need to care if something happened to me.

The most logical question to have asked myself was why I should believe Miron. For all I knew, he could be lying. He might have harbored a malicious intent, or no intent at all, to embarrass Axel. Miron and I were not friends. We barely knew each other. After two—well, three—not-so-pleasant encounters, and he suddenly had my best interests at heart?

That was what my mind said.

My heart, however, begged to differ.

There was that gut instinct that he was telling the truth, and another question sprang up: What did he have to gain by unexpectedly driving all the way down here to lie to me?

He gave a hint last night, didn't he? He'd obviously known him and said Axel was trouble. I just didn't know how much trouble.

Oh, God.

I felt sick.

Miron saved me from what could have been the most horrible night of my life, and I'd practically smeared crap on his efforts.

My lungs constricted, and I bit down hard on my lower lip until a warm, metallic taste touched my tongue. This was another moment to swallow my pride and apologize for being wrong.

"I shouldn't have snapped at you. I'm sorry. I didn't know you were trying to help me."

"I get it," he said simply. "You were angry."

"Yes, but I shouldn't have taken it out on you. I still recommend that you find better ways to manage and express your anger, but if I had known why you did it, I wouldn't have reacted like that."

“You didn’t know. So, it’s fine. I didn’t tell you to evoke an apology.”

Miron’s expression didn’t change, but something in his posture eased, and when he looked at me, he didn’t have to say why he’d driven all the way to Prima Care to explain himself.

Last night, I’d outright told him not to stick his nose where it didn’t belong while he was being noble.

Ouch.

“You’re not so big on apologies and mushy moments, are you?”

He shrugged. “No. But that seems like your forte, creating mushy moments. Which made me wonder why you went to The Tavern alone.”

“So, we’re not going to talk about why and how you randomly showed up there to save the day? And where you’re currently taking me to?”

“I had some business to take care of, and I am taking you to your house,” was all he offered.

I lifted an eyebrow. “And you know my address, how?”

“I have my ways.” A shadow of a smile crossed his face, only to disappear. “Back to you and your loneliness at The Tavern.”

“I wasn’t alone or lonely. My friend Elena and I were there together. That was until Axel showed up and—”

“You know what I mean.”

Did I?

His eyes were insinuating something, but I wanted to hear him say it.

“I’m asking if you have a boyfriend, Miss Sinclair. And I’m genuinely curious because Axel wouldn’t have had a chance if he had been present. Or existed. ”

It was the strangest thing, but we’d somehow transitioned from a heated, prickly moment, to talking with ease, like civil people. It felt lighter, different; and though I twisted uneasily about bringing up Nathan with him, the atmosphere between us was comfortable enough.

And, somehow, I found myself enjoying listening to Miron talk.

“He does exist. His name is Nathan.” I smiled a little, encouraging myself to speak with boldness about him because I wasn’t doing anything wrong. “And it was a girl’s night out, so he wasn’t invited.”

Miron didn’t react immediately. He just hummed. Then, in the same flat tone he’d used the entire evening, he said, “I’m engaged.”

I thought I paused breathing when that piece of information knocked the air out of my lungs. I stared at his long, slender fingers. No ring.

But he looked dead serious.

I should’ve felt nothing. But instead, a strange discomfort settled in my chest, tight and unwelcome.

“Oh,” I said, forcing a smile. “Congratulations.”

Then, he glanced over his shoulder, unreadable as ever, as he watched me briefly before facing the road again. “Usually, Alina is the one who gets most of the congratulations. I handle the paperwork and ask for places to sign.”

“Are you being metaphorical?”

“What do you think, Miss Sinclair?”

“I think if you’re speaking about your upcoming wedding like it’s work, then....” The realization dawned on me. “It’s a contract? Your marriage was arranged?”

“I see how you put those qualifications to good use.”

“Let me get this right; if I understand things correctly, you’re not happy about this arrangement.”

“Happy?” He blew a dismissive grunt. “Sounds like the name of a children’s playground. Getting married to Alina is an obligation I must fulfill. Where I come from, there’s no choice in considering happiness . And I’m not complaining. She’s got her intense days, and I’ve got mine. We’ll deal with it.”

“Sounds like it’s convenient then.” Fumbling with my fingers, I blurted out something I thought I’d only ever tell Elena. “I, on the other hand, am not very happy with the way things are on my end. It’s long-distance, and it’s slowly taking a toll on us.”

Again, Miron didn’t say anything, but this time, the faint smile on his lips was more visible. “No wonder you’re so wound up. Makes sense. I mean, with your boyfriend always gone, I doubt you’re getting much action.”

Sudden heat rushed up my neck, and my whole body locked up. “That’s—”

“Never mind.”

His guards went back up, and I swallowed hard, gripping my seatbelt.

The car felt unbearably small all of a sudden, and I should have been grateful that he didn’t prod further. But the words slipped out before I could stop them.

“I—I’ve never had sex.”

The car jerked violently.

My breath caught as Miron’s knuckles went white on the steering wheel, his foot slamming on the brake just in time to keep us from swerving into the next lane. A car horn, though muffled by the wound-up windows, blared behind us, and he cursed under his breath, steadying the wheel.

Then, he turned to me, eyes wide with disbelief. “You’ve never... how ?”

It was the most genuine and stupefied reaction I had ever seen on him, and my ears burned with embarrassment. Thanks to my big mouth. Sometimes, I feared I talked too much.

“Forget I said anything.” I shrank in my seat, covering my burning face with my hands. “You know what? Here’s fine.”

“You’re the crazy one if you think I’m leaving you here.”

“Miron....”

His eyes grew as hard as granite. “I’m taking you home. End of discussion.”

I had already begun fumbling with the door, thinking he was going to burst out at any moment, laughing in my face—even though, technically, I’d never seen him laugh. But I couldn’t wait for him to mock me. I couldn’t let that happen.

“My house is nearby. I’ll walk the distance. Here is fine.” A lie. It wasn’t anywhere close, but I needed out. Now.

Miron’s grip tightened on the wheel, his jaw ticking like he was about to argue. I reached for the door handle, fingers shaking. It wouldn’t budge.

“Unlock it,” I demanded, my heart hammering so loud that I heard the blood roaring in my ears.

He hesitated.

“Please, unlock the damn door, Miron,” I snapped.

A soft click.

I shoved the door open, stepping out before I could second-guess myself. The night air hit my skin, cooling the humiliating heat on my face.

I didn’t look back.

I walked away, fast. Maybe too fast, attempting to leave that memory behind. But I didn’t care.

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:48 pm

I barely heard the men rumbling greetings as I stomped through the double oak doors, past the foyer, and headed straight to the wine shelves in the kitchen.

The house was quiet, which was not the most ideal situation because she now completely consumed my thoughts. And I didn't bother to fight her away.

Her image from earlier was stuck in my mind: her dressed sharply in an ivory blouse tucked into a sleek black pencil skirt, her heels still on despite how late it was. She'd looked exhausted. The kind of tired that settled in the eyes, not just the body. A strand of hair had slipped from the neat bun at the nape of her neck, brushing against her cheek, but she didn't bother fixing it.

I'd kept my eyes on the road, acted like I didn't notice. But it disturbed the shit out of me.

Blindly grabbing myself a random bottle, I poured myself a couple of fingers of whiskey neat, the amber liquid swirling as I gripped the glass tighter than necessary.

Then, I held the counter, feeling the rage tick for letting her angrily trudge in the darkness. But what benefit did I get from stopping her?

She was my fucking therapist.

I'd gone over there to buttress that I'd prevented her from getting her ass fucked without her permission and then ended up finding out that she'd never been fucked at all.

Shit.

It was disturbing that her virginity excited me in the strangest way, and I'd nearly lost focus on the damn road.

I tossed back the whiskey, the burn grounding me.

Hazel was different, annoyingly so. A boyfriend who was never around, yet she still held onto him, kept herself for him, as if he were the last steady thing in her world.

The moment she ran out of my car, I should've let her fade from my mind. Instead, she lingered, the scent of her perfume pressing against my thoughts in a way I couldn't shake. I'd burned, imagining what that perfume smelled like on her neck. And it wasn't just her innocence that frustrated me; it was the way she carried it without pretense.

I poured another finger and threw my head back with my eyes closed. Still, in the darkness of my mind, piercing hazel eyes haunted me. Red-painted lips whispered therapeutic jargon into my ears. Chestnut-brown hair begged my fingers to feel them. And then, there was that fucking little black dress that had made a permanent mark in my memory.

Infatuation.

Misplaced lust.

There'd been no reason for it. But the coil in my chest when I thought of Hazel burned the same way I'd sizzled fleetingly for Genevieve, like a flickering flame that called my attention.

The woman wasn't for me. And yet, somehow, I already knew I wouldn't be able to

leave her alone.

I took out my phone and texted the one person I wasn't ready to see but needed as a distraction.

Barely half an hour later, I heard the double doors creak open and heavy footsteps cutting through the quiet. Damir appeared through the threshold, no jacket, no tie, his white shirt covered in sweat, and...I thought I saw a few spots of crimson on his collar.

I filled another glass and slid it on the counter toward him.

We drank in silence.

“Did Ruslan give you my message?”

“Yeah, about the docks. To double up security. I've taken care of it.”

I knew he would; he was Damir. Always on top of every fucking matter. Dry amusement filled me, but I didn't show it. He thought I was still stewing, counting the seconds until I yelled his ear off. Two hours ago, that might have been the case. But now, something else needed sorting out.

I moved over to the marble kitchen island and settled on a swivel high stool.

“And the Swiss-Moscow transfer,” I said, watching him carefully. “Why was it delayed?”

Damir exhaled sharply, running a hand through his damp hair. He opened his mouth, and I held up my hand because now I had to ask.

“Before you answer that, why the hell do you look like shit?”

The corner of his mouth curved. “I found the guy who stole the missing crates.”

I arched a brow. “And you killed him?”

“Even better. I beat the shit out of him.”

To Damir, beating the man to a pulp was better than killing him. It was a style he’d learned from me in the days of our early beginnings, before I decided going straight for the kill was more effective. Me and him, we’d almost experienced the brutality of the world together, though at different times. On the outside, he looked calm, rational, but we were both familiar with the monsters lurking in our shadows. Bloodshed and violence were woven into our very existence, and that way, torturing traitorous bastards seemed more viable an option than snuffing out their miserable lives immediately.

Rolling my eyes, I returned to the previous conversation. “So, back to the transfer.”

“There was an issue on the Zurich end. A flagged transaction. Nothing we couldn’t handle. It just took longer than expected.”

“Good.” I stared at my drink. “I’ve got something else for you to handle. I need information on a certain someone, everything you can get on her: private life, social life, work, hobbies. What she has for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. I want it all. Plus, a full report on her boyfriend.”

Damir’s facial expression didn’t even crack in the slightest, but the twinkle in his eyes betrayed the mask. “So, it’s a woman, with a boyfriend, who is not your fiancée.”

“Oh, we’re cracking jokes now,” I said dryly.

“Not at all, Boss. I was just making sure I got all the details right.” Damir moved closer to the door. “You know I can get this done in a blink. I just need a name.”

Finding her address was easy. All it took was random Facebook searches to pinpoint her current residential location.

Digging up more information meant involving Damir. He had his way of trailing and picking the tiniest speck of information on people.

“Hazel Sinclair.”

“Got it.” He started out the door, then stopped. “Wait, Miron. That’s...that’s your therapist.”

He would have known because he handled the therapy treatment discussions with Amelia and took note of every single detail, including the name of the therapist handling my sessions. But I didn’t fucking care about what he thought. He didn’t have to deal with the Hazel-syndrome; I did.

Ignoring him, I buried my face in my hands. “I need reports, not fucking questions.”

“On it. And, before I forget, it’s Amelia’s birthday next week. It’s a formal event. Suit, tie. That kind of shit.”

“So?”

“So, it means you know you can’t miss it. Not where Amelia is concerned, anyway. I have your invite, and she sent one over to Alina.”

“Separate invites, huh?”

“Just in case you think you can ditch. Alina’s backup to ensure you’re there. Smart woman,” he said and turned around to leave.

Then, he stopped. Again.

“Miron?”

“Jesus. Yes, Damir. What the fuck is it?”

This time around, when Damir spoke, his voice was heavy and quiet. I didn’t see his face, but, like me, the energy that radiated off him when he was serious was different.

“I know you didn’t ask, but I’m going to say it anyway because I always fucking blurt at the most unexpected moments. About this current assignment, it’s not advisable. What you’re asking me to do will only feed that obsession, and you know it.”

My fingers curled tightly around the glass, and I remembered that I’d nearly blown his head off earlier today. “You’re right; I didn’t ask for your fucking opinion. Reports, and not questions or heart-to-hearts, Damir. That’s all I need.”

“Sure.”

I heard his retreating steps and was left alone to deal with the intrigue that had taken root.

Severely undeniable and persistent.

And no matter how hard I tried to unravel it, my attraction to her remained.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:48 pm

Elena said it was the perfect dress. And I completely agreed.

In the mall, the second my eyes fell on it, I knew it was the one. How could it not be? I'd gone into the fitting room to try it on and stepped out with the brightest beams.

The maxi bodycon dress draped effortlessly, hugging my body in all the right places like a second skin. It was a bold, shimmering blood red, featuring a low neckline that revealed a glimpse of cleavage. The material was soft yet structured, with a daring slit that rose high above my knee. I had worried about showcasing my waist curves and full hip dips, but no dress in my wardrobe instilled confidence like this one.

I spent the money; I selected it. And it was just flawless. Modest, but not too modest. The best pick for Amelia's thirty-fifth birthday party. A standard VIP formal event, and I'd gotten an invite. To me, that was a very big deal.

I went all out with my hair. I used the hot iron to shape each roll into full, shiny body waves, arranging some over my shoulder and leaving the rest dangling behind my back. My makeup was at the barest minimum, with dark eyeliner, mascara, and only a bold red lipstick to complement the dress. Elena had preferred a pair of strappy heels, but I picked the suede red pointy stilettos to finish the look.

And all night, from the moment my boyfriend drove by my house to pick me up, I'd held my breath, waiting for the smallest compliment.

"Nate," I whispered, clutching his arm tightly. "Nathan, you're doing it again."

"Crap. Babe," he murmured, keeping the phone aside only long enough to mutter

another tasteless apology before leaning in to brush a kiss on my cheek. “I’m sorry. It’s important, but I’ll be done with it soon so we can enjoy the night together.”

It was the third time he said the exact same thing since we arrived at Amelia’s grandiose celebration hall over an hour ago, and all the while, there’d been no improvement. He hadn’t taken a full minute to notice me, even once.

The soft glow of his phone screen reflected in his eyes as he checked it once more, his fingers quick, his mouth in a worried line.

As always, he looked dashing. The plain black tuxedo was a perfect fit, and I’d smiled when I noticed he trimmed his taper fade. He’d made an effort to be a charming plus one, and I was appreciative. But a quiet ache settled in my chest because he wasn’t present.

I forced a smile to my face and advised myself to look away.

Golden lights illuminated the hall and shimmered over the elegantly set tables. At the corner, there was a long banquet table dressed in ivory linen, gleaming with fine china and crystal glassware. Roses, pale pink and white, spilled from delicate vases. On another table, there was a wine fountain, and beside it were delicious-looking appetizers. If Nathan was feeling up to it, I might have coaxed him to accompany me to that table.

The air carried rising laughter, and I tried to relax under the sound of soft music that blended with conversation. Until a group of men trooped in through the doors and a sudden hush fell over the hall. The music kept on playing, but almost no one was speaking.

From a distance, I saw them but couldn’t make out their faces. The men were tall and huge, all dressed in black suits. Most of them spread into every corner, unsmiling,

while a few stayed together in a small circle.

From the center of the hall, where she greeted guests, Amelia noticed the eerie stillness that followed the men's entrance and hurriedly went over to meet them. They talked amongst themselves, and when Amelia laughed a little too loudly, the music tempo picked up speed, and conversation resumed like everyone hadn't been quiet only seconds ago.

The small circle moved with Amelia, and going by the frequent gestures she made with her hands, I guessed she was showing them to their seats, which were not far away from mine and Nathan's table.

They drew closer, and their faces became clearer. Positioned between them was a woman in a short, bespoke silver dress. She turned to one of the men, and that was when I recognized the man at the forefront. The air suddenly shifted. Hot and cold shivers ran tremors to my toes.

Miron.

What was I expecting? Amelia was his cousin. It wasn't strange for him to be here. But it was strange that my heart stuttered when I caught sight of how devastatingly handsome he looked.

Nathan was right beside me, but I couldn't stop my eyes from roaming.

He, too, had gotten a hair trim, and the blond strands seemed to dazzle brighter under the golden lights. The shadows enhanced the sharp contours of his face, and the suit...God! The stylish three-piece had to be tailor-made for him alone.

Miron stood tall and proud, with his jaw set and eyes narrowed heatedly when Amelia chuckled. Knowing her, she'd made a joke that didn't go down well with

him.

The girl in the middle clung to his arm, her diamond bracelet catching the light as she tossed her black hair over one shoulder. That must have been his fiancée, Alina. The one he was to marry.

She was beautiful in the effortless way of girls who had never known inconvenience. Polished and perfect, she was a walking, breathing display of wealth.

And yet, Miron wasn't looking at her.

As if he sensed someone watching across the room, his gaze lifted on instinct, and his eyes found me instantly.

The noise around me dulled to a hum at the unexpected impact—a clash of blue and hazel and heat dancing around my neck and cheeks.

Amelia was talking. Alina was laughing. But Miron kept his eyes locked on mine.

My breath hitched as his gaze traveled slowly and deliberately down the length of me, then back up. His gaze burned my bare skin, from the shock on my face to my heaving cleavage and the fair glimpse of the thigh that was displayed through the slit. There were a thousand unspoken things pressed into that stare. I felt it.

And swallowed hard.

I was insane for allowing crazy thoughts to pop up in my head about this man. He was my client, and my boyfriend was seated right next to me. Somehow, my heart was screaming, “It doesn't matter!”

I was allowed to look, to crush on, but not touch. He was attractive, true. But we were

both off limits, I reminded myself.

Regardless, tension crackled heavily, like high-voltage electricity. And for one unbearable, heart-pounding second, I refused to look away.

The first notes of the waltz swirled through the air, and around me, couples turned toward the dance floor. The room was quickly shifting into motion, and I knew what that meant: Nathan and I would have to file to the dancefloor.

Across the room, I already spotted Amelia and, surprisingly, Miron making their way toward our table. Thankfully, he wasn't looking at me and appeared to be paying rapt attention to his chattering cousin.

I held my breath and sat patiently, counting the seconds with my fingers, before eagerly shifting closer to Nathan.

"Nate." I tapped him. "We have to go dance. Amelia's coming here to practically drag us out of the table because we've been isolated for far too long. We're not mingling. And I really want to mingle."

I could count the number of things Nate and I said to each other the whole night. Whatever was going on with that phone was obviously more important than having a decent thirty-minute conversation with me, and his lack of zeal affected me greatly.

It took a moment for him to raise his head, and when he finally did, the damn phone buzzed in his hand.

Hastily scrambling to his feet, Nathan flashed an apologetic smile and kissed my cheeks. "Cupcake, I'll make it up to you, I promise. I just...I really have to take this.

Work-related stuff.”

The hurt that sliced through my chest wrapped me like a vise, constricting the airflow in my lungs. I sputtered, blinked back tears, and watched his back disappear in the throng of people before two shadows fell over me.

“Was that Nathan?” Amelia craned her neck to follow his movement. “Is he leaving?”

Conveniently ignoring the god-like human by her side, I rose to my feet, literally fighting the tears back while leaning in for a hug. “No, he’s not. It was an important call he had to take. Happy Birthday, Dr. Greystone.”

“Amelia, Hazel. We’ve talked about this. And thank you.” She offered a warm smile. If she noticed the shimmer of tears in my eyes, she didn’t mention it. “Doesn’t matter, though. I’m taking you to that dancefloor.”

“Oh, Amelia. Please, I don’t really feel like it.”

She caught my hand before I could slip away. “Oh, come on, it’s my birthday. You’ve worked so hard at the Clinic, and you have been seated here all night. I’m not allowing you to sit this one out.”

“I don’t have a partner.”

“We’ll find you one.”

“No need. I’ll take her.”

Miron had his long arm extended and his wide palm stretched, with those unreadable stormy eyes on me.

Amelia threw a cautionary stare at her cousin before I did. “ You want to dance with her?”

“Did I have water in my mouth?”

“And Alina? Are you sure she wouldn’t mind?”

“Coincidentally, she’s on a call with her father. It could take a while.”

I glanced between both of them. “Do I have a choice?”

“No,” they answered at the same time.

“Great.” It turned out that being attractive wasn’t the only similarity they shared.

“Okay, then.” Amelia moved me closer to Miron, practically shoving me into his chest. “His willingness to stand in for your boyfriend is unusual, but I assure you, he isn’t a terrible dancer. You are in good hands. Move along now. I have to go say hi to some guests.”

Good hands.

I remembered the burning sensation his hands left on my wrist when he’d dragged me out of The Tavern and tried to ignore the warm fuzzies that erupted in my stomach when his fingers covered mine as I followed him to the dancefloor. His grip was firm but not unkind.

And as he led me into the first sweeping turn, my heart leaped, and the world narrowed to just us, keeping him in focus.

I should have been focused on my steps and the pattern of the dance. Instead, I was

keenly aware of the way his hand rested against my back, the way his sturdy frame kept me grounded. I wasn't sure if to hold on tighter or step away.

Our movement flowed in smooth sync with the music, and he moved with certainty, guiding me effortlessly. Amelia was understating when she said he wasn't a terrible dancer. Miron was an excellent dancer.

His eyes shifted from gazing at the distance to scorching my face. "I like your dress. You look good in it."

"That's a shocker." Not sure how to react to that, I chewed on my lips and fought the blush rising to my cheeks. "I didn't know you gave compliments."

The music swelled, and we flowed together seamlessly. His gaze drifted again to the crowd with a crease between his brows, and I thought I felt his fingers twitch behind me. "Years ago, I learned how to. I didn't know you don't take compliments well."

I ducked, burying my face a few inches from his chest and overpowering fresh scent. "I'm sorry. Thank you. You don't look too bad yourself."

"Thank you."

We swayed, moved our feet in rhythm, and twirled.

It was the first time I'd seen him since I ran out of his car like a bandit in tears after confessing to being a virgin. The ground might have as well opened to swallow me up because the shame was real.

"You skipped your session this week. What happened?"

His shoulder moved. "I knew I'd see you here," came his flat response, and my ears

were suddenly perked.

Did he? Was there the smallest possibility that Miron was looking out for me tonight? If yes, why did the thought make me giddy?

I kept my eyes pinned on the black vest beneath his jacket. “No, you didn’t.”

“No, I didn’t.” A flicker of a smile passed his mouth. “But you’re here now. You can ask me all the questions you want.”

“What are you saying?” For the first time that evening, a genuine chuckle left my lips. “We can’t have a session at my boss’s birthday celebration party. That will be unprofessional.”

“Who set the rules?”

“The profession.”

“So, you need the four walls of an office before you help your client?”

I smiled up at him, though his eyes were elsewhere. “I thought you didn’t need helping? Is someone having a different perspective on therapy?”

What was I thinking, teasing him when he was obviously going to ward off my attempts and ignore me? The smile melted off my face.

“Miron, you can’t skip the next session. Or the one after that. We’re aware of what would happen if the reports don’t reflect participation.” During the briefing, Amelia made sure to emphasize all the things that could go wrong if he didn’t follow the court order.

“I don’t respond well to external cautions, and I am not good with taking orders, Miss Sinclair.”

“It wasn’t an order but a fact.” Then, it occurred to me that I’d made a passive observation. Not once since our encounter had Miron said my name. He was only being formal, as he should have been. But I had somehow convinced myself that we’d moved past the formalities.

“Will you ever call me by my name?”

“I will. When the time is right.”

“What does that mean?”

He looked over my shoulder, and the shutters were back down, though they’d never really been up. “So, the boy in the suit. That was Nathan. Your boyfriend?”

Somehow, while Miron and I twirled under the golden lights and bickered back and forth, I managed to forget that my boyfriend accompanied me to the party. I felt awful.

“Yes— wait ,” I’d started to respond and paused. “He’s not a boy.”

“He looks like one.”

“And what do you look like?”

Thick eyebrows rose on his forehead, his lips curving just high enough to form a suggestive grin. “You really want me to answer that?”

He didn’t have to; the answer was clear as day. He looked like a man and felt like

one, the entire solid length and breadth of him pressed up against me. He had lean, muscular arms, sturdy hands, and a powerful build. I secretly wondered about his exercise routine and diet plan.

Miron didn't look as young as Nathan, but every time I got close to him, it was harder to remember the seventeen-year gap between us. The reason?

Funny, but we clicked.

Not initially, at first. But in an odd way, even with all the tantrums and steam blowing out of proportion, I started to realize we did. His presence came with the power to rile me up and calm me down. He was the venom and the antidote. The plague and the cure.

He had walked through those doors and into my office like a raging inferno, ready to burn down anything on his path, but looking at him now, he seemed...different. Maybe the light touched his softer edges, or I misjudged him because of his current composure. Or maybe he was not what I, and the rest of society, pegged him to be.

"I saw how he neglected you tonight. Left you sitting there to look at everything else, and before you say shit, no, I wasn't watching you; your loneliness was glaring to everything that had eyes. Not even boys do that. Only idiots."

I took back everything I thought. I was wrong. Miron was a jerk.

Tearing my eyes away, I mumbled loud enough for him to hear. "Nathan's not an idiot. He just has a lot of school and work stuff to deal with. You probably wouldn't understand."

"Says the girlfriend of the man who is distant, both at home and away. Seems like you're still devoted to staying loyal to the absentee, Miss Sinclair."

I met his gaze, unfazed. “Still engaged to a woman who’s doubling your work shifts?”

His smirk twitched, only slightly, before he spun me—too fast, too sharp, making me catch my breath.

“Careful, Miss Sinclair.” He pulled me close, and his warm breath tickled my ear when he said, “You almost sound jealous.”

The music stopped, and the dance ended. I was saved by the bell because, otherwise, I had absolutely nothing to say to that, except reacting like I had a bad case of red skin. From above his shoulder, across the room, I saw his fiancée, Alina, and she was seething.

We stepped apart, and without waiting to hear a word from him, I turned on my heels, making my way back to my table. Only to find Nathan waiting with his hands folded across his chest and a muscle throbbing on his neck. I had never seen him so pissed.

Absolutely superb.

What a beautiful night it was.

I blamed Jeffery.

It was petty to point fingers when my control was slipping, but if he hadn't double-crossed me, then I wouldn't have reacted, and if I hadn't reacted, there would have been no hearing in court. No court hearing meant no therapy sessions. No therapy sessions meant no Hazel fucking Sinclair. It was that simple.

Before Jeffery's betrayal, life was as regular as it could be, like a well-oiled machine with every cog and gear working. Every morning kickstarted at the same time, with the same routine, and I prided myself on being organized and focused. The blueprint guiding my next steps and thoughts was clear. Then, Jeffery exhibited his inanity, and it ushered in the biggest distraction I'd ever had to face. Now, the routines started to feel stale and uninteresting compared to the thrill of getting to know her.

Then, there was last night.

First, it was the little black dress, and later, the red dress that only let my imagination run wilder. The woman was trying to kill me. I'd let my guard slip just a little. One dance. One touch of her small hand in mine. A big fucking mistake.

I was man enough to admit that self-control wasn't my thing; on my list of weaknesses, it came first. Last night, though, I fought to keep it on that fucking list and from completely slipping away from existence. Not letting my hands go below her waist had to be the hardest task I'd ever accomplished.

Christ. I didn't even care that we were surrounded by hundreds of people with prying eyes; right there and then, I wanted to devour her, rip that dress with my bare hands,

and sink my teeth into those soft dips and curves of hers. I wanted her red lips on mine, her small fingers in my hair, and mine between her legs.

I wanted— needed to know what she tasted like. My face burned to be buried in the burrows of her shoulders, and my tongue drooled for a lick at her nape. Even now, at this very moment, just thinking about it had my blood flowing faster, my balls tingling with need, pushing me, until I was teetering over the edge of absurd desire.

How did I go from detesting the therapist to daydreaming about her being pinned against my wall? Naked. Wet. Ready for me.

Maybe I never really did. I just didn't pay attention to her, and now I was, and I couldn't get enough.

Three rapid knocks on the door cut my thoughts short before it creaked open, and Damir strolled in uninvited, all smugness and bad timing.

I arched a brow at the gleam in his eyes. "Can I help you?"

"That is weirdly polite of you, my boss, and I would answer, but the problem is, you have never asked me that before."

"That's because you only come in here if I send for you or you have important information that I asked for. From the way I see it, neither of those factors are present. So, why the hell are you seated across me, looking like you know something I don't?"

Damir shrugged. "One factor is present. I have important information on something you asked for, but I'm not spilling until we go over something first."

"Look who's dishing orders now. First, he walks into my office, and now he's setting

ground rules.”

“I’m feeling pretty confident because the information I have is a power card. I’m holding a card with power.”

“I know what a power card is, Damir. What do you want?”

He inclined into the chair, crossing his arms over his chest. There was a knowing in his eyes and a tease on his lips when he smiled. “I saw her last night, and then I understood. You like her, don’t you?”

I wasn’t going to play ignorant; I knew he was talking about Hazel. And if he said he saw her last night, it meant he looked at her. Damir was an asset, but an uncomfortable itch grew at the back of my head at the mere thought that he’d traced her body with his eyes. I wanted to take whatever he’d seen and erase it from his memory, even if it meant punching his face to do it.

“What if I say I don’t like her?”

“Then you would be lying to yourself, not me. I saw the way you looked at her last night. Heck, you couldn’t even turn your head away. And you offered to dance with her. There’s no denying it, Boss. You like her.”

“Damir.”

He hesitated. “Miron.”

“Have you ever been to a mall before?”

Damir frowned and pretended to give it a thought before shaking his head. “A mall? No, I don’t think so. What does it look like?”

I resisted the urge to smile. “I’ll assume you know what it is and go straight to the point. You see, in a mall, there are lots of beautiful things placed on those shelves, and when you go over to the toy section, ah, that’s where the magic really is.”

“That’s if you’re a kid.”

“In this context, let’s say you’re a kid. The toy section is the center of attraction, and nothing else really matters. Then, there’s this one toy. It’s the shiniest and most outstanding one there, and you want it. There are a million other toys you could get—”

“And there’s one other toy already in your house, going to Italy on Friday for a wedding dress fitting....”

“—but you want that one other toy so bad, you know you’ll do anything to get it,” I glared at him, “to keep others from getting it first. It’s an insane attraction—”

“That could cost you a lot. And we both know I’m not talking about the money, Miron.” Sighing, he pinched the bridge of his nose and sat forward. “Our reality is realer than a mall, and your growing obsession with your therapist is beyond wanting a shiny toy on the shelf.”

Damir was reasonable and logical most of the time, but I wasn’t ready to entertain the voice of wisdom. I groaned, throwing my head back to stare at the ceiling with my fingers laced over my stomach.

“Besides, the toy has an owner.”

A boyfriend that doesn’t talk to her in public or fuck her in private. How convenient.

“Hazel is not a toy.”

“Your illustration, not mine.” I heard his chair move when he shifted closer. “There are many things to consider. First, she has a boyfriend.”

“Established,” I grunted. “Next?”

“You have a fiancée. Alina Ivanova.” A fiancée who I was under an obligation and duty to the Pakhan to marry.

The subject of being attracted to Alina was not in contention. She was pretty enough, with a spiky character and personality that needed some amendments. Most importantly, she was an easy fuck. When my balls were heavy, she willingly came through for me. And that was it.

Before our engagement, marriage was not one of those things I considered, so I didn’t necessarily care about the contents of a wife. My expectations were simple: With my permission, she had the liberty to do whatever she wanted, be a good mother to our children, and stay by my side looking pretty.

But when I thought of Hazel, the feeling that came was like a mighty rushing wind blowing doors down and uprooting trees from the ground. Being close to her, talking to her, looking at her. Mere contact with that woman made me feel like I knew nothing and was starting life all over again.

“Alina is not a factor,” I said instead. “We’re already engaged.”

“Yet, your mind harbors thoughts about another woman. A woman who, you forget, is your therapist.”

Ah, shit.

And that was the third upsetting factor that I’d deliberately kept in a blind spot for

long enough.

Hazel's job.

The profession.

Her line of work had strict prohibitions regulating their relationships with clients. Getting involved with her beyond the restrictions of laid-down procedures exposed her to trouble.

That didn't sound like something I would want to intentionally cause, but I also didn't really care about the rules of ethics and professional boundaries.

I pulled out the first drawer on the desk, pulled out a stick of cigar to bring to my lips, and flicked a lighter.

"The penthouse uptown, the one I put up on sale a month ago. Any buyer yet?" I asked, exhaling smoke.

Damir lifted a brow at the sudden change of topic. "Yeah, the agent's been considering the last three—"

"Tell him to forget about it. I'm not selling."

"You're not selling."

"No. I might visit it on Monday."

The confusion grew deeper, but he nodded. "Okay. Monday. Such an odd working day to suddenly visit the place you wanted to sell out a month ago. But, done. I'll tell Danil to dismiss those interested and take the sale down. The place needs a little

work, but it's standing strong."

"What kind of work?" I flicked the ash off the desk.

He shifted, side-eyeing me. "Nothing major. Dust. Some furniture covered up. Nothing a couple hours won't fix."

I caught the look. Damir wasn't stupid.

"You want it ready for Monday early hours or Monday night?"

"Monday night." I turned to him, smirking. "That a problem?"

He shook his head. "No problem."

A pause. I held his stare long enough to make him blink first. Then, a slight grin. "You're still going to go after her, aren't you?"

"Let's just say what I'm feeling toward the therapist is a budding curiosity that I want to explore."

He laughed. "That's what we're calling attraction now? Curiosity? Boss, the sessions with her are working miracles. You're growing a good sense of humor."

"I'm one click away from pulling the trigger on that smart brain of yours, Damir. Just one click away."

He held his hands up, his shoulders shaking with laughter. "I guess I'll have to tell you what I found then."

"You had intentions to withhold info from me?"

“It wouldn’t have been necessary if you decided against exploring your curiosity. ”

Damir fully busted out laughing, and the infectious sound grew a smile of my own.

Ignoring his cackle, I stretched out my hand. “Just give me the damn thing.”

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“Yes, Mom. Yes—oh, my God, I promise I’ll try the new recipe you sent over one week ago. Uh-huh....”

My fingers kept rifling through my bag, with my phone pressed between my ear and shoulder as I walked down the busy corridor to my office, but I was distracted, so I felt everything else but the damn keys. “Mom.... God, Mom, I really have to call you back. I’m at work—yes, Nathan’s fine....”

My fingers brushed against pens, a lip balm, and an old receipt—but no keys.

“No, he hasn’t popped the question. What— Mother! I’ll have you know we’re in love and all, but he has school and work to handle, and I really need to get into my office now, and I can’t find my keys. I need to find the keys, Mom.”

With a sigh, I shifted my purse to my other arm and bent down, only to freeze. My mother was on the other end of the phone, rambling about how she met my dad and something unrelated about cheesecake, but I was barely listening.

A bouquet of flowers rested against my office door. Elegant, carefully arranged, and undeniably meant for me.

Poor me, a sucker for mushy moments and sweet things.

My heart gave a curious little flutter as I crouched to pick them up.

“Mom, I love you so much, but I have to go now.” I didn’t wait to hear her protests before hanging up.

For a brief moment, I just held them, inhaling the delicate scent of lilies and roses. I wondered, and was hoping, that Nathan realized how much of a jerk he'd been lately and sent me these.

Shaking off the mystery for now, I finally found my keys and stepped inside, placing the bouquet gently on my desk. I had a full schedule ahead: appointments, notes to review, lives to help untangle. But as I settled into my chair, a warm feeling lingered.

I pulled the bouquet closer. A crisp white envelope nestled among the stems bore my name in neat handwriting.

Smiling cheekily, I opened it and slipped out the folded note.

Miss Sinclair,

I know. I'm skipping the session again. You told me not to, but I never promised I wouldn't. Before you start composing that concerned lecture in your head, hear me out. I have a better offer.

Dinner. Tonight. My treat. Consider it a professional courtesy, an expression of gratitude, or just me attempting to be properly civil for once. You've put in a ridiculous amount of effort trying to fix what's broken in me. Even if I don't agree that I need fixing, the least I can do is host you for a meal.

At eight, I'll have a car in front of your house. If you dismiss the driver, I'll assume you're done putting up with me. If you don't, well...I guess we'll both be surprised.

The sender wasn't Nathan but....

—M. Yezhov.

I shouldn't have accepted, but curiosity got the better of me.

After spending all night getting ready and choosing a simple short plum brown dress, a pair of flats, and a matching bow for my hair, I told myself I shouldn't go.

It was unprofessional, maybe even reckless. But after a long day of listening, guiding, and holding space for others, I felt an eagerness stir in me. I had no idea what I would be walking into, but I wanted to find out.

It was a simple dinner, I repeated.

Consider it a professional courtesy, an expression of gratitude, or just me attempting to be properly civil for once.

He was trying to be nice, and the least I could do was give him the opportunity to be courteous.

So, here I was, struggling to breathe regularly when the elevator doors slid open, revealing the private entrance to the glass-fortress penthouse.

I smoothed my dress, sucked in another breath, and stepped inside.

The air carried sandalwood, bergamot, and a warm, spiced aroma.

Towering windows showcased the city skyline, its lights shimmering like distant stars. The room was expansive yet cozy, featuring dark wood accents, minimalist silhouettes, and subtle sophistication.

And there he was.

Miron stood near the plush sectional, hands in his pockets, watching me with a gaze that was both unreadable and magnetic.

He looked effortlessly put together, wearing charcoal trousers tailored to perfection, a crisp white shirt unbuttoned just enough to suggest ease, and a watch that likely cost more than my rent.

“I see you got my note.” His voice had just a hint of warmth.

My stomach fluttered. “It was right in front of my door; how could I miss it? Are we starting the session before or after dinner? Because you know we still have to make up for the one you missed today.”

He seemed to consider it. “After. Dinner is prepared already. So, the sooner we start eating, the better. Come this way.”

I might have been imagining things, but there was an edge to his voice and tension in his shoulders when he led us to the beautiful dining area.

We got seated across each other on the small table, and he barely even looked at me.

He filled our glasses, and I sipped my wine, feeling an odd mix of confusion and something else coil in my chest. The soft clinking of glasses and ceramics became uncomfortable, prompting me to lighten the conversation.

“Did you prepare all of this?”

He scratched the bridge of his nose with his little finger, looking like someone on the brink of impatience. “No, I didn’t. It’s a direct order from La Vine, the restaurant.”

Wow. I wasn’t really expecting that brutal revelation.

“Uh, okay. But the note was definitely your handwriting, right?”

“I had one of my employees write it.”

Dumbfounded, I stayed mute, finding it hard to process what he said, and he looked up from his plate, tilting his head to the side. “That was a joke.”

“You know you’d have such a bright future in comedy, if you consider it.”

I waited for the smallest smile, but Miron’s lips were pulled tight. Instead of returning to his food, he reached for something under the table and slid it across.

It took a moment for my gaze to adjust under the bright lighting. It was a picture. Three, actually, with the same targets.

The glossy prints reflected dim café lights. My fingers hovered over them before I dared to pick them up.

I froze. That face—I could recognize it even in my sleep.

Nathan ?

There he was, laughing, his hand resting a little too comfortably on the waist of a woman I didn’t recognize.

“New York University School of Law,” Miron grunted from across the table. “One week before he came back here.”

My tongue was parched, as dry as sandpaper. But I swallowed to find my voice. “What...what is this?”

I flipped to the next photograph. It was zoomed in, a closer shot.

They were smiling at each other, with Nathan leaning in, taking something out of the woman's eye. She was young and pretty, with perfect hair and a smile that screamed sunshine and rainbows.

"Her name is Piper."

"So? What use is her name? She could be...." My breath was faltering, my head swimming. "She could be a friend or colleague," I said more firmly. "I don't know all of his friends."

There was that insinuation in his eyes again, that hint that I didn't want to hear him say aloud. "You know goddamn well that she's not his friend or colleague."

"Miron...."

"I know you don't want to hear it, but that is proof that your absentee boyfriend has another girlfriend in New York, and if you're not convinced, I have a lot more work-related outings to show you."

Rising to my feet, the chair scraped backward, and I slammed my napkin down on the table, once again struggling to keep my breathing in check.

It was hard.

I'd never known what dying felt like until now as I stood there, gasping for air and fighting so hard to keep the stinging tears away.

My ears were ringing, and my heart pumped so loud I could go deaf.

I always believed that words, when chosen carefully, could ease any wound. But as I looked at Miron, I threw all caution to the wind, going all in to hurt him as much as this tore me to shreds.

Because I couldn't deny it.

Once again, there was that gut instinct that told me he wasn't lying.

"How dare you?" He pushed his chair back, and I glared at him as he walked over to my end of the table. "Why would you do this to me? Was this why you invited me here? To humiliate me?"

"Humiliate you?" He looked anything but apologetic. "It was driving me fucking nuts that you were staying devoted to someone undeserving. A man who doesn't even respect you enough to tell you to your face that he has someone else."

Hearing that broke me, and a tear slipped to my cheek.

Eight years of hoping and waiting. Eight years of loving unconditionally, even when it was inconvenient. Eight years of thinking I was the only one for him and believing that he had me.

"Driving you nuts? It wasn't your business, Miron! God! It wasn't your—" More tears rushed out, and I lost control over holding them in. "You had no right...you had no right to go poking your nose in something that doesn't concern you."

I blinked hard, but the tears poured down anyway, blurring the hard expression on Miron's face. He sighed, a slow, measured sound, and then, he surprised us both.

His hand moved before I could stop it. His fingers, calloused and firm, brushed against my cheek. A rough thumb caught the tear before it could fall further, and his

touch startled me.

I stilled. He did, too.

His jaw tightened, as if regretting the moment already. “You’re crying.”

His touch was unexpected, warm against my skin, and for a moment, I forgot the weight in my chest. He didn’t pull away immediately, his thumb lingering as if waiting for me to push his hand away. I didn’t.

My throat was tight when I swallowed. “And it’s your fault.”

His hand dropped, but the space between us felt impossibly small. I hadn’t realized how close we were standing until now.

Until I could feel his warmth. Until I noticed the way the light caught the sharp angles of his face and the intensity brewing in the depths of his blue eyes.

It was raw, unguarded.

The atmosphere between us had shifted, thickened. Maybe long before this moment, and neither of us noticed. A slow, magnetic pull drew me in, and I didn’t resist.

I reached for him first, wrapping my hand around his neck to bring his lips down to mine, breathing him in.

The impact was hard, almost knocking me off balance, and his lips were firm against mine. Unmoving. Or more like shocked.

I practically flew backward, and my hand shot to my mouth. “Oh, God. What have I...what did I do? Miron, I’m sorry. That was a mistake. I didn’t mean to—”

“Please, shut up.”

His mouth covered mine as he slipped his arms around me. His hand, still warm from touching my cheek, slid to my jaw, tugging it to part my lips.

There was nothing hesitant about the way he kissed me. It was harder, demanding, consuming. He kissed me like a man who never asked—only took.

But this wasn't theft.

He sucked on my tongue, nibbled on my lips, and groped my ass with one of his hands, like he was claiming a prized possession. And I let him.

I melted against him, my fingers curling into the fabric of his shirt. He was solid beneath my hands, yet the way he held me, tucking me against his chest with one arm locked around my waist, made me feel something I hadn't in a long time.

Wanted.

I was barely breathing, only inhaling him, tasting this man who managed to make my head swim from the first day he stepped into my office.

My eyes snapped open.

My office.

This was wrong. He was my client. He was engaged.

“Miron, this is crazy. You're crazy,” I rasped.

His lips left mine only so he could press his forehead against mine, his breath harsh

and unsteady.

“I know. You deserve better,” he murmured hazily. “But allow me to show you just how much better.”

I thought I was strong enough to be rational and to pull away—to walk out of those doors and not look back. But I was wrong. I let my walls fall.

For once, I allowed myself to want.

I swallowed, my hands still fisted in his shirt. “Show me.”

His grip tightened, as if he’d been waiting for me to say it. And when his lips crashed into mine again, I knew there was no turning back.

I moaned into his mouth, shut my eyes, and threw my head back when he greedily grazed my collarbone and bit on the skin below my ear.

“Hazel,” Miron growled my name into my hair, like a man drunk with maddening desire and insatiable need. And hearing my name on his lips lit up a torch inside me, which burned with an equal hunger.

Trembling hands slid under my dress, and he gripped my hips, his palms scalding hot against my skin when he lifted me from the ground and wrapped my legs around his waist.

His feet moved, and his lips were everywhere, tasting and taking. And I gave with equal fervor. Cupping his cheeks, I captured his firm lips, sucking each one at a time. He tasted so much better than strawberry jam.

I heard a door slam shut behind me and opened my eyes briefly to see him move to a

king-size bed at the center of a bedroom.

Gently, he lay me on it and moved back with the darkest gaze to unbutton his shirt, neither of us saying anything.

I knelt on the bed, matching his speed as I hooked my fingers under my dress and lifted it over my head. I was left in a bra and a flimsy thong that barely covered my ass. My breasts grew heavy in my bra, my nipples tightened with want, and my arousal dampened the thin material between my legs.

He watched me as he took off his pants, and when his cock sprung out, I gaped.

Miron was mouthwateringly huge.

An ache settled between my legs, making me squirm when he hadn't even laid a single finger on me. Yet.

“Take off the bra and lie down on your back.”

It was an order, but I didn't refuse. Reaching for the hook, I unclipped it and let the bra drop to the foot of the bed. Then, I lay back and spread my legs for him, watching as he joined me on the bed in a hungry daze.

He nestled between my thighs, fisted my thong, and slipped his hand through it to cup my sex. Moaning, I arched my back, pushing my pussy deeper into his hand.

So much heat. So much need.

One of his hands pinned my wrists above my head while his mouth found my breast, sucking gently.

I devoured the sight of his chiseled cheeks, the rippling muscles of his chest and arms as he hovered above me. He looked perfect in a way I considered otherworldly.

Miron was not the type of man I'd pictured for me. He belonged to another circle, the type his fiancée obviously rolled with: high-class, powerful, commanding.

It probably wasn't ideal for me to think about her while he feasted on my breasts like he'd been starved. But I couldn't help it.

But seeing him now, holding me and touching me like he worshipped me, made me feel an immense amount of pleasure that crashed through me, inside me, until I was quivering, jerking, twitching—believing that there might have been a world where we existed together.

He squeezed my nipples and journeyed lower, kissing the faint stretch line marks scattered above my hips, his fingernails digging harshly into my thighs.

I never knew what it felt like to have a man buried inside me, and I doubted that his cock would fit, but I wanted to feel Miron more badly than I could express. I wanted him so deep that he could touch my soul.

“Miron...” I whimpered. “I need you.”

Broken and shattered, yet craving a man who was promised to another. If this wasn't madness, I wondered what was.

He lifted his head, stretching above me to a drawer, and pulled out a shiny foil packet. With his teeth, he ripped it and skillfully rolled down the condom to sheath his terrifying length.

His fingers spread the wet lips of my pussy, and I shivered when he kissed my

shoulder.

“You’re beautiful, even more than I imagined,” he rasped.

I didn’t trust myself to speak, so I wound my arms around his neck, and I was sure he saw the fear in my eyes because he kissed my neck and breathed, “I’ll be gentle.”

His fingers traced the outer layers of my pussy, teasing and circling my clitoris. I sucked in a sharp breath when stars dotted my vision.

Something hard poked me, and I looked down to see his glistening head prying its way inside me.

At first, it stung, and I winced, regulating my breathing and forcing my body to relax so I could adjust to his size.

“Tell me if it hurts.”

I nodded, and he pulled out. And went in again, balancing both of his arms beside me as he pushed his hip and urged his cock to plunge deeper.

A blend of pain and pleasure ripped through me at the same time, and my hand flew to his arm, fingernails biting into his taut skin.

“Miron...” I gasped. But he didn’t stop. Not until, finally, my walls tightened around him, letting him in.

His head dropped to my shoulder, his eyes shut, and a groan rumbling through his chest. “You’re so fucking tight, moy dorogaya Kheyzel .”

I was so distracted by the sting of the stretch that I couldn’t focus on what he said.

My pulse was racing, and the more I looked, the more beautiful he was.

I caressed his strong jaw, ran my fingers through his hair, and flicked my tongue against his mouth.

“Miron, this is so wrong,” I moaned.

“I know. I know, Hazel. But you’re so fucking right.” He pushed into me, literally burying his face in my hair.

His other hand gripped my thigh, guiding me, controlling the slow, aching roll of our hips. And before my eyes, I watched Miron shudder and tremble. I watched his restraint dissolve like mist in the morning sun.

“I’m going deeper.” His voice was brittle, but his eyes held a warmth I had never seen there before. It was more than just a heads-up; he was making sure I was okay.

“I can take you.” My heart thumped like a marching band when I kissed his lips and murmured the next words. “I want you, Miron.”

With a growl, he raised my hips with one hand, fixed the other behind my head, and slammed into me with just enough force to drive a wedge into the ground.

I muffled a scream. And he nipped my neck with his teeth, grazing hard enough to leave a mark. “I want to hear everything. Moan for me, moy dorogaya Kheyzel. ”

The pain zapped first, followed by the tingles of an awakening hunger and inane lust. But I obeyed and moaned like he wanted me to, because he felt good.

His exquisite face contorted in ecstasy with each powerful thrust, his fingers digging into my leg as he devoured me. The agony and ecstasy blurred, and time lost all

meaning. He repositioned me, his hands firm but gentle, and took me with a primal intensity that left me breathless.

Miron pounded into me, trembling and muttering strings of Russian above me as he took me mercilessly but with consideration. He rode me hard and harder, cancelling all the noises of the pain from Nathan's betrayal and the nagging voice of reason that we were repeating the same cycle of hurt on his fiancée.

In the moment, it was just me and him.

Him for me, and me for him.

I held onto him tight as my climax peaked, and he mumbled in my ear that he was coming.

All it took was one drive, one loud growl, and we exploded at the same time, merging the bubbles of reality and fantasy. I quivered violently as I came, and his body collapsed on mine, our harsh breaths mingling and chests heaving as we came down from the roller coaster.

And when all was calm, the nagging voice was louder.

What have I done?

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:48 pm

Smoke curled in the air, the scent of expensive perfume and spilled liquor thick around us. The men were in good spirits, and the music in the club was great. I didn't expect any less when my brother owned the place.

Damien had a blonde draped over his lap, laughing at something she said, while Damir was busy with a girl I'd known for less than twenty minutes.

Me? I had a drink in one hand and a cigar in the other, and that was all I needed.

"You're no fun tonight," Damien drawled, swirling his whiskey. He looked from Genevieve, who was busy giving Damir a lap dance, to me. "I could have sworn you liked her."

My brother had a voice as loud as two mega speakers, so she heard. She held my gaze, and something fleeting, almost like hurt, passed her green eyes before she turned around to stuff her face in Damir's neck.

I didn't care, and I didn't like her. It was twenty minutes of fleeting attraction.

"I thought I did, too. Damir's a better pick, though. He'd pay attention to all her needs."

Damien snorted and spanked the blonde's ass. "So, what then? Screw her. All these gorgeous women, and you're just going to sit there, acting like a goddamn monk?"

I exhaled a slow stream of smoke, watching the bodies move on the dance floor, heat and sweat and hunger in every glance exchanged. None of it interested me. "A man

who eats steak at home doesn't go looking for scraps in the gutter."

"And he's a motivational speaker now?" Damien's laughter caught Damir's attention. "Alina's got you by the balls, huh?"

"Assuming it's Alina," Damir added, and if looks could kill....

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

My brother wasn't laughing now. The smug, stupid grin was off the bloody idiot's face, and he raised a questioning brow at me.

Damir just smirked, tapping his cigarette against the glass ashtray. "I'm just saying, what if it's not Alina that's got him by...you know?"

I turned my head slowly, meeting his gaze. The table went quiet. The bloody bastard was of great value to me, but sometimes, he talked too much.

"Careful, Damir," I murmured. "You're starting to sound like a man who doesn't value his tongue."

The girls watched on expectantly, and with a gaze to kill, Damien flicked his wrist, silently ordering them to leave. The women scattered like leaves in the wind.

"He's messing around, right? Damir is just talking like he always does. Is that not so, brother?"

The alarm in my brother's head was going off; I could tell by the unsettled look in his eyes, but I leaned back in my chair, swirling the drink in my hand, feeling their stares burn into me.

“He is not.”

“ Fuck . What the hell, Miron?” Damien ran a hand down the growing stubble on his chin. “Who is she?”

“His therapist.”

“Do you really want to fucking die, Damir?” I glared at the smirking bastard. My little brother was an inch away from killing me, and he was finding this funny.

Damien continued firing. “Her name?”

I narrowed my eyes at Damir, just in case he wanted to offer up himself on a platter again. “Hazel Sinclair.”

The details he required were necessary routine checks for when we were dealing with anyone or anything we were not already acquainted with, and Damien needed to know to confirm that I wasn’t mingling with an enemy.

Damien paused. “Never heard of a Hazel Sinclair.”

“You haven’t because she’s just a therapist. She works in Amelia’s medical center.”

Damien’s jaw dropped. “You’re putting your head on the slaughter for an ordinary girl? A no—”

“Take my advice, Damien: Do not finish that fucking sentence.”

Hazel was far from being ordinary or a nobody. She was somebody enough to make my control slip two weeks ago and somebody enough to make every other girl suddenly look bland and uninteresting, including my fiancée.

I clenched my jaw. “Look, it just...happened.”

Damien snorted. “Bullshit. You let it happen.”

“You fucked up,” Damien continued, his voice even, but the steel underneath was unmistakable. “You gave your word for Alina. You are under a fucking duty to the Pakhan , Miron.”

I exhaled slowly. “I know.”

A beat of silence. Then Damien scoffed. “You know? I’m pretty sure you don’t. But tell me, how bad is it with this Hazel girl? Maybe we can fix it before the Pakhan finds out. Is she clingy? Trying to get between your legs? Blackmail?”

I leaned forward, placing my glass on the table with deliberate force. “I fucked her,” I admitted. “No point in pretending otherwise. I already cheated. And I don’t plan on stopping.”

The room went silent.

“Do you even hear yourself?” my brother muttered. “We have rules, Miron. You know how shit goes down when we try to play without them. You’re promised to Ivanova’s daughter, and he will demand respect.”

“Enough. Don’t talk to me about rules. I know every single one of them. This time, it’s different. I’ll take what I want and deal with the consequences later. That’s the game. End of discussion.”

Damien’s eyes darkened. “The Pakhan won’t see it that way.”

It didn’t matter because one thing was certain: I wasn’t letting Hazel go.

Ignoring my brother and a quiet Damir, I plucked my phone from the table and went back to the messages I'd been scrolling through before we arrived at the club—the ultimate reason I was in such a sour mood.

The first three messages were sent two weeks ago, the afternoon after the most amazing, intense fuck I'd had in a while.

Me: Hazel.

Me: Hi.

Me: If your phone's bad, I can get you a new one.

And the last two were sent a week later, when she missed our scheduled session at the clinic.

Me : Amelia said you called in sick. Get well soon. I don't want to have to tell the judge my therapist needs treatment. Yeah. L.O.L.

Me : Hazel. Hi.

Looking at the blue ticks now, I wanted to throw my phone at Damir's head—because he deserved it. All the messages had been sent at different time intervals, hours apart from each other.

And she'd read all of them.

It was obvious she was avoiding me. I couldn't even look at another woman for more than two seconds, but she could stomach reading my messages without responding. The effect it had on me was devastating—like I was sliding downhill, rolling, tumbling, and not being able to do anything about it.

Was this what she meant by feeling powerless?

If it so, it was fucking pathetic.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:48 pm

Every time I walked through the doors of Prima Care Medical Center, a surge of life would burst through me. There was a permanent smile I had for the workers and patients there, and sometimes, I had a doughnut, too. Working there and interacting with the beautiful people made me believe I was on the path of fulfilling some bigger purpose.

My life was like a kindergarten; it was simple and all planned out. I could laugh, live, and breathe. It never felt like I was walking with weights on my shoulders.

Not until two weeks ago happened, and now I had two pits burrowed in my heart. One was filled with regrets for what I'd done, and the other nursing a hollow ache for deliberately avoiding Miron.

Standing at Amelia's door, I released a deep breath and dropped two soft knocks.

"Come in."

My legs felt like they'd been strapped to tons of bricks as I stepped into her office and shut the door behind me. "Hazel, please, take a seat. How are you feeling?"

"A lot better, thank you."

"That's great to hear. We really missed you around here."

Her smile was warm and welcoming, as it always was. But looking at her seated behind her desk, buried in tons of paperwork, jogged a not-so-distant memory from a month ago, when I'd practically barged into this same office and begged her for a

challenge.

Yes, I'd wanted it, craved it, even—but heavens knew I did not need or expect one to blow through my life like a damn hurricane, tearing up everything on its path. One that was hot and cold one minute and then settling between my legs the next second.

I'd sat on this same stupid chair, chest puffed up, with an expectant smile and naive eagerness, telling her nothing was going to be too difficult. I told her I was ready for anything.

Oh, Hazel.

If only I could see into the future.... I never would have complained after Mr. Harold Plumley's session.

"Hazel, are you listening?"

Salty tears stung the back of my eyes, and I sniffled, smiling as warmly as I could. "I'm sorry, Amelia. I lost you there for a second. Can you go over what you said one more time?"

She gave me a once-over like she wasn't sure but went over it again.

"I was saying Miron's been showing positive signs on the progress charts so far. The past two weeks you've been away, he's kept to time with the scheduled sessions and enquired about your whereabouts." Amelia smiled more to herself than to me. "Honestly, it's the softest I've seen him in a while. You're doing a great job, and I don't even know how you're doing it. There's been no reports of him randomly flaring up or exhibiting explosive, destructive reactions...."

Just hearing his name made my heart clench. I knew he'd dropped by the clinic. I

knew he'd been consistent. He'd sent messages; I read and ignored them all. That second pit in my chest burrowed deeper.

Amelia continued giving a summary report on Miron, offering tips in between and general professional advice on how to handle the client. I almost laughed out my pain in her face when she pointed out the one rule I'd trampled on and thrown into the trash:

Never get too mixed up in the client's personal business; always keep things professional.

"Great! Once again, welcome back, Hazel. It's a blessing to have you here. That will be all for now."

"Thanks, Amelia." She didn't notice, but this time, the smile didn't get to my eyes.

I left Amelia's office more downtrodden than I'd been when I'd gone in but kept my head up to avoid further questions from passersby.

Down the corridor, I caught sight of my office before I got close enough to see that it was ajar.

My pulse sped up because I knew the client waiting inside. It was nine-thirty a.m. on a Monday. I didn't only know him; I'd tasted him, kissed him senseless, dragged my nails down his broad back, and moaned my pleasures into his ears. Jesus. The hairs on my skin were already rising, just recalling the details of the steamy moments.

Clearing my throat, I pushed the door farther, keeping my eyes locked on my couch as soon as I stepped in and shut the door behind me. I dropped the Chanel bag first and took a moment to properly regulate my breath before I settled down and faced him.

God. The sight of him on that green settee blew me away. He was even more handsome than the last time I saw him, like a perfect sculpture representation of one of the gods of Olympus. Just sitting there, with one arm crossed over his chest and one hand under his chin, dressed in his regular white shirt and black dress pants, he was delectable.

“Good morning, Miron.”

“Miss Sinclair.” He nodded curtly, and my brows rose.

Miss Sinclair?

That night...his texts. He'd called me Hazel. I was disappointed. Maybe a small part of me wished he'd call me by my name, and if he did, I might have just abandoned all my reservations and thrown myself into his arms because, deep down, I wanted to relive that one reckless night with him again.

Miron's eyes held mine, but there was no warmth. It was blue and cold, like the frozen seas in the Arctic. We sat close enough, and yet he seemed so far away now. His entire demeanor was the complete opposite of the nice things Amelia had to say about his progress charts in her office.

Taking my iPad from my bag, I held my breath before proceeding. “How was your weekend?”

“Do me a favor, will you? Let's skip the unnecessary bullshit and go right into the reason I'm seated on this fucking couch because I know you really don't care, and I don't appreciate my time being wasted.”

I jerked like I'd experienced a bad case of whiplash and struggled to keep my jaw from dropping. He sounded like anything but the man who'd groaned into my hair

and held me close to his chest as if his life depended on it. This one, staring at me with contempt, was not the one I'd daydreamed about for the past two weeks.

Amelia's advice rang out in my head: Never get too mixed up in the client's personal business; always keep things professional.

We were within the four walls of my office, so here, I was the boss.

"Fine." I looked away, determined to keep my eyes on the glowing screen till ten-thirty. "We will be monitoring your progress so far, and I will do that by asking you a couple of questions you have to answer honestly. Is that okay?"

"The questions, Miss Sinclair."

My fingers curled around the device, and I clenched my jaw. "How have you been managing your emotions since our last session?"

"Which? The last two sessions you intentionally ditched under the guise of being sick? Or the private session we had at my penthouse?" he answered casually, though the undertones of aggression couldn't be any louder.

The memories came rushing back like the floodgates had been opened, and I gritted my teeth. "Mr. Yezhov...."

"If it's the former, let me see...I've been managing just fine. I do more breathing exercises, some physical bag-punching routines, and I soap my cock at night. Everything's under control. Nothing is unsettled."

I resisted the urge to look up and continued with the questions. "Can you describe a recent situation where you felt angry or irritated? How did you respond?"

“Skip.”

I inhaled slowly, still keeping my cool. “Mr. Yezhov, you can’t skip questions. Each one has a purpose: to monitor your progress since the commencement of your sessions. So, can you please describe a recent situation where you felt angry or irritated? How did you respond?”

“Miss Sinclair,” he said slowly, his brows creasing and the frown on his face etching deeper. “I don’t fucking care about the purpose of the question. Whether it’s a cause for the greater good or not, I say we’re skipping it.”

It was on the tip of my tongue to argue with him and insist on the question being answered, but I guided myself against it. He had given no hints, but my instincts said I was the recent cause of his irritation and anger. And I wasn’t ready for the chaos that could possibly accompany such an admission.

“Fine. Next question. Can you think of a recent situation where you felt like you were about to lose your control? If you can think of that, how did you handle it?”

A sudden hush fell between us, and it lasted for more than a minute. When I thought it would drag on for much longer, I raised my head. Only to find his eyes already on me.

“I wasn’t about to lose it; I lost it,” he said quietly, with his gaze still hardened. “And I didn’t handle it; I fucked her. And it turned out to be one of the best fucking nights of my life, though I can’t say the same for her.”

The walls I’d labored so hard to build from the commencement of today’s session crumbled to dust between our feet. I didn’t have to press; I just knew he was talking about that night, and it was necessary for me to keep things professional. We still had more than half an hour to go with the session, and I was obligated to record his

answers to the questions for the reports.

“Okay.” I adjusted in my seat, ignoring the burning sensation behind my ears. “We’ll address your lack of control later. Let’s move on to the next question.”

“Why?”

I almost bit my tongue. “Why should we move on to the next question? I’m sorry, I’m not following. You were the one who requested that we move right on to the questions.”

“Don’t play dumb with me, Hazel. I’m tired of this stupid charade of formalities. Tell me why you’ve been avoiding me. Why have you taken it upon yourself to be so cold and detached?” For a moment, the shutters went up, and I saw the slow warmth melting through the Arctic. Roaring blue seas surfaced with waves of it crashing against the seashore.

If I turned a blind eye to the man’s question, I knew what was going to happen next; Miron wasn’t a patient man. He would stand up from the couch, walk over to Amelia’s office, and demand that another therapist handle his case. She wouldn’t refuse him because all our actions had to be in the client’s best interest, and then I would never see him again.

I set the iPad aside, crossing one leg over the other to convince myself that I hadn’t completely lost control and there was a sliver still left. Breathing exercises were becoming my specialty. “Mr. Yez—”

“Fuck it, Hazel! It’s me, Miron!”

My shoulders quaked under the effect of his voice echoing off the walls. This was the first time he’d shouted at me, the first time I knew what it truly felt like to have a

blazing dagger rammed through one's beating heart. It hurt more than anything else.

He was out of his chair now, crossing the room in long strides to stand in front of me, his nostrils flared and eyes narrowed. My head tilted further back to meet his gaze until I forced myself to rise to my feet.

"Miron," I mumbled shakily and had a hard time looking him in the eye. Saying his name aloud made our situation a lot more real, and my silly heart wouldn't stop pounding in my chest. "I...I gave it a lot of thought, okay? That night was, um...it was... it can't happen again."

"What?"

"Hold on, I have to say this. I know it was consensual. We were two consenting adults." Standing close to him was messing with my logic, so I side-stepped to inhale something other than him. "We were swept up, enraptured in the heat of the moment, and that's it. That's all it will ever be, Miron—a mistake."

He took a step closer, and I took one back, leaning closer to my desk to have something to grasp onto when I pulled the rug from under our feet.

"Hazel, listen to me—"

"No, Miron. I want you to listen to me." I tried to muster a smile, but the tears were starting to blur my vision. "That night was a mistake for so many reasons, and I'll do you a favor by starting with the most obvious one: Look around. We're in my office. The desk behind me? It's mine. It's my seat of control during working hours because I work here. That one over there, the green one? That's yours, and that is because you are my client. I know you don't understand this, but here, I am responsible for you, your well-being, your progress, and your recovery. I can dig into your personal life, only to help you. Nothing else. No form of intimacy is allowed. If Amelia gets wind

of what happened, I could lose my job, and I do not want to lose this job, Miron. It's almost everything I have left. What we did was wrong and against the codes of professional conduct guiding our relationship. It was unethical and should never repeat itself."

Miron surprised me with a sudden burst of laughter, but it sounded as dry and empty as the look on his face. "Now you're only repeating some shit from an actual textbook. We both know the reason you've been avoiding me is beyond these four walls."

"And you're right," I snapped back. "There's also Nathan to think about, remember? My boyfriend?"

"Jesus." He brushed a hand down his face, frustration slowly seeping through the cracks of his barely composed facade. "That cheating idiot? You're still thinking about him?"

"Eight years, Miron!" I whisper-shouted. "Eight long years! Don't you understand? We were building a life together, a life I laid the foundations of. We made plans. We had goals. Being with Nathan has always been a very big deal to me. That's not a joke. That is not something I can just walk away from. I cannot turn my back on him. Not right now. I know there's a possibility that there is another...but Miron, it's hard to just walk away. Nathan is all I've ever known."

Miron's jaw tightened, and he exhaled sharply through his nose. The frustration simmered, and he drummed his fingers on his thigh, his restraint unraveling.

"You know you have to leave him. You are only hurting yourself by staying."

We had sex for one night, and now he cares if I'm hurting?

“It is not that simple. I’ve already explained it to you.” The room felt smaller, suffocating, but I stayed pinned to the edge of that desk. “We’ve been together so long, it feels safe.”

“Safe?” He came closer, leaned forward. “You call this safe? Being stuck, miserable, afraid to let go?”

I flinched. “I’m not miserable.”

“It sure as hell looks like it. And I don’t know why I’m finding it so fucking hard to pull away. You think you’re the only one with things on the line?”

“No, Miron!” I was trying so hard to keep myself from exploding. “Can’t you see? That’s another reason why that was a mistake. You’re engaged, for crying out loud. Promised to another. What we did...it’s only going to be a continued cycle of hurt, and I can’t stomach knowing that I caused another that kind of pain.”

His frustration sharpened, his fingers digging into his fists before he let them open again. “I should walk out of that door right now and ask Amelia for a better person. Someone who wouldn’t play with my head and mess it all up like you’re doing to me. Hazel, when I look at you, I can’t think straight. I can’t stop myself.”

For a while, all I could do was stare up at him, my heart pounding in my chest, my breath shallow. His presence was suffocating, and yet, I found myself unable to pull away, to create that emotional distance I so desperately needed.

He reached forward, and his fingers brushed against the edge of my hand, just a whisper of contact, and I felt a jolt of electricity shoot through me.

My breath hitched, my pulse spiked, and before I could stop myself, I found myself leaning in ever so slightly.

“I don’t want to need you like this,” he continued, his voice dropping to a near growl. “But I do.”

I couldn’t speak. I couldn’t move. I wanted to say something, to tell him again that this was wrong, that he was crossing a line, that I was here to help him, not to be pulled into whatever this was between us. But the words didn’t come. Instead, I sat frozen, feeling the weight of his gaze on me, the intensity of his feelings pressing against me.

And despite everything inside me screaming to stay professional, I couldn’t deny the flutter in my chest, the undeniable pull that his words had on me. I couldn’t ignore the way my body responded to the heat of his proximity, the raw need that simmered just beneath the surface of his controlled exterior.

I wanted to pull back, to regain control. But in that moment, I didn’t want to.

And that terrified me.

“I can’t stop thinking about you, Hazel. You’re all I think about since that night. And I don’t know how much longer I can keep it together.” Then, thankfully, he stepped back, his gaze lingering on me, almost too heavy, too intense.

I swallowed hard to find my voice, trying to steady myself, but my heart was racing, my thoughts a whirlwind. “Sex isn’t all there is to life, Miron, and you know it. It was one night, and that’s all we’d have. It is not happening again. A few months or a week down the line, you’ll realize that you’ve broken free from the euphoria of that moment. Or better yet, when you see your gorgeous wife walking down the aisle.”

He parted his lips and started to say something, a bunch of incoherent Russian, but suddenly stopped. And my iPad chose that exact moment to chime on the couch.

Building my courage, I sucked in a sharp breath, brushed past him, and picked up the ringing device. “Ten-thirty. Our time for today is up. Hopefully, we’ll see more progress on your charts in the near future. It wasn’t the smoothest session, but everything eventually comes to an end. Unfortunately, this is the end of yours.”

Miron’s eyes hardened. “And you want me to leave.”

If I blinked, I would cry. So, I flashed the most professional smile I could muster and gave a curt nod. “I want you to leave.”

He scoffed but didn’t argue, and in a flash, I saw his broad back disappear through the threshold before the door slammed shut. My resolve crumbled like stacks of wooden blocks, and the tears I’d been holding streamed down my face with no reserve.

Watching him walk away felt like a slow, agonizing tug on a drawstring, gradually tightening the knot of heartache and longing that had been crashing inside me. Deep down, I knew I wanted this man, more than any logic or rationality could explain.

And that scared me more than anything else.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:48 pm

“Is your brother on a mission or something? Why does he have so many startups?”

Alina walked gingerly beside me, with her long brown skirt flowing below her ankles, while the host, a man in a plain white dress shirt and vest, showed us to our table. An intimate table-for-two set up, with warm lights hanging over heads and a good view of the nearby beach.

I wanted to ignore her but instead found myself responding. “It’s not so many; it’s just seven. And each startup is for a different purpose. As for this one, the La Vine was commissioned fourteen months ago.”

“So, The Tavern is his newest startup?”

“No, the gym is. It was commissioned three months after The Tavern.”

“Damien started a gym?”

“Why so surprised? He’s talked about it for the longest time. I wonder what took him so long.” Distracted, I made to sit first, and she cleared her throat, eyeing her chair suggestively. I grunted before pulling it out and settling into mine.

“Thank you.” She smiled sweetly. “I know it’s not your thing, but it doesn’t hurt once in a while to see the gentleman in you.”

“There is no gentleman in me.” I signaled a wine steward and a waiter to place our order. “You already know what you’re getting yourself into by getting married to me, Alina. No need to pretend like you’re going to get a different package.”

“It’s not pretending. I’ve seen your sweet moments, remember?”

“Oh, really?” I dismissed the steward and waiter, raising a brow at her. “Like which ones?”

Alina laughed airily, her eyes twinkling under the lights, happy that I’d finally succumbed to her constant pleas to go on a date to La Vine. She looked pretty, with her black hair flowing below her bare shoulders and down the small sleeveless top she wore, and after a quick sweep, I waited for it, the small spark that started in the hollow of my chest and traveled between my legs. The spark that made me want her all those other times. But I felt nothing.

Seated across from me, she looked young and distant, almost like a first-time stranger. She started talking about the times I took her shopping and random days I’d sent gifts to her house.

Alina and I had been engaged for six months. Ivanova didn’t want the wedding rushed, so I was more or less under an obligation to take his daughter through a proper courting process. The outings, the gifts. The Pakhan himself had reminded me to do those things that were needed. But I didn’t tell Alina that. I listened to her speak about more sweet moments, which had more sexual content, before she ventured into praising my brother’s restaurant.

Alina blushed as she reminded me of the first time she made a random visit to my office, and I fucked her right there on my table. Then, she laughed.

And across the room, someone else laughed louder.

My senses were suddenly on high alert, and my eyes subtly scanned the room. I tried to focus on Alina’s words, tried to stay in the moment, but then, out of the corner of my eye, I saw her.

Hazel.

The sight of her hit me like a punch to the gut, as it always did. That spark, the one I'd searched for with Alina, lit up and rushed through my blood faster than nicotine. My heart skidded. After our last session in her office, I got Amelia to approve our subsequent sessions to be streamed. For three weeks, I participated online, with our videos turned off—based on my insistence.

I'd tried to stay away, to put the distance while keeping up with the participation. It was hard, but at least I didn't have to see her.

Well, life had a way of playing cruel, sick games, because now, I did. And she was still so fucking perfect.

Effortlessly beautiful, as she'd always been, with the way she held herself: so poised, confident, graceful.

She stood near the bar, laughing softly at something a man had said. Looking closely, I recognized the bastard's face and watched as he casually placed a hand on her back. It was a small gesture, nothing overt, no grand display of affection. But it was enough to send a wave of something sharp and bitter rolling through me, like vinegar in my gut.

I tried to look away, to focus on Alina's voice, but my eyes kept darting back to Hazel. To Nathan's hand on her.

Her body language was relaxed, familiar. She leaned into him slightly, her expression soft and easy, the way she'd leaned into me that night, cradled my face, and told me she needed me.

He was her boyfriend; his hand on her waist didn't mean anything.

It didn't matter how many times I repeated it. To me, it was everything.

My stomach churned, my chest tightening with a sharp, possessive rage. Was this what jealousy felt like? Like having the insane urge to rip someone's throat out for pleasure?

I shifted in my seat, glancing down at my untouched glass of wine, the red liquid swirling as my mind raced. I told myself it was irrational. That I was being ridiculous. I had Alina here with me. She was Ivanova's daughter.

I had an obligation to the Pakhan .

But none of that stopped the surge of territorial anger from rising.

"Miron, is everything okay?" Alina's voice snapped me out of my head.

I blinked, forcing a smile as I turned my gaze back to her. "Yeah, just...distracted for a second."

She frowned, her eyes searching mine, but I did my best to mask whatever had twisted inside me. "You look like you want to put a bullet in something."

I forced another smile. "Yeah. I just remembered that I have some unfinished business to take care of."

"Oh." Hurt flashed through her face, but she masked it with a bright smile. "I understand. You've been working so hard anyway. What do you say? Let's finish up quickly here and stop by my house. I could help you blow off some steam, just the way you like, before you go settle your unfinished business."

"Sure." I continued to smile at her. "Let's do that."

All night, I had my eyes on Hazel.

When she ordered, what she ordered, when she laughed, talked...everything. They sat at the other end of the room, many tables away, but it was easy to monitor them because Alina paid full attention to her food when eating.

As the hands on the clock ticked by, my patience stretched thin, and when I thought it would snap, Hazel's chair moved backward as she excused herself from the table with a smile.

The golden opportunity had finally presented itself, and I'd be damned if I didn't take it.

"I have to call Damir. I'll be right back."

I barely had time to watch her smile and nod before moving fast out of my seat, tracing Hazel's footsteps. She was heading to the ladies' room, but I followed a shortcut to intercept her before she reached her destination.

It was a small corridor, narrow, dim, and slim, linking different wings of the restaurant. Barely anyone walked through it, but Damien liked it because he could display some interior design creativity in the space.

The second Hazel passed, my hand closed around her wrist, and I dragged her into the shadows, pressing her back against the wall and trapping her with my body before she could protest.

Hazel's eyes grew wide, and she gasped, but I didn't let go, didn't loosen my grip. My fingers dug into the softness of her skin, maybe a little too rough, but I wanted

her to feel this.

I needed her to feel me.

“What the fuck, Hazel?” I growled, not bothering to hide my frustration. “You think this is funny?”

She blinked up at me, looking innocent. “Miron...what—what are you talking about? What are you doing here?”

I stepped even closer, crowding her against the cold wall, pressing the bulge between my legs against her thighs. “You want to play games, fine. But don’t play them with me. You asked me to leave, and I tried to keep my distance. And now you’re here, with that bastard, laughing and touching and rubbing it in my fucking face that I can’t have you?”

“Can you hear yourself? You think you’re the center of the universe, Miron? News flash: The world doesn’t revolve around you, okay? Nathan and I are here on a date. He asked for good recommendations, and I remembered....”

She remembered the food we had that night. The direct order I’d placed from La Vine.

“This was the only place I could think of. The Tavern reminds me of Axel.”

And the first night we’d had a genuine connection.

I could feel her pulse fluttering beneath my grip, her chest rising and falling too quickly, and it drew my attention to her breasts. Though hidden behind that olive green dress, I knew what they looked like: their taste and texture. And my mouth watered to have her again.

She could pretend all she wanted, but I knew the truth. She wasn't unaffected. She wasn't indifferent.

"Well, it doesn't fucking matter. There were a thousand other restaurants to choose from, and you picked here."

"Because I could." She eyed me defiantly.

"And I'm here, too, so you don't get to do all of that mushy stuff when I'm still around," I said, my voice dropping even lower. "Especially not with that idiot."

"You're being unreasonable, and you're acting crazy again."

"What was that?"

Her breath hitched. I watched her throat bob as she swallowed, and when she finally spoke, it was softer. "Why are you doing this, Miron? Why do you care so much anyway? It was just one night of misplaced affection. Why can't you let it go?"

It was a question I'd asked myself over and over again. Why couldn't I just let it go? But only one answer came back to haunt me. I'd fed my obsession, and it had grown into a wild, consuming fire. She thought it was hard to walk away from her cheating boyfriend?

She didn't know the first thing about struggling to walk away. This right here—being close to her, inhaling her, wanting her—threatened all my inhibitions and made me forget who had control.

I exhaled sharply, the corner of my mouth curling in something dark. I let go of her wrist only to slide my fingers higher to her jaw, tilting her face, but she refused to look me in the eye.

“You know why I can’t let it go. I want you, Hazel. I want you madly and deeply. I want to fuck you until all you can think and breathe is me.”

And then she looked up at me, her breaths coming fast, her lips parted in shock or maybe something else. I remembered we weren’t supposed to be alone. We weren’t supposed to be this close.

But her big eyes were filled with something she didn’t want to say out loud. Something I wasn’t ready to admit. And without thinking, before I could stop myself, before I could remember all the reasons she’d listed to prove why this was wrong, I kissed her.

Hard.

She gasped against my mouth, but she didn’t pull away. No, she melted into me, her hands fisting in my jacket. It was rough and fucking desperate—because that was how she made me feel, like we were trying to tear something out of each other, something we couldn’t have.

Her nails scraped against my neck, my hands gripping her waist like I was afraid she’d slip away. It was fire, and it burned like hell, but I didn’t care.

“Miron....”

I buried my face between her neck, breathing her scent in like an animal in heat. Christ. I was fucked. I pressed my hips deeper, dragged my fingers to her hips to grip those soft thighs. “That’s it. Say my fucking name, moy dorogaya Kheyzel.” My dear Hazel.

She shuddered in my arms, whimpering when I kissed her jaw and finally found her lips again.

“Miron,” she moaned into my mouth, and I swallowed it. Licked it. Tasted the wine on her warm tongue and had a strange feeling that I’d never have enough of this woman.

“Miron, please....” Then she broke, her voice shaking, with tears in her eyes. She clutched a pendant hanging around her neck with a death grip, and it was the first time I’d noticed she wore it consistently. Even that night.

“Please, no. I’m begging you. I can’t. We can’t. This is wrong.”

I was burning up, and she was begging. Begging me to stop.

And just like that, I did.

I pulled back, chest heaving, heart hammering like a fist against my ribs. Her lips were red, her breath uneven.

I should’ve walked away first, turned around and left her crying there without once looking over my shoulder.

But I didn’t.

I let her go.

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One Month Later

“The greatest step toward a life of freedom and happiness is letting go of what no longer serves you.”

I couldn't remember who said it or where I'd read it, but it was all I thought about on the ride to the airport. I pondered on the weight of holding on, the liberation of letting go, and the journey to freedom and happiness, as well as cultivating a mindset to prioritize that freedom and happiness.

Beside me, Nathan slept like a baby, with his head rolling back and forth on the window as the car moved.

Years ago, I always made fun of how easily he slept during road trips and how cute he looked every time. Long lashes kissed his cheeks, his lips were puckered, and he looked peaceful. I managed to smile despite the painful tug in my chest as I reached out to brush the hair on his forehead.

His hand rested on my thigh, and I felt the burn of his palm through my jeans. Gently, I took his hand in mine and interlocked our fingers, being careful to not wake him up. To me, our palms had always been the perfect fit, though his were larger. But holding him felt safe.

Safe .

My heart clenched when Miron's voice came back.

Being stuck, miserable, and afraid to let go.

The car stopped, and Nathan's head jerked forward, jolting him awake. We'd reached our destination and stepped out of the car, rolling the luggage behind us.

The airport doors slid open with a quiet hiss, letting in the crisp morning air. Nathan and I stepped inside, and the polished floors reflected the cold, artificial glow of overhead lights.

The terminal buzzed with families murmuring their goodbyes, more travelers dragging luggage behind them, and flight announcements echoing overhead.

Nathan's suitcase wheels hummed against the floor as we walked toward the check-in area. Neither of us spoke. Maybe we didn't need to. The weight of the moment pressed down on my chest, making it harder to breathe, harder to think.

He was leaving.

I stopped just before the security checkpoint, my fingers tightening around the strap of my suede tote bag. Nathan turned to face me with sadness in his eyes.

"Hey." With a sleepy smile I'd always thought was charming, he reached forward, kissed my cheek, and wiped something from my eye. And when he pulled back, I saw the glistening teardrop on his finger. "Don't cry, cupcake. I'll see you again soon."

I tried to smile, but more tears blurred my vision. "Nate, before you go, I have a joke for you."

Grinning, he cupped my cheek, his eyes turning glossy. "Go on, babe."

"Why did the corporate lawyer break up with his girlfriend?" I paused and added

quickly, “Because he found someone with more assets.”

I laughed and cried, like I had done the day I saw him again, holding up that box of doughnuts in the clinic. That day when I’d run into his arms with overflowing joy like I was sixteen again. But now my tears were for all the wrong reasons.

“That was a good one.” He was about ready to laugh when I slowly reached into my bag, feeling the familiar coolness of the silver chain against my fingertips. I pulled it out and let it dangle between us.

The necklace he had given me when he asked me to be his girlfriend. The pendant caught the light, glinting softly like a fading star. His gaze flickered to it, and something in his expression shifted.

Nathan’s brow furrowed as he looked at me. “Hazel....”

Before he spoke, I beat him to it.

“Why didn’t you just tell me?”

“Cupcake, listen to me. I can explain”

“But you can’t, Nate.” It felt like someone had rammed a stake through my chest. “If you really had something to say, you would have told me about her. But she means something to you, and that’s why you didn’t say anything.”

“Hazel....”

I shook my head before he could say more, pressing the necklace into his hand. “Just...take it. Please. I don’t regret the years we’ve been together, but I can’t do this anymore, Nathan. I’m sorry. You deserve to be happy, and so do I.”

I should've said something more. But what was left? The truth sat heavy in my chest, too much to force out, too useless to hold in: growing distance, the incessant calls that were always work-related. Piper.

His fingers curled around the pendant, his grip tight like he was trying to hold onto something more than just silver and chain. Nathan and I knew each other well enough, and with the way he looked at me, he saw that I didn't have the strength left to fight for us anymore. He exhaled sharply, then nodded.

"Can I hug you at least?"

That would shatter my heart to more pieces, but it was the least I could do.

He wrapped his arms around me, pulling me close enough to wet his shirt with my tears. I held him, breathed him in for one last time.

The final boarding call for his flight rang through the terminal, and I pulled back.

Nathan withdrew without looking at me. He couldn't with the tears in his eyes. He took a step back. Then another.

And then, while stuffing the necklace into his pocket, he turned and walked away.

"Let go of the past and go for the future. Go confidently in the direction of your dreams."

That was what Henry David Thoreau said, and I agreed too suddenly.

I walked away, my steps slow and deliberate, as if the weight in my chest had settled

into my bones. Each step took me farther from Nathan, my once-true love, away from the life we had built, and from the safety of what I once believed was unbreakable love.

I should have felt more grief, more hesitation. But instead, the relief was like a quiet exhale, spreading through me in soft waves. The air felt clearer, and the morning was open with possibilities I had refused to acknowledge until now.

Someone else plagued my thoughts, and it wasn't Nathan.

It was Miron.

His name flickered through my mind like a forbidden prayer, wrapping itself around my thoughts, my breath, my pulse. It was always him, wasn't it? Even when I tried to fight it, even when I buried the longing beneath the obligations of what was right, he had already carved his place inside me.

I hated myself for it. For how slowly but easily my heart adjusted to abandoning the man I had just left. For how little regret I felt.

Because all I could feel now was hunger.

Thoughts of Miron consumed me, wrapped themselves around my soul so completely that I didn't know where he ended and I began.

Nathan was no longer in the picture, but there was Amelia and Alina.

It was wrong; I knew that. I should have run from him, severed whatever strange power he had over me before it was too late.

But it was already too late because I knew I couldn't start the next chapter of my life

if I kept re-reading the last one.

As I pulled out my phone, flipping through the folder containing his E-file, I zoomed in on his work address, knowing I wouldn't stop myself from going to him.

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Calmly, I leaned against the desk, folding up my bloodied sleeves while I watched Damir curl his fingers into fists and ram his knuckles into the man pressed up against the wall.

Sweat trickled down his face, drenching the collar of his shirt, and he clenched his left arm, swinging it into the man's face. Heavy grunts echoed in the room but the man was still on his feet, proving to be a lot tougher than we thought.

Damir gave me a look over his shoulder, silently asking whether to continue. I circled a finger in the air, urging him on. And the shouts continued again.

The body at my feet twitched once, then stilled. I watched, feeling nothing, as the crimson pool darkened the rug. He wasn't dead. Not yet, anyway. But he'd been an accomplice to the screaming bastard by the wall and had to take his own share of the package.

The rats sold us out to Customs at the dock, and they'd done it with their scumbag partners, who'd been stealing our crates.

Eventually, when we were done getting names, I was going to fucking end the both of them. It was always the same. A life ended, another name crossed off, and I'd move forward, unburdened.

I'd stopped keeping count years ago.

Faces blurred together—pleading eyes, curses spat through broken teeth, the last ragged gasps of men who thought they were untouchable or smart enough to stab me

in the back and get away with it. None of it mattered. They all ended the same.

Maybe there was a time when I hesitated. When I thought there was a line between who I was and what I did. But that line had long since disappeared. Now, there was only the focus and determination of getting the job done.

Watching Damir deliver blows in quick succession to the groaning asshole, I never felt better. And my head had never been clearer.

I pushed myself off the desk, stalking closer to Damir. Putting a hand on his shoulder, he stepped aside, and the groaning man fell to his knees before me, his breath coming in ragged gasps, blood dripping from his split lip onto the floor.

His eyes searched mine, begging for mercy, but there was none.

“You know why you’re here.” I didn’t raise my voice. I didn’t need to. His fear did all the talking.

“Please,” he stammered, spitting out blood. “Miron, I...I can fix this. I swear I didn’t need to. My wife is sick. I needed the money. But I can fix this, I promise.”

I sighed and crouched down, leveling my gaze with his.

“You think this is about fixing?” I murmured. “You stole from us. Lied to my face. Had the feds breathing down our necks, and, on top of that, your stupid squad created big trouble that called the Pakhan’s attention. That isn’t something you fix. It’s something you pay for. And I don’t care if your wife is sick. You should have come to me for the fucking money!”

He whimpered as I pulled my knife from its sheath between my belt. A beautiful thing, it was. Sleek, sharp, and ever-ready to do the job. I let the tip trace a slow path

across his cheek, the pressure just enough to break the skin, to make him flinch.

“You know, you had your chances to come forward and own up to your shit. Maybe then I’d have let you live. You could have gotten your boys to return the things they stole before I put Damir on the job, but you didn’t. You thought you wouldn’t get caught,” I continued, almost bored. “I let you breathe longer than you deserved. And yet here we are.”

His sobs started then, pitiful, desperate. I’d seen it all before. Regret meant nothing when it came too late.

I pressed the blade to his throat, not enough to kill. Not yet. Just enough for him to feel how close the end was. My other hand gripped his jaw, forcing his teary eyes to meet mine.

“Tell me,” I said, tilting my head. “Was it worth it?”

His lips trembled, but he had no answer. I smiled. Then I gripped his neck and started slicing through the thick skin of his throat.

The man’s screams tore through the room. Blood dripped from my knife, slow and steady, onto the floor beneath him. I saw the color drain from his face. I watched him writhe, his breath coming in ragged sobs.

Then....

A creak. Barely a whisper of sound. But enough to know that someone else was here.

Damir’s head snapped to the door at the same time as mine did, and Hazel stood there.

Frozen. Eyes wide, breath shallow, hands trembling at her sides. For a moment, neither of us moved or made a sound, except the man in front of me, gasping for breath.

The look in her eyes, filled with horror and disbelief, cut deeper than any blade ever had. She shouldn't have seen this. Not me like this.

I let out a slow breath, adjusting my grip on the knife. "You shouldn't be here. How the fuck did you get here? Who the fuck let you in?"

Hazel didn't answer. Didn't blink. Just stared. At me. At the man. At the blood. She looked pale and was trembling. Her wide, disbelieving eyes flicked between me and the other bloodied body beside my desk.

She looked sick. Disgusted. Like she was seeing a stranger instead of the man she'd come to find.

She had something to say to me—I saw it in the way her lips parted, in the way her hands clenched at her sides. But whatever words she had died the second she saw me like this. The second she saw what I really was.

I clenched my jaw. "Hazel."

Nothing.

A muscle in my neck ticked. I'd seen men beg for their lives, seen them break, seen them turn into hollow shells. But this...her silence, it made my pulse hammer in a way no enemy ever had.

"Turn around and close the door behind you."

She didn't move.

"Hazel, I need you to fucking leave this room right now, damn it!"

Jerking like a restarted engine, she scrambled out of the room with shaking hands.

Combing my fingers through my hair, I rose to my full height and handed Damir the blade. He didn't look happy about her interference, but I didn't fucking care.

"Take care of him. Don't let him bleed out just yet until I handle her."

"Miron, you know we have to—"

"I swear to God, I'm going to run my fist through your fucking chest, Damir! For once, just shut the fuck up and do what I say!"

I left him in the silence, barging out of the room with my heart doing strange flips in my chest when I saw her pressed against the wall, with her arms wrapped around her like a shield and tears flooding down her cheeks.

I took a step forward, and she flinched. A small movement, barely there, but I caught it. And I hated it.

I hated that she was afraid of me because I knew she had every reason to be.

"I need you to tell me how you got inside. Did someone tip you off?"

"W—what?" She had a hard time looking me in the face and speaking. "No. No, I came...I searched your file to know where I could find you. I wanted to see you. It's a Friday; I guessed you wouldn't be home. Miron, it's a club. Believe me or don't, but I just walked in here, and...I heard crying."

“There was no one out front?”

“No one.” Hazel shook her head, and as if she suddenly remembered, her eyes grew wide again. “Miron, that man—what are you planning to do to him?”

“Hazel....”

“Oh, God.” She broke down, letting herself crumble and fold into a sobbing mess. “You were going to...weren’t you?”

“Don’t ask questions you don’t want answers to, and don’t stick your nose in business that doesn’t concern you.”

I was cold deliberately to push her far away from what her eyes had seen. I knew what this was going to do to her; it would break her, mess with her head, and give her sleepless nights. And I felt like a fool for being the one to cause that.

“Please.” She surprised us both by springing forward, close enough for me to smell the cinnamon shampoo in her hair. “Please, Miron. I know I have no right. I don’t know what he did, but I’m sure whatever it is, you can forgive him. You can report him to the police, just don’t...don’t kill him. Please.”

The way she still believed in mercy, in second chances. She had no idea that men like me didn’t grant them. When she mentioned the police, it dawned on me that she hadn’t understood the magnitude of what she’d walked into. We had more of the goddamn police force on our side than the side of the law. We were justice. Only a few people like Jeffery found their way around the lacunas to loop us into the civilian system.

Seeing the tears in her eyes disturbed me. Watching her cry touched me in places I didn’t know existed. On reflex, I lifted my fingers to wipe them away, and, again, she

moved away; this time, her gaze brushed over the blood stains on my hands and shirt.

Silently, I backed away from her and walked into the room. Damir was holding the knife to the bleeding man's neck, and his eyes met mine at the door.

"Let him go."

I could count the number of times I'd seen Damir lose control. This moment was another one on the list. Without warning, he struck the man with his shoes. Again. And again.

"Damir!"

He stopped. "Do you want me to take him to a hospital, too?"

I knew Damir was being sarcastic, but that was what Hazel would have wanted. Her heart and entire soul were just too fucking pure, and somehow I knew I'd pick that instead of leaving her to believe I was a monster.

"Dump him at the nearest one."

Heaving, and without so much as an acknowledgment, Damir dragged him by the arms and tugged him through another exit door in my office. He had his reservations, and they were clear to me. We never had to let traitors go. Never. The risk of letting them go was higher than when they hadn't been caught.

But we'd found them and taught them a lesson they weren't going to forget anytime soon. If they tried shit again, I knew exactly how their lives were going to end.

I shut the door and turned around to find her watching me. "Damir's taking him to a hospital. If he still fucking dies, know that's on him. Now, let's go somewhere else

where we can talk. You said you wanted to me, and if you had to come all the way here, then I assume it's important."

Her chest heaved with relief, and she pushed herself off the wall.

I moved toward the left, hoping she was following, but in a blink, I noticed she was walking the other way—away from me.

Fuck.

"Hazel, where are you going?"

No answer.

"He's taking them to a fucking hospital. What else do you want?" I called out again.

She didn't answer, and I was forced to watch her small back and curvy hips disappear through a dark corridor. A muscle in my jaw twitched. Right now, for the first time in years, I felt something close to fear.

Not for myself, but for her. For the possibility of losing her.

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Exercises, calorie deficits, starvation, and maybe diarrhea.

Those were more logical explanations for losing two pounds of weight in one night. Not nightmares. The number of times I'd woken up from sleep, screaming and clutching the sheets because of lifeless, bloodied eyes drowning in deep blue seas was unhealthy. The aroma of breakfast hadn't been appealing, and the thoughts of doughnuts reminded me of Nathan.

I climbed off the scale and put my shoes back on, smiling at the attendant who'd assisted with holding my bag and water bottle. "Thanks, Natalie."

"Anytime, Miss Sinclair."

I was sleep-deprived, hungry, and already excited for the day to end, though it had barely begun, but if there was one thing I was not, it was a coward.

I pushed open the door to my office, already knowing who was sitting on the couch waiting for me. "Good morning, Mr. Yezhov."

"Hazel." He nodded curtly.

He sat across from me, his posture as effortless as always, legs crossed at the knee, hands resting lightly on the armrests. He looked composed, as if this was just another meeting. But I knew better now.

This would be our last session.

With the same vigor I had used to ask Amelia for a challenge, I was going to use the same to recommend that Miron Yezhov be taken to an asylum.

Seeing his face reminded me of the men in his office and the blood he had on his hands. Literally. Whatever madness plagued him was bigger than just anger management problems. He'd had a knife pressed to a man's throat. The main reason he was here was because he'd hit an old man across the head with a bottle.

The signs had always been there, hadn't they? But I'd been blinded by his charm and everything else to even recognize that the help he needed was anything but therapy.

For all I knew, he could be a serial killer or an assassin. Whatever it was, I couldn't understand him. And to help someone, I had to understand what I was dealing with.

"I think we should end here," I said, keeping my voice measured. It wasn't easy. My chest was tight, my breath shallow, but I had to remain steady. He would notice any wavering, and I refused to give him that satisfaction.

"End what here?"

"Our sessions. I can't keep up with them."

Miron tilted his head, an almost imperceptible movement, but I caught it. "Is that so?"

"Yes." I folded my hands in my lap, pressing them together to keep them from shaking. "I've done all I can. And I've realized I'm not helping you."

His lips curled downward the edges, the ghost of a frown. "You've come to a conclusion about me, then? Because of what you saw in the club?"

I allowed my gaze to dance on everything else but him, a heavy weight settling in my stomach. I had come to many conclusions about him. That he was cruel in a way that went beyond mere action. For a man to prepare to kill another without batting an eyelash, that cruelty had to be in his very nature. That he dissected people like they were puzzles meant to be solved, not individuals with feelings. That the coldness in his eyes wasn't something I could thaw, no matter how much I tried to understand.

"I don't think you need a therapist," I said finally. "You need something else. And I can't give it to you."

"You think I'm crazy."

"And would that be such a bad thing? Besides, it wouldn't be the first time I've said that about you."

His fingers tapped lightly against the chair's armrest, a gradual, deliberate rhythm that mirrored the ticking clock. "But the other times you said that, you hadn't seen what I was capable of."

"I would rather not talk about what happened last Friday, Miron."

"I know, but you sound afraid."

I flinched. Not outwardly—no, I'd prepared myself too well for that—but something inside me recoiled.

Was that what this feeling was? Fear?

I thought the very reason I was putting an end to the sessions was because I was not a coward.

I lifted my chin. “I’m not afraid of you.” A half-truth. I wasn’t afraid of him in the way most people would be. But I was afraid of what he represented: that void, that depth of cruelty I would never fully understand.

He exhaled a quiet laugh. “Liar.”

I forced myself to hold his gaze, to keep my breathing steady. This was why I had to let go. How easily that sad laugh of his plucked the strings of my heart, conflicting me even more.

I reached for a notepad on my lap, tearing out the last page. “This is my final recommendation,” I said, waving it in the air. “I’ll be handing it over to Amelia, so I suggest you prepare yourself for someone else.”

He didn’t look at the paper. Didn’t even reach for it. Instead, he studied me and sprung up to his feet.

My pulse skipped as I watched him slide his hands into his pockets. “Hazel. I’m going to tell you something not a lot of people know. And I’m not telling you to evoke pity. After I’m done, I’ll walk out that door, and you will never have to see me again.”

I had seen sides of Miron before—the cold man beneath the suit, the guarded and snarky client, the man who hated therapy but looked out for his therapist.

But this? This was new. The tension that usually braced his shoulders was gone, and the ice in his gaze melted, leaving behind a transparency that had never been there before. His eyes had no walls now. Just exhaustion. Just truth.

“My life and yours, they’re not the same. They can never be. Our worlds are apart in ways you can’t even begin to imagine. You’re like the light, and I’m the darkness.

And it's not something that can go away when you wish upon a star; it's who I've been for a very long time."

I kept my legs crossed and focused on him to silence the pounding in my ears.

"I work for a very powerful man who controls a tight network of powerful and dangerous people." He arched a brow. "You ever heard of the Mafia?"

Reluctantly, I nodded, not sure where he was going.

"Well, I'm a part of the Russian Mafia, as absurd as that might sound to you. I don't regret being a part of it; it's the only life I've ever really known and am comfortable knowing. We're not saints, Hazel. We have our limits when it comes to hurting innocent men, women, and children. But when we need to eliminate threats, we do it with our eyes open."

I was reaching for my bottle, trying to move past the part where he said Mafia, and I reminded myself that, before I let my emotions rule, I was first his therapist.

So, I maintained my professional composure.

"I'm taking my time to explain what— who I really am to you. As crazy as it is, I want you to have a clearer picture. You see those men in my office? They stole from me, double-crossed me, and ratted me out. And Jeffery Smith? The man's a fucking snake. I won't go into the details, but I'm telling you for a fact that I gladly hurt those who deserve it."

He chuckled, but there was no humor. "You know, I've killed a man before. In fact, I've killed quite a number. But only one death is of significance to me.

"My father was always an animal. I don't think I'd ever seen him be anything else.

Violence ran through his blood, and he always took it out on us: me, my brother, and my mother. You know when I told you I learned how to give compliments years ago? That's because the pig never has anything nice to say to her.

"I was fourteen," he continued, voice devoid of emotion, like he was simply stating a fact. "I wasn't sure where he'd been, but he came home wasted. He always did, but that night was worse. My mother was in the kitchen. She never fought back, just took it. But I knew...I knew he was going to kill her this time if I didn't stop him." His jaw tightened. "So I did. I stopped him."

Silence pressed in, thick and suffocating. I didn't look away, even as my heart pounded. This wasn't a confession seeking absolution. There was no remorse in his voice. Just a simple, undeniable truth that he killed his father and didn't regret it.

And he wanted me to know it.

For months, I had tried to understand Miron, peeling back layers of his anger and control issues, sifting through the jagged edges of who he was. And now I saw that the man standing before me wasn't born; he was made.

I swallowed, my throat tight. "And after?"

His lips quirked, not in amusement, but something far more bitter. "After? I cleaned the blood off my hands, packed a bag, and never looked back. The Pakhan was kind enough to take my brother and me his wings, and that's how it has been ever since. We have served him with loyalty, in everything. And that's why—"

"Your marriage to Alina was arranged," I finished for him. "It's more like a transaction than anything else."

"Yes. And I agreed because, as I said, the mechanics of this world are all I have ever

known. I never have second thoughts about my loyalty and unparalleled obedience to the Pakhan .”

The gravity of his words pressed against my ribs, and yet, I didn’t recoil. I should have. A part of me, the rational part, knew that. But I couldn’t.

Because for the first time, Miron wasn’t hiding. And I couldn’t look away from that. The therapist in me wanted to probe deeper with questions to keep the conversation flowing for the records and reports. But my emotions which I had tried so hard to keep at bay overpowered all other rational thoughts.

I should have said something. Instead, I watched. My hands rested in my lap, fingers curled against the fabric of my skirt, grounding myself. I told myself I wasn’t disappointed as he moved toward the door, smoothing out the creases in his jacket. I told myself I wasn’t affected when his dark gaze locked onto mine one last time.

His lips parted slightly before he finally spoke. “That was until you came along. I’ve never had regrets or second guesses about anything at all. Yet you...you do something to me, Hazel.”

The words landed softly, but they struck deep.

In that moment, all my training, all the carefully constructed walls between us, scattered. My pulse skipped, and I felt something dangerous curling in my chest, something I wasn’t supposed to feel. If I sat there for too long, he was going to leave, and that would be the last I’d see or hear of him.

But my heart waged war against it, propelling me to my feet, pushing me toward him before his hand could touch the knob on the door.

I wrapped my arms around his waist, with my face pressed in his back, as tears

poured from my eyes. The same tears I thought I'd blocked from flowing last night.

"Miron, no, don't go." He didn't turn around, but I felt his shoulders slacken, and he let me hold him much longer. "You do something to me, too. It's insane how much I think about you. I mean, where logic is concerned, everything is wrong about this; with all you've told me, I should be running for the hills, but I'm not. I don't want to let you go. God, I know it's selfish of me. We barely even know each other—"

"...and there is nothing I would keep from you, unless it's unnecessary or confidential." He turned around, and I got a good glance into his eyes. They were hard as granite but not with anger. Smoldering heat blazed in his eyes, and his hands cradled my face. "The necklace. It's not there."

Trust Miron to notice every minute detail.

"I took it off."

Carefully, he searched my face. "You don't think about him?"

"I broke up with him."

Miron scoffed, and then, the craziest thing happened. He laughed. Wide mouth, twinkling blue eyes, and pure joy. The throaty sound traveled straight through my chest, fueling the fire already burning within, and stirred a pool between my legs.

"Interesting development," he growled, and before I could mutter a word, he crashed his lips against mine.

The world around us slowed down to a fading noise.

God .

I'd missed him so freaking much. I moaned like a satisfied maniac. My eyelids fluttered shut, and I melted into his arms like pudding, fisting his shirt until my nails scraped the solid mold of his ripped torso. The aroma of breakfast wasn't appealing; I couldn't even stand my favorite doughnuts, but...Jesus. Miron's mouth was a healing balm.

What I felt for this man had grown beyond a fatal attraction; it was a deepening, maddening experience that kept drawing me in like a black hole.

We moved against each other, grabbing, biting, nipping, and sucking like hungry predators feasting on prey in the savanna. Beneath my clothes, my nipples peaked, aching for him, and the warmth between my legs grew extremely uncomfortable.

Miron grabbed my hips, hoisting one leg from the ground to drape around his waist as he slammed me against the wall, knocking the breath out of my lungs. He was aggressive, and I wasn't backing down either. He pressed against me, the hard bulge between his legs digging deeper between mine, and the tension brewing between us grew into a tsunami, blowing and crashing every reservation we'd ever had.

He smiled against my lips, his hot breath fanning my mouth. "Did you expect this to happen?"

"What?"

"The skirt," he rasped, his hands moving to his belt. Miron dragged his lips to my throat and grazed the tender skin on my nape. "You've never worn one for a session."

"You're insane." I laughed, joining him to unbuckle the steel keeping his pants on his waist. The belt came off, the zipper went down, and his pants hung low on his firm buttocks. I slid an arm behind his waist, palming one in my hand and dragging him closer.

“Someone’s growing bold, I see.” He bit my earlobe, sucking hard on it until I was pleading for him to hurry up.

“Miron, please,” I cried, twisting my face to catch his lips. “I have another client scheduled to walk in here in thirty minutes.”

“We better make use of the time, then,” he groaned into my mouth and pulled me, walking backward toward my desk. He trapped me against it, shielding the rest of the view with his body.

Miron was merciless, hard, and unforgiving. I needed oxygen, but having him bunch up my skirt and cup my thong eliminated that thought. I arched into him, pushing my dripping pussy into his hand. He fisted the thong and, in a flash, ripped it apart.

I barely made it through another breath of air before he slipped two fingers into me at the same time. My head rolled backward, a guttural sound tearing from my throat.

“Do you like that?”

“God, yes.” Hazily, I kissed his jaw and pulled at his cotton briefs. “Miron, there’s no time.”

He pushed his fingers deeper, catapulting me to a dangerous edge, but didn’t allow me to tip over. “How many minutes left?”

“Twenty, twenty-five—I don’t know. But I need at least ten minutes to put myself together.”

“Because you know I’m going to fuck you until you shatter, right?”

Blushing as an effect of dirty words had never been my thing until Miron. They made

my heart soar. Made me anticipate.

“We’re doing something different today. If it hurts, tell me to stop, and I won’t hesitate.”

Curiosity made me ask, “Something like what?”

His brows dipped in a crease. “If it hurts, tell me to stop, Hazel. Did you hear that?”

I nodded and was about to repeat my question when he flipped me around, gently pressing my stomach to the desk. Grabbing my hips, he bunched my skirt higher and spread my legs. Then, I felt his lips trailing kisses from my butt cheeks to my pussy.

“Miron...”

I groaned into the desk, curling my fingers to hold on to the other edge while the rest of my body quivered with blinding desire. His fingers played with my clit while his tongue and mouth did the fucking. It felt so insanely good that a ringing sound started in my ears, and I had to keep the moans from journeying out the window.

“You’re ready for me,” he growled against my sex and drew a loud gasp from me when his tongue lapped there and licked on my juices.

Rising to his full height, I heard the shuffle of his clothes, and his cock stationed at my entrance.

“You have to promise not to make a noise, okay?”

Miron spoke so incredibly softly that I thought I was in heaven.

“Okay— God, Miron.”

He'd driven into me, muffling the sexiest groan I'd ever heard from a man, and my walls clenched around him, slowly adjusting to his size. I spread my legs wider to accept all of him and closed my eyes, reeling in the ecstasy, pushing my hips to complete this divine merger that had absurdity written all over yet felt so right.

Holding my waist, he pulled out and rammed into me with more force than I ever thought I could handle. And I shamelessly begged for more. I couldn't have enough. Not when he fucked me harder, deeper, and faster. Not when the desk quaked under our weight and the items clattered to the ground.

"This shit isn't working," I heard him say before he flipped me onto my back and raised me so we were gazing into each other's eyes. "I need to see you while I fuck you."

He drove into me again, and I bit the back of my hand from screaming. A throaty moan escaped my throat with each thrust. I bounced up and down, and he moved his hips with quicker precision until I was mumbling his name over and over again, like a hamster working its wheel.

The more he sank into me, the closer I got to the moon and stars, and when he kissed my sweaty neck and lips, the entire universe was at my feet.

He tensed beneath me, losing focus while he kissed my mouth, and I wrapped my arms around his neck, urging him to give one final push. He did, pulling out of me quickly to spill thick bursts of cum between my thighs as we shattered together, our orgasms exploding, and held each other tight.

From the couch, the iPad chimed—ten-thirty a.m.. The session had come to an end, but we could both feel that something else was about to begin.

With his chest rising and falling rapidly, he kissed my forehead. "I'll be leaving now.

But I promise, I'll see you again soon.”

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:48 pm

For years, I had been a loyal soldier, a man who did his job without hesitation, without complaint. I never asked for favors, never stepped out of line. I followed orders, enforced the Pakhan's will, and left no loose ends behind.

Egor Yezhov, a man feared more than death itself, ruled with an iron grip. Betrayal wasn't just punished; it was erased.

I had seen it firsthand. A man who skimmed money from the books? Buried alive. A soldier who let emotions cloud his judgment? His own family paid the price before he did. He was not a man of second chances.

And yet, I stood before him now, ready to make an announcement that sounded more like a death sentence.

"I can't continue with the engagement." My announcement breezed through the ripples on the blue pool and was met with brooding silence.

Cool wind rustled through the nearby trees, ruffling the strands of my hair, and I seized a minute to inhale the freshness, knowing there was no guarantee that I would walk away from this scene with my head on my shoulders.

Egor stood beside me, his rough hands clasped behind his back and broad shoulders relaxed as he watched the maintenance staff seize debris from the water's surface with a skimmer.

"You mean your engagement to Ivanova's daughter?"

His voice was eerily calm, like an echo in the canyons, and it was neither a promise of good nor bad tidings.

I gave a curt nod, keeping my eyes on the pool just as he did. For all I knew, Egor could pull out a Marakov in the blink of an eye, and the next debris the staff would carry in his skimmer would be my dead body from a bloody pool.

Before I drove to Egor's hotel for this private meeting, I reminded myself that, after I dropped the announcement, every breath I drew could be my last.

He shifted his feet and started walking around the edges of the pool, quietly paying attention to invisible things I couldn't see in the water.

"And you are calling it off because?"

I followed after his footsteps, eyeing the smooth flex of his back and every little thing that could be a fucking signal of his explosion. "I have eyes for someone else."

Egor halted in his steps and turned around. The setting sun, all purple and orange splashes of rays, bathed him in its warm light, and the depths of his eyes swirled with years of experience, deep secrets, and...nothing else. I couldn't pick a hint of his possible reaction toward this conversation we were having.

"You have eyes for someone else, or you've already told that someone else that you're coming back for her. Which one is it, Miron?"

I shrugged as casually as I could. "Don't they mean the same thing?"

"Arrogant asshole." Egor shook his head, a hint of a smile curving on his mouth. "The former means that there's still a chance to remind you where your loyalty lies and turn your eyes back to Alina. The latter means you have made a promise and

made up your mind, and you somehow believe that you can leave this place with my blessing to do whatever the hell you want.”

“My loyalty lies with you, Egor. It always has and always will.”

“And yet,” the smile turned into a full-fledged grin now, “there’s someone else who I had no clue existed until now. How long has it been?”

Briefly, my gaze faltered. He was taking this more calmly than I imagined, and it disturbed me. “A few weeks after I started therapy.”

Evidently intrigued, he lifted a brow. “The therapist or her daughter?”

“The therapist. She’s twenty-four. Single. No children.”

“Same age as your fiancée, no?” He frowned slightly. “And this therapist knows who you are and what you do?”

I cleared my throat. “I told her two days ago, and she took it well. ”

“Interesting. She took it well,” Egor repeated, unclasping his hands, and my brows creased in alert when he slid them into his pockets. He watched me like a predator studying a shift in the wind.

“Miron, do you know what happens to a man who looks back on a battlefield?”

“He’ll probably die.”

“You’re looking back. So, you know that you can get shot right in the head, and you wouldn’t know until you’re down on the ground.”

“Egor, I—”

“There is a lot at stake here. A lot to consider. It strikes as odd that you would choose such a delicate time to pull this stunt.” He was talking more to himself than to me.

“Unless you’re in love with her?”

I didn’t answer. Couldn’t.

Love?

The word felt too small, too simple for what twisted inside me. It wasn’t just attraction. It wasn’t just need. It was darker, deeper. I wanted her safe. I wanted her close. I wanted her to know that no one—not even herself—would take her from me.

“Your silence says enough.” Egor chuckled again, shaking his head. “I promised you to Ivanova, and his daughter is preparing for a wedding next month, Miron. You know that this decision of yours would cost us heavily. Millions of dollars lost, good connections for future business dissolved. Most importantly, Alina’s pride. I doubt that Ivanova wouldn’t dare cross me, but the girl is wildfire.”

Alina? Easy. I could take care of her. Alina was not a threat. She was the least of my problems. What mattered was whether the Pakhan was on board or not.

With Egor’s question still plaguing my thoughts, I exhaled through my nose, unwilling to admit to something I wasn’t even sure of myself. “I have counted the costs, and I’m willing to work harder to restore every loss recurred in triplefold. What concerns me the most is your blessings, Egor. As I said, my loyalty lies with you, and always will. As for everything else, I’ve made my choice and will not change my mind.”

“You surprise me, Miron. Never would I have thought that you, of all people, would

take these steps for a woman.” He studied me for a long moment before giving a slow nod. “As for my blessings, I give them to you. But I hope, for your sake, she’s worth all the hell that will break loose.”

I didn’t reply.

I already knew the answer to that.

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:48 pm

I balanced my phone between my ear and my shoulder as I shoved my arms into my jacket. My mom's voice crackled in my ear, completely oblivious to my struggle.

"Are you taking your vitamins?" she asked.

I sighed, hopping on one foot as I tried to get my shoe on. "Yes, Mom. I am taking the vitamins."

"The good ones? Not the cheap ones that just dissolve into nothing in your stomach?"

"Yes, the good ones." I grabbed my bag and checked for my keys. Not in my pocket. Not in my bag. Not on the counter. Fantastic.

What was it with damn keys not being where they were supposed to be?

"Are you drinking enough water?"

I shoved my hand into the couch cushions, praying my keys weren't lost in the abyss.

"Yes, Mother. I am drinking enough water."

"Not just coffee?"

"...yes." To be honest, my caffeine intake was pretty decent. I properly balanced caffeine, water, and healthy smoothies.

There was a long pause on the other end, and I could hear the doubt radiating through the phone.

“Hazel.”

I sighed dramatically. “Fine. Maybe mostly coffee. Sometimes. But it has water in it, so technically—”

“Baby girl, that is not how that works. I have told you time and time again that too much caffeine in your system is bad for your health.”

“Yes,” I groaned. “Yes, Mother. I hear you.”

“And Nathan?”

It took everything in me not to scream at that moment. “I told you, Ma, we broke up. Well, I broke up with him and—”

“So what? You two were as close as two peas in a pod for eight years. There must be some communication—”

“There is someone else in the picture, Mother.” I didn’t even know when I’d practically yelled that into the phone.

Before my mother could jump on the moving train to investigate every detail until she knew this mystery man’s favorite color, I triumphantly found my keys under a pile of mail and snatched them up.

“Okay, Mom, I love you, but Elena is waiting for me, and if I don’t leave right now, she’s going to text me a long list of reasons why I’m an unreliable friend. Love you, bye!”

I hung up before she could launch into an unrelated lecture on caffeine addiction and the new man in my life before throwing open the door—then immediately ran back

inside to grab my phone, which I had, of course, left on the counter.

I met Elena at our usual spot, a quiet café tucked between towering buildings, the kind of place that I secretly loved for intimate outings. She was already seated by the window, her hands wrapped around a steaming cup of coffee, eyes lighting up the second she saw me.

“You couldn’t pick anywhere else but a coffee shop?”

Elena grinned from cheek to cheek, standing to give me a tight hug before taking a chair out for me. She adjusted the scarf around her neck. “What? Wipe that fake frown. I know you love it. I thought it would be cliché and chic to have this serious conversation you urgently wanted to have. ‘ Oh, Elena, the most unimaginable happened, and I need to talk to you, or I might die,’ ” she mimicked. Or at least tried to.

“I sounded nothing like that.”

“Are you sure? I have a recording,” she laughed, shifting her cup of coffee aside to fold her arms atop the table. “Better hope to God it’s important, Haze. I canceled two dates to be here.”

“Two dates, Elena? How do you manage these things? It’s barely dusk.”

“Who says dates have to be at night? And yes, two. I met one on Tinder and the other in the grocery store. A brunet and a blonde. Better safe than sorry, you feel me? But, before you go into the lectures, it’s casual. No sex, just talk.”

“Your life is always buzzing with fun, isn’t it?” I tried to make it sound light-hearted,

but I slackened. “Lena, I’m in a mess.”

“Talk to me, Haze. I promise, I’m keeping all the jokes aside. I’m here.”

Leaning forward, I sucked in a deep breath, and when I released it, it went with all the information I’d been dying to tell Elena. For months, I’d needed someone to confide in and wasn’t sure of spilling any beans before trying to untangle the complications myself.

But the complications had formed into a more tangled web, and I realized dealing with it myself was pointless.

So, I told her everything, from the first day Miron walked into my office to the night at The Tavern—which made her gasp because she remembered—to the private session at his penthouse and learning about Nathan’s New York girlfriend.

“That cheating virgin bastard!”

I laughed. “You can’t imagine how heartbroken I was, Lena. I was torn to shreds, but...” I dropped the first bomb, revealing that Miron and I had sex barely an hour after I learned of Piper.

Elena’s jaw dropped, almost hitting the floor. “Girl, what ? Tell me, was it good? How does he look down there?”

“Shh, someone might hear you.” I looked around the café. Thankfully, no one paid attention to our hushed noises. “I’m telling you, that was the best night I’d had in a while.”

“Haze, that was the only best night you’ve had in your entire life.”

“Shut up.” We laughed, and I gave her more details about the times I tried to avoid Miron after that night, from the subsequent sessions to the surprise at La Vine, and finally, the most crucial information: the dangers surrounding him.

Intentionally leaving out details of the bloodied men, his father, and the Russian Mafia, I hinted that he worked for powerful people and was expected to marry the daughter of one of those men, and there was, of course, my job to think about. Amelia was still in the dark, and I knew it was only a matter of time before the truth came out because neither Miron nor I were ready to let each other go.

Elena sat back on her chair, firstly reaching for her coffee before mumbling, “Shit, Haze. You’re in a serious mess....”

“Repeating the problem doesn’t solve the problem.”

“You didn’t let me finish.” She beamed. “You’re in a serious mess, but from everything I’ve heard, you and Miron can get through whatever hurdles there are.”

I scoffed. “Elena, wake up and smell the coffee. This is real life.”

“But I am awake, Haze, and I am smelling the coffee, literally. I’m telling you, there’s serious chemistry here. It’s giving ‘Level One’ attraction.” I laughed when she’d used the exact word Amelia did to describe him months ago.

“So, you like him?”

Shyly, I nodded. “I really do.”

“You’re saying he’s not bad for you; he makes you feel good.”

Well, to be honest, I wasn’t sure Miron was one hundred percent good for me either.

He was like an addiction I couldn't get enough of—a drug I almost couldn't resist.

Instead, I told Elena, “Yes, I believe he's great for me.”

“Then, what is the hesitation for, Hazel? My dear friend, you deserve to be happy. No hate here, but I always thought what you had with Nathan was borne from convenience. I mean, I don't like to admit it; he was a good guy. Smart, good-looking, great personality, and all, but Haze, you guys were better off as friends. This spark you have with Miron, I'm certain that it will give rise to something more glorious than you can imagine.”

Elena kept talking, trying to encourage me to give this thing with Miron a chance. While I listened with rapt attention, the conflicting emotions continuously nagged. My mind reeled at the impending dangers that could come with accepting Miron completely, and I couldn't shake off the foreboding feeling that something bad would happen.

And soon.

We stayed in the café for more hours than we'd planned because, apparently, we had more catching up to do. After lots of talking, we saw the pink hues in the skies and picked up our bags to go home. Knowing Elena, she was going to sleep at my place for the night without asking first, so I bought extra brownies and two cups of mocha before leaving the café—because she had a weird obsession with drinking coffee at night.

Elena and I walked side by side down the quiet street, the evening sun casting long shadows along the pavement. The air smelled of freshly baked bread from a nearby bakery, mingling with the faint scent of gasoline from passing cars. She was talking

about an animated series and some new artist causing a frenzy when she stopped and pointed to a small convenience store ahead.

“I just remembered I need to grab something from that shop.”

I hesitated, eyeing the bustling crowd gathered near the entrance. “Sure, I’ll wait out here,” I said softly. “There are too many people.”

She gave me a knowing look but nodded. “All right. I’ll be quick.”

As she disappeared inside, I took a deep breath, somewhat grateful for the moment of solitude. Miron occupied my thoughts for most of the day and the girls’ time out with Elena. I loved Elena, but I needed some space to breathe and think for myself, and now looked like the best time to do it.

The hum of the city blurred into the background as I let my thoughts drift. My phone buzzed in my bag, and I lowered my head to search for it. Then, suddenly, the sharp screech of tires shattered the peace. Before I could turn, a black van pulled up fast beside me.

Panic shot through me like a lightning bolt, and my mind was going into a system overdrive. “Elena!”

I took a step back, screaming, “Elena!” but it was too late. Strong hands grabbed me, rough and strong, yanking me off my feet. A cry escaped my lips as I struggled, kicking, clawing at my captor’s grip. It was no use. The van door slammed shut, and the darkness swallowed me whole.

The air inside smelled of leather and something metallic, sharp, and cold. My heart pounded so hard I thought it might shatter. I didn’t even bother holding back the tears; I let them pour as fast as they wanted.

“Elena!”

“Miss Sinclair, it’s a pleasure to finally meet you in person. Does fucking your clients come with the job description?”

My heart sank at the sound of a woman’s voice. Breathless, I blinked against the dim interior, trying to focus. Then, my blood ran cold.

Across from me, staring with unreadable eyes, sat the woman with angry brown eyes and jet-black hair falling like ink below her back: Alina. Miron’s fiancée.

She tilted her head slightly, lips curling into a ghost of a smile. “Well, well, Hazel. Judging by that look in your eyes, I guess you already know who I am. Great, we’ll just skip the introduction.” Her voice was smooth, almost amused. “But you disappointed me out there. What, no fighting skills? Nothing? That was easier than I thought.”

My stomach dropped, realizing what this was. I had been kidnapped. And whatever future I had dreamed of with Miron, this woman looked ready to make it a living nightmare.

When the van stopped, a brawny man shoved me out, roughly dragging me by the arm into the night air, which was thick with silence, the kind that pressed against my skin like needles. Alina’s men led me deep through the woods, where even the moonlight struggled to reach, to what looked like an abandoned house.

My heart pounded as Alina stood before me, arms crossed, her gaze sharp enough to cut. “Welcome to your new home.”

She moved aside, and they pushed me inside the house, grabbing my hair and yanking me through the dusty, empty space toward a chair positioned at the corner with ropes dangling on the rim. “Tie this bitch up!” she barked at the men and glared at me like she couldn’t wait to kill me. “You really have no shame, do you? Breaking apart something that wasn’t yours to begin with.”

Guilt twisted in my chest. I knew this day was coming, when I had to face the reality of the betrayal against her. I just didn’t know it would be today. I never wanted to hurt anyone. I never meant for things to spiral like this. But how could I fight something that had already taken root in my heart?

The men pinned me to the chair, harshly wrapping the ropes around my body, spiraling the twines so hard that I struggled to breathe.

“I didn’t—” I swallowed hard, choosing my words carefully. My life was hanging in the balance; one wrong word and I was done for. “Listen, I know you’re angry, and you have every right to be. I’ve been where you are right now; I know what the rage is. I’ve felt it. So, I get it. But I promise, I never set out to ruin anything. It was Miron who came to me. He’s the one who—”

I barely had time to react before the sharp sting of her palm cracked across my cheek. My head snapped to the side, pain blooming across my skin, burning.

“Don’t you dare,” Alina hissed. “Don’t you dare make it sound like you were powerless in this. You’re a fucking woman! Talk like a woman who knows she had the fucking voice to say no. He came to you, and so what? You accepted him, melted in his arms, and charmed him enough to call off his engagement?”

Oh, crap. Miron called off the engagement.

Tears pricked at my eyes, but I refused to let them fall. I wasn’t powerless, but I also

wasn't the villain she saw me as. I had fought against this feeling, denied it, and buried it beneath guilt. But Miron—he had pulled me under anyway, and I let him.

So she was right; I accepted him, melted into his arms. But I didn't charm him; he charmed me. Swept me off my feet in the craziest way and made me fall hard.

And even sitting here, knowing that she could be the last person I would ever see, I felt no regret.

"I'm sorry," I whispered, not because I thought it would fix anything but because it was the only thing I had left to give.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:48 pm

I never thought I would feel this way, Not truly. Not in the way that seeped into your bones and unfurled like the first breath of dawn after a night that seemed endless.

Speeding down the highway, a stupid grin sat on my lips, my mind already springing up Hazel's different reactions when I told her I called off my engagement to Alina. I already dunked myself in thoughts of what would happen next and knew it would end with one of us on top of the other.

For so long, I carried my life like a weight, dragging my past behind me, certain that some people were simply not meant for joy. That I was not meant for joy. I had accepted the cage, convinced myself the bars were safety, that silence was peace.

But then—this.

I remembered the conversation Hazel and I had about being happy, and at the time, I couldn't even identify the feeling.

The windows were rolled down, the wind blowing against my skin, warm and alive. I watched the sun dipping low, spilling gold over everything it touched. Laughter—fucking mine—broke the air. It sounded strange, very unfamiliar, yet right.

Happy?

I was fucking elated.

I felt it now, the lightness, the space between my ribs no longer tight with old ghosts.

This freedom. And it was not just escape, not just the absence of chains, but the presence of something complex. The quiet knowledge that the Pakhan allowed this. That happiness was not for specific people, but something I could claim.

And for the first time, I did.

On the passenger's chair, my phone vibrated, and I snatched it—somehow thinking Hazel was the one on the other end. But it was Damir. I swiped at the screen and placed the phone on my ear.

“You can say whatever shit you want now. I’m in such a good fucking mood, I can condone it.”

“That means you haven’t heard.”

“Heard what? That the Pakhan knows about Hazel? That I called off the engagement? That he gave me his blessing? Is that what you were going to say, Damir? Ah, I didn’t only hear it; I gave the announcement.” I laughed into the speaker.

If someone else saw me right now, they wouldn’t hesitate to believe I was high. But Damir was stone-cold quiet, and it completely wiped the smile off my face. Something was wrong.

“Damir....”

“Boss. It’s Hazel. She’s been taken.”

A cold heaviness settled in my chest, and the world didn’t seem so bright anymore. “What do you mean, taken?” I asked, my voice low and fighting to stay in control. But inside, a storm brewed.

“Her friend Elena reported it at a police station. They were out for coffee, and they stopped somewhere. She heard her scream her name, but when she came out, she wasn’t there. She couldn’t reach her. Some others reported seeing a black van snatch up a woman, and the descriptions match Hazel.”

For a second, thick and suffocating silence stretched between us. Then, red-hot rage ignited in my veins. Someone had dared to take what was mine.

“Find her.” My voice was steel. “Trace her phone. Check the cameras. I want her location in ten minutes.”

“Already on it, Boss.”

I gripped the phone so hard my knuckles went white. My mind was already working through the possibilities. Whoever did this...whoever thought they could put their hands on her, would learn what a fatal mistake that was. Because I was coming. And there would be no mercy.

To think that, only a moment ago, I’d been relishing in the bubble of unexplainable joy, and now, the feeling had been brutally replaced with an uncomfortable vacuum-like stretch of uncertainty.

Fear.

I had never feared anything before. Not pain, not death, not the burden of the world pressing on my back. Fear was for the weak, the naïve, for those who had something to lose. Besides Damien, I had nothing else to lose.

But now, it felt different. A snarl built up in my throat, raw and animal-like. Anger

coiled inside me, a wildfire licking at my ribs, my lungs, and my heart. It was unbearable, this nagging feeling of helplessness, the sickening realization that no amount of strength or sheer force could protect or shield her from whatever she was already facing.

Damir sent a text message in under ten minutes.

The location he had sent me was deep in the woods—an old abandoned house. The roof sagged, the walls were covered in grime, and the windows were nothing but jagged holes of broken glass. It stank of damp wood and decay, the kind of place where screams went unheard. It was the perfect place to make someone disappear.

Rage burned through my veins like gasoline thrown on an open flame. Hazel was in there. *Moy dorogaya Kheyzel* . Every second she spent in that hellhole, every moment she breathed in the filth of this place, was another moment I'd carve into the bastards who took her.

I stepped out of the car, and the crunch of dead leaves under my boots was the only sound in the silence. My gun was already in my hand, but I tucked into the holster hanging on my belt. I didn't care how many were inside. Didn't care if it was a trap. I was going back with her, whether they liked it or not.

Men in black gathered outside the house like flies, but none of them stopped me. Getting to the cracked porch, I pushed the door with pent-up rage and stepped inside. It smelled like damp concrete and motor oil. My eyes immediately started scanning, and I held my breath for just a second before forcing it to steady.

Hazel sat tied to a chair, her body bound, her face pale, and her head held backward by the person I had least expected to be this stupid. Alina had a gun pressed to the side of her head.

“Baby, I’m so glad to see you here,” she greeted smoothly. “You came just in time.”

I stepped forward, keeping her gaze and holding my breath. My fingers itched for the weapon holstered at my side, but I didn’t draw. Not yet.

“Alina, what madness is this?”

“Madness, you say?” Alina’s eyes blazed angrily. “Miron, the only one mad here is you. You called off our engagement for this whore!”

“Don’t test me, woman.”

“Oh, that upsets you? Hearing me call her what she really is?” A tear slipped down her cheek, and she quickly wiped it with the back of her hand before repositioning the gun at Hazel’s skull. “I waited for you for months! Did Damir tell you I have my wedding dress? Everything’s ready for us, babe. And she comes along and makes it all disappear? No fucking way, Miron. Did you hear me? No way am I letting that happen! You belong to me!”

Throwing caution to the wind, I growled, “Let her go.”

Alina tilted her head, dragging the cold barrel of the gun along Hazel’s cheek. “And why would I do that? Because you’re asking nicely?”

Hazel’s eyes met mine, and my gaze quickly flickered to the dried tear stains on her cheeks. She’s been fucking crying. My eyes snapped to Alina, and I exhaled because if I didn’t, I was going to rain down bullets without giving it a second thought.

“Because if you don’t, I’ll put a bullet between your eyes before you take your next breath.”

Alina smirked. “I always loved that confidence of yours. But you can’t do shit because I have your weakness seated right here.” She cackled. “Whoever thought that you would have a weakness?”

I heard noise from outside and was confident that my men had arrived. The noise caused a brief distraction, and she looked over her shoulder. I seized the moment, gunning down one of her men, before running forward to tackle her. I dragged her by the elbow, pulling her close enough to myself to disable her arm with the gun, and then I pushed her to the center of the room, careful not to physically hurt her the way I wanted to, while I started working the ropes on Hazel’s chair.

Hazel whimpered, but I kept my eyes on Alina. And everything else happened in a blur.

Damir kicked open the door, ushering in one of Alina’s men with a gun raised behind his head and his hands raised. I loosened the last of the ropes binding her and helped her to her feet, cradling her shaking body with one arm.

The entire house reeked of gunpowder and sweat, the air thick with the scent of blood. My men had turned the tide; bodies were strewn across the concrete, groans of the dying ones echoing in the cold expanse.

“To think that there was a chance I was ever going to marry you,” I said to her. “You’re a fucking lunatic.”

“You’re no better, Miron Yezhov,” she spat, eyes filling to the brim with tears. “You’re just like me, broken and fucked up. Does she know? Has your whore seen you in action? Has she watched you feed a man his own tongue?”

“I swear to God, Alina, I will—”

“Do absolutely nothing, Miron! What you fail to see is that we were made for each other. This world, it’s ours alone. She wouldn’t even last a day. You need me, and I need you.”

Alina sat on her knees in the center of the room, her chest rising and falling in ragged breaths, her mascara smeared like war paint. I raised my gun, had it trained on her, finger pressing just enough to feel the trigger’s resistance.

Her lips trembled, but her eyes were still defiant. “You don’t have the guts, Miron.”

I could have proved her wrong. Should have. But my gaze flicked to Hazel, standing just beside me, her face pale with fresh tears, her hands clenched. If there was one thing Alina said that made sense, it was that Hazel did not belong in this world, and for reasons I didn’t want to admit, I didn’t want her to see me like this. Not now. Not like this.

“You know I can do it, Alina. But I won’t.” I exhaled through my nose and lowered the gun a fraction. “It’s over,” I said. “I want you to stand up and leave. Get the hell out of here.”

Alina’s breath hitched, her fingers twitching at her side. Desperation shone in her eyes. She wasn’t built to lose. “Unbelievable. You’re letting me go.”

“We both know I don’t have the patience, so enjoy it for the next few seconds. Leave.”

She hesitated, and her eyes flicked back and forth, from the man standing in front of Damir with his hands up to Hazel leaning into my side.

I should have watched closely. I should have picked the hidden signal that passed in split seconds, giving the man permission to tackle Damir and snatch his gun. But I

didn't. So, when Alina yelled, "Now!" I did the first thing that came to my mind: protect Hazel.

The crack of a gunshot split the air, and I threw myself in front of her, wrapping my arms around her like a shield. A white-hot explosion tore into my side, searing deep, and I tried to look up, to see her face one last time, but the darkness rushed in too fast.

Damn it.

Hazel gasped, and my heart stopped cold.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:48 pm

Before she gave birth to me, my mother practiced as a community-trained nurse. I grew up flipping through the photo albums to relive the beautiful life she'd lived through those pictures. She looked happy, with a permanent smile on her face and her head held high in accomplishment.

After I was born, as a single mother taking care of her needy daughter and herself, we didn't have enough money, so she took up more jobs to handle the bills. Short story: She lost her job at the general hospital for inconsistency and giving too many excuses. But there was never a time when my mother made me feel she wished I wasn't born. She took care of me, loved me—and still does.

She willingly gave up her job to be a mother and father to me.

My mother taught me that love was not always soft. That sometimes, it was made of sacrifice, of silent suffering, of giving away pieces of yourself with no promise of return. I used to watch her hands, worn, steady, tireless, as she mended, as she cooked, as she worked late into the night while the world rested. She never asked for thanks. She never needed it. Love, she told me, was not measured in words but in what you were willing to endure for another.

I didn't understand then. Not truly.

But now, I sat in this plain room, enduring the rhythmic beep of machines filling the silence, and I finally knew.

And I couldn't stop crying.

The sterile scent of the hospital burned in my nose, mixing with the iron tang of dried blood— his blood . His face was too pale against the white sheets, his chest rising and falling in a slow, agonizing rhythm that felt too fragile. I clutched his hand in mine, my fingers trembling, desperate for any sign of warmth.

He'd stepped between me and a bullet. In a single moment, without any hesitation, he chose my life over his own. And I wondered, was it instinct? Or was it the same kind of love my mother spoke of, the kind that did not think of cost, only of giving?

"If you asked me, I'd say you're wasting your tears." I lifted my head, narrowing my eyes at the man who stood by the doors, looking indifferent. I recognized him from the brief glance we'd exchanged at Miron's office at the club. "We haven't met officially. Damir."

"Hazel Sinclair.

He snorted, and I found it rude. "I already know who you are. I know a lot more than I honestly should." Pushing himself off the wall, he ambled closer, stopping at the foot of the bed, arms crossed, watching me with something that barely passed as concern. "It'll take more than a bullet to his arm to put him down."

My breath hitched, and I sniffled. "He lost so much blood," I whispered. "You don't know what it felt like, watching the light go from his eyes as he collapsed into my arms. I thought...I thought I lost him."

Damir sighed, running a hand through his short hair. "I do know him, and I'm telling you, Miron Yezhov is too damn stubborn to die like this. I've worked with the man for more than a decade, and I've seen him take worse."

I wanted to believe him, but the sterile beeping of the heart monitor mocked me. Each passing second felt like a longer hold of my breath, stretching and pulling at the

frayed edges of my nerves.

Then, there was movement. Miron's fingers twitched. Just slightly, but enough. A small groan left his lips, and I nearly collapsed with relief as his eyelids fluttered open.

"Boss," Damir greeted casually, as if he hadn't spent the last hour watching over a man hovering on the edge of life and death. "Took your time waking up. I told the fine lady here that she was wasting her tears, and I'm glad I was right."

Miron's dark eyes flicked to me, his lips barely parting before Damir straightened. "I've got other matters to handle," he said, and I guessed what matters he had to handle. Alina and her men.

After Miron passed out, I was such a blubbering mess. I blindly followed Damir and Miron's men out of the house, practically dragging and cradling him on our ride to the hospital; I didn't spare any time to care about what happened to a screaming and wailing Alina.

I stiffened, glancing up at him. "Damir—"

But he was already at the door. "Stay with him," was all he said before slipping out, leaving me alone with the man who had nearly died in my arms.

I squeezed his hand tighter, blinking back tears. "You're not allowed to scare me like that again," I whispered. "Why would you do something like that?"

"And why are you such a crying mess?" he croaked, his lips barely twitching when he attempted to smile.

"How can you ask me that? Miron, you...you took a bullet for me; you almost died."

Miron exhaled sharply, tilting his head to look at me. His dark eyes, usually so unreadable, softened. “But I didn’t. I’m here, aren’t I?” There was no edge to his words, only quiet curiosity. “Besides, the bastard was such a sloppy shot.”

“Miron, none of this is funny.” I let out a weak laugh, shaking my head. “I’m such an emotional, psychological, and physical mess because of you,” I admitted, because there was no other reason. Because I couldn’t stand the thought of something happening to him. Because I—

“I love you, Hazel.”

The words shot through me like bullets. Bad joke. And I stared at him, stunned, my breath catching.

Love was sacrifice.

Love was pain.

And love, at its purest, asked for nothing in return, only the quiet promise that we would carry its load with grace.

With Miron, nothing made ordinary sense. How did we get here? How did this man become the only thing I could think about? The only man I believed with deep conviction that I needed, maybe a bit more than air?

“You love me?” It wasn’t that I didn’t believe him; I just didn’t believe he would say it. And hearing it out loud was the only confirmation I needed to clarify my feelings.

I cupped his cheeks, my voice trembling, but the certainty in my chest was solid. “I love you,” I said, and laughed, because it sounded surreal. “I think I’ve been in love with you for a while now, Miron.”

A breath of something close to relief passed between us before I moved without thinking, closing the space between us. I threw my arms around him, pressing my face against his shoulder, nearly forgetting the bandage wrapped around him.

Miron grunted slightly but didn't pull away. Instead, he chuckled, the sound rumbling against me. "Careful, baby," he murmured, amusement laced in his voice.

"Baby?" I chuckled on his shoulder. "What happened to moy dorogaya Kheyzel ."

"You don't know what that means, do you?"

"It's not like you've cared enough to enlighten me."

Softly, he brushed his thumb against my cheek. " My dear Hazel ."

A sudden warmth passed between us, and I snorted, my eyes flickering to his lips. "I could have easily figured that one out."

Before he could respond, the door swung open, and the doctor stepped in. I quickly pulled back, my face burning, but Miron didn't look away from me. Even as the doctor checked his wounds, even as instructions were given, his gaze stayed locked onto mine.

And I was sure of one thing: He wasn't letting go of me, and I wasn't letting go of him, either.

Him for me, and me for him.

It was exactly a week since the scare with Alina, and Miron had been resting well

these past few days, though he'd never admit it was because I insisted on taking care of him. He didn't need much; the man was as strong and stubborn as a mule.

But I found comfort in tending to him, making sure he ate, ensuring his bandages were fresh, watching over him even when he teased me for fussing. He didn't push me away. I knew he enjoyed my presence, even if he only showed it in quiet moments, in the way his fingers lingered on mine when I handed him a cup of tea, in the rare softness in his gaze before he looked away.

A day after he was cleared and discharged from the hospital, Miron asked me to move in with him, to his actual house and not the penthouse. I said yes, and found it oddly comforting sharing the space with him. It felt more intimate than the steamy nights we enjoyed.

Tonight, though, I found myself alone in his empty bedroom, the sheets still warm from where he had been resting. His absence tugged at me like that damn drawstring, even though I knew where he was: in his study, speaking with Damir.

I slipped from the room, moving carefully through the dimly lit hallway. Did I say Miron's house was an actual mansion? Oh, it was. He made Damir give me a grand tour, and I fell more in love with every décor and design as the days went by. Though cold, it felt like home.

The external structure stood like a fortress of quiet power with a dark stone facade. Tall, arched windows gleamed under the moonlight, framed by sleek black ironwork and tinted glass.

A long, curved driveway led to massive double doors of polished ebony, carved with intricate details.

Inside, the air was thick with the scent of leather and aged whiskey. The grand foyer

boasted a sweeping staircase with wrought-iron railings. A chandelier of black crystal hung above, releasing fractured light onto the marble floors, dark-veined and cool underfoot.

The master bedroom, the one we shared, was both indulgent and understated. A king-sized bed with dark silk sheets stood against a backdrop of shadowy grays and deep blues, the colors of midnight and his sexy eyes. Floor-to-ceiling windows overlooked the city below. Standing close enough and gazing through made me feel like one of those Disney princesses. Only difference was, my Prince Charming was in the Mafia.

Damn. I was living the dream.

About the living room? It was a masterpiece of restrained luxury with deep, tufted sofas in shades of charcoal and espresso, a grand fireplace framed in onyx, and floor-to-ceiling bookshelves lined with first editions and relics of a life lived in power. A sleek bar stood in the kitchen, stocked with the finest scotch, cognac, imported cigars, and a bunch of other stuff I didn't know.

The study was his sanctuary. I'd seen it yesterday and, knowing he was there, drew my feet toward it. I couldn't help it; I missed him.

The door to the study was slightly ajar, and I hesitated just outside. Dark wood paneling lined the walls while a massive mahogany desk dominated the space. A single gun rested in a glass case behind him. A leather chair, worn from late nights, sat before a wall of monitors displaying security feeds, ensuring that nothing within these walls escaped his gaze.

Miron's voice was sharp and audible enough for me to hear a large scoop of his conversation with Damir.

"What do we do with her? She's too dangerous and unstable to simply let go."

Alina. My stomach twisted.

“Remember Ivanova? She comes from power and a strong Russian background. This could get complicated. I know you have the Pakhan’s blessing, but there is no way he will agree to you starting a war,” Damir answered, barely seething like Miron. He played with a rubber ball and busied himself with it while his boss paced the room.

Miron leaned against his desk and drew his lip between his teeth, like he was considering something.

“I don’t care how complicated it is. I want her to suffer.”

My breath caught. Honestly, I could stand there and watch him all night, but the man was drawing up strategies for murder. I had to intervene somehow. I stepped back, my fingers gripping the doorframe to steady myself. This was the side of Miron I knew existed but rarely saw so clearly: the cold, ruthless part of him, the man who carried vengeance in his veins as easily as breath.

But I’d accepted him and the baggage that accompanied living this reality, hadn’t I?

Still, my heart ached for him. I wanted to go to him, to pull him from the dark, to remind him that revenge wouldn’t heal the wounds that still bled beneath his skin. But I knew better than to step inside that room now.

Instead, I turned, retreating quietly.

Tomorrow, perhaps, I would remind him that there was still warmth to be found. That no matter how much the past demanded retribution, he didn’t have to let it consume him whole.

I was almost past earshot when I heard him suggest taking her to some underground

prison and leaving her there until her father found her corpse, and my heart couldn't take it. I rushed back, pushing the door open with urgency.

As I stepped into the room, Miron and Damir turned to me. "Baby, what are you—"

"Before that gunshot, you asked her to leave," I said softly, holding Miron's gaze as I walked up to him slowly. "I know you did it because of me, but you did it, nonetheless. So, please, let her go."

"You're joking, right? Maybe you don't understand; Alina wouldn't have hesitated to blow your brains out if I didn't show up."

"I understand. But you did show up, and I'm here." I sighed. I was tired of the past following us like an annoying hangover. It needed to go, and we had to focus on starting together as...whatever we were—two odd humans madly in love with each other. She needed to go.

"Let her go, Miron."

Miron scoffed, folding his arms as he leaned against the table. "You never cease to amaze me, Hazel. After everything, you're just...letting her go?"

I looked down, fingers tracing the edge of my long sleeve. "She was a woman in love, Miron. And in one cruel moment, she lost everything." I remembered the pain of Nathan's betrayal. "That doesn't make what she did right, but I know how that pain can drive you to do the unthinkable. She wasn't evil or insane. Just blinded by love."

Miron let out a quiet chuckle, shaking his head. "You really can reason your way through anything, can't you? Okay, I'll let her go, but I'm not doing that without making her have a taste of the chaos she created by herself. Damir, we're canceling

all our deals with Ivanova. The plan is to drain them until they have nothing left. Luxury was a drug to Alina, and now I'm going to take it all away. Before now, I told the Pakhan I would work harder to restore any loss my decision would cost."

Damir rose to his feet, tossing the rubber ball on the table, before marching toward the door. "Got it." Then his eyes flicked to mine with a glimmer of something similar to amusement. "Anything else, Hazel? Would you like me to take her to the hospital too?"

I laughed, and Miron snatched the rubber ball from his table, aiming it at Damir's head. Luckily, the guy was fast enough to duck before he got hit.

"Get the fuck out of here."

The door clicked shut behind Damir, leaving us alone. Finally.

Miron winced, moved away from the desk, and pulled me to one of the corner sofas. I helped him settle on it, and he dragged me down with him.

"Miron, the doctor recommended plenty of rest. You should rest," I whispered, but even as I said it, I was leaning closer, drawn in by his warmth and the way his eyes darkened as they watched me.

"I will," he murmured, his voice rough. "Just stay with me for a while. I'll probably sleep soon."

"Really? With me like this?" I lifted a hand, tracing my fingertips over his cheek, down the strong line of his jaw. He sighed into my touch, his breath warm against my wrist. Slowly, I bent, pressing my lips to the corner of his mouth, tasting salt and something that made my whole body shiver.

He turned his head slightly, meeting me in a kiss that was soft at first, a slow, aching slide of lips. But when he made a low sound, half pain, half pleasure, I pulled back.

“I don’t know why you’re so stubborn. You’re hurt,” I reminded him, pressing my palm flat against his chest as if I could hold him still.

“Correction: I’m recovering.” His lips quirked. “I’m not dead.”

I laughed, but it faded as his hands found my waist. It was warm and urgent. His face found my chest, and he inhaled my scent through my clothes, breathing deeply, with his chest rising and falling.

I wasn’t wearing a bra, so my nipples tightened to hard pebbles, peaking through the flimsy fabric of my dress.

Miron noticed and did what he did best. His large palm covered one breast, and his mouth covered one, sucking on it hungrily through my clothes like a baby needing its mother’s milk.

Feeling lightheaded, I curved my back, driving more of me into his mouth, and I shifted, climbing over him carefully, straddling his hips, mindful of his wounds. His breath caught, and I felt him tense beneath me. His hand lingered on my waist, and his fingers drew circles at the small part of my back.

“Miron, you do insane things to me,” I mumbled, finding the courage to tell him how he made me feel. “I can’t control myself around you. It’s like you make me want to unleash.”

“And I want you to.” He squeezed my breast harder, causing pain and pleasure to shoot through me. “Baby...I want you to make me feel good. I’ve missed you, my dear Hazel.”

His eyes communicated his wants, and I caught onto them, knowing exactly what he needed.

“I know, Miron. I’ll take care of you,” I whispered, leaning down to kiss him again, deeper this time, until I felt him melt into me.

His hands traced slow paths over my body, hesitant, reverent, but I set the pace, moving against him, drawing soft gasps from his lips.

His head fell back against the rim of the sofa, eyes hooded, mouth parted, and the sight of him like this, vulnerable and wanting, made my heart ache.

I nipped on his jaw and met his mouth with mine. I took my time, not fully educated on his aggressive skills. But he held the back of my head with his functioning arm and deepened it, kissing me as if it were a matter of life and death.

He trailed his lips down my neck, breathing something about not wanting to wait. Eagerly, I reached for his pants, and he raised his hips, aiding me as I pulled the fabric down and gripped his cock out of cotton briefs. It sprung out, and my mouth watered.

But before I slid off him to take his length into my mouth, as if sensing my intentions, he planted me firmly on his thighs and bunched up my dress. “Some other time, baby. I want you right now.”

Lifting my hips to position his cock, he saw I wore no panties and squeezed my ass with a delicious groan. “Fuck, yes. You are so fucking gorgeous, baby,” he mumbled, kissing my lips.

Then he cupped my pussy, fisted it in his hands, and looked me in the eyes with a gaze darker than any brewing storm. “This fucking belongs to me, you hear? This

gorgeous pussy, your tits, your ass, and your succulent lips. They're mine, you understand?"

The pressure of his hands between my legs made me barely able to respond, so I managed a quick nod, moaning when his fingers rolled against my clit.

"Yes," I breathed.

"Yes, what?"

"Yes, my pussy, my ass, my tits, and my lips are yours, Miron.

"Good." His fingers left almost immediately, and I missed them. Kissing my neck, he grunted. "Ready?"

I nodded, and he brought me down, covering my mouth to drink up the slow, steady moans that poured from my lips when his cock stretched my walls.

My body burned like a wildfire ignited by his touch, consuming me inch by inch. It was an all-consuming blaze that licked up my spine, curled around my ribs, and settled deep in my core. Every brush of his skin against mine sent another spark, another rush of fire that spread through my veins like molten lava.

My hands flew to his shoulder, biting into his T-shirt, and his hot breath fanned my neck.

His fingers slid through my scalp, grabbing a fistful of my hair as I rode him, cautiously at first, unsure what to do and what pace he wanted. I searched his eyes, and he moved his head, urging me to go faster. Increasing my tempo, I pressed my face against his throat to stifle the small sounds I made and sucked the skin.

He jerked his hips, his nails leaving my scalp and digging into my back as he thrust faster. He moved with purpose, his touch both hard and possessive, stoking the flames higher, hotter.

My breath came in sharp, uneven gasps, my nails digging into his skin to anchor myself against the inferno threatening to consume me completely.

I arched above him, feeling my body surrendering to the scorching pleasure, my world narrowing to the way he felt, the way he moved, the way he made me burn.

Tremors broke out on my skin, shivers journeying through my body like electricity, until I felt my toes curl. He exhaled, and I inhaled. Our lips joined, and our breathing intertwined.

“Oh, Miron ,” I groaned. “I’m coming.”

“Yes,” Russian. “Baby, I’m—” More Russian.

This time, I came first, bursting like a million shooting stars in the sky, with a shout that startled me. The fire finally exploded, and it was nothing short of an inferno, blinding, overwhelming, leaving nothing but raw, unfiltered sensation in its wake.

I held onto him; he was almost there, but not quite. So, I let him take as much of me as he wanted, enjoying the sweet ways he placed kisses on my face and lips. Gripping the couch behind him as he spread my ass even wider, slamming into me with determination, plunging into me with trembling fingers and feverish lips.

God, he was so beautiful, my heart clenched. I raised myself, moved my hips, and matched his rhythm, riding his cock with all the love I could give, allowing myself to show him just how much I wanted him without using words.

I took my time, savoring every inch of him, every shuddering breath, every heavy groan. And when he finally gave himself over to the pleasure, I followed again, lost in him, in us, in the quiet promise that I would always be here, holding him together even when the world tried to break us apart.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:48 pm

Three Months Later

“I can’t say I ever thought this would be a match at all, let alone a match made in heaven.” Amelia shot me a knowing glance over her shoulder. She knew I could overhear her conversation with Hazel, who stood before her with the most solemn expression I had ever seen on her face.

“I am disappointed,” Amelia was saying. “Not because you fell in love. I am disappointed that you didn’t open up to me. We would have found a more professional approach to it and....”

The rest of Amelia’s words got lost when Damien tapped me on the shoulder, and I turned around to see his lips curve into a smirk. He adjusted his jacket and looked briefly above my shoulder, where Amelia stood with Hazel.

“I see her now, and I understand why you were willing to sacrifice an arm. If I were you, I might have sacrificed both.”

“Idiot.” We shared a smile.

“Seriously, though. It’s good to have you back, nursed to full recovery and strong enough to deal with my bullshit.”

“Where’s Damir?”

“Somewhere, doing God knows what? I don’t know. Miron, what do you say: me, you, and a vacation? You look like you need one—the beach, the sun.”

Shaking my head, I lifted my glass to my lips. “Firstly, I’m not going anywhere without Hazel. Secondly, this is my vacation. Right here, celebrating my life, drinking, and not having to bury anyone today. And too much sun makes me itch.”

“Of course it does.” He flicked a coin high and caught it without looking. “Maybe I should book one, then. Go somewhere nice. Take a break from”—he waved his hand vaguely—“business.”

I eyed him. Damien never spoke without purpose. He planted seeds, let them grow in the dark. “What are you working on?”

His smirk widened, but he didn’t answer right away. Instead, he leaned forward, whispering into my ears. “Nothing you need to worry about yet. But when I tell you, you’ll want in.”

Sometimes, my brother played long games. Dangerous ones. I had a feeling that whatever this was, it wasn’t going to be some petty hustle.

“Just don’t make me clean up after you.”

Damien grinned and started walking away. “Wouldn’t dream of it.”

Liar.

“Hey.”

I whisked around to find my woman perched on my arm, beaming up at me with the most beautiful eyes and smile. Every moment I spent with her reminded me that she was just perfect—too good for me.

I lowered my face to kiss her on the cheek. “Is she done terrorizing you yet?”

Hazel's eyes went wide. "Miron, don't say things like that. She's still my boss."

"I heard that." Amelia walked up to us, eyeing me without malice. "Take care of this one, Hazel. He's a serious piece of work."

"Oh, I know. My Level One, Code Red Client," she smiled up at me, then quickly sobered up. "And thank you again, Amelia, for believing in me and not firing me."

"You're one of my best at Prima Care, Hazel; I wouldn't dream of it." With that said, my cousin walked away, leaving me alone with a beaming Hazel.

"So, what did she tell you?"

She shrugged, adjusting the sleeve of her gown on one hand. "Nothing I don't already know. I told you I went against every code of conduct there was. What I did was terribly wrong." Her lips were saying one thing, but her eyes were saying something else. "So wrong, but so terribly right."

She pushed herself onto her tiptoes, and I kissed the corner of her mouth. She shuddered, her eyes hooded and lust-filled.

"The feeling's mutual."

"Can you do that again, please? The tiny kiss?"

Grinning, I swooped in, but instead of landing at the corner of her mouth, she twisted her head so our lips met on time.

Eyes fluttering shut, I groaned into her mouth, completely shutting out anyone who thought to pry. Her fingers slid into my hair, and I kept her planted, firmly gripping her waist and pulling her closer. She kissed me slowly and tenderly, cupping my cheeks with so much love that my heart could burst.

I could stay like this for a long, long time in this woman's arms, and I could take her right here, if there weren't so many people.

"You're horny, aren't you?" I smiled against her mouth, slowly pulling away.

"With you, I always am. After tonight's party, I have a surprise waiting for you at home. In the bedroom."

"You do realize you're not so subtle."

"I've never really been a good flirt." She shrugged again, eyes glinting mischievously. "And back to the topic of my job, Amelia wasn't happy that I wasn't bold enough to talk to her about us. But she did pardon me. My case won't get to the board."

I frowned slightly. "You honestly think I'd have let her do that?"

"It's not about what you would have dictated, Miron. There are consequences for every action, and I would have had to face mine."

"Sure, while I fold my arms and watch you get your license revoked. You do know getting a job is the least of your worries when you have me." I kissed her nose, feeling a warmth spread through my chest when she blushed. "If Amelia fired you, in thirty minutes, you'd have received a call for an interview somewhere else."

"Yes, I know. But you have to understand this first: I don't think I want you meddling in my job. I'll tell you again, the same way I did the first time we met: I know I don't look like it, but I have the qualifications, and I'm an expert. Or at least I'm trying to be. Secondly, I really like my job at Prima Care, and I love working with Amelia. She is the best person to learn from, in my opinion."

"Fine, whatever you say. But if she ever gives you trouble, I don't care what happens

next; I'm pulling the plug."

A burst of laughter rang out from the other side of the terrace, drawing our attention. Elena, Hazel's closest friend, had somehow wrangled Damien and Damir into an animated conversation. I saw a glint of challenge in her eyes and believed she was giving them hell.

Before the party officially started, we'd been introduced. The woman had fire in her gut and no hesitation to speak her mind. I believed I liked her enough to consider her as not a threat.

"Your friend is a special one."

Hazel laughed, snuggling closer. "Oh, a very special one. Her uniqueness is one of the reasons I love her."

"And your beautiful heart is one of the reasons I love you." I crossed the terrace, stopping us at the center. "Dance with me."

"There's no music," she teased.

I pulled her close, wrapping her safely in my arms. "There doesn't have to be."

"Hm." And as she rested her head against my chest, I knew this moment, this peace, was ours. "I love you, Miron."

She chose not to call me any other name. She said my name gave her good shudders, made the hairs on her skin rise, and also made her remember our journey.

She said calling my name was powerful enough to convey the love she had for me, and I was fine with it.

I kissed her forehead. “I love you, too, my dear Hazel.”

From the second I’d had the chance to make things right with her, once I opened my eyes in that hospital, I knew what I was going to do, too.

Nothing felt more right than every moment with her, and I was absolutely confident that she felt the same.

Leaving everyone else behind, I led Hazel up the last set of stairs on the terrace. Her fingers curled gently around mine as we stepped onto the rooftop. The night air was crisp, carrying the scent of the city below and the buzz of anticipation.

I had insisted on bringing her here, knowing it was the best place to watch the fireworks.

“Careful,” I murmured, glancing back at her as we stepped onto the gravel-lined surface. Warmth filled my voice, but I knew she had caught the wince that flickered across my face. Hazel’s grip on my hand tightened, her concern evident.

“Miron, I know you’re fully recovered, but it takes time to heal some wounds, and I mean that literally. You should still take resting seriously,” she said, her gaze searching mine.

I smiled softly. “And miss this?” I guided her to the edge where the skyline stretched wide, city lights flickering in the distance like fallen stars. “I had this planned, Hazel. Nothing was going to keep me from tonight.”

Before she could argue, a loud crack split the air, followed by a burst of gold and silver that painted the sky.

I felt her breath hitch beside me.

The fireworks bloomed above us in mesmerizing shapes, their reflections dancing in her wide, captivated eyes.

“It’s beautiful,” she whispered, utterly enthralled.

“I agree,” I said, but I wasn’t watching the fireworks.

I was watching her.

Her face glowed in the shifting colors, her expression open, breathtaking in a way that made my chest tighten. My fingers curled around the small velvet box in my pocket, and it suddenly seemed heavier now that the moment had arrived.

As another explosion of color filled the sky, I pulled the box out, flipping it open just enough for the ring inside to shimmer in the glow of the fireworks.

“Remember when you said I would get over the euphoria of that night when I saw my wife walk down the aisle?”

Beaming, Hazel turned, her gaze dropping to my hand, and her breath caught.

“Well, I’m not sure about that, because I’m still crazy about you, and the euphoria of that night lives rent-free in my head.”

“Miron—”

“Marry me, Hazel,” I said, slowly, as if the words themselves were fragile and precious. “I know you like mushy moments, so if you want a speech, I’m willing to give you one to convince you: I can’t say I know when the attraction started between us. What I did know was that I wanted to pull the judge by her gown and tell her to

her face that I would rather do time than therapy.”

I paused. “Maybe somehow we have Damir to thank for this because he had a hand in our meeting somehow. The first time I saw you, I wasn’t focused enough to decide whether I liked you or not; I was in my head more often. But once I started to really pay attention, all the pieces fell into place. My heart chose you, even before I caught on to what was happening.

“Yes. There is your speech, my dear Hazel. Trust me, that’s only the tip of the iceberg; you can’t refuse after making me work my ass off to memorize those lines.”

She exhaled my name again, and I saw the resolve settle in her eyes. “I don’t need convincing, Miron I—” Then, barely above a whisper, she said, “Yes.”

“You’re going to have to be louder than that, baby.”

“Yes!” She reached out to hug me, and I wound an arm around her waist to steady her.

Then she pulled back, her eyes glistening with tears. “Miron, this is...this is huge. This is a lot more than I ever planned for in my life,” she laughed. “But I want you to know that I’ve never been more sure of anything else. I walked into Amelia’s office, demanding a challenge, and then you came along. You were my biggest challenge yet. But I didn’t conquer you, Miron; I conquered with you. I’m so grateful for the progress you’ve made, and I know together we will achieve so much more.”

And I had her to thank for that.

Hazel had tweaked something for me.

The truth remained that I still carried the same darkness, the same ruthless edge that made me me in the first place, but with her, it was different.

She managed to soften the sharpest parts and quiet the rage that had once fueled me.

With her, I realized I had spent years letting anger consume me and pent-up rage at my father dictate the rest of my actions. But then she happened: small, fierce, untouchable in ways that had nothing to do with strength and everything to do with the way she looked at me.

I mean, I took a bullet for her. Not because I wanted to be a hero, not because I sought redemption, but because there had been no other option. If she died, there would be nothing left of me worth saving.

Saving her was saving the most valuable piece of myself.

She didn't belong in this world, but I kept her because I was selfish, and I knew she was the light in my darkness, the calm to my storms, and my soothing balm.

I could still be brutal when needed, still send men to their graves without hesitation, especially if they tried shit with me. But Hazel helped me learn to think first and act later. She had fixed me in ways I hadn't realized I was broken.

Once upon a time, I thought control meant dominance and that power came from fear. But she had shown me another kind of power, the kind that came from restraint, from choosing not to hurt, from protecting rather than destroying.

Some people cling to control to avoid feeling powerless.

But not where she was concerned.

With her, I didn't have to fight to be understood. I didn't have to raise my voice to be heard. She had given me peace in a world that had never allowed it. And I would spend the rest of my life keeping her safe in return.

A breath I'd been holding escaped me.

A wave of relief, that joy I'd felt the moment I had the Pakhan's blessing, and a liberation so overwhelming and impossible to describe filled my chest as I slid the ring onto her finger.

And then she was in my arms, her lips on mine, the fireworks above us a mere echo of the explosion inside me.

The world narrowed down to just the two of us.

I held her close, my grip tight, my heart locked on hers, and I knew that I would kill, die, and rule for this moment, for this love, for her.

Forever.

THE END