



# Forced By the Ruthless Bratva Beast (Tarasov Bratva #3)

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**Category:** Urban

**Description:** He took me, forced me to marry him, and now I'm carrying his baby.

I came searching for answers, but Roman Tarasov found me first.

A much older, ruthless Bratva beast who took me as his bride.

I didn't plan on getting pregnant by a man who only sees me as a pawn in his game of power.

He controls every move I make. Locks me away in his mansion.

His cold hands claim my body, leaving me no choice but to surrender.

I fight him, but he only tightens his grip, making sure I know who's in charge.

Now, I'm trapped.

Pregnant with his heir and bound to a man who shows no mercy.

I wanted justice, but all I have is him—dominant, dangerous, and obsessed with keeping me.

Will I survive him, or will I break under the weight of his control?

**Total Pages (Source):** 28

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:15 pm*

My shiny black shoes clicked against the linoleum floor as I walked through the hospital corridor. The air was filled with the smell of antiseptic and disinfectants. A hand was tucked in the pocket of my plain and impeccably tailored black pants as I navigated the hallway.

The Tarasov Bratva had occupied a section of the hospital's sixth floor, and no one that wasn't family or friend was allowed up there. The huge men in black suits slightly bowed their heads as I approached the elevator with Boris Smirnov by my side.

Boris was my right-hand man, a ruthless, cold-blooded killer who answered to no one but me. He was a little taller than I was, with more ink on his skin than a Chicago newspaper's Sunday edition. The man's eyes were cold, dark, and hollow, and he wore a signature frown that accentuated his ruggedness. Boris limped when he walked; however, it was almost undetectable unless one looked closely. But the aura he exuded never left room for people to look at him more than once. The man was a scary bastard with a wrecking ball for a voice that always crushed spirits before his fists shattered bones.

Just like the tats on my body, Boris's told the story of each soul he'd sent to hell.

Boris was called "The Bull," a nickname he earned after single-handedly taking down a mindless, raging Spanish Fighting Bull in an underground tournament. The monster's horns were as long as Boris's arms, yet he somehow managed to grasp them after a long wrestle. He'd held on tight before snapping the beast's neck with a sickening crack. However, his victory came at a cost—his left leg. The bull's horn had dislocated his bone during the fight, hence the reason he limped while working.

But as mindless as he was, he was still my most trusted enforcer, and he'd proven his loyalty countless times.

One of the men manning the elevator pushed a button, and the door slid open with a soft ding. Boris and I stepped inside, it shut, and I pressed the button to the sixth floor.

It was a smooth, silent ascension, and when we arrived at our destination, we walked out of the elevator. I could feel their gazes on me even before I jerked my head off the floor. The security was tight up here, and all eyes had shifted to the elevator door as the guards subtly reached for their weapons.

The moment they realized who I was, they stood at ease, lowering their guard and also their heads in respect. As I walked through the corridor, my expression stern—devoid of any emotions—I toiled with my cufflinks, my eyes fixed on the ward ahead of me.

I halted in front of the closed door and turned to Boris. “Wait here.”

He nodded, his hands crossed in front of him as he backed the ward, his attention focused across the hallway.

The door creaked open, and I walked inside to find my cousin, Kostya Tarasov, sitting on a sofa by the bed, his body leaning forward. My younger brother, Afanasy, was standing by the door, his back against the wall, and across the bed, Mikhail, my cousin, stood, towering over Sierra.

Sierra Tarasov was sitting on the edge of the bed, her hands holding on to her husband's with tears in her eyes.

Her husband, Artem Tarasov, the Pakhan of the Tarasov Bratva, had gotten a liver

transplant. It was successful, so I couldn't understand why she was being so emotional. He was out of danger, so why was she still sobbing?

I had great respect for Artem and his wife, not just because I was obligated to, considering their position in the family, but because they and everyone else in this ward were a part of the few individuals that I cared about.

Even so, I just couldn't rationalize her behavior. Maybe this was because the concept of love and romance was alien to me; that would explain my inability to comprehend how Sierra was feeling.

Artem was lying on the bed, his gaze fixed on her teary eyes with a faint grin playing on his lips. He was the Pakhan, the most ruthless of all of us in this room, yet he was somewhat soft and smiley around his wife. I admired them—their bond and what they shared—but that was all it was: admiration.

I was on a different path, a path devoid of love and any sort of emotion. Romance wasn't for me; I closed that chapter of my life a long time ago.

“Roman, brother.” Afanasy's gaze met with mine. “Glad you could make it.”

“Of course. It was a call I couldn't ignore.” I embraced him before looking at Kostya. “How're you doing, cousin?”

“I've been alive.” He rose to his feet and wrapped his arms around me. “Good to see you, Roman.”

My response was a faint grin and a gentle nod. Then, my eyes darted to the beautiful woman sitting beside her husband. “Sierra, how're you holding up?” I placed a consoling palm on her shoulder.

“Better now that you're all around,” she said, jerking her eyes to look at me with a subtle smile.

“ Pakhan ,” I called softly, bowing my head, my tone laced with reverence. “Feeling better?”

He coughed after attempting to laugh.

“Take it easy,” Sierra said, gently rubbing her palm over his chest.

“I feel brand new.” He chuckled, his voice faint and weak but audible. “It'll take a lot more than liver failure to put me down.”

I flashed him a subtle grin. “I don't doubt that.”

“He'll be back to smashing heads in no time; that's for sure,” said Mikhail, arms folded over his broad chest.

“Not on my watch, he's not,” the wife objected, and there was some scattered laughter in the room. “He needs some time to rest.”

“You worry too much, Sierra.” Artem squeezed her palm and turned to face me with a corny smirk. “Could you hand me a cigar?”

I knew he was trying to tease his wife, and as expected, she fell for it and cast a stern glare at me, her jaw clenching. “Do that, and I swear to God, I don't care how big you are; I will throw you out the window.”

With my hands raised defensively in the air, I backed away. Artem laughed, his eyes crinkling at the corners.

“It's not funny!” She playfully slapped his chest. “You don't need that poison in you anymore.”

“But I have a new liver,” he said amidst blissful chortles.

Her eyes narrowed, a hint of exasperation dancing in her gaze as affectionate frustration was etched in her features.

They were the perfect couple despite being from two separate worlds. Maybe that was why they were such a great match: a cruel mafia boss and a sunshine girl with zero tolerance for violence. Sometimes, I wondered how they managed to make their marriage work, but each time, the answer eluded me. I wasn't ready for a lifetime commitment to anything that wasn't the Bratva cause. I'd torn the page of love and romance from my dictionary, leaving a jagged edge that mirrored the scars on my heart. Many people thought I was cold as ice, but they were wrong. I was colder than the frost that had formed inside me.

As good as Artem and Sierra made love look like, it just wasn't for me. And the only reason I could stand being around them right now was because of the respect I had for both of them. Besides, Artem had called us all here for a reason, and none of us knew what that was yet.

He drew in a deep breath, his chest rising and falling as his eyes swept across our faces. “I know you're all wondering why I called you here. So, I'll make this quick.” He groaned, shifting uncomfortably as he sat upright with the back of his head resting on a pillow against the wall. Artem sighed, clearing his throat. “I have an important announcement to make,” he began.

The rest of us exchanged glances, each wondering what Artem had in mind.

He continued, “With my recovery period stretching to two months, I won't be able to

do much as the Pakhan .” Artem looked at our curious faces for a moment. “So, someone needs to take my place for the time being, at least until I'm fully recovered.”

Afanasy sighed and stepped forward, his confidence enveloping the room. “Alright, alright. I'll take the reins.” He lifted his hands, his lips curling into a sly smile. Afanasy locked eyes with Artem. “I know I'm the one you have in mind.”

My brother was only fooling around; he knew that if there was a list, he wouldn't even be on it, but he just couldn't help but make a joke.

Mikhail let out a dismissive laugh. “Don't kid yourself. The mantle wouldn't be handed to you even if you were the last surviving Tarasov on the planet,” he teased, a grin spreading across his face.

“Your faith in me is touching, cousin. I'm tearing up over here.” Afanasy said, a hand on his chest, his tone dripping with sarcasm.

“Enough banter.” Artem's voice returned the order in the room. “I've made my choice.” He paused, fixing his gaze on me. “Roman, you'll take my place as the Pakhan ,” he announced.

My brows rose instantly. I wasn't expecting to be chosen, and this was a huge honor, one that came with an even bigger responsibility. I could feel my brothers' gazes lingering on me, pride flickering in their eyes.

“I chose you because you're the most logical...” said Artem, further clarifying his reasons.

“No offense taken,” Afanasy chipped in.

Artem continued, “You don't waste your time and money on women...unlike some of

you.” His eyes left my face and settled on Afanasy.

“Okay, some taken,” Afanasy said with a playful frown.

Kostya leaned back in his chair, chuckling as he turned to Afanasy. “He's not wrong, considering your last mistress almost drained your bank account.”

Afanasy combed his fingers through his dirty blond hair, his green eyes pinned Mikhail. “Well, at least I didn't get caught with a nightclub stripper.”

“Hey, that was one time,” Mikhail snarled at him, his brows furrowing.

I maintained a stoic expression, a faint smirk playing on my lips. “I accept,” I declared, my voice silencing Afanasy, whose mouth was shaped, ready to shoot back at Mikhail. “Thank you for this opportunity. It's a great honor to walk in your shoes. I will not disappoint.” My words were spoken with all sincerity, my eyes squinting slightly.

“I trust you, Roman,” he said, looking right into my eyes. “I know you'll do well as the temporary Pakhan .”

“Thank you, Pakhan Artem.” I bowed my head in reverence.

“Well.” Afanasy exhaled sharply. “Sucks to be you, buddy,” he teased with a wide smile. “Congratulations, brother.” He embraced me.

Kostya stepped forward to hug me as well. “The ice in your veins makes you the perfect man for the job.”

Mikhail stretched out his fist, and our knuckles collided seconds later. “I knew it was gonna be you.”



My gaze locked on Sierra, and she nodded her head with a smile.

Just then, the door swung open, and the visitor's walking stick came into view first before he appeared in the room.

“Uncle Ivan,” we all said at the same time, our eyes widening.

He laughed, strolling in with the aid of his walking stick. Uncle Ivan was pretty old, with gray hair and a gray beard that complemented his eyes. He was our hero growing up, and the tales of ruthlessness as a youth and his dedication to the Bratva cause still lingered on the fringes of my mind to this day.

In Tarasov history, no one was as dedicated to the Bratva as he was, and rumor had it that he would stop at nothing to defend the cause. He was still my hero, and I was working to someday be like him.

One by one, we paid our respect to this living legend who wouldn't stop smiling. One would think he was harmless until they heard his story.

Jorah, his bodyguard, was standing behind him. Uncle Ivan never went anywhere without him. Jorah's expression was stoic, and even while everyone else was smiling, his face was devoid of emotion. Everything was a threat to Jorah, so he was always on high alert.

“Sierra, darling.” Uncle Ivan smiled at her. “How are you?”

“I'm very well, thank you,” came her reply, and she mirrored his gesture.

“I came to check on you,” he said to Artem, going over to stand by his side. “How's the new liver?”

“I wanted to light a cigarette to test it, but...” Artem replied with a smile, stealing a glance at his wife.

The old man laughed. “I won't be able to help you when she comes for you.”

“Thank you, Uncle Ivan,” said Sierra, her gaze never leaving her husband's.

“Roman, my boy.” He chuckled, turning to face me. “I see you're already warming up as the acting Pakhan .”

My reply was a faint scoff, eyes darting to my feet momentarily. I wasn't surprised that he already knew this without anyone in the room telling him. Uncle Ivan always had his ways.

“Artem made the right choice.” He placed a hand on my shoulder. “I'm sure you'll do great. Best of luck, boy.” He beamed at me, his grip firm but friendly. Then, Uncle Ivan drew a deep breath, glancing around the ward. “I've missed these faces. I think I'll stick around for a few more weeks.”

“Excellent,” Afanasy exclaimed. “Now, we have two reasons to celebrate.”

I sighed, unable to hide the faint grin that spread across my face.

Who needed love when you had family?

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:15 pm*

My Uber pulled over outside the sleek neon-lit building, a high-class nightclub with the sign “Jupiter” in a bold, fancy font.

I could feel the vibration of the loud music booming from inside the building. The sound was muffled, but I could hear it. Heaving a sigh, my shoulders slumped for a moment as I massaged my eyeballs.

Here we go again.

The words echoed in my head.

The door gave a soft click when I grabbed the handle, pushed it open, and stepped out on the sidewalk. The vehicle drove away while I made my way to the entrance, heels clicking against the pavement. The closer I got, the louder the music grew. I was late tonight, but I wasn't too shaken up about it because I already had someone covering for me.

She was not going to be happy with me for breaching our agreement. I should have been here half an hour ago. I couldn't wait to see that look on her face, though, and the thought came with a sly smile. I could almost predict her exact words, and sometimes, I would piss her off intentionally so that I'd know whether or not I predicted right. However, my being late tonight was not at all intentional.

“Hey, Brooke!” I smiled warmly at the black-suited bouncer standing sentinel, his broad frame and stern expression accentuating his imposing height.

He turned to me, a small grin spreading across his rigid face. “Hey, Jules. You're late

tonight.” His features contorted into a pretentious scowl on the last statement.

“Yeah, I know,” I drawled lazily, flashing my employee card out of habit. It wasn't necessary, considering that we were already buddies—just standard procedure, nothing more.

“You know she's gonna kill you, right?” His brows rose, eyes narrowing with a mocking glint in their depths.

“Who, Wren? Nah.” I shook my head, chuckling. “She's all bark and no bite.”

His expression turned solemn. “Oh, she bites, alright.” The conviction in his tone couldn't be any more glaring. “Still hurts till today.” Brooke's eyes darted to his left arm, his sleeve rustling as he rubbed over the remembered pain.

I laughed, recalling the infamous event that happened about two weeks ago. According to the story, Brooke had snuck up on Wren in an alley after work, trying to scare her, but his plan backfired. She left a long-lasting impression on his arm—literally. My only regret was that I wasn't there to witness it.

“That'll teach you not to sneak up on girls in an alley.” I chuckled, moving past him.

“Says the girl who's about to go six feet under,” he replied teasingly, eyes crinkling at the corners.

“Just make sure my obituary mentions that I died from my best friend's wrath,” I said, smiling as I pushed the door and walked inside.

The vibrant lights of the club danced on my skin, and the pulsating music enveloped me as I wove through the crowd. Dancers moved their bodies to the rhythm of the DJ's hypnotic beats, hands flying in the air.

I nodded, exchanging waves and smiles with familiar faces, like Magic Mike at the bar, who was wiping a cloth over the counter, his eyes locking with mine.

“Hey, Jules,” a waitress greeted me as she walked past, expertly holding a tray of drinks.

“Hey, Lucy,” I replied, not stopping in my tracks.

I walked into the employees’ lounge—a cozy haven adorned with plush sofas and couches meticulously arranged in the space. Dressed in skimpy gowns, Harriet, Jane, and Mitchell were seated around the circular table at the center of the room, giggling and laughing. Jane and Mitchell were the newbies, having started out about a week ago.

Harriet, Jupiter's finest drama magnet, a neurotic attention-seeking brunette with a knack for fabricated tales, was at it once again. Her perfectly manicured hands were flying around in a theatrical motion as she fed the wide-eyed newbies with one of her cooked-up stories.

Everyone always fell for lies at first, until they became old news; eventually, Jane and Mitchell would come to see her for who she truly was: a pretty little liar. But for now, let her have her fun.

“...and just like that, Roman Tarasov himself approached me and pleaded with me to organize an exclusive after-party for the VIPs,” Harriet gushed, her blue eyes sparkling with excitement. “Can you believe that?”

No, I cannot, I thought, minding my own business as I headed toward the minimalist bar at a corner that offered snacks and refreshments. “Hey, Trish, how's it going?” I halted by the counter.

“Better than it's about to be for you,” she replied, nodding toward a secluded section of the room. Trish, a tattooed albino with short, spiky hair and a tongue piercing, leaned forward and whispered to me, “She’s gonna murder you.”

I scratched the back of my head, my heels clicking against the floor as I walked past a group of girls in sexy dresses, all short and revealing way too much skin. They were the likes of Harriet, the attention-seekers.

Through the beaded curtain, I could see her figure pacing back and forth, chewing on her nails.

Yep. I was done. She was definitely going to kill me.

The curtains parted, and I walked into the room, arms wide open. “Hey, Wren!”

She paused and turned to face me, her brows furrowing and creasing her forehead.

Wren Everett was my best friend. Like me, she was working as a VIP hostess here at Jupiter. However, Wren was only working here temporarily until she found something better.

Me? I didn't have any plans of leaving this place—at least not yet, anyway. There was still work to be done. I didn't always enjoy my job, catering to egocentric narcissists at the VIP lounge, but like everyone else, I had my reasons for doing what I did. It wasn't easy putting up with those pervs every night, smiling and laughing with them even when, deep down, all I wanted to do was gut them like a fish. However, over time, I learned to be friendly with them despite their advances, especially when they were drunk.

Jupiter was one of the biggest nightclubs in the city, owned by Roman Tarasov, and a lot of girls here felt privileged to work for him. Why wouldn't they be? The pay was

good, and every once in a while, it was said that the charming Roman Tarasov would grace the club with his majestic presence. I'd never really met him in person, but according to Harriet, the man was a handsome piece of work—colder than arctic waters but handsome.

My attention was forced back to reality when my gaze met Wren's brown eyes, which held a glint of rage, accentuating the frown on her cute baby face.

“Okay, before you say anything,” I began, taking careful steps toward, my hands raised in front of me in a defensive manner.

“You said you were going to be here half an hour ago,” she cut in, narrowing her eyes.

“And I would've been, if traffic hadn't been so terrible,” I stated, halting in front of her.

She crossed her arms, eyes fixed on me. “Oh, yeah. Humor me.”

“Okay, so...” I said, my hands moving around as I narrated the incident. “My Uber's driving down Main, everything's going smooth, when suddenly, this chicken truck comes outta nowhere and overturns right in front of us. Boom! There are chickens everywhere, flapping and squawking.”

Wren's expression switched from annoyance to amusement, her brows slowly rising.

“Then comes the farmer,” I continued, still demonstrating with my hands. “He hops out of the truck and starts chasing after them, waving a net and yelling, ‘Come back, my babies!’” The words jumped out of my mouth with enthusiasm, and I paused for a moment, realizing who I sounded like.

Fuck.

My shoulders dropped in dismay, eyes shifting toward the floor.

Wren's twitching lips pressed into a thin line as though she was struggling to contain a laugh bubbling in her throat.

The other girls in the room all had their eyes on me with a sly smile on their faces.

"I sound a lot like Harriet, don't I?" I asked, my voice dripping with shame as my fingers pressed against my temples.

"Uh-huh." Wren nodded, smiling. "Looks like you picked up a thing or two from her."

"I heard that!" Harriet yelled from the other room.

Wren and I laughed lightly. "You look amazing, by the way," she remarked.

"And you look so hot," I replied, eyes dancing across her perfect figure, her silver dress hugging her body like a second skin. The pearls that adorned the fabrics shimmered in the lights, as did her pale skin.

"Says the dazzling princess with a physique to die for." She chuckled, her cheeks turning red.

My hand flew to my mouth as if to hold back my blush as I looked in the mirror to glimpse what Wren was talking about. I smoothed down my full-sleeved fitted dress, its emerald green hue accentuating my curves. My outfit always caught the eyes of high-end customers despite not revealing too much skin. Regardless, though, those perverts loved my outfit and would always leave bigger tips. The extra cash wasn't so



bad anyway.

I blew a kiss to my reflection, admiring how my smokey makeup made my hazel eyes pop. My manicured fingers combed through my brunette hair, forming silky waves that cascaded down my back. I took one last look at myself in the mirror and exhaled sharply. Perfect.

“Ready to rake in those tips?” Wren asked as she hovered behind me, her gaze fixed on the mirror.

My lips curled up into a small smile. “You bet.”

She returned the gesture and tapped my shoulder. “Alright. I'm sticking to my usual routine now. I believe I've helped out in the ways that I can.” She walked away.

“Thanks, Wren. I owe you one.” I shot a glance in her direction.

“You owe me plenty!” she replied, her voice a higher pitch thanks to her distance.

I scoffed and shook my head before stepping out of the lounge. As I walked through the hallway, making my way to the VIP section, I exchanged pleasantries with a few more familiar faces, a smile plastered on my lips. Under the dim lighting, I nodded to the pulsating music, humming to the rhythm of the song as I approached a door labeled “Tsar.”

It was a private room reserved for Jupiter's most valued patrons. I halted outside the door and positioned my knuckles to knock but drew in a deep breath first. The men on the other side would eventually say or do stuff that would get on my nerves. I had to be prepared emotionally, mentally, and physically so I wouldn't lash out at them. I'd been doing a pretty good job at keeping my cool all this time, and I was determined to continue in that manner.

I knocked twice, and a deep voice bade my entry. The door creaked open, and I walked in, wearing a charming smile.

“Hello, gentlemen,” I greeted the five men lounging on plush couches and sofas.

One of them whistled as I glided in their direction, my heels clicking on the sleek floor.

“Fuck. Look at that body!” His brows rose, eyes roaming my figure. “Damn!” he added, his tone dripping with lust.

I halted in front of them. “Welcome to Jupiter. I’m Julia, and I’m your hostess for tonight.”

The men weren’t regulars here. None of them were familiar, hence the reason I introduced myself.

“How can I make your evening memorable?” I asked, maintaining that smile on my face.

“I can think of a few things, honey,” the previous speaker chipped in, his gaze unwavering with a pesky little smirk on his lips.

He seemed like the youngest of all of them in the room, maybe in his mid-forties, with gray eyes, brown hair, and a chiseled face. I thought he looked familiar, and I could’ve sworn that I’d seen him somewhere before now. I just couldn’t place where.

“Pay no attention to him,” a second man said, drawing my attention to him.

He was sitting on a sofa, legs crossed, his polished shoes shimmering under the lights. The man was clad in a white suit that complemented his hair and beard.

He jerked his head and locked his green eyes with me. “Under the influence, he tends to act impulsively and forget his responsibility as DA.”

That's it. No wonder he looks so familiar, I thought, recalling that I'd seen him on TV a couple of times.

“More vodka, princess,” another one of them slurred. “The good stuff.”

“Of course, sir. I'll go fetch our finest Beluga,” I replied, my smile unwavering. “Would you also like another bottle of Dom Pérignon?”

“Ahh. More of those, please. We're celebrating,” the white-haired man said amidst chuckles.

“Got it. Coming right up.” I flashed a courteous grin and gathered their empty bottles.

As I bent over, I sensed that the drunk DA was about to spank my butt from behind. Reflexively, I sidestepped, avoiding his hand as I straightened with their bottles in my hold. He lost his balance and fell off the couch during his failed attempt to touch my ass. The other men busted out laughing as I exited the room like I had no idea what I'd just done.

I headed back downstairs, wading through the sea of frenzied dancers, their faces illuminated in the flashing, colorful beams. They all seemed lost in the hypnotic music, but that was the reason they were here tonight—to bask in this feeling of euphoria.

“Hey, handsome.” I glided toward the bar, smiling at the bartender, Magic Mike.

He smiled back, his blue eyes crinkling at the corners. “Hey, beautiful.”

I handed him the empty bottles as I leaned against the counter, fingers pressing softly against my eyelids.

“Rough night?” His brows rose as he accepted the bottles and fixed his concerned gaze on me.

“Not really,” I replied with a sigh, jerking my head to look at him. “Some asshole tried to spank my butt in the VIP lounge.”

His jaw clenched immediately, his eyes narrowing.

I flashed a smirk. “Don't worry. He got what he deserved.”

Mike's expression softened a little. “That's good to know.” He grabbed a bottle, wiping it with a clean cloth. “What do the big spenders want tonight?”

“The usual VIP treatment,” I replied, scanning the room and drinking in the sight of the energetic dancers as he got to work on the drinks.

My eyes settled on a couple kissing fervently on the dance floor, their hands roaming each other's bodies. The guy, maybe in his mid-twenties, had his palm traveling underneath the teenage girl's short flared skirt. My brows arched instantly, and my eyes widened at the sight.

Please, get a room, for Pete's sake.

I rubbed my fingers over my forehead.

He pulled away from her, lust and desire flickering in both of their eyes. Without wasting much time, he grabbed her wrist and led her toward the back door. That teenage girl was about to get fucked in an alley at the back of the club. That was for

sure.

I'd stumbled upon such acts so many times while working this job. Sometimes, it was even in the bathroom. I'd hear the girls moaning, their butts clapping against their lovers' groins.

I was twenty-one, but unlike those girls, I hadn't gotten laid yet. Of course, nobody knew that. They didn't have to; it wasn't their fucking business.

"What's the occasion tonight?" Mike asked, expertly pouring the premium liquor and champagne.

"Huh?" I asked, lost in thoughts.

"The big spenders," he clarified.

"Oh." I returned my gaze to him. "No idea. They just said they're celebrating. I guess they're trying to make it memorable."

"Or forgetful," he chipped in, smiling. "Depending on how much they drink. Here." He handed me a chilled bottle of Beluga.

I chuckled, accepting it. "Thanks, Mike. I'm pretty sure your magic potion will have them wasted by the end of the night."

"You flatter me, Jules." He laughed as he finished preparing the drinks.

"Isn't that why they call you 'Magic Mike'?" I winked at him, efficiently arranging the glasses and bottles on a sleek tray.

"Coming from the queen of making memories, that means a lot." He smiled, his eyes

sparkling with mischief.

I scoffed, shaking my head as I balanced the tray with practiced precision and walked away. “Catch you later, buddy.”

Navigating through the crowded floor, I found my way back upstairs, and just as I was about to return to the room labeled “Tsar,” I paused in my tracks.

My gaze was fixed on a group of hot men all dressed up in impeccable suits. I watched them laugh and converse as they walked into a room across the corridor. They all seemed in their thirties and forties, yet handsome and heavily built with imposing heights. These men exuded wealth, influence, and power, and I didn't need to be a witch to know who they were. They were the Tarasov men.

Jane, one of the newbies, walked past me, heading in their direction, and I stopped her quickly. “Hey, where're you going?” My voice was low and discreet.

“To cater for them,” she replied, looking at the men as they walked into the room.

“Uh...” I scratched the back of my head. “You know what? I got this.”

“What?” She looked at me, puzzled, her eyes slightly widening.

“Those men can be difficult, trust me,” I said, handing her my tray. “The men in the other room, though...” I nodded toward the door labeled “Tsar.” “They're a lot easier to handle.” I smiled at her.

“O...okay,” she stuttered, reluctantly accepting the tray, her brows knitting in confusion.

“Atta girl.” I patted her shoulder and left her standing there, still trying to wrap her

head around what had just happened.

I heaved a sigh as I approached the door.

You can do this.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:15 pm*

The orange glow of the evening sun cast its warm lights across the vast mountains, their summits bathed in the sunset. The sounds of roaring engines filled the air, echoing over the horizon as we raced on the road that snaked through the hills like a serpent, our tires screeching against the asphalt.

Kostya was in the driver's seat, his fingers firmly wrapped around the steering wheel. His eyes narrowed as he focused on the road, taking deadly drifts with practiced precision.

I sat rigidly in the passenger seat, seatbelt securely fastened, fingers clenched around the grab handle for support. My body stiffened slightly as the sleek black Porsche 911 floored the unwinding mountain road at high speed. The speedometer needle quivered at triple digits as the car's tires hummed a steady pitch, accentuating the occasional squeal of rubber on asphalt.

My green eyes squinted as a wild breeze, carrying the scent of pine and earth, rushed in through the open windows. Howling in my ears, it blew over my buzz cut, cooling my scalp.

The wind whipped Kostya's hair into a frenzy as he remained focused, his grip tightening around the steering wheel. The man must be feeling like an action movie star right now as his hands moved with precision, navigating the twists and dangerously sharp turns so effortlessly.

We were almost at the finish line when I glanced at the side mirror and saw Mikhail's scarlet Ferrari 488 GTB quickly catching up. The roar of his car engine grew louder the closer he drew to us.



“Step on it, buddy. They're closing in,” I said, shooting a quick look at Kostya.

Outside, the mountain scenery was a rapid blur of movements as the landscape itself seemed to rush past in a dizzying whirl. Occasionally, I'd catch glimpses of glittering waterfalls and distant valleys as we pressed onward.

Instinctively, my body leaned into the comfy seat, and I braced myself as Kostya accelerated, almost doubling his speed. He was at dangerous speed, but I loved it—the thrill, the adventure, the feeling of adrenaline pumping through my blood. The evil smirk playing on his lips was a clear indication that he, too, was enjoying this, and I was certain Afanasy and Mikhail shared the same excitement.

Mikhail, being the one at the wheel, soon caught up with us, and we were neck and neck with his Ferrari. Afanasy, from the passenger seat, stuck his head through the window, a pesky little grin plastered on his face. “So long, suckers!” He laughed, slithering back into his seat. “Hit it, Mikhail!”

And just like that, those two bastards whooshed past us with an incredible speed, Afan's whoop of exhilaration echoing through the landscape.

“Dang it!” I slammed a palm on the dashboard, my forehead creasing in playful irritation as we reached the finish line seconds after they did.

Both cars skidded to a stop by the sea, our tires kicking up clouds of dust as our engines shut off.

“Yeah, baby! That's what I'm talking about!” Afan stepped out of their car parked at a distance, wiggling his waist rhythmically.

I opened the door and slid out, inhaling the scent of burned rubber and saltwater that wafted through the air. Kostya did the same, watching as Afan danced mockingly,

celebrating their win.

He turned to face me as he walked over to Mikhail's Ferrari. "I swear to God, I could put a bullet in his head right now."

I flashed him a faint grin. "Well, it's not his fault that we lost."

"What's that supposed to mean?" He cocked his head, eyes squinting at me.

"I don't know. Maybe if you had stepped on it when I asked you to, we would've won—who knows?" I shrugged my shoulders slightly on the last statement.

"Easy for you to say," he replied. "Next time, you're taking the wheel."

"It doesn't matter which one of you is at the wheel; you're still gonna lose." Afan chuckled as we halted in front of him.

"Ha, ha. Very funny." Kostya jokingly shoved Afan, but the latter was quick enough to deflect the advance, laughing. "Oh, you think you're fast, eh?" A mischievous scowl settled on Kostya's face.

Afan swallowed hard, his hands thrown up in surrender. He knew better than to engage Kostya in a brawl, even though he was just as skilled in physical combat. Regardless of his playful nature, my younger brother, Afan, was also a ruthless bastard like the rest of us.

"Didn't think so," Kostya said to him, chuckling.

Mikhail joined us, and as we laughed, our attention drifted to the car approaching us, a sleek white Rolls Royce Phantom VIII—my car. The vehicle pulled over by Kostya's Porsche, and Boris Smirnov alighted, standing sentinel outside the shut

door, his eyes fixed on us.

“I don't know if I've told you this, but your right-hand man gives me the creeps,” Afan whispered to me, stealing glances at Boris.

I scoffed, shaking my head, fingers gently rubbing over my eyes. Boris had that effect on people. The man was scary as fuck, and I never went anywhere without him. He hadn't been a part of the race, but he'd followed us out here.

“He's been your shadow for as long as I can remember,” Mikhail said, looking in Boris's direction before fixing his eyes on me. “Now that you're the Pakhan , I bet he'll never leave your side.” He flashed a corny smile.

Afan chuckled, nodding his head in agreement as the two men had a fist bump.

“Temporary Pakhan ,” I corrected, slipping a hand in my pocket, eyes darting across the vast ocean.

Seagulls squealed overhead, and the waves crashed against the rocky shores in rhythmic accompaniment. The setting sun draped its warm glow over the horizon, and we stood bathed in it.

Afan gave a soft grunt, hopping onto the trunk of the car. “Temporary or permanent, a promotion is a promotion, and it should be celebrated,” he said, his gaze shifting across our faces.

“Artem's surgery was a success, Uncle Ivan is around, and you're the new temporary Pakhan ,” Kostya chipped in, looking at me with a sly grin on his lips. “I'm with Afan on this one; we need to celebrate.”

“Yeah,” said Afan, his voice tinged with mischief. “Let's get wasted, blow off some

steam, fuck some random chicks in an orgy.” He chuckled, his brows wiggling at us.

“Okay, I take it back. I’m not with you on this one.” Kostya put his head down, fingers pressing against his forehead, embarrassed by the idea.

Mikhail leaned closer to whisper to Afan. “He’s married now. Keep that in mind next time you propose something like this.”

“Oh, shit. My bad.” His response was laced with a glimmer of mild sarcasm, which caused the rest of us to laugh. “Alright. No orgies then.” He paused for a moment before adding. “Blowjobs, maybe?” His brows rose teasingly, eyes shining with roguish charm. “Come on, a good head never hurts anyone.”

“Some good liquor would be nice for the night,” Kostya said, his soft tone carrying a hint of finality.

Afan groaned in objection. “You sound like Pakhan Artem right now, always taking the fun out of everything.” He rolled his eyes and added almost immediately, “Just don’t tell him I said that, though.” A momentary seriousness settled on his gaze.

“We should hit Jupiter for the night,” Mikhail suggested. “Can’t think of a better place to blow off some steam than Roman’s high-class nightclub.” He looked at me, smiling.

“Yeah, good idea,” Kostya seconded and turned to face me. “What do you say, Roman?”

My partying days were over, and even though I owned a couple of nightclubs scattered across the city, I really wasn’t a fan of those places anymore. I’d had my fair share of fooling around with them in my twenties. Once upon a time, I used to be drawn to the nightlife—the booze, the women, and the orgies, like Afan had

proposed. But now, none of that excited me anymore. I was all about the Bratva business and how to take it to greater heights.

However, my brothers seemed keen on celebrating at Jupiter tonight, and despite my reservations, I knew one night wouldn't hurt.

As my gaze shifted across their faces, I could see the anticipation in their eyes, and I couldn't let them down. "Fuck it," I said dismissively, a smirk slowly lining the corners of my lips. "Let's have some fun."

"Ha! Now that's what I'm talking about!" Afan clapped once and hopped off the car trunk, his voice dripping with excitement. "Let's get this party started."

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It was crazy in here—lots of fancy lights crisscrossing the crowded space as dancers moved their bodies in a frenzy to the loud music thundering through the speakers.

I couldn't fathom how I used to find places like fun to hang around. Well, I was much younger then, and life hadn't dealt me its toughest blows.

Afan was already nodding to the DJ's hypnotic beats, his waist twirling behind a random girl's behind. She turned slightly, shot her head up, and caught a glimpse of the charming man rocking her from the back. The girl smiled, bending over to position her ass so he could grind over it. Afan smirked and did just that, his palms grabbing her waist.

I scoffed at the sight, shaking my head as Kostya and I made our way upstairs to a VIP lounge while Mikhail stayed back to literally pull Afan away from the girl.

Afan was the most fun and easygoing one among us, and he was no alien to places

like this. But although he seemed unserious eighty percent of the time, he was just as ruthless as he was playful.

As we ascended the steps, my eyes caught a beautiful woman at the bar. She had the most amazing smile I'd seen all week, and she seemed to be talking with one of my bartenders. She was a brunette, petite with the shape of a model, but I didn't get a good look at her as we were already at the head of the steps.

Mikhail and Afan joined us, and we headed to the VIP lounge reserved for the Tarasov family. I didn't come around often, but whenever I did—alone or with friends and family—this was where we always lounged. I opened the door, and we walked into the dimly lit room bathed in a soft golden glow that enveloped the plush cream-colored couches, sofas, and polished marble floors.

Everyone else took a seat, the fine leathers crunching at their weights, but Boris stood by the door like a watchman.

“Hey, big guy,” Afan called out, and Boris turned to face him, his neck moving like Arnold Schwarzenegger's from the Terminator movie. “We're here to blow off some steam—have a good time. You can chill.” He sighed, tapping the space on the couch he was seated on. “Here. Come sit down.”

Boris was reluctant at first, his eyes darting toward me, and I gave an approving nod. He walked over to my brother and sat beside him.

I stood by the floor-to-ceiling glass panels, which offered a breathtaking view of the lively dance floor below. From this vantage point, I could see everyone and everything going on in my club.

The door opened, and a sweet feminine voice caught my attention, prompting me to turn around and add a face to the voice that had caused my chest to flutter.

“Good evening, gentlemen. I'm Julia, and I'll be your hostess for the night,” she said.

My brows arched instantly as I gazed at the woman in front of us.

Her dark, silky hair cascaded down her back, framing her face as her hazel eyes shifted between each of us. Her smile warmed my stone-cold heart, but I maintained a blank expression, subtly checking her out.

She was pretty. No arguments there, as her petite frame belied a striking presence. Her outfit, a knee-length, full-sleeved fitted dress, accentuated her curves and her model-honed physique.

Looking closely, I realized that she was the same woman I'd seen smiling at the bar earlier. I couldn't recall seeing her before, so she must be a recent hire.

She sashayed over to the center of the room, a mysterious glint in her hazel eyes. “What's the damage? What can I get you gentlemen tonight?”

“Oh, love. We're men, alright. But we're far from gentle,” Afan said, crossing his legs as he relaxed on the backrest of the couch.

“Well, you're in luck because that's why I'm here,” she replied, her gaze sweeping across the group before settling on me. “To tame the beast within.”

“Ooh.” Mikhail let out a low breath, his tone husky and intrigued, dripping with amusement.

My brows rose instinctively at the confidence she exuded, eyes narrowing slightly. “Don't get too cocky; some beasts aren't so easily tamed,” I said, looking right at her, but she wouldn't flinch or break eye contact.

“Maybe.” She shrugged her shoulders. “But eventually, they all do.” For a moment there, she went silent, her gaze unwavering, before she looked at Afan. “But don't worry, darling. I've handled worse monsters in heels.” She winked at him.

Afan laughed. “I'm shaking in my boots.”

Impressed by her wits and sass, Kostya and Mikhail exchanged glances, chuckling as they shook their heads.

I was amused by her and the fact that she was looking at me without fear in her eyes. Usually, whenever women like her met with me for the first time, they would tend to act silly out of anxiety or tension. But she was different and wasn't exhibiting any signs of nervousness.

“For real, though,” she said, pulling me from my thoughts. “What's the damage? Drinks or something more...sensual?” The slight pause came when she returned her gaze to me.

Is she flirting with me? I wondered, watching her enticing lips part slightly, her eyes pinned on me like a hook to a fish.

I could feel the sexual tension hovering around us and also the stares of my brothers lingering on me. My brows furrowed, and my expression softened as I drank in the subtle glint of flirtation in her gaze.

Mikhail conspicuously cleared his throat, drawing her attention to him. “I'll have a whiskey, neat. Make it a double.”

“Are you sure?” Afan asked him. “You're gonna regret that in the morning.”

“Not if I water it down for him,” Julia chipped in, smiling at them.



Mikhail chuckled. “Amazing.”

She took Kostya's and Afan's orders and then shifted her attention back to me. “And for you, sir?” Her lashes battered at me as she blinked a few times.

There was something erotic in her eyes. It was subtle, but it was there, and the energy radiating from her was pulling me closer. However, I remained unphased.

“What would you like?” she asked, her gaze never leaving my face.

“Just a gin and tonic will do,” I said, my eyes discreetly roaming her curves.

“Lime or lemon?” she inquired, her voice low and sexy.

I felt my eyes crinkling at the corners, and I flashed her a smirk. “Surprise me.”

A smile settled on her pretty face, illuminating her pale skin. “Dangerous choice,” she said, then broke eye contact. “I'll be right back.”

I watched her gracefully walk away, exiting the room.

“Oh, my God!” Afan said, his voice dripping with excitement. “She was totally into you, brother.” He looked at me, chuckling. “Please, tell me you saw that at least.”

“The sexual tension was off the charts,” Boris said, his thick voice a little rusty from disuse.

Immediately, the room went silent as the others all turned to face him, shock flickering in their eyes. This was the first time he was speaking all day.

“See? Even Schwarzenegger here felt it,” said Afan, tapping Boris's shoulder.

She is attractive. That's a fact.

I shook my head, walked over to the couch, and settled down, letting out a soft groan. There was something about this woman that I just couldn't wrap my head around. She was mysterious, and that was one of the things that drew me to her.

“Don't we have better stuff to discuss than a woman?” I asked in an attempt to change the subject.

Afan laughed. “You're just running away from the truth,” he said to me, leaning closer. “But, uhh, Mikhail and I were talking about something that I think I'd love to hear your take on.”

Subject successfully changed.

“Okay,” I replied, indulging him.

“Alright, so I was telling Mikhail that the market is ripe for disruption and that our startup can capitalize on the growing demand for sustainable energy.”

“Of course,” I replied, narrowing my brows as I looked at Mikhail. “Did you disagree?”

“No, I did not,” he replied, sitting up in his chair.

“Yes, you did,” Afan said to him, his voice accusing.

“No,” came Mikhail's defensive response. “What I said was that we needed to mitigate the risks—that the competition was fierce.”

“True,” Kostya chipped in. “But I think we should explore partnerships with

established players.”

“Yes. It'll give us access to resources, not to mention credibility,” I said, toiling with my cufflinks, my mind racing with infinite possible strategies to make this work.

The door swung open, and Julia returned with our drinks arranged on a tray expertly balanced on her palm. “Gentlemen, your refreshments.”

“That was fast,” Afan commended her, his tone tinged with amazement.

“Thank you,” she replied with a smile, serving each of us our orders. “You kinda get a hang of it after a few months of doing the same thing over and over.”

Kostya's eyes narrowed at her, his brows knitting together. “Wait a minute,” he said to her. “I've seen you before, haven't I?”

She squinted, her head tilting sideways as if thinking about the possibility of them meeting before now. “Uh...I don't...I don't know....”

He clicked his tongue and snapped his fingers, his eyes widening as the realization sank in. “You were at my wedding,” he declared, scrutinizing her.

Her brows rose in confusion as she struggled to recall what he was saying.

“You were my wife's chief bridesmaid,” he added for further clarity.

Her face softened, and a smile played on her lips. “Oh, my God. You're Madelyn's husband,” she exclaimed. “I knew it. I knew you looked familiar, but I just couldn't....” The words burst out of her amidst chuckles. “How is she? I lost contact with her after the wedding.”

“She's fine,” he replied, relaxing in his seat.

“So, you two know each other?” Afan asked, his eyes shifting between them.

“Not exactly,” she replied, smiling. “His wife and I used to be best friends.”

“What a small world, eh?” Mikhail chipped in, wasting no time to sip from his glass.

“Yeah, tell me about it,” she muttered under her breath, pouring my drink into a glass.

“Hey, Jules—can I call you Jules?” Afan asked her.

She laughed. “Yes, of course.”

“Excellent,” he replied with a single clap. “My brothers and I were discussing the future of sustainable energy, and I was hoping to hear your take on it.” He fixed his eyes on her.

“Um, might I ask why?” She raised her brows, clearly as stunned as I was about his statement.

I took my gaze off her and settled on my brother. “Yeah, Afan. Why?” I asked, my forehead creasing slightly, hinting at my disapproval.

He ignored my scowl and replied, looking at her, “You're a woman, and they say women always give good advice.”

I knew exactly what he was trying to do. The idiot was trying to engage her in this conversation so he'd involve her with me.

Sneaky move, little brother.

I cast a playful glare at him, and he just winked at me.

“Please, take a seat,” he said to her, gesturing at a vacant sofa across from me. “Let's hear your thoughts.”

She sat down and exhaled softly with a smile as she took a moment to collect her thoughts.

I arched my brows with a subtle move, noticing how she crossed her legs. Her full-sleeved fitted dress rustled softly as she exuded confidence, leaning back a bit.

“Well,” she began, and I was curious to know what she had in mind, “business-wise, I think the key to success—or one of the keys to success—lies in integrating sustainability into the heart of the business model rather than treating it as an...add-on.”

The men all had their eyes on me, and honestly speaking, I hadn't been expecting such an intelligent response from a VIP hostess.

“That's an amazing point, Jules,” Kostya admitted, nodding his head impressively. “But how do you think organizations or companies can efficiently and effectively measure return on investments into sustainable initiatives?”

This was personal now because he was equating it with the Bratva's current situation with this problem. From her thought process, she might just provide us with an excellent solution.

I was intrigued and ready to hear her.

“For starters, these companies can adopt a triple-bottom-line approach,” she replied, her gaze sweeping the room.

We exchanged glances, and she read the puzzled looks on our faces, then clarified, “I mean, people, planet, and profit,” Julia continued. “It’s important that these organizations quantify the environmental and also social impacts alongside profit making.”

For a moment there, I thought I was in a board meeting, and Julia was a stakeholder, sharing insights on how to move the company forward. I had to admit, I was blown away by her articulate delivery.

“Impressive,” Mikhail said, smiling at her. “It’s a holistic approach that I think we can adopt.” He leaned in closer. “However, I’m a little confused about how we can, you know, overcome the initial investment cost.”

She let out a sharp exhale, her palms instinctively smoothing her dress as her brows furrowed. “That’s gonna be tough. But if you ask me—which you have—I’d say that long-term brand reputation enhancement and savings outweigh the upfront cost.” She drew a deep breath. “Maybe consider the implementation of these sustainable services in—”

“Phases.” I stole the word right from her mouth.

She looked at me and smirked. “Exactly. That way, you’ll prioritize high-impact initiatives.”

“I’m sorry. Who did you say you were again?” Afan laughed, impressed by this mysterious woman.

She giggled, sweeping her gaze across all of us. “I’m just a girl at your service

tonight.”

I wondered how she managed to look so sexy in a dress that wasn't so revealing and how she'd managed to keep all five of us on our toes, captivated by her intellect.

I leaned back in my chair, my eyes roaming her figure. It was an established fact that I was attracted to her. Why wouldn't I be? She was beautiful and had brains, too.

“Speaking of services,” Afan said, groaning slightly as he rose to his feet. “I think mine's needed elsewhere.”

I jerked my gaze to him, furrowing my brows as the others did the same, each one picking up his bottle and glass. My fingers rubbed my eyes as I put my head down, realizing that they were setting me up with her.

In a single file, they all exited the room, and Kostya, being the last to leave, shut the door behind him but not without winking at me first.

It was quiet between us for a while until I broke the awkward silence. “So, that happened.”

“Yeah...” she drawled lazily, eyes on me.

As I stared at her, I realized that there was no point in holding back—I obviously wanted her, and I knew she wanted me, too. My gaze left her eyes, settled on her lips, and then traveled down to her cleavage.

I could feel my cock twitching in my pants, and I had to get a grip of myself. “You're brilliant,” I admitted, my eyes returning to her pretty face. “I'll give you that.”

“What?” Her head cocked sideways. “The music's loud; I can't hear you.” She rose to

her feet.

Ohh. I see what you're doing, girl.

My palm swiped over my mouth as I watched her walk toward me, her alluring legs crossing each other as she approached me. Her moves were graceful—like a pageant queen on a runaway.

Julia settled on the couch I was seated upon, barely inches away from me. “I couldn't hear you properly,” she said, her voice almost a whisper. “Mind repeating yourself?” Her eyes bore into mine.

I felt a flutter in my chest, and I hated it. Yet, I couldn't deny my attraction to this incredibly hot woman whose warm breath I could feel on my skin.

She was too sophisticated—too schooled to be a VIP hostess—and that alone piqued my interest. I got curious about the mystery surrounding her. She was sexy, intelligent, and, of everyone in the room, she was drawn to me. What were the odds?

“What's an intelligent woman like you doing working in a nightclub?” I asked, my gaze fixed on her face.

“A girl's gotta do what a girl's gotta do,” she replied, her voice low and arousing, her lashes battering at me.

“That's too vague an answer,” I said with the same tone, trying to calm my hormones, especially my cock, as I could feel it swelling in my pants.

“We could spend this little time talking about the series of unfortunate events that led me here...or...” she leaned closer, her perfectly manicured fingers brushing over my suit, “...we could do something else.” She jerked her eyes to look into mine.



“Something more...stress-relieving.” Her voice dropped so low that it ceased my breath for a moment.

Alright. You asked for it.

I smirked, testing the waters by placing my palm on her thigh.

She didn't stop me, nor did she break eye contact. I dared to go up a little, and her body trembled at my touch with a soft moan that made me hard instantly.

I wanted her, and it was obviously a mutual feeling. We stared at each other for a moment, and I could see her chest swelling in anxiety as her body writhed at the feeling of fingers traveling toward her underpants.

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I could smell the rich scent of his cologne up close. His breath was warm on my skin, and in my chest, there was a flutter that paused my heart, racing like a galloping horse.

His green eyes were hooked to me, and he wouldn't tear his gaze off me, nor would I do the same. A smirk lined his lips as his fingers traveled up my thighs.

My eyelashes battered at him, my chest swelling with pleasure. I had to admit, I didn't expect to feel this type of sensation when he touched me. A moan escaped me—not an artificial one, but a genuine moan that resulted from the feeling of his skin on mine.

This hadn't been the plan.

I wasn't supposed to enjoy this.

Yet, there I was, doing the exact opposite.

His sharp facial features and buzz cut that looked good on him had drawn me in. The man was more handsome than I thought, and his intense stare was crippling me. He exuded confidence, and although he was a man of few words, he had his own charms.

The way he had those eyes glued on me like a hungry beast, ready to devour his prey, was so hot that it made me wet in my pants.

Shit. Focus, Jules. Focus, I thought, struggling to remain as calm as I could despite the turmoil and chaos in my head.

I'd never done this before—seduced a man. It was all new to me, but I needed this. It was the only way that I could get this close to Roman.

For a first attempt at being slutty, I obviously nailed it, considering how hooked to me he was. Rumor around the club was that Roman Tarasov was a hard man to get; even Harriet agreed to that. But there we were, alone, with his fingertips caressing my underpants.

He felt my wetness, and although he didn't say anything, the small grin on his rugged face said it all. He knew what I wanted. Did he, though? However, Roman Tarasov seemed to be done holding back.

As I steadied my breath, my eyes darted down to his pants, brows arching instinctively at the length of his erection.

My acting skills must be off the charts, considering that he had no idea how nervous I was. My body was shaking, and my feet were cold. Literally. Things were starting to escalate real quick, which, by the way, was what I wanted, but then my chest suddenly felt so heavy.

In my head, those voices wouldn't quiet. My thoughts were conflicting, and I was starting to overanalyze the moment. Outwardly, I was doing a great job at maintaining a slutty expression; I couldn't afford for him to see my fears and insecurities.

I leaned into the backseat of the couch without breaking eye contact, legs gently spreading apart as I bit my lower lip. He stared deeply into my eyes as though they were a window into my soul. With his fingers grazing over the smooth fabrics of my underpants, I arched my back at the sensation coursing through my body.

Roman shifted closer, his head inching toward my face while his fingers continued to

work their magic between my legs. I watched his eyes darken with pleasure, and the next thing I knew, I was gasping for air. He rushed my lips, sealing them with a kiss so fervent that it left us both breathless.

Our heads moved in sync, tilting sideways as directed by the overwhelming ecstasy that had a hold of us. His tongue danced in my mouth, and I sucked on his soft lips, deliciously biting them.

My hand drifted to his fine buzz cut, tracing gentle circles as I kissed him back with equal intensity. My heart felt like it was about to explode from my chest while I melted in bliss, writhing in pleasure. Waves of ecstasy washed over me, causing my fingertips to tingle. His scent was all I could smell in the heat of the moment; it was intoxicating, spreading warmth through my body.

The sensation of his tongue gliding in my mouth made my muscles relax, pulling a series of soft moans out of me. I could feel the sparks of electricity jolting through my veins, and I was drowning in delight.

I broke free from his kiss and looked into those green eyes, burning with desire, as I straddled him. My manicured hands cupped his face, and my lip curled up into a smile. I tilted my head downward and locked my gaze with him, my hair falling forward to brush against his face.

He chuckled softly, grabbing my waist as he adjusted on the couch, the fine leather crunching under our combined weight. Gently, I grazed my nose against his, fingers dancing down the buttons of his black undershirt as I released each one with deliberate slowness.

Roman struggled for a moment but eventually shed his jacket, tossing it aside with his gaze still locked on mine. As I unfastened those buttons, my eyes darted across his body, drinking in the sight of his chiseled features bulging out from under his

shirt. His sleeves clung to his strong arms like a second skin, revealing his muscles.

My pulse quickened as I helped him slip out of his shirt, eyes traveling across his broad chest covered in ink. The tattoos on his skin were so hot that the sight of them caused my breath to hitch in my throat.

My hands settled on his chiseled abs, palms traversing his whole body. His skin was thick and covered with scars here and there, each one having a story of its own. Some looked like bullet wounds that had healed over time, and others looked like deep cuts from blades or sharp objects.

He was obviously a dangerous man who'd lived and was still living a dangerous life.

I bent over to kiss the nape of his neck while grinding my waist against his groin. I felt his hands drift into my hair, his fingertips gently digging into my scalp. A grin played on my lips when I heard him groan in pleasure.

The feeling of my underpants grazing over the print of his cock sent shivers down my spine; it was hot and erotic. I'd completely let myself fall deeply into this because it was the best way to get into his mind and his head.

I kissed his chest, licking his nipples for a moment before going down to his abs. I jerked my head and smiled at him as I slowly went down on my knees, holding his gaze. My fingers unbuckled his belt, unfastened the lone button of his impeccably tailored pants, and then unzipped them.

His gaze was unwavering, and without looking away, I smiled at him. "Allow me to ease you of your stress," I said softly, my voice barely above a whisper as I dug a hand into his pants.

Gently, I clenched my palm around the thickness of his cock, and I could feel the

veins on it. My heart was racing with anticipation as I traveled deeper before feeling the cap of his cock.

Fuck! Clearly, it was a long one.

I swallowed discreetly at the fear of all of that going inside me. Could I handle it? I'd never taken a cock before, and he seemed too massive for the first time.

Our eyes remained locked, and I bit my lower lip to accentuate the lust perched on my face, masking the fear in my heart.

Finally, I withdrew the organ and shifted my gaze to it. An abrupt gasp escaped my lips, my eyes widened in shock, my brows arched instantly, and my jaw dropped at the sight of his cock. It was huge and longer than I had imagined it to be.

Even with both my hands wrapped around it, I couldn't match its length. My heart skipped a beat, and I wasn't sure if I should be intimidated or impressed by the Eiffel Tower I was beholding. As it loomed before me like a skyscraper of pleasure, I stared at the enormity, gently stroking its length.

The couch crunched beneath his weight as he leaned back, unleashing a thick groan that filled my heart with warmth. I inched downward, licking the tip of his cock, his pre-cum dancing on my tongue. He continued to groan, surrendering to pleasure, and soon, my lips covered his cap, my teeth grazing over his flesh.

I pressed my head down, feeling his cock in my throat. It was like my eyes were about to pop; they were teary for sure, but I needed to leave a long-lasting impression on him by the end of the night. And if getting deepthroated was one of the ways to go, then I was down for it.

It was sloppy, the blowjob, and judging by his husky groans, the way his hands were

caressing my hair, I could tell that he was basking in ecstasy. I pulled out my head, drawing a breath through my teeth as a silky thread of drool connected my lips to his cap.

My head jerked to look at his pleasure-captured face as I rubbed the moisture over his cock.

His eyes sparkled with lust, and within the next second, he was on his feet, and I was in his arms. He was so fast at whisking me into his hold that I didn't see him coming.

I locked my feet around his waist, bending down my head to kiss his lips as he arched his neck to do the same. The kiss was hot, causing us to exchange breaths as he headed toward a wall.

With my back resting against it, and with his lips never leaving mine, he buried his hand under the hem of my dress, fingering my cunt. I was moaning in his mouth, our heads dancing in delight. With his other hand, Roman fondled my breasts over my dress, and while he was at it, I leaned forward, hands flying to the zipper at my back. I unzipped my dress halfway, still swooning in the fervency of his kiss.

Roman yanked the dress off my shoulders, momentarily pulling away to gaze at my breasts nestled behind the lace of my bra. He drank in the sight for a moment, then, with eyes burning with desire, he reclaimed my lips. His left hand was between my legs, while with his right, he squeezed my breasts before undoing the hook of my bra in a split second.

I slipped out of it, and he left my lips to settle his mouth on my boob. My head arched toward the ceiling at the chill of his tongue on my nipple. I moaned softly as he swallowed that breast, sucking on it like his life depended on it. My hands flew into my hair, enjoying the triple action he was giving with expert precision. Ironical how no one had ever made me feel this way before.

While fingering my pussy, he was sucking one breast and, at the same time, deliciously pinching the nipple on the other. If he wasn't squeezing a breast, he was sucking it, and these simultaneous actions had me lost in the moment, swept by sensation.

Roman dragged my underpants down to my knees, and with a little shake of my leg, they fell off, welling at my feet. He went down on me, and I let out the loudest moan the moment his tongue touched my clit.

Leaning against the wall, my back was arched, and my mouth remained open, producing momentary moans. My head was lifted toward the ceiling, with my palms circling over his buzz cut.

He licked my entrance so well that it made my body tremble. I felt his thumb gently pull up my clitoral hood, and I let out a strained moan as his wet tongue swept over my throbbing clit.

Roman got back to his feet and kissed me some more as he raised my leg, his cock positioned outside my entrance.

My heart skipped a beat at his readiness to take me. "Wait," I said softly, struggling to catch my breath.

He pushed his head back a little, eyes flickering with wonder.

"Um." I swallowed, embarrassed to reveal the truth, especially after acting all slutty earlier. "Be gentle." My voice was low, and my eyes roamed over his face. "I...uh.... I've never.... I've never done this before," I confessed, shifting my gaze to the floor.

"You're a virgin?" he asked, his tone dripping with shock.



I managed to look back at him and nod. “Yes.”

He exhaled softly, swiping a palm over his face as he attempted to pull away from me, his expression blank.

“No, wait.” I pulled him back, pressing his rigid frame against my soft skin while my eyes bore into his. “I...I want you.”

“Julia, you're a...” he said, rubbing his forehead, a glint of disappointment flashing across his face.

“I know,” I said, my tone soft and smooth as I reached to kiss him, hands resting on his cheeks. “I want you,” I whispered in his ear. “I know you want me, too.” I returned my gaze to his face and positioned myself to kiss him.

“In that case,” he said quietly, his breath brushing against my skin, “don't blame me for whatever happens after this.”

My lips curled up into a sly smirk, and he reached out to kiss me again. Roman yanked me off my feet and took me to a couch. He lowered me on it, and as he climbed on top of me, I could hear the sound of my own heart racing. It was almost impossible to catch my breath at this point, and my body was tense.

“I'll be gentle,” he whispered into my ear, his husky voice sending shivers down my spine.

He rubbed his cap over my entrance, smearing his pre-cum over it as I moaned at the spark he'd just ignited in me. Roman pushed into my cunt as gently as he said he would.

It was painful, and my lips pressed into a thin line with a hand covering my mouth.

My eyes were tightly shut, and I could feel my flesh tearing apart at his slow thrust.

Finally, he was inside me for a few seconds before pulling out and pushing back in. My hymen was clearly broken, and the pain had traveled to my brain. I was certain that there'd be blood on his cock, but my mind was more concerned about how that initial pain was gradually transforming into pleasure. His thrusts were gentle and slow, filling my heart with ecstasy. The more he repeated the routine, in...out...in...out, the more I got accustomed to the feeling.

Just like that, the pain gradually became pleasure, and with my legs dangling in the air, I moaned, writhing beneath him. His hands were all over my body, tracing my curves and contours as he sealed my lips with a hot kiss.

I raked my fingers along his back, my nails scraping against his thick skin. The feeling of his scars beneath my palms was sensational as he ravished me with sweet torment. I broke free from his kiss, thrashing in ecstasy as his touch unleashed a maelstrom of sensations.

These electrifying waves inflicted me with a delicious agony that caused me to surrender to his will. At this point, it was like I had no control over my mind and body; he had me hooked.

The faster he plunged into my cunt, the louder I moaned out of orgasmic bliss.

Fuck. This feels so good .

I tried to caution my thoughts, but his power over me was strong. How could something so deadly feel so good?

He signaled his arrival with a primal growl and soon filled me up with his essence, his warmth spreading through me like a gentle flame.

Fuck.

I dropped my head against the armrest, letting out a soft exhale as I dripped with satisfaction.

He got off me and sat with his feet on the floor as he slipped into his pants. “Get dressed,” he said, shooting a glance at me.

Roman rose, straightening as he withdrew a stack of cash from his pocket.

My brows narrowed at him, and I felt a flicker of irritation as he placed the cash on the table.

He didn't just do that.

My face scrunched up into a scowl.

I got on my feet, picked up my dress from the floor, and eased into it. “What's that for?” I asked, eyes hovering over the stack of cash he'd dropped on the table.

“You earned it,” he replied, fastening the buttons of his black shirt.

“I earned it?” I scoffed in disbelief, pushing my head back, vexed at his insinuation. “What do you think I am, a hooker?”

He raised his head, brows furrowed in confusion. Clearly, that was exactly what he thought I was: a slut who just gave up her virginity for some cheap change. Although the stack of money he'd dropped was not cheap at all, that was beside the point.

This arrogance and condescension of his was a reminder of why I'd done this in the first place. The sex was great, but I was glad to be back to seeing him as who he

was—the enemy.

Once I was all dressed up, I quietly walked out of the room, leaving him standing there with a puzzled look on his face and the money on the table.

I pushed the bathroom door, and it swung open, allowing me access. With a heavy heart, I walked inside and glided over to the sink to wash my face. Once done, I turned off the tap and lifted my head at the mirror.

“You can do it, Jules,” I said to my reflection. “You've taken the first step. All you have to do is see this through.”

My jaw clenched, and my teeth gritted as I balled both hands into fists. “You won't know what hit you, Roman Tarasov,” I added softly, my lips turning into a frown. “And I swear to God, I will have my vengeance.”

My voice dripped with resentment, and all that pleasure he'd infused me with minutes ago suddenly meant nothing.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:15 pm*

The unease oozing out of him was subtle as he tried to mask it with a straight face and a sly grin. But I could feel it; I could sense his tension and anxiety. He was clearly wondering why I invited him for a ride. Occasionally, he'd steal glances at me, his chest heaving slowly as if trying to summon the courage to ask where we were headed.

Boris was at the wheel, eyes focused on the road as he drove us through the bustling city tonight.

In silence, I sat poised in the backseat, legs crossed as I relaxed, leaning against the backrest. Bernard sat beside me, inches away, hands clasped together on his lap, his rigid frame tensing. His shoulders were stiff, and he shrunk into the seat in an attempt to put a wider distance between us.

The stench of his fear was comparable to that of a filthy rag. His breathing was labored, and his eyes darted across the sleek interior of my plush G-Wagon. His posture betrayed his unease, and his lips were pressed into a thin line.

For a fleeting moment, Boris's eyes met with mine in the rearview mirror. He held my gaze, a silent understanding passing between us, a confirmation of the unspoken plan. I shifted my gaze out the window, taking in the breathtaking view of the city's nightlife.

I took my eyes off the environment and settled them on the man beside me. "How's the family, Bernard?" I asked, my gaze unwavering.

He managed to look at me, eyes narrowing slightly. "They're fine, Pakhan ," he said,

his tone laced with suspicion.

“Good. Good,” I replied, my voice low and husky. “You're probably wondering why you're in my car.” I returned my gaze out the window, drinking in the neon lights of skyscrapers and billboards dancing across the glass.

“Well, it's not every day you get invited to ride with your boss.” He forced a chuckle, avoiding my eyes. “I'm honored, Pakhan . But am I in trouble?” Now, his eyes settled on my face.

With a blank expression that seemed to intensify his bewilderment, I drew a breath. “What do you think makes a good soldier, Bernard?”

His brows knitted together, forehead creasing as uncertainty flickered in his eyes. “I don't...I don't follow, Boss.”

“What's the number rule of the Tarasov Bratva?” I rephrased, my gaze fixated on him.

His lips trembled for a moment, skin dampened in cold sweat. “Lo...loyalty.”

“Loyalty,” I repeated, letting out a dismissive laugh, my voice menacingly low. “How do you define that word, ‘loyalty’ in times of...uncertainty?”

He swallowed hard, his chest rising and falling, hinting at his fear. “Uh....” Bernard cleared his throat, adjusting in his seat. “Sta...staying the course, no matter what.”

“Interesting,” I said, taking my eyes off him for a moment. “I like your definition, Bernard. You understand the meaning of the word.” I returned my gaze to him. “Such a shame that not everyone in the organization shares this belief.”

“What're you talking about, Pakhan ?” he asked, his head tilting.

“I'm talking about the Judas within the Tarasov Bratva,” I answered, my voice calm and quiet and my expression serene.

“Judas?” He arched his brows, squinting at me. “That's impossible.”

“Is it?” I asked, then contemptuously clicked my tongue. “Humans can be greedy, Bernard. I mean, even Christ himself was betrayed for what? Thirty pieces of silver?” My facial muscles tightened for a moment, and I flashed a stern look at him. “Don't underestimate the extent to which a greedy man will go just to get what he wants.”

His eyes left my face, and his breathing became heavier by the second as his legs trembled.

“Someone's been selling sensitive Bratva information to the enemy, information that they had sworn to protect with their lives,” I declared, watching him try to mask his fear and anxiety, but his shuddering body betrayed his failed attempt at composure. “You wouldn't happen to know anything about that, now would you?”

He swallowed hard and shook his head. “No, I...I don't. I swore an oath of secrecy, and I'm loyal to the Tarasov Bratva. I'll never betray you, Boss,” he said, looking right into my eyes as he tried to sound as convincing as he could.

I gave him a gentle tap on the shoulder with a smirk on my face. “Good. You see, Bernard,” I held his gaze, “if betrayal was forgivable, the devil would still be in heaven with God right now. Loyalty is non-negotiable.”

That instant, the car came to a halt, and Bernard's eyes flew out the window, scanning the surroundings. “Why'd we stop?”

“Because we found the mole in our midst,” I said, reaching to open the door. “Wouldn't you like to know who this Judas is?” I stepped out of the car.

Boris, who was already outside, helped Bernard with his door, and the man exited the vehicle.

We were underneath a dimly lit bridge where the cool night air carried the distant hum of the bustling city and the faint wail of sirens. The soothing sound of waves gently lapping against the shore filled my ears, and the salty scent of seawater wafted by.

Three of my men stood armed behind a man on his knees with a hood over his head. His hands were zip-tied in front of him, and judging by his muffled voice, his mouth was likely taped.

Bernard walked over to me, his eyes roaming the environment. “Is this the man?”

I walked up to him, a hand in my pocket. “Not exactly.” I stood beside him, gazing at the captive. “But he's the man who's gonna identify the mole.” I gave a nod at one of the men, and he yanked the hood off the captive's face.

Bernard's eyes widened in shock once the man's identity was revealed. He swallowed hard, chest heaving rapidly.

The man's mouth was taped, so I couldn't understand what he was struggling to say, but he was constantly pointing at Bernard.

A few weeks ago, Boris had told me that one of my men had been compromised, working with the enemy against us. At the time, we didn't know who they were until I asked Boris to look into the matter. We acted like we had no idea that there was a mole in the organization so they wouldn't do a better job covering their tracks.



Two days ago, Boris discovered that Bernard, our most trusted underboss, had been the mole—the one leaking sensitive Bratva information to the enemy. Bernard's position was of significant influence; he was in charge of overseeing key operations and strategic decision-making within the Tarasov Bratva. His betrayal cut deeper than a knife to my chest.

Loyalty was the bedrock of the Tarasov Bratva, and personally, I hated betrayers. Whoever was against the Bratva was against me, Roman Tarasov. And there were no lengths that I wouldn't go to protect and maintain the dignity of the organization.

“Do you know who this is, Bernard?” I asked without turning to look at him.

His heavy breaths accentuated my fury, causing my jaw to clench as I looked at him. The man was petrified, his hands shaking, eyes flying around as though seeking an escape route.

“Pakhan asked you a question,” Boris said to him, his thick voice low and menacing as his hollow eyes bore into Bernard's.

“I...I...” he began, stumbling on his words, lips trembling as he looked around at the furious faces glaring at him.

Slowly unfastening the buttons of my black coat, I shot a glance in his direction. “The Bratva trusted you, Bernard.” I shed the coat, handing it over to the closest man. “I trusted you,” came the additional statement, my composure calm but dangerous as I took off my cufflinks, one at a time. “And what did you do?” My scowl deepened, creating creases on my forehead as my fingers rolled up the sleeves of my black undershirt. “You committed the one sin that I cannot forgive.” I jerked my eyes at him, and both sleeves were completely rolled up to my elbows.

He cringed, mouthing words of mercy. His hands were stretched out in front of him,

eyes flickering with terror.

My fingers balled into fists as I glared at him, brows narrowing and jaw clenching. “You betrayed the Bratva, Bernard.” I rushed at him, my blood boiling with rage.

His legs dangled in the air, eyes widening in fear as I grabbed him by the collar, effortlessly lifting him off the ground. “Betrayal is unforgivable, Bernard—punishable by death,” I snarled at him, flinging him to the ground with reckless force, his body landing with a crash.

Without hesitation, I descended on him, swinging my fist at his face, drilling a series of heavy blows that dented his skull into the concrete.

On the first blow, his nose cracked, releasing an uncontrollable flow of blood that smeared over my knuckles. But I wouldn't stop even as the red fluid splattered over the concrete.

“Did you think you could sell us out and live?”

I rained down blows, each strike landing with fury. My fist pounded his face non-stop, his blood spilling on my shirt and splattering my cheeks.

Bernard's groans were guttural, his body bucking beneath me with flailing arms as he attempted to escape. But I wouldn't let him. I pinned him down, mercilessly driving my fist into his crumbling facade.

“You sold us out, Bernard. You jeopardized everything we stand for. How dare you!” I barked, forcing him back to his feet.

Bernard stumbled, too weak to stand, his legs buckling beneath him. A swift kick from me sent him crashing onto the hood of the car, where he slid down to the floor

with a sickening thud.

I wrenched the door open, grabbed Bernard's now limp body, and positioned his head at the entrance. With a powerful swing, I slammed the door shut, the impact cracking his skull, a gruesome crunch wafting through the air. "You're no brother. You're no soldier. You're a fucking traitor!" I barked, my voice laced with venom.

His bones cracked, his flesh tore, and his pathetic screams dissolved into gurgling whimpers as I repeatedly slammed the door against his head. His legs were twitching, his body trembling at the agony of how his life was exiting his form. Blood gushed as his head disintegrated, eyes dangling from their sockets with a distorted skull.

With a final slam—a viscous one—the edge of the door sliced through his neck, severing his head from the rest of his body. His lifeless form thudded to the ground, and his head rolled over to my feet.

My chest heaved rapidly as I straightened, eyes still blazing with fury. His blood was all over the backseat of the car, dripping down and flowing through the concrete.

I stretched out my hand, and a handkerchief was placed in my palm. With it, I wiped the droplets of blood on my face and cleaned up my knuckles.

Our captive's eyes widened in fear as he locked eyes with me, breathing heavily. He looked like he'd seen the devil in human form. His hands were shaking, as was his whole body.

I rolled down my sleeves, requested for my cufflinks, and signaled one of the men to free the man's mouth.

A loud gasp came forth as the tape was peeled off his lips. "Please, please. Show mercy. I'm begging you!" He bowed at my feet, weeping and pleading. "I have a

daughter. She's just a year old, and I'm all she has. I don't deserve to live, and I don't expect you to let me go, but please, I'm all that little girl has.” He jerked his head, locking his gaze on mine. “I'm not begging for myself; I'm begging for her. If you kill me, she'll have no one else. Please...she's just a year old.”

His pleas meant nothing to me, and for all I knew, the story about his daughter was just a means to save his own skin. I'd dealt with men like him before; cowards would say anything—do anything—just to get out of trouble. I slipped back into my coat and towered over him.

I could tell when my victims were lying—it was a superpower—and right now, this bastard was lying.

“You and your organization were buying information on the Tarasov Bratva.” I squatted to his level. “Big mistake.” I clicked my tongue with contempt, raising his head by the chin, the barrel of my pistol pressed against his flesh.

“No, no, no, please. Hear me out,” he begged, whimpering as I stared at him with a blank expression. “I can be of value to you...I can turn on them—be your spy.... I'll tell you everything we—” His rushed words were cut short by the sound of a gunshot that echoed in the air as I pulled the trigger on him.

The bullet passed through his chin and burst his brains, creating an exit hole at the top of his head. His body thudded to the ground, motionless in the pool of his own blood.

“No one messes with the Tarasov Bratva and gets away with it. No one,” I muttered, rising to my feet. “Clean this up.” I gestured at the two dead men.

“Yes, Boss,” one replied, immediately getting to work with the others.

I glanced at my watch; I was already late for an event, and with a sniffle, I wiped a

thumb over my nose. The G-Wagon was messed up with blood; there was no way I was going anywhere in that.

Boris requested for the keys to the other car—the one my men had driven in. They were handed to him, and he led the way. “Let's go, Boss.”

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The hall was filled with the soft chatter of societal elites—politicians, philanthropists, some Hollywood stars—all dressed to impress. Waiters skidded through the crowd, holding up trays of champagne and canapés.

A soft classic jam wafted through the air, adding to the ambiance of the atmosphere as a live band performed at a corner. Chandelier lights cast a warm glow over the guests as they hung in small clusters, exchanging smiles and pleasantries.

Personally, I found charity events like this to be a waste of time. The idea behind it was to help the needy, but that was far from the truth. It was just another way for the rich to keep getting richer, for the powerful to retain power, and for the famous to retain fame. This was nothing but a business gathering under the guise of charity.

Regardless, though, there were still a few people here who were truly charitable.

I wasn't one of them.

The Bratva needed more allies and more investors, and I was seeking ways to expand our horizon. My being here tonight, mingling with these hypocrites, was for one purpose and one purpose only: the growth of the Tarasov Bratva. And for that cause, I wouldn't mind striking a deal with the devil himself.

“Ah. Look who it is,” a familiar voice spoke behind me, their tone dripping with

bliss.

I turned and locked eyes with the speaker. It was Kostya, and he had his wife, Madelyn, by his side. His white tux clung to his frame, revealing his masculine build, while his beautiful wife had her arm locked in his, her red gown complementing her lipstick. Her hair fell loosely on her shoulders, her feet perfectly fitted in her heels.

“Pakhan Roman,” he said, chuckling as they halted in front of me.

“Temporary Pakhan ,” I replied, mirroring his gesture. “Good to see, cousin.” I embraced him for a moment and shifted my gaze to his wife. “Madelyn, you look amazing as always.”

“Thank you, Roman.” She smiled, her eyes crinkling at the corners. “You don't look so bad yourself.”

I grinned, tucking a hand in my pocket.

“Hey, what happened the other night anyway?” Kostya asked, his eyes sparkling with mischief. “The brilliant hostess—she treat you well?” he teased, playfully slapping my arm.

A scoff escaped my lips as I thought about her for a moment—the woman, a mysterious virgin, hot and sexy, who had seduced me into fucking her. I couldn't understand what exactly was different about her, but she'd somehow managed to keep me in suspense, wondering who she was.

At first, I thought she was a hooker, but after she rejected my money, I was struck with confusion. And even now, I couldn't seem to find my way out of this web of bewilderment.

She'd piqued my curiosity, and now I wanted to know more about her. Julia was an amazing woman, not just sexually but also intellectually. However, she was a woman I couldn't crack, a puzzle I couldn't solve. There was mystery surrounding her, and after that sex, she left me intrigued with a lot of questions on my mind.

I wasn't one to fall back to the same woman more than once...at least not in a long time. But ever since that night, thoughts of Julia had been lingering on the fringes of my mind. I'd fought it so many times, but her mysterious ways kept pulling me in like a moth to a flame.

“Madelyn, you used to know someone named Julia, right?” I asked her, holding her gaze. “Petite, silky brunette hair, hazel eyes....” I squinted, hoping she remembered the woman in my description.

“Julia Sawyer?” Her brows arched instantly, and her eyes widened as she chuckled. “Yeah, yeah.... She was my friend—a little younger than me, but we were cool. Why?” She tilted her head, casting a suspicious look at me. “Hold on a second; you know Julia?”

“No. Not really,” I replied. My voice was low yet dripping with anticipation when I added, “But I was hoping you'd tell me about her.”

Madelyn smiled, her face brightening up. “Well, Julia is beautiful—as you already know.” She chuckled. “She's smart, like, really smart—”

“On that note, we agree,” I concurred, flashing a faint grin.

She continued, “Julia's kind, hard-working, doesn't give a shit what anyone says—she does what she believes is right. She's wife material.” Madelyn wiggled her brows at me teasingly.

“Okay, let's not go there.” I let out a dismissive laugh. “What else do you know about her: family, where she came from...?”

Madelyn sighed, shoulders slumped. “Sadly, I can't help you with any of those.” She accepted a glass of champagne from the waiter beside her and took a sip.

“Why's that?” I asked, my brows knitting in confusion.

“Well, because I don't have the answers you seek,” she replied, cradling the glass in her hand. “You see, Julia has always been, uh....” She thought for a while, groping for the right word—the adjective to best describe her friend.

“Mysterious?” I chipped in, eyes fixated on her.

“Yeah. Exactly,” she agreed, snapping a finger in agreement. “She never mentioned her family or her parents.” Madelyn sipped from her glass.

Interesting.

Maybe I'd stop by the club again.... I just might bump into her again—the mysterious woman.



## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:15 pm*

I pulled over outside a building with the name “Metro Hospital” written on it in bold font. The engine died down, and I let out a sigh, slumping into the driver's seat as my hands tightened around the steering wheel.

My eyes were shut, lips pressed into a thin line as my chest heaved slowly. It was chaotic in my head, with depressing thoughts of my reality tugging me in every direction and charging my tear glands. My heavy heart was broken, bleeding from the pain that woke me up every morning—a constant reminder of who I was and why I must stay focused on my mission.

From my purse, I withdrew a small photograph of my family, which I carried with me at all times. In it was my dad in a black suit, his right hand wrapped around my mom's slender waist. She was wearing a classy red dress with a charming smile on her lips. In front of them was my younger brother, Tom, and me.

The picture was taken six years ago, so I was much younger then—only fifteen years old. My brother, who was ten at the time, had his arm around my neck, his eyes sparkling with excitement and a wide grin perched on his face. My head was thrown up, as the camera had captured me laughing hard at a joke Tom had made.

As I sat in the car, staring at this photo, my hand flew to my mouth as if to prevent a sob from bursting out. I missed everyone in that picture. I missed them all so much that it made my heart bleed.

My life hadn't always been this sad and pathetic. No. If anything, it used to be so full of joy, laughter, and bliss, all of which were now in the past. I was raised in a home where I never lacked anything, and neither did my younger brother.

Dad was a formidable businessman—a tycoon, one of the most revered and respected individuals in the city. He was the founder and CEO of Gray Consolidated, a successful company renowned for its innovative entrepreneurship and strategic acquisition. Under my dad's leadership, Gray Consolidated was a behemoth admired and feared by many—especially competitors. The company's success was envied by a lot of people, which put a giant bullseye on the Gray family.

Dad was just a man diligent in his business, but his competitors didn't see him like that; they saw him as a threat.

I might have been just fifteen at the time, but I knew he had enemies. Dad had many associates and business partners, but he always said that he didn't trust them.

His voice echoed in my head: “Not everyone that laughs with you loves you, sweetheart.”

I let out a deep sigh, sinking into the dreadful memory that kept me up late at night.

I woke up to the ear-piercing scream that echoed throughout the mansion. My heart was racing, chest heaving as I sat on my bed, wondering what was going on.

The power was out, and darkness had settled in the house that night. It was pouring outside with occasional clashes of thunder as a strong wind whistled in through my window. The curtains danced to its rhythm, and in a flash of lightning, I caught a glimpse of the wall clock across my bed. It was barely past midnight.

The scream came again, and I recognized that voice. “Tom!” My eyes widened, and I tossed the sheets aside, jumping out of bed.

With that much adrenaline pumping through my veins, I ran faster than I had ever run before, my footsteps pounding against the floor. I got to his door. “Tom!” I banged on

it but got no response. I didn't bother checking if it was locked or not; I kicked the damn door open and rushed inside. "Tommy!" I looked around, but he wasn't there.

I heard his terrified scream again, and this time, his voice emanated from our parents' room. My heart skipped a beat, and without hesitation, I took off reflexively, sprinting down the hallway with reckless abandon.

The darkness was closing in on me, but this was my house, and I was already familiar with the place. I didn't stumble on anything, nor did I miss a step while bolting toward my destination.

I rounded a corner and burst into my parents' room, only to find Tom on the ground, weeping beside our parents' lifeless bodies.

"No..." I muttered, frozen in shock as tears stung my eyes. I couldn't feel my legs, and each step seemed impossible. My gaze was fixed on the chilling scene in front of me.

Both my parents lay motionless in the pool of their own blood, their fingers eerily locked together—a testament to their enduring love even in death. Tom was staring at his hands, covered in their blood, as he jerked his head to look at me, his expression a mixture of horror and bewilderment. Those pale blue eyes, once vibrant, now seemed cold and empty, as though the light within had been snuffed out.

My brother was numb, frozen in shock, with lips slightly parted as if in a silent scream.

I sank to my knees, tears rolling down my cheeks with an uncontrollable flow as I dragged myself over to their bodies. "No, no, no...."

I took both heads in my arms, my heart shattering into a million tiny pieces. My tears,

hot from pain and anger, dropped in their blood as I clenched my fingers into fists. I vowed in that moment to make it my life's mission to find whoever had been responsible for this and make them pay.

Back in the car, I sniffled, drying my tears, my mind filled with rage and resentment.

The authorities had said my parents had committed suicide, but the authorities were either wrong or they were paid to cover up the truth. My parents would never commit suicide; I knew that much. They had two kids whom they loved and adored, and there was no way in hell that they would take their own lives. There was so much to live for, so killing themselves made absolutely no sense at all.

My parents were murdered in cold blood, and it wasn't a robbery gone wrong. No. They were targeted and eliminated. This was someone's doing, someone who saw them as a threat and needed them out of the way. Dad had a lot of enemies—a lot of people who wanted to hurt him. And according to Larry Paige, Dad's lawyer—the only person he ever really trusted outside the family—my parents' death was an assassination. Larry believed that whoever was responsible for this must be someone high up in the game and that they could come for us, as well.

So I ran.

Changed my last name from Gray to Sawyer.

For six years, I'd been living on my own, fending for myself with only one thing in mind—only one thing keeping me going. Revenge. Sometimes, I sought comfort in the horrors I would invoke on those who hurt me, those who snuffed out the light in my brother's eyes, those who robbed my parents of their lives.

I clenched my fist, my jaw tightening in fury at the thought of Roman Tarasov.

I'd found out about two years ago that my father had an ongoing clash with a Russian Bratva during the period of his murder. He'd had a falling out with Roman Tarasov just a few weeks before his assassination, and after his death, after the fall of the house of Gray—the fall of Gray Consolidated—it was the Tarasov Bratva that benefited the most. I hated Roman so much, and I wouldn't stop until I burned his fucking empire to the ground.

Infiltrating his nightclub was phase one, sleeping with him was phase two, and even with all his influence and power, he wouldn't see what hit him until it was too late.

As my dad used to say, “Keep your friends close, but keep your enemies closer.”

I let out a sigh, slipping the picture back into my purse as I wiped my face with a handkerchief, adjusting the rearview mirror to catch my reflection. For a fleeting moment, I stared at the woman in the mirror whose eyes were blazing with fury before picking up the bouquet of flowers on the passenger seat.

The door opened, and I stepped out of the car, squinting at the sunlight. I shut the door, locked it, and headed into the building.

My heels clicked against the linoleum floor as I glided through the reception. “Hey, Suzanne.” I waved at the woman behind the counter, smiling like an angel.

“Hi, Jules.” She grinned widely as she watched me walk through the hallway.

To most people, Julia Sawyer was a nice, caring young woman who would always smile no matter the circumstance. They thought Julia Sawyer was an angel, a lovely individual who couldn't hurt a fly. If only they knew. One of the nurses here had once told me that she wanted to be like me, unphased by whatever challenge I was going through. Of course, I'd smiled and given her some encouraging words.

People loved Julia Sawyer, but they'd fear Julia Gray if they ever met her.

I pushed the door open and walked into the ward where my brother was lying on the bed, the electrocardiogram beeping steadily beside him. The fragrance of the sunflowers and daisies wafted through the air, their vibrant colors defying the somber atmosphere.

My eyes locked on my brother's motionless body as I approached his bed, my expression softening. He just turned sixteen today, and even after six long years, his condition never improved. The incident—the gruesome scene of our parents' death—had messed him up so badly, and the doctors said he was suffering from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.

Tom hadn't just lost the light in his eyes that night; he'd also lost his voice and his ability to speak or express himself.

I strolled over to the bedside table and gently placed the bouquet of flowers on the surface. My lips trembled as I jerked my head toward the ceiling in an attempt to force back the tears that filled my eyes. Seeing him in this state always broke my heart, and no matter how many times I came here, I would never get used to this sight.

“Hey, Tommy,” I greeted, my voice barely above a whisper as I sat on the edge of the bed, watching his blank face. “Guess what day it is.” I sniffled. “It's your birthday, buddy.” I paused, exhaling slowly as I wiped my tears. “I brought you your favorite flowers: daisies and sunflowers. You can smell them, can't you?”

He just lay there, too numb to speak or move.

I put my head down, fingers rubbing over my eyes as I wept with an aching heart. “Happy birthday, Tommy.” I looked at him, drying my tears with the back of my

hand.

My mood switched from anguish to rage in a split second, and my jaw clenched, leaving deep creases on my forehead. "I'll make him pay, Tommy. He will pay dearly for every tear that I've shed," I said, taking his hand, my gaze fixed on his vacant eyes. "Roman Tarasov will pay for all the pain he's caused us." I gently squeezed his fingers. "I promise you that."

"That's right, Julia," a familiar voice spoke from the entrance. "We'll make him pay for all the atrocities he's committed," he added, his voice dripping with certainty.

I raised my head, my teary eyes meeting with Agent Anderson's gaze.

Oliver Anderson, a portly forty-year-old man with dirty brown hair that complemented his beard, was the FBI agent following up on the death of his parents. He was the one who told me about Roman Tarasov's involvement in the case.

Agent Anderson had spent years searching for ways to bring down the Tarasov Bratva, but they were always two steps ahead of him. They covered their tracks, and although the agency knew they were dirty, there just wasn't enough evidence to put them away for good.

The Tarasov Bratva was very well connected, with countless strings to pull whenever the need arose. Hence, it was next to impossible to bring them all to justice.

Anderson was looking to bring Roman Tarasov and the entire Bratva to justice to make them atone for their sins. But I was in this for revenge. He'd seen my situation as an opportunity to finally get the men he'd spent years chasing after, so he proposed an alliance.

With the agency's approval, we'd embarked on this mission to destroy these cruel

men from the inside. He was my backup, always supplying me with relevant information needed for the execution of our plan.

Anderson hated Roman almost as much as I did, but I didn't just hate the man.... I wanted him dead.



## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:15 pm*

Fingers rubbed over my eyeballs in a massaging motion as I sat in my car, parked outside Jupiter.

Don't do this. Just turn around and leave , I thought.

I'd been sitting in here for the past ten minutes, unable to make up my mind—go inside the club or leave. It was a simple decision, yet it wasn't easy. I'd never visited Jupiter twice in the same week because I never had any reason to.

This time, it was different.

Julia had managed to pique my curiosity, and all I wanted was to know her better. I needed to put together pieces of the mystery surrounding her. She was someone I couldn't read—I couldn't understand—and that was the most fascinating thing about her.

It had been ages since I thought about a woman more than once after sex. But here I was, struggling and constantly failing in all my attempts to get this one out of my mind. I simply couldn't. She had me hooked.

“Fuck,” I muttered, angling my head downward as I pinched the bridge of my nose.

No matter how hard I tried to dispel the thoughts of Julia, images of her face, her smile, and her sexy body kept flashing in my head. Even now, I could hear the sound of her delicious moans echoing in the back of my mind.

It wasn't so at first.

Initially, I was doing just fine after the sex, but as time went on, I found myself reminiscing on the events of that night. I'd tried to stop myself, but my efforts were futile.

This woman was living rent-free in my head, and it was both intriguing and concerning at the same time.

Something had snapped open in me that night, and it had been drawing me back to her ever since. Of course, I was stubborn and had resisted the urge to reach out again, but after Kostya asked me about her, it was like the walls I'd built around my heart came crumbling down.

I realized that I was more fascinated by this woman than I would admit. There simply was a lot about her that had caught my attention. She was beautiful, intelligent, and classy.

This woman, a VIP hostess at a nightclub, was able to hold up a reasonable conversation with four businessmen. Her ideas and insight on the concept of sustainable initiatives were mind-blowing and just downright amazing.

I'd always admired beautiful women, especially those with the ability to think outside the box, and she was on a whole different level. Julia had no idea that she'd provided us with a solution to a problem. With that big brain of hers, she was clearly an asset.

But she was also a wonder.

That night, one minute, she was all flirty and naughty; the next minute, she was an innocent little virgin. Like that wasn't enough drama already, she rejected my money with a demeaning scowl on her face and then walked out on me.

She fucking walked out on me.

Her guts, though.

The thought of that alone prompted a chuckle out of me, laced with disbelief, as I massaged my temple.

Everything about Julia was drawing me to her. My attraction to this woman was beyond the physical, beyond sex. She possessed something that kept pulling me in like a fucking moth to a flame.

I let out an exasperated groan, gripping the steering wheel with my chin against my chest. The struggle was real. Inside my mind was a tug of war: go in...don't go in. Both sides were pulling hard as if to rip my mind apart, and neither was willing to back down.

If I turned back now, this feeling of suspense, of being in the dark, would continue to plague me, and it would only be a matter of time before I came back. So why delay the inevitable?

I drew a deep breath.

This is a bad idea, but fuck it.

The door gave a soft click and opened.

I extended a foot out, then exited the vehicle, shutting the door as I headed into the club.

“Boss,” one of the heavily built bouncers at the entrance greeted me, his head slightly bowed in reverence.

My response was a subtle nod as I walked past him, a hand in my pocket.

Inside, I halted by the entrance, taking in the sight in front of me. It was a wild sea of writhing bodies, dancing to the music that thundered through the speakers in a frenzy, hands in the air.

Beams of vibrant colors sliced through the space, revealing glimpses of the dancers' ecstatic faces—some dampened in sweat.

“Hey, handsome.” A feminine voice laced with a subtle allure stole my attention, and I turned in her direction. Instantly, the whispery charm on her face disappeared. Her brows arched, eyes widening at the realization of who I was. “Shit. I'm sorry, Boss. I had no idea it was you.” Her gaze shifted to the ground.

The woman, a tall blonde with a rose tattoo on her neck, was a hostess who'd mistaken me for a patron.

“Would you like me to be of service to you tonight?” she asked, jerking her eyes toward me.

She was pretty, but my interest was elsewhere, and with a straight face, I replied, “I'm good. Just came around to inspect a few things.”

Her lips pursed, hinting at the subtle gleam of disappointment that washed over her face. “Alright.” She forced a faint grin that barely concealed her dismay, and with that, she walked away.

My eyes darted across the space and soon settled on the bar. I recalled seeing Julia talking with the bartender the last time I was here. He was the perfect candidate to help me fish her out.

I glided over to the bar, taking a seat on a stool in front of the counter.

“Evening, Boss,” he greeted, recognizing me immediately.

I didn't always frequent this place, but all my staff already knew who I was, except for the new recruits who'd walk past me without acknowledging my presence.

“What can I get you?” the bartender asked, his eyes fixed on me as he expertly wiped a couple of glasses with a white towel.

“Julia, is she around?” I inquired, setting both arms on the countertop.

“Uh...” His brows knitted together in bewilderment. “Yeah. Yeah, she is.” He cleared his throat. “Would you like me to call her for you?”

I stared at him in silence, and he clearly got the message.

“I'll take that as a yes .” He stepped away, disappearing for about a minute.

She looked amazing tonight, her full-sleeved fitted dress highlighting her curves. Her hair was styled in loose, delicate ringlets that cascaded around her head like a halo of brown curls. However, as she approached me, I realized that her hazel eyes were devoid of the sparkle they held the last time.

“You wanted to see me?” she asked, her voice flat and casual as her eyes darted across the space.

She seemed off—avoiding my gaze with a stiff posture and furrowing brows. Her jaw was clenched, her feet constantly tapping against the floor. She was clearly upset about something.

My eyes narrowed as I wondered what exactly was going on. This wasn't the girl I'd met the last time.

“Sit down,” I said, my tone laced with a hint of dominance.

She shot a quick glare at me and hesitated for a moment before reluctantly sitting on the stool next to me.

I leaned forward, my gaze unwavering. “Look at me.”

“I don't want to,” she replied, her voice blunt, arms across her chest.

My brows arched at her response—her arrogance—and I felt a pang of vexation mixed with amusement. “What's with the attitude?” I asked, maintaining my composure.

Her lips pressed into a thin line, and her blazing eyes settled on me with a cold, empty stare.

What the fuck is going on here? I thought, leaning away from her, my back straightening. “Don't look at me like that. It's condescending.”

Her eyes narrowed, brows raising as she let out a dismissive laugh. “Condescending? That's rich coming from the man who tried to pay me off after taking my virginity.” She glared at me, the words tumbling out of her in a rush.

I scoffed, a sly grin playing on my lips. “So, that's what this is about?”

“I'm not one of your whores, Roman,” she blurted out, her cheeks flushed with anger.

My forehead creased at the way she said my name. I hated the disdain in her voice, and my jaw clenched subtly.

A flicker of irritation swelled up within me, and a scowl settled on my face, hinting at

my displeasure.

Her tone was disrespectful, as was the pesky little frown on her face. Although her comments were bold, they were also rude. It was like she was nowhere close to being fascinated by me anymore, and I was starting to regret coming around.

“Okay, right off the top,” I began, my eyes narrowing slightly as I struggled to mask my anger, “I didn't give you that money as some sort of payment for your service ,” I said, air-quoting the word.

“Oh, yeah?” She squinted, her frown deepening as her tone dripped with sarcasm.

I ignored her infuriating attitude and continued. “I like to spoil the women I fancy, and trust me when I tell you I don't fancy many women.” My gaze locked on her face.

She rolled her eyes, tilting her head. Her palm flew to her chest in mock indignation. “Wow! I'm flattered.” Her tone was laced with amusement, and a hint of a smile appeared on her lips. “Thanks for clarifying. I was worried I might not be special enough.”

My chest heaved slowly at her attitude, and my brows furrowed. “You do realize who you're talking to, right?”

She was silent, her gaze dropping to the floor for a moment before flying back to my face. Her eyes were stern and cold.

I couldn't understand Julia tonight. She definitely knew the type of man I was; every other staff member did, and a vast majority of them feared me. Yet, she had the guts to get on my nerves with her sass.

My scowl deepened, creating more creases on my forehead as I glared at her, my jaw

tightening. She was an arrogant little brat who'd just disrespected me without remorse and fearlessly had her eyes fixed on me despite the anger she saw in mine.

Many had died for far lesser offenses, yet there she was, casting her cold stare at me with her arms across her chest. Her nose wrinkled, her lips quivered, and her breathing was tense.

I couldn't sit there and have her disrespect me. I was her boss, and she was my employee—there ought to be some level of respect here. It didn't matter how angry she was; her attitude was unacceptable.

“You will apologize,” I stated, my voice stern and authoritative.

Her brows slowly rose at my words, hinting at her displeasure. “And if I don't?” She held my gaze, her stare empty.

I felt a flicker of irritation that made me grit my teeth. Her attitude and condescending expressions were driving me nuts, and my blood was boiling.

“I could fire you right now if you don't bridle that sharp tongue of yours,” I warned, my words low and threatening.

Her lips parted into a faint grin. “That won't be necessary.” She rose to her feet, unclipped her employee card from her dress, and leaned forward to whisper, “I quit.” Julia dropped the card on the countertop and walked away.

I swiped a palm over my mouth, watching her leave, her form disappearing in the crowd of dancers. An abrupt chuckle escaped my lips as I brushed my fingers against my forehead. She should've known that as an employee at Jupiter, she couldn't resign or quit without a two-week notice. Julia was a character.



I smiled subtly, intrigued by her drama.

And just like that, I felt my annoyance fading away, replaced by a feeling of fascination.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:15 pm*

“I only spoil women that I fancy, and trust me when I say I don't fancy many women,” his voice echoed in my head, prompting a small smile on my cherry-red lips.

My plan was working. He'd confessed to seeing me as someone special, and Roman was starting to take an interest in me. Excellent.

I smoothed down my tight black skirt, making sure the hem was adjusted to perfection. Knowing that my ideas were effective brought me some peace.

One of the ways to sneak into a man's heart was to fuck him in ways he'd not so easily forget. The plan was to make sure he had a great time with me; that way, he'd have a reason to come back, looking for more of me.

At first, I wasn't entirely sure that it would work, considering that I was a virgin and he must have had countless women before me. However, I knew it was one of my best shots.

Since I discovered Roman Tarasov was behind my parents' demise, I'd been doing my homework on him, reading any and every article on him that I stumbled across. The idea was to know him better, at least to an extent, before going undercover.

While researching him, I came to understand that he was the type to enjoy the company of intelligent and beautiful women. Who wouldn't?

Luckily for me, I was both. I just had to build myself physically and mentally so I'd capture his attention whenever I appeared.

He was a businessman, I knew that for sure, which meant that in order to get him to notice me, I'd have to be a problem solver. Most of the time, when men like him came around the VIP lounge to relax, they would take some time to discuss pressing business issues before letting the hostesses help them drown out their worries and concerns.

So, I read widely. I read every business book I could find, making sure that I improved my mind to the point where men like him would have no choice but to listen when I spoke. I spent three hours every day feeding my mind with knowledge, which was more time than what I allocated to making myself look pretty.

I'd been waiting for an opportunity to practice all that I had planned, so that night, when one of his brothers had asked my thoughts on a business matter, I'd celebrated internally.

Up until now, everything seemed to be going according to my plan.

My intellect and the great sex we'd had brought him back, just as I'd intended. But I wasn't going to make it easy for him.

The next thing on the list was to get under his skin, and I killed it. Roman hadn't expected his next encounter with me to go down the way that it did. I could see the confusion in his eyes even though he tried to mask it. He was trying to understand how I switched from the sexy woman who was all over him the other night to a cold and infuriating bitch.

Being exasperatingly difficult to handle was part of my plan—it was yet another way to sneak into a man's heart and mind.

Roman was a mafia boss who wasn't used to defiance; people always obeyed his every instruction. They trembled at his voice, and his presence alone was intimidating

to most. He was the type of man who always got whatever and whoever he wanted at will.

In order to keep his attention on me, I needed to be different from everyone else around him; he indirectly gave me permission to act this way the night we fucked.

As a regular employee, I had no right to be rude and sassy to my boss. But sharing a bed together—well, a couch, in our case—catapulted me to a level above the other employees. He clearly enjoyed my body, and I was using that to my advantage.

The look of shock on his face when I told him that I quit the job was priceless—if only I had taken a picture.

I didn't really quit; that was just me being dramatic. Quitting wasn't an option right now, and there was still much to be done.

However, tonight, I wasn't a VIP hostess at the club. I was an assistant at a luxury car auction.

Agent Anderson had gotten me a slot for this particular auction because Roman Tarasov was going to be here. The plan was to always be around him, in his sight but unavailable at the same time.

I heaved a sigh, standing poised on my heels and clad in my uniform—a white button-down shirt that clung to my contours over a black skirt that accentuated my shapely body.

My gaze swept the opulent auction hall, taking in the crystal chandeliers that cast a warm glow over the marble floor and the floor-to-ceiling velvet drapes that adorned the walls, whispering luxury and style.

To my left, a sleek black Lamborghini Aventador stood poised, its glossy surface reflecting the hall's decor. A 1962 Ferrari 250 GTO stood nearby, its amazing design earning it the attention of aficionados.

Agent Anderson helped me prepare for this job, educating me about cars, their models, and how each operated in its own unique design. This mission to bring down Roman Tarasov was proving helpful to my mental growth in so many ways. I was learning a lot in different spheres of life, and each time it felt overwhelming, I reminded myself of the reason why I was doing this: revenge.

Soon, the impeccably dressed guests poured into the hall—men in tuxedos and women in elegant gowns. With glasses of wine in their hands, they mingled, admiring the high-performance cars on display.

“Ladies and gentlemen, esteemed collectors and honored guests, welcome to the SLT Luxury Car Auction...!” The auctioneer's voice came through, his tone sweet like honey as he welcomed the guests.

I watched them glide around gracefully with smiles on their faces, their chatter soft underneath the auctioneer's voice.

My eyes roamed the hall for the one man I was here for, and just as he stepped in, my breath hitched in my throat.

There he was, Roman Tarasov, clad in a perfectly tailored black suit. His muscular build bulged out from his coat, his sharp eyes scanning the room.

He looked so dashing tonight, but I couldn't harbor such thoughts about him, so I reminded myself of what he had done to my family. The memory of my parents' lifeless bodies flashed in my head, nudging me back on track. My jaw clenched, fingers balling subtly into fists.

We locked eyes, and I felt a flutter in my chest, my heart racing as he wouldn't tear his intimidating gaze off me. His expression was blank, and I was unable to read him, although just before he looked away, his lips curled up to a smirk.

My eyes trailed him as he moved with his associates, checking out the cars on display, pointing and marking the ones he liked. My fists tightened as my stare transformed into a glare.

However, my expression softened the moment a vintage car caught my attention. My heart skipped a beat, my eyes misting, but I was quick to regain composure. It was a 1967 Aston Martin DBS—the exact one Dad used to own.

Memories of our family Sunday rides in that car flooded my mind, causing my heart to ache. My breaths were almost hard to catch as I fought to stay in control of my emotions.

I wasn't sure it was the same vehicle my dad used to drive until I saw the heart-shaped scratch somewhere above the left front tire. I'd drawn that as a kid—a testament to our family's love. Mom had scolded me that day, but Dad thought it was amazing to mark his car.

“Well, at least now, if the vehicle ever gets stolen, we have something unique to identify it with,” his voice echoed in my head, his smiley face flashing in my mind.

I blinked rapidly to hold back the tears that filled my eyes, my teeth gritting in the process. Discreetly, I drew in a series of breaths: in through my nose, out through my mouth.

After Dad was murdered, most of his property was sold off, and this car was no different. My blood boiled as I watched those greedy fucks admire the vehicle. The idea that one of those collectors here tonight would eventually buy my dad's Aston

Martin DBS caused my skin to crawl, filling me with rage.

A scowl settled on my face, my jaw clenching as my brows knitted together, creating deep creases on my forehead.

But despite my fury, I knew I had to stay focused—I couldn't let my emotions get the better of me. No matter how angry I was, I wouldn't let it affect my mission.

The event had commenced, and guests were all seated, their attention fixed on the auctioneer.

“Bidding starts at \$100,000; our first lot is the 1962 Ferrari 250...” the auctioneer began, standing on the podium.

As one of the assistants, it was my job to distribute the bidding cards to our esteemed guests, and while doing so, I navigated toward my target.

The plan was to stay in his sight, and I was working to achieve that goal. As I approached him, eyes avoiding his gaze, my hand trembled slightly, and the card slipped from my fingers.

It was orchestrated perfectly to look like an accident, and I immediately bent over to pick it up.

However, Roman's lightning-quick reflexes were fast enough, and he snatched the card from mid-air. My brows arched at his speed, my body trembling as his fingers brushed against mine.

Our eyes met, and he flashed a smirk, looking right at me. The intensity of his gaze made my heart race, my chest slowly heaving. His touch ignited a fire in me, and I stood frozen in shock at the feeling of ecstasy that jolted across my body in a split

second. This sensation had caught me off guard, forcing me to swallow in anxiety, my eyes slightly widening.

I cleared my throat. “I’m...I’m sorry—I didn’t mean to be—” My voice was low and soft.

“Clumsy?” he finished my statement, raising his eyebrows at me.

I let out an exhale, feeling my cheeks flush at the teasing look plastered on his face. It was sexy.

Shit. Julia, focus.

Extending a hand toward the card, Roman held it tantalizingly out of my reach. “You know, if I didn’t know better, I’d say you were stalking me.” He squinted at me.

I cocked my head to the side, a small smile playing on my lips. “Well, you took the words right out of my mouth.”

“If I did that literally, I’d leave you breathless,” he said, his tone hushed and husky, sending shivers down my spine.

“You’d like that, wouldn’t you?” I narrowed my eyes at him, savoring his enticing lips for a moment before getting a grip of myself.

Gracefully, I rose to my feet and stepped aside, returning to my position with a racing heart.

Fuck, fuck, fuck!

I shut my eyes momentarily, trying to compose myself as I struggled with the images



of our naked bodies against each other.

The memory of that night had ambushed me, and it was all that I could think about right now. My pussy tingled between my legs, as did my fingertips and nipples.

No, this can't be happening.

I rubbed my hands over my eyes, my mind flooded with these illicit thoughts.

When he touched me, he'd inflicted me with this dark desire that had now stolen my attention and focus. I hated that I was feeling this way. I was supposed to have control over my emotions, yet I kept going back to that night. My own moans came echoing in my head, as did his primal growl.

Shit.

Fuck you, Roman.

I stole a glance at him, pissed by the way his touch made me feel good.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:15 pm*

I slouched in my chair, eyelids drooping. My mouth slacked, relaxing into a slight pout. Every now and then, I checked my watch, my eyes glazing over with disinterest.

“And now, ladies and gentlemen, we have Lot 7,” the auctioneer's voice droned on. “The exquisite 2015 Lamborghini's Huracan with only 500 miles on it—a true marvel of Italian engineering. Bidding starts at \$300,000.”

At this point, nothing about this event was exciting—it was all just boring to me. What I wanted wasn't on display.

My eyes darted across the hall and settled on Julia as she stood at her position, balanced on those heels. Inarguably, she was the hottest and most beautiful assistant in the hall tonight.

Her alluring legs looked so enticing, and so did her model figure, as revealed by her tight, short skirt. My palm swiped over my mouth as I fixed my gaze on this perfect work of art meticulously sculpted by the Creator himself. Every curve, every inch of her gorgeous body, was a marvel I'd choose over these exotic cars any day.

Momentarily, she would steal glances at me, our eyes meeting for only a split second before she'd tear her gaze off me.

Something had happened to her when our hands touched minutes ago—I felt the spark of electricity between us, the tension that caused my chest to flutter for a moment. She definitely felt that, too, even though she'd masked it with an act of professionalism.

But I could see right through her.

When my skin had brushed against hers, she'd trembled, however subtle, her sultry lips parting slightly to allow a quiet gasp to escape. Her breath had hitched in her throat, and the shocked expression on her face exposed the sensation she experienced.

Even now, with this much distance between us, I could tell that she was struggling to remain composed. Each time I caught her eyes, their depths showed a glint of endearment.

I wouldn't take my eyes off her, and I couldn't stop smirking. I was enjoying the show—watching her fight to maintain composure.

Her shoulders tensed, then relaxed, and her weight shifted, distributed evenly on both feet. She drew in a deep breath, lifting her chin, and her eyes flew across the hall as if looking for an escape from my intense gaze. I watched as she pursed her lips, a tiny crease forming between her brows.

She straightened her spine, her mouth curling into a faint, self-deprecating smile. As my gaze lingered, I watched her nostrils flare, her pupils dilating—a subtle hint at the tension running through her.

I was loving this.

My eyes narrowed, that playful smirk still stuck on my face.

“Do I hear \$330,000? \$330,000?” the auctioneer's voice cut through my thoughts like a knife.

My eyes darted toward a bidder in the front row holding up his paddle.

“Thank you, sir. \$330,000 is it,” the auctioneer acknowledged. “Do I hear \$350,000?”

The bidder was Matthew Quintin, a greedy old fuck who had a reputation for lusting over young girls. My fingers clenched into fists as I watched him fix his eyes on Julia. His gaze roamed her body, and the idea that he was harboring illicit thoughts about her caused my skin to crawl. My jaw tightened, jealousy getting the better of me.

I hated that someone other than me had their eyes on her, and peering closely, I realized Matthew wasn't the only one lusting over her. A couple of men—the majority of whom I knew to be married—also seemed enchanted by her.

My forehead creased as a scowl settled on my face. I knew that I shouldn't be jealous, but I couldn't help it. Julia was different—she was special—and those dirty dogs were unworthy to even lick her shoes.

My only consolation was the fact that she wasn't paying attention to any of the sick fucks drooling over her. I was the only man in the hall she stole hidden glances at.

“\$350,000, going once, going twice. Sold! For \$350,000 to bidder number 14,” the auctioneer announced.

The event continued for the next hour or so, and I was bored to death with Julia as my only source of comfort and entertainment.

When it was finally over, I took my attention off her for barely a minute, and when I returned my gaze, she was gone. I sprang to my feet, eyes slightly widened in wonder, and roamed the hall, scanning for any sign of her.

“Excuse me,” I said softly, weaving through the crowd as I looked around, hoping she hadn't slipped through my fingers.

I exited the hall and stood poised at the hallway intersection, turning my head to survey both sides. Out here, the crowd was thin as most of the guests were still in the hall; however, a few stragglers lingered, exchanging quiet conversations.

Down the corridor, a door caught my attention—the staff room, slightly ajar—and a spark of hope ignited. Maybe she was in there.

I spotted Matthew and his associates, and without a second thought, I pivoted toward the staff room, eager to avoid their notice. Matthew had a knack for lengthy conversations; his penchant for that was legendary, and I was in no mood for small talk.

With a hand in my pocket, my shoes clicking softly against the polished marble floor, I glided over to the door and looked inside.

There she was, pacing back and forth with a phone to her ear. Her voice was hushed, so I couldn't hear her exact words.

Who is she talking to?

Julia had her head bowed. Her chin rested on her chest, fingertips gently rubbing over her eyebrows in a soothing motion. She was clearly listening to someone on the other line, but she seemed stressed and uneasy for some reason. Her eyes were closed, the lids twitching occasionally, and her lips were pursed. If her slumped shoulders were anything to go by, the conversation was draining her.

But despite all of this, she still looked so beautiful and sexy.

I stepped inside, my gaze locked on her.

She must have heard me come in, and her eyes darted toward the entrance. I watched

her breath cease at my appearance, her throat wobbling as she swallowed hard. Obviously, she was shocked to see me. Julia discreetly ended the call and set the phone down, eyes lingering on my form.

I furrowed my brows, wondering why there was a glimmer of fear in her eyes. She seemed terrified—bothered that I might have listened in on her conversation.

She would never cease to amuse me.

Why would I eavesdrop on her phone call?

Tonight, she seemed a lot more approachable compared to the last time we met. She exuded a welcoming atmosphere devoid of hostility, and as I stepped forward, her chest heaved slowly.

“Relax, I didn't come here to fight,” I said, a smirk dancing on my lips. “And you can rest assured that I didn't hear your phone conversation either.”

She let out a sigh, blinking rapidly, a wave of relief washing over her face.

“Just curious,” I stated, halting in front of her, my gaze unwavering. “Who were you talking to?”

Her eyes furrowed, head slightly tilting sideways with a faint grin. “Wouldn't you like to know?” Her tone was soft and inviting.

I scoffed, pinching the bridge of my nose as I decided not to pry further. She was much nicer and calmer tonight, and I couldn't risk ruining that.

So, I changed the subject.

“You’re everywhere I look,” I said, my voice low and husky as my eyes bore into hers. “Are you stalking me?”

“You wish,” she replied, her expression softening as she gazed back at me. “Maybe you're the one who's stalking me.” She wouldn't break eye contact, causing my chest to flutter. “Besides, you walked in here just to talk to me.”

I chuckled, bowing my head for a moment before returning my gaze to her face. “I noticed you didn't quit your job at Jupiter.”

The bartender had kept me informed of her activities at the club since our last encounter.

She squinted her eyes. “Now, who's stalking?”

“It's my nightclub. Keeping tabs on my employees is part of the job,” I replied, my gaze drawn to the subtle curves of her enticing lips.

“Is it now?” Her brows arched. “Or is it possible that you're just obsessed with me?” she asked tauntingly, turning around to grab her bag from a couch.

The shape of her ass caught my eye, prompting me to step closer, my hands resting on her waist from the back. “What if I am?” I gently pulled her to myself.

The air was filled with the scent of her perfume, mixing with that of my cologne, as her ass rested on my groin. She writhed against me, squirming out of my hold, but I wouldn't let go. I could feel her unease and sense her reluctance to resist me. The air around us was thick with sexual tension, and I was certain that she liked the way my erection was brushing gently against her ass.

My hands dared to caress the gentle swell of her bosom through the fabric of her

shirt. She moaned softly, attempting to pull away from me, but her heavy breaths and subtle grind over my boner betrayed her resistance.

A part of her was enjoying it.

With a delicate motion, I seized the nape of her neck, my fingers tracing down to her cleavage.

She trembled at my touch, sluggishly attempting to break free. “Roman, stop.” Her tone was low and sexy, hinting that she wanted the exact opposite of her words.

My hands roamed her curves and settled on her thighs. A soft gasp escaped her lips as my fingers climbed under the hem of her skirt. “Please, stop. I’m working,” she moaned, melting into my arms, her hands pulling mine off her thighs.

I smirked, knowing that she definitely wanted me as much as I wanted her.

“You’re gonna get me in trouble,” she added, the sweetness of her voice only making me harder.

I spun her around, pressing her waist against my groin, and fixed my gaze on her misted eyes. I squinted, wondering why she looked like she was about to cry. If she was enjoying this, why did she have tears in her eyes? Why was there a glint of guilt flashing in their depths?

What a mysterious woman.

Someone conspicuously cleared their throat, announcing their presence. Quickly, she pulled away from me, tugging down the hem of her skirt while simultaneously fixing her shirt. Her head was bowed in embarrassment as she stood coldly at a pace away from me.



I turned to face the man clad in a white suit. It was Ethan Michaelson, the manager of tonight's auction. With one last glance in her direction, I scoffed at how innocently she stood, unable to raise her head.

Digging a hand in my pocket, I stepped out of the room.

## Page 10

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:15 pm*

I shouldn't be feeling this way. His touch shouldn't have this effect on me. No.

I paced back and forth, absentmindedly chewing on my nails as I thought about how terrible this was for me.

This was all shades of bad—it was wrong from whatever perspective I chose to look at it. I couldn't let my feelings control me. I was supposed to be in charge, but sadly, I wasn't.

It had been four days since the auction, four days of distraction from my mission. No matter how hard I tried to focus on the task at hand, I always found myself reliving the night we'd fucked.

This hadn't happened before, and I'd thought that I was immune to his charms. Clearly, I wasn't. It was as if his touch had ignited the burning desire in me, and right now, all I wanted was him.

I wanted to feel him deep inside me again, to feel his breath on my skin, his tongue in my mouth, his strong arms all over my body. I wanted to taste him. Literally.

“No!” I slapped my forehead in frustration, my heart racing as my body tensed. “No, no, no, no! This cannot be happening,” I muttered, groaning with my eyes shut and my head jerked toward the ceiling.

I tried to remind myself why I was doing this, but the more I tried, the more I failed. It was as though my heart and my brain were at war, and neither was willing to lose.

I cupped my face in my palms, letting out a deep sigh as I slumped into a chair by my table. “What are you doing, Jules? You need to concentrate,” I said to myself, fingers massaging my temples in a shooting motion.

It was almost impossible to stay focused, especially with all these nasty thoughts that occupied my mind, leaving me sexually frustrated. I could feel my pussy tingle between my legs, my nipples standing erect. I was horny just thinking of him. Fuck.

My hands flew into my silky dark hair, smoothing it backward as my eyes widened at the effect Roman's touch was having on me. I couldn't get him out of my mind; I couldn't stop thinking about him. Why was that?

Roman was responsible for my parents' murder. My brother was numb and in the hospital because of him. His touch should repulse me; the mere thought of him should irritate me. Yet, none of that was the case here. It was the exact opposite.

How could I be attracted to the man who had made me an orphan, the man who had set me on the path of revenge?

My parents would be disappointed in me. I'd be letting them down if I continued like this. I'd be letting myself down.

I scratched the back of my head, fingers grazing over my scalp. My mind was ruined—too many things to juggle. It was chaotic, and I was stuck in this whirlwind of confusion. I knew my feelings were out of place, but I couldn't help it.

It felt like my brain was about to explode.

“Goddamn it.”

I rose to my feet again, hands on my head as I thought of a way out of this mess.

I was in desperate need of an escape plan, or I could risk ruining what I had spent years planning.

Maybe I should confess to Agent Anderson—maybe I should tell him how I felt. But on second thought, that would be a terrible idea. How would he look at me? He'd be disappointed, and he'd think that I didn't value my parents enough to want to avenge them.

I walked over to my full-length mirror and stood in front of it, staring at my reflection. “Take a deep breath, Julia,” I said to myself, following my own instructions. “In through your nose, out through your mouth.” I repeated the routine over and over again with closed eyes.

I needed to let go of this feeling. It was bad energy, and I needed it out of my system. The struggle was a tough one, and I fought to push these illicit thoughts to the back of my mind.

As light as a feather, I emptied my mind, feeling the tension slowly ooze out of me. I let go of the thoughts that held me bound all day, constantly reminding myself of the mission.

I remembered my parents' lifeless bodies, my brother's numbness at the gruesome sight—the PTSD he suffered. And just like that, I could feel all that lust seeping out of me. I buried whatever nasty ideas I'd cooked up in my head and occupied my mind with the mission. I'd come too far to mess it all up.

A wave of nausea hit me, causing my stomach to twist in discomfort. My palm reflexively flew to my mouth as I rushed to the restroom and dropped to my knees in front of the toilet seat.

For the next few seconds, I vomited what I'd had for breakfast, and just as I lifted my

head, I felt so dizzy. There was a ringing in my ears. My head was heavy, and it was aching badly—throbbing relentlessly.

I groaned in pain, wiping the back of my hand over my mouth as I flushed the toilet and rose to my feet. In front of the sink, I turned on the tap and slowly lowered my head to rinse my mouth and wash my face.

Once done, I jerked my head, watching my reflection in the bathroom mirror. With a towel, I wiped my face, wondering what had made me so nauseous. Was it what I'd eaten this morning? I only had coffee and some pancakes—nothing out of the ordinary. So, what happened?

I dug my fingers into my temples in an attempt to soothe the ache that plagued my heavy head. Hanging my towel back, I sluggishly glided out of the bathroom, rubbing my palms over my eyeballs in a massaging motion.

Back in my room, I tossed myself on my bed, battling with this sudden migraine that occupied one section of my head.

My TV had been turned on this entire time, but the chatter on the screen now seemed louder, prompting me to wince in agony. I grabbed the remote and turned down the volume.

Much better.

I let out a sigh, my fingers relentlessly pushing into my temples as I returned my thoughts to the mission.

The plan was working. Roman was starting to develop some sort of obsession for me. He was clearly interested in me now more than before. I'd managed to slip my way into his stone-cold heart, and now, it was time to move to the next phase.

All I had to do was get close enough to him so I could get my hands on the evidence needed to put him away for good.

Victory was close; I could feel it. I just needed to keep playing my part without any unnecessary distractions. It was the only way I was going to get back at him for what he'd done to my family.

I exhaled sharply, picking up my phone from the bed. I'd managed to persuade the manager at Jupiter to give me the boss' number, and now, staring at my lit screen, I typed in a text.

Hey, you busy? Can we talk? It's me, Julia.

I hit the send icon and tossed the phone aside, fingers rubbing over my forehead. The headache was killing me.

My eyes jerked at the TV, where a woman was being interviewed about some early signs of pregnancy. My breath ceased for a moment, and my brows furrowed as I fixed my gaze on the list of signs plastered on my screen.

Grabbing the remote, I turned up the volume just in time to hear her say, “Nausea, early morning sickness, fatigue, headaches, dizziness, swollen breasts, tiredness, loss of appetite—in some women, though, the reverse is the case; they tend to eat a lot.” She demonstrated with her hands as she spoke, her countenance exuding confidence and professionalism.

“What about a missed period?” the interviewer, a blonde woman in a black suit, asked the guest speaker, clad in a patterned red dress.

The guest speaker pressed her index against the bridge of her wire-rimmed glasses. “Well, that goes without saying.”

The two women burst out laughing, and the interviewer turned to face the camera. “You heard her, so check yourself. If you're having one or more or all of these symptoms, there's a 99.9 percent chance that you're pregnant.”

Instantly, my brain began to run some calculations, analyzing everything I'd just heard. My heart was pounding in my chest as I realized that I had been experiencing a lot of these symptoms for the past few days now—tiredness, fatigue, headache, dizziness, and now nausea.

My eyes widened, and my breath hitched in my throat as I tried to recall the last time I had my period.

Shit!

My hand flew to my mouth in fear as it finally hit me. I'd been so busy chasing after Roman that I didn't realize I'd missed my period by two weeks, and it'd been a little over a month since we had sex.

“No.”

My jaw dropped at the possibility that I just might be carrying Roman's baby inside me.

How fucked up was that?

My body stiffened, and I sat there, frozen in shock, overwhelmed by a sudden cold that caused my body to shudder.

This is bad. This is really bad.

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:15 pm*

Eyes narrowing down at the pool table in front of me, I bent over, cue stick positioned to align with deadly precision. I could feel their gazes lingering on me, especially Afanasy's intense stare—he clearly was rooting for a rotten shot.

I raised my head to look at his face for a moment, savoring the skepticism in his expression. With a smirk playing on my lips, I returned my focus to the task at hand, and seconds later, I struck the cue ball with a smooth motion.

The sound of clanking balls rolling over the surface filled the air as the table erupted into colorful chaos. The cue ball had kissed the 7-ball, sending it spinning into the corner pocket.

At my shot, solids and stripes careened off rails, colliding and rebounding in unpredictable patterns. I jerked my head, watching as Afan's eyes trailed the balls scattering across the table.

Afan's breath hitched in his throat as he squinted, watching the 9-ball roll tantalizingly close to the center pocket. “Damn it,” he cursed under his breath as the ball finally fell in.

“Nice shot, Roman,” Mikhail said, his brows arching at the precision of my strike.

“Don't praise him. He got lucky.” Afan grinned, unphased, and locked eyes with me.

“Dude, you've lost to him three times already,” Mikhail said, chuckling, his eyes crinkling at the corners. “In a fucking row.” He laughed.



“Yeah, well, as the saying goes, third time's the charm.” His lips curled into a sly smile. “Or, as in this case, the fourth time's the charm.” He let out an evil laugh, chalking his cue stick.

Boris, leaning against the wall, raised an eyebrow at Afan's confidence, his expression softening ever so slightly.

Mikhail lined up his shot, his focus intense, but the cue stick slipped, veering the ball off target. Unworried, he shrugged off his failed attempt. “You know what they say about pride, Afan?” He looked at him, referencing his earlier boast.

“It's not pride, cousin. It's called confidence. You should try it sometimes,” Afan replied, his voice laced with amusement and his tone teasing but not mocking.

Mikhail chuckled, stealing a glance at me.

“I'll take you down, brother. Watch.” Afan bent over to take his shot, his eyes narrowing at the cue balls with rapt attention.

Boris and Mikhail both had their gazes lingering on him while I stood poised, arms across my chest, with a smile on my face. I knew my brother better than he would ever admit; he was going to flop. And I couldn't wait to see the look in his eyes.

“You don't have all day. Just take the shot,” Boris chipped in, his voice dripping with anticipation.

“Hey, don't rush greatness, okay? I'm about to break the record here,” came Afan's response, his eyes never leaving the ball.

“Your trash talk isn't gonna help you much, you know,” Mikhail said to him, brows arching.

“You're distracting me, cousin. I'm trying to focus here,” Afan said, seemingly becoming one with the table, the balls, and the cue stick in his hand.

Mikhail raised his hands slightly, backing away with a low chuckle.

We watched as Afan tightened his grip on the cue stick, squinting and moving his hands in tandem to align the tip with the cue ball. Afan's index finger slid along the length of the stick as if finding a good balance point.

The air was thick with anticipation, and then, finally, my brother took the shot, striking the cue ball with perfect precision.

However, as I'd already predicted, the target ball was clipped at the wrong angle, causing it to spin into the side rails. The ball bounced off and soon came to rest inches from the pocket.

Mikhail burst out laughing. “After all that concentration, you still missed.”

“Looks like the fourth time isn't the charm after all,” Boris said, his voice low and mocking as he flashed a faint smirk.

I narrowed my eyes at him, keeping my tone playful. “Maybe you should have tapped the table four times.”

“That was just a warm-up shot, people,” Afan said, straightening, unphased by our mocking remarks. “I'm saving the magic for the next one.” He winked, chuckling.

We all laughed.

There was never a dull moment with these guys; hanging out with them was the perfect distraction for me.

At least I was focused on something that wasn't Julia. The woman had been on my mind all day, every day since the auction. Thoughts of what would have happened between us if her manager hadn't interrupted constantly played in my head.

I still wondered why she'd had misted eyes, though—why I saw that guilt in their depths—but I didn't want to dwell on that right now. I was with the boys, and I shouldn't be thinking about Julia at the moment.

“Hey, I've been meaning to ask,” Mikhail jerked his head at me. “What about the hostess from the other night?” Curiosity flashed in his gaze.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah?” Afan concurred, nodding as he shifted his attention to me. “The intelligent one with the sexy body.” There was a glimmer of lust in his tone that made my jaw clench. “Did you have any luck with her? Because damn, she was fine—a drop-dead gorgeous diva. I mean, look at that shape.” He gestured with his hands, air molding her figure.

I felt the deep creases lining my forehead, and my eyebrows furrowed at him, hinting at my disapproval of his lust.

“Did you see her legs? Man, she was a knockout.” Mikhail chuckled, swinging his cue stick over his shoulder.

The anger in me was swelling up, and my chest was starting to heave slowly. I didn't appreciate their tone or the way they painted her as some hooker.

“Brother, she was totally into you,” Afan said to me, oblivious to the scowl on my face. “Please tell me you fucked her because if you didn't, I just might shoot my shot.” He laughed.

“Do that, and I'll forget you're my brother when I put a bullet in your chest.” I glared

at him, my eyes narrowing and jaw clenching.

He swallowed, his smile gradually vanishing as he saw just how stern my gaze was. Afan knew he'd overstepped—he'd crossed one of my lines.

“Apologies, brother. I meant no disrespect.” His hands were raised slightly in a defensive motion. He locked his eyes with me, finding his smile again. “You like her, don't you?” Afan teased, his grin widening. “That's why you're defending her.”

“What's going on, boys?” The familiar voice shifted our attention to the speaker as he approached us, followed by the distinctive stomp of his walking stick on the floor.

“Uncle Ivan,” we chorused, heads bowing in reverence.

“We're just teasing Roman about some girl he fancies,” Mikhail added, bringing our uncle into the fold.

I shifted my glare at my cousin, but he refused to look in my direction; his eyes were fixed on Uncle Ivan.

The old man's brows arched, amusement washing over his face. “Roman fancies a girl? It's about time.” He chuckled, halting in front of me with Jorah standing by the bar.

“Yeah, but he doesn't wanna admit it,” Afan said, resting against a wall behind him.

Uncle Ivan looked at me and laughed, placing a palm on my shoulder. “You should be thinking about settling down and starting a family now, Roman. You've come of age.”

I scoffed, pinching the bridge of my nose. I was certain some heartwarming speech

was on the way, and I honestly wasn't ready for that now.

“You know,” he began, a smile playing on his lips, “my babushka used to say a woman is the warmth that makes a house a home.” He paused, his gaze unwavering. “I think you're ready for that warmth, Roman.” He tapped my shoulder. “Get yourself a wife—a good one—because a good wife is like a good shot of vodka; she'll warm your heart and soothe your soul.”

“Ahh. That's a good one, Uncle,” Afan said, nodding his head in agreement.

I let out a sigh but said nothing, although deep down, I knew he was right.

He looked deeper into my eyes, and a small grin spread across his face. “You know, girls from our allied families would be a perfect match for you, nephew.”

I raised my brows in disbelief, but he continued regardless. “What do you think of the Petrov girls? I hear they're of good behavior, and the eldest daughter is ripe for marriage, too.” He winked at me.

My expression was blank, my countenance radiating disinterest as I stared at him.

“No?” His eyes narrowed, and he pressed on. “What about the Kuznetsov or even Sokolov family? A union with any of them would be beneficial to the Bratva and also strengthen our alliances.”

“Thanks, Uncle,” I said, forcing a grin. “But I don't need any matches. I'll get married to whoever I want when I feel like it.”

The disappointment in his gaze was subtle, but it was there—I could see it.

He nodded, breaking eye contact for a moment. “You still think about her, don't you?”

Emily?”

My blood boiled at the mention of her name, and my jaw tightened. My scowl deepened, my forehead creased, and my brows knitted together in anger as buried memories came flooding my mind.

Her face flashed in my head, and I could hear the sound of her laughs—her giggles. Her voice echoed in my thoughts, causing my heart to race.

“It's been twenty-one years already, nephew. Please, let go of her ghost,” he beseeched, pleading with his eyes.

I gritted my teeth, casting a stern glare at him—if he wasn't my uncle, I wasn't sure what I wouldn't have done to him for making that statement.

Silence fell amongst us as I continued to seethe, fingers balling into fists. Everyone else in the room knew better than to raise that subject around me; they knew that saying that name always triggered me.

Emily used to be the love of my life. I wasn't always so cold and devoid of emotions. There was a time when I was a lover boy who would do anything for my sweet Emily.

However, sweet turned sour and bitter when the unexpected happened, forcing me to become the man I was today.

I glared at Uncle Ivan, eyes blazing with unspoken anger as my intense silence radiated across the room. Avoiding my piercing stare, the others cast their heads down, none saying a word.

He realized that he'd made a mistake bringing up Emily.

Uncle sighed softly. “I’m sorry, Roman. I didn’t mean to trigger you.”

This rage would pass, and I would eventually hate the way I glared at Uncle Ivan. It wasn’t his intention to upset me—he was just being a parent.

It was clear that I hadn’t completely healed from that wound; it still hurt so much like it was yesterday. He was right. I still carried her ghost around, and that was the reason I shut myself out. Emily had been my world, and when that world crumbled to the ground, I withdrew into the shadows, becoming one with the darkness that enveloped my life.

I thought I’d made peace with my demons, but obviously, I hadn’t.

My chin rested against my chest as I rubbed my fingers over my eyeballs in a soothing motion. My mind was chaotic; I was fighting to bury those fond memories creeping back to the surface. I couldn’t let them in.

I couldn’t let myself feel all that pain again; it would be catastrophic, and that was the last thing I needed right now.

My eyes shut for a fleeting moment as I drew in a breath and let it out slowly, pushing these heartbreaking memories to the back of my mind.

I heard my phone chime, distracting me from my thoughts. Digging a hand into my pocket, I withdrew the device, my eyes darting at the lit screen.

It was a text.

You busy? Can we talk? It’s me, Julia.

The sight of her name sent a wind of relief across my face, filling my heart with

peace and calmness.

I put the phone back in my pocket and let out a soft exhale.

This was the perfect way to get my mind off these drowning memories.



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*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:15 pm*

I wasn't sure this was a good idea.

Holding up a beautiful red dress to my front side, I stared into the full-length mirror, picturing the high-slit gown on my body.

It was my favorite outfit—a classy spaghetti-strapped dress with delicate, beaded lace that trimmed the neckline and hem. It had small sequins that sparkled like diamonds in the lights.

“Too much?” I muttered to myself, swaying left and right with a gentle motion as I checked out the dress.

My shoulders slumped in dismay as I lay the gown on the bed.

I let out a sigh, my head slightly bowed as I rubbed my fingers over my eyeballs, disappointed at my inability to pick an outfit. It was just a stupid date. Why couldn't I decide on a dress to wear? This was the third one, and still, my mind wasn't made up.

It was as though I was subconsciously trying to impress him.

I wanted to look good for him. It was part of the plan—getting him hooked. But this time, it was different. I could tell that I wanted to impress him, not because it aligned with my agenda but because, deep down, I cared about what he would think when he saw me. And that alone was scary as fuck.

I jerked my face up, looking in the mirror, clad in a white robe with a white towel wrapped around my head. “You're getting distracted, Julia. Focus.”

It felt like this was Julia Gray talking to Julia Sawyer. I was a fucking mess.

“You're on a mission—a quest for revenge. Stick to the plan, and you'll be fine,” I said, encouraging myself with a faint smile.

I took one last look at my reflection in the mirror before striding across the room and heading to the closet. I slid the door open, and the neatly organized array of shoes came into view.

“Hmm.” I scrunched my lips, index finger playfully tapping on my chin as I made a face, eyes scanning the row.

Eventually, my gaze settled on my favorite pair of heels—sleek black stilettos that added a touch of excellence to any outfit. “Perfect.” I grabbed them and glided back to the room.

Dropping my heels at the base of the bed, I slipped out of my robe, letting it pool around my feet. The fabric whispered against the floor as I stepped away, catching a glimpse of my toned figure in the mirror.

I removed the towel from around my head and reached for the dress on the bed. Sliding into it, I felt its fine, silky fabric crawl over my pale skin like a soft caress. The gown clung to my curves, highlighting my slender waist and contours.

I strolled back to the mirror, smoothing my manicured hands over the elegant dress, admiring how it hugged my skin and accentuated my figure. He'd love it, I was sure, and for some reason, that certainty prompted a smile on my face.

Damn. He's done a number on you, hasn't he? a tiny voice spoke in my head, and immediately, my mind was invaded by the images of his hands traveling up my thighs.

A flutter stirred in my chest, and a shiver ran through me as I recalled his touch back in the staff room the other night. There was a tingle between my legs, so soft and sweet that it had me biting my lower lip.

For the next few minutes, I let myself sink into the memory of that night, wondering what would have happened if my manager hadn't interrupted.

I still couldn't comprehend how his touch had managed to ignite a flame of passion within me. I should have been repulsed by his touch or the mere thought of him—irritated, disgusted. But I wasn't, and that was the problem.

Does this mean I'm going soft? Does it mean that I'm...?

No. I'd rather not think about such things. He was the enemy, and that was all that he was ever going to be to me. Nothing more, nothing less.

This dinner date was just another way to get into his head, but it was still part of the plan.

Just as I reassured myself that it would all be in my favor in the end, that pesky little voice echoed in my head again: You're carrying his child; don't forget. Do you know how bad that is?

My breath hitched in my throat, and my eyes widened as I swallowed hard.

This was beyond terrible—it was a fucking disaster. I'd tried so hard not to think about it, considering I couldn't do much about the situation. But then I was reminded of this impending doom.

I had yet to come to terms with the fact that I was indeed carrying his baby. I was pregnant with the baby of the man who had killed my parents and put my brother in a

hospital. There was no better way to put it. I'd messed up, and now it was important to fix this.

The only way out of this was to have an abortion, but I didn't think I could live with myself if I did that. The baby in my womb was innocent and had no part in all of this.

This was my fault. I should've been more careful. I'd laid my bed, but it was way too uncomfortable to lay on now.

Aborting the baby was a no-no. But I couldn't keep it either. I'd die of shame, and if, for some reason, I survived, I'd live a life of regret. My bad decision would haunt me for as long as I lived.

My hands flew into my hair, smoothing it backward as I tried to calm my nerves. The situation was worse than I had thought, and I was terrified of thinking deeply, dreading what I'd decide in the end.

From the way I saw it, there was no way that I was getting out of this unscathed. In the end, whatever choices I made would have a heavy price; they would cost me, and I'd have to live with the consequences.

I let out a sigh, staring at the woman in the mirror, Julia Gray, wearing a serious expression. "Whatever happens, you've come too far to back down now. We'll deal with whatever lies in the future when the time comes. But for now, we have a mission to complete."

A smile spread across my face as I pushed the negativity to the back of my head.

A sharp exhale escaped my lips, and I brushed my fingers through my hair, giving it a final touch as it cascaded down my shoulders.

I glided over to the bed and sat on the edge as I slipped into the sleek black stilettos. The soft leather enveloped my feet as I bent over to lock the delicate ankle straps, securing them in place.

I rose with a gentle tug, shoulders squaring as I straightened. I walked over to my purse, which was resting on a table. With each graceful step, my heels clicked against the floor, and soon, I stopped in front of the table by the window.

A car pulled over outside my single-story apartment, the gentle hum of its engine filling the air.

Shifting my gaze out the window, I saw a sleek black Porsche parked in front of the building, its headlights flashing three times.

It was him. Roman Tarasov.

I held back the smile threatening to break through as I watched him step out of the car in his signature black suit.

He jerked his head toward my window, and we locked eyes, my heart skipping a beat. Roman grinned at me, and I couldn't help but return the favor—I couldn't stop myself this time, even if I wanted to. He leaned against his car, one leg effortlessly crossed over the other, his stylish nonchalance exuding poised sophistication.

His eyes were fixed on his phone, thumb swiping through the lit screen as the illumination cast a soft glow on his handsome face.

I looked away, picked up my purse, and headed out of my apartment.

While descending the steps, I let out a series of sharp exhales in an attempt to regain control of my emotions. “Calm down, Julia. It's not a real date. It's not a real date,” I

said to myself over and over again.

Downstairs, I gave the front door a gentle push, and it swung open, revealing the fine man leaning against his car—a vehicle that could impress any woman.

Under the crescent moon and the twinkling stars, I sashayed over to him with a small smile on my lips. He looked so dashing in that impeccably tailored black suit, and as I drew closer, my eyes roamed over his masculine form. I swallowed subtly, drinking in the sight of this ravishing man.

His fitted black blazer highlighted his broad shoulders, their sleeves hugging his muscles. Meanwhile, his black undershirt and dark pants accentuated his sophisticated looks.

Roman straightened as I approached him, his eyes lighting up and brows arching. “Wow. You look amazing,” he remarked, lips curling into a sly smile.

A gentle warmth spread across my cheeks as they flushed at his husky voice, laced with admiration. His remark sent shivers down my spine, coaxing a genuine smile out of me.

“Thank you,” I said, my voice barely above a whisper, eyes darting to the floor.

With a fluid motion, he glided over to me, his steps graceful as he extended a hand to claim mine.

Slowly, I jerked my eyes to his rigid form, my lips trembling at the effort to suppress a smile.

He smirked, his gaze sweeping across my body. “Shall we?”

Finally, I gave in to the grin twitching at the corners of my mouth and took his hand.

Roman led me to his car, the moonlight casting a silver glow on the polished surface. We settled in, the plush leather crunching under our weights as I took the front passenger seat. The air, thick with the rich essence of premium leather, was cool and refreshing.

He started the engine, its gentle purr vibrating through the interior as the car came alive. His eyes stole one last look at me before he drove away into the night.

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The car came to a halt outside a sleek modern building that shimmered in the moonlight. Its magnificent facade hinted at the luxury within.

He killed the engine and stepped out of the car while I did the same, my eye taking in the surrounding area. I watched him toss his keys at the valet, who caught them with practiced precision.

Roman appeared over at my side, taking my hand. As his skin grazed against mine, the contact ignited a spark within me. I drew a deep breath, savoring his touch with rapidly blinking eyelids.

Together, we headed into the building, with him holding up the door for me. My brows rose at the gesture; I honestly hadn't expected him to be such a gentleman. I didn't know that he had it in him. Now, I was left to wonder what else he was hiding that I was yet to find out.

"Thank you," I said softly, stepping inside with a wide smile that couldn't have been helped.

As we skidded through the restaurant's lobby, the *maître d'*, a gray-haired man probably in his late fifties with a mustache, clad in his tailored tuxedo, greeted Roman by name.

“Good evening, Mr. Tarasov.” He smiled courteously, his voice dripping with a British accent and eyes warm with familiarity. “Your table is set on the rooftop as you requested.”

“Thank you, Alfred,” Roman replied, his grin faint.

Alfred led the way, and we followed him through the crowded dining room filled with the soft hum of quiet conversations and occasional giggles. Glassware clinked every now and then as smiley faces engrossed in their conversation carried on with their activities.

A mix of expensive scents wafted through the atmosphere, adding to the interior's ambience. Chandeliers hung from the ceiling, their soft glow enveloping the space.

As we strolled behind Alfred, I could feel the eyes on me—heads turned as we passed by. Roman, noticing the looks in our direction, pulled me to himself with a possessive hold. He clearly was proud to show me off.

We stepped into the elevator, and all through the lift, his hand never left mine. Soon, a soft chime announced our arrival at the rooftop.

The elevator doors slid open, revealing a breathtaking oasis above the city that melted my heart. The man might be an evil bastard, but he had good taste; that was for sure.

“Your spot, sir,” said Alfred, gesturing at a table nestled among lush greenery.

“Thank you,” Roman replied as we both stepped out of the elevator.



Alfred bowed slightly and excused himself, heading back down.

It was cold up here, and the view was insane. I could see the city's nightlife bustling, its twinkling lights stretching before us like diamonds. The sound of a gentle fountain, soft jazz, and distant sirens wafted through the air in a perfect blend.

“It's beautiful,” I said, drawing a deep breath as I felt the gentle breeze wash over my face, rustling my hair.

“I figured you'd appreciate the view,” he said, eyes crinkling at the corners.

A smile played on my lips, and I watched him pull out my chair, his hand grazing mine as he seated me. “Thank you,” I said, eyes dropping to the floor as I tried to mask the blush on my cheeks.

He took a seat across from me, his eyes never leaving me as I avoided his gaze.

The aroma of roasted vegetables and herbs from the dishes already set on the table filled the air, teasing my taste buds. The table itself was set with fine china glassware, a variety of dishes and a chilled bottle of 2015 Dom Pérignon nestled in a bucket of ice.

Among the dishes were a delicate plate of pan-seared scallops and a plate of perfectly grilled filet mignon paired with a rich demi-glace.

Roman lifted the bottle, expertly popped the cork, and poured the golden liquid into our glasses. Once done, he set the bottle on the table and handed me my glass, the bubbles dancing in the soft moonlight.

Our fingers touched as I accepted the glass, feeling a shiver run through my spine.

“Cheers to a lovely evening,” he said, his voice smooth and charming.

“Cheers,” I replied in the same tone, taking a sip of the fine wine; its fantastic taste danced on my tongue. “So,” I began, setting my glass aside, “you and Alfred seem cozy.”

He leaned back in his chair, letting out a quiet scoff.

I fixed my gaze on him, a playful glint in my eyes. “Tell me, how many women have you brought here aside from me?”

He arched his brows with a smirk. “Why do you think I’ve brought women here?”

“I don’t know,” I said, my eyes discreetly roaming his form. “Maybe because it appears you come here often.”

He laughed lightly, shaking his head as he adjusted forward. “Yes, I do come here sometimes—to clear my head. It’s a good spot to sit down and reflect.” He paused and added almost immediately, “But contrary to what you might think, I always come alone.”

I smiled, my cheeks flushing at the special treatment. “And you expect me to believe that?” I teased him.

“Yes,” he said, his gaze unwavering. “Because it’s the truth.”

For the next few seconds, it was silent between us, and his eyes wouldn’t stop boring into mine.

I was speechless, and despite my attempts to veer the conversation toward something less charged, I simply couldn’t find the words.

“So, Julia Sawyer,” he said, finally breaking the silence. “What's the mystery behind you?” His eyes narrowed at me as he spoke.

My brows furrowed, my heart skipping a beat as I wondered why he'd asked what he did. “What do you mean?” I inquired, pinning my gaze on him.

He flashed a sly smile. “Well, you're like a complex piece of machinery—a puzzle that I just can't figure out,” he said, watching me. “It's fascinating how you always throw me off each time I think I'm starting to understand you.”

I laughed, relieved that he wasn't on to me. “I don't know if I should be worried or flattered.” I battered my eyelashes at him as I sipped from my glass.

He grinned, relaxing in his chair and drumming his fingers on the table. “I guess what I'm trying to say is that I'd like to know you better.”

“Hmm.” I savored the wine in my mouth before swallowing. “What do you wanna know?”

He hesitated for a while, brows arched. “Your family,” he said, eyes fixated on me. “Tell me about them. I'd like to know the people who raised an intelligent woman such as yourself.”

I felt a pang of vexation mixed with pain slowly swelling up within me, lighting my skin on fire.

How dare he ask me that? How dare he bring up that memory?

My jaw tightened slightly, and my chest was starting to heave. It was cold up here, but my blood was boiling.

Calm down, Julia, I chided. You can't let him see that you're upset. Roman's smart. We don't want him asking too many questions.

This was definitely Julia Gray talking.

I heaved a sigh, instantly cooking up a story. “Well, I never really, um.... I never really knew them that much, you know?” The slight pause came when I cleared my throat. “Turns out I was such an ugly baby that my parents rejected me.” I locked eyes with him, tapping into my hurt and pain so I could sell the story with more emotions.

“What do you mean?” he asked, brows knitting in confusion and gaze flashing with curiosity.

“They gave me up for adoption the moment I was born,” I replied, eyes misting with a nasty stinging. “Looks like I was too much of a burden, so they abandoned me. How can you abandon your own baby—your own blood?” Tears rolled down my cheeks at the thought of my parents’ death. I sniffed, drying my tears. “Anyway, I spent half my life in foster care—tossed around from one family to the other, rejected over and over again until I came of age.”

His expression was flat, his eyes still fixated on me. Roman was quiet and attentive, so I was careful not to flop, and it seemed like I was doing a good job at selling my made-up story.

“I've been on my own ever since, busting my ass out so I can make a name for myself.” My gaze bore into his, and I added, “So, I can achieve my goal...no matter what.”

A soft scowl settled on my face.

He had no idea I was talking about him in my last statement. He was my goal, my mission, and I would stop at nothing until he'd atoned for his sins.

I let out a deep breath, wiping my tears as I tried to remain composed.

“Hey,” he called out, leaning forward. “In the end, you turned out fine—more than fine. You should be proud of yourself for making it this far all on your own.” He smiled at me, eyes crinkling at the corners. “What didn't kill you only made you stronger.”

Ironically, his words and voice were comforting, soothing my broken heart. How could the one who had hurt me make me feel so comfortable? It didn't make sense at all.

“Anyway,” he said, adjusting in his chair, “let's change the subject, shall we?” Roman's lips curled up into a grin. “I saw the way you looked at the 1967 Aston Martin DBS during the auction.”

My eyes jerked up immediately as a myriad of thoughts overlapped in my mind.

Roman's gaze narrowed, his expression solemn for a moment when he asked, “Did you know the Grays?”

My breath hitched in my throat, and my brain shut down immediately.

Does he know who I am? Did my story give me away? Fuck.

Now, I was starting to question whether or not I was going to survive the night.

As he looked at me with that stern expression, I felt a strand of cold sweat trickling down my forehead. My legs had completely turned to jelly, and my heart was

pounding in my chest.

Now what?

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:15 pm*

Her pupils dilated, the color draining from her eyes as she stared at me, her brows slightly knitting together. For a moment there, she seemed nervous, like my question had triggered something.

I watched her gaze flicker, eyelids drooping ever so slightly, and, as if thinking about her response, her lips parted, then closed. She blinked a few times, her hand reaching for her glass. Fingers brushing against the stem, she gripped it, eyes roaming my form.

Julia took a sip, her tongue darting out with a delicate motion to capture the lingering droplets on her enticing lips.

Her poise reasserted itself just before I could register her fleeting hesitation. Her shoulders relaxed, and she leaned back in her chair, gracefully cradling the glass. Her hazel eyes sparkled with mischief, a sly grin playing on her lips.

My head tilted to the side, brows arching at the sudden shift in her countenance that left me wondering if I'd imagined the subtle signs of her nervousness.

Julia was a wonder, an enigma—a master of reinvention, constantly shifting like a mirage. She was always one step ahead of my understanding of her. It was as though her mystery deepened each time I saw her.

Whenever I thought I was close to grasping a glimpse of her essence, she would switch so deftly, eluding my grasp and leaving me perpetually intrigued.

Her ability to become an elusive siren, luring me deeper into the labyrinth of her soul

with little or no effort at all, was fascinating. She was a puzzle I had yet to solve, a puzzle whose patterns were constantly rearranging themselves, knocking me off course each time I got close.

“Why do you ask?” she questioned, her voice smooth and confident.

I relaxed back, my fingers drumming against the table. “That vintage car is one of a kind, and it belonged to Anthony Gray—CEO and founder of Gray Consolidated.” My gaze on her form lingered. “So, it's either you knew the man or his family...or you're just a sucker for good cars. Which is it?”

She sipped from her glass and set it down beside her plate. “You talk like you knew him—Anthony Gray.” Her eyes jerked to look at me. “Were you two close? Friends, maybe?”

An abrupt, dismissive laugh escaped my lips. “Friends?” My brows rose at the absurdity of her assumption. “I don't think there's a universe in the multiverse where Gray and I could be friends.”

“Really?” she asked, intrigued, yet her expression was flat. “Why's that?”

I drew in a deep breath, hating the idea of having to talk about a deceased rival. “When he was alive, Anthony Gray and I...we never really saw eye to eye. I hated his guts as much as he hated mine.”

The man was dead, and despite our differences, the thought of him never triggered any emotion. None whatsoever. I was simply giving an honest answer to a pretty woman's question.

“But why, though?” she asked, her voice dripping with curiosity, her eyes never leaving my face. “Why did you hate him so much? Did he do something to you?”



“Well, now you're twisting my words.” I groaned lightly, leaning forward. “I didn't say that I hated him—I said that we hated each other. It was mutual.” I let out a soft exhale. “Anthony Gray was a formidable businessman, as was I. As such, we had conflicting ideas and interests, resulting in our enmity,” I further explained, my voice laced with condescension. “He was a self-righteous man who believed he could change the world by doing good.” A scoff came forth. “Look where that got him: six feet under.”

With both her elbows on the table, fists under her chin, she watched me in silence, her expression unreadable.

I poured myself another glass, the Dom Pérignon flowing like liquid gold into the crystal as faint whispers of oak and citrus wafted through the air. “I may have despised the man but he did have an impressive taste in cars.” I set down the bottle and yanked my glass by the stem. “Like the 1967 Aston Martin DBS.”

“Yeah,” she said, emptying her glass with a single shot. “The car is definitely one of a kind.”

“Refill?” I gestured at the towering bottle.

“Yes, please,” she said, extending her glass.

“I was so distracted during the auction that I didn't buy the car.” My eyes jerked at her as I poured more wine into her glass. “Perhaps I'll buy it from the man who did.”

She accepted her glass and took a gulp before settling it on the table. It was like she was trying to mask her emotions, and even though she was looking at me with a straight face, I could sense that something was off.

“You seem uncomfortable by my opinion about Anthony Gray,” I said, pinning my

gaze on her. “Why?”

She hesitated for a moment, fingers rubbing over her eyeballs. “It's just....” Julia exhaled sharply. “It's terrible what happened to the Gray family—I mean, they were incredibly influential in Chicago.”

Yeah. They were, I thought.

“Gray Consolidated used to be one of the fastest-growing companies in the county, and then....” She scoffed, shaking her head, her voice rising slightly above normal as she spoke, “Poof! They lost everything. Mother and father, dead. The sister, missing. The brother, hospitalized.” Her tone softened, dripping with empathy. “So, pardon my reaction. I get uncomfortable with stories like this.” She grabbed her glass and took another sip.

“It was horrible what happened to the Grays. But shit happens,” I replied, my tone flat and devoid of emotion.

The fall of the house of Gray was beneficial to the Tarasov Bratva, so in the end, something good came out of Anthony's demise.

With Gray Consolidated being out of business, no rival was strong enough to oppose the Bratva. He had been our major competitor, and when he was finally out of the way, we had a million and one reasons to celebrate.

No hard feelings. It was just business.

I watched her lean back, heaving a heavy sigh as she tried to regain composure. The story about the incident with the Gray family had messed with her more than she cared to admit.

Obviously, she was the emotional type, and at least I was sure of one thing about her: She was easily triggered by painful stories—tragedies.

I wondered how she would react, knowing that my family and I specialized in ruining lives—especially the lives of those whom we saw as a threat to the family business. If she got triggered by stories about the oppressed, then she'd definitely freak out knowing that I was an oppressor to anyone in my way.

I wasn't sure whether or not she knew about my family business—the real deal, not the legal section I managed.

Maybe she did. Maybe she didn't.

“You seem to know a lot about the Grays,” I said, interested in her response.

“Yeah, there's a lot you can find out on the internet these days,” she replied, her tone smooth and confident. “Plus, in my leisure time, I like to read about powerful and influential families.”

“Is that so?” My brows arched at her revelation.

She nodded, a faint grin lining a corner of her lips.

Fascinated, I leaned forward, arms on the table with my eyes fixed on her. “Tell me, what other families have you read about?”

She edged closer, her gaze intent and flickering with mischief. “Is this a roundabout way of asking if I've read about your family?” Her tone was laced with flirtation, her eyelashes battering at me with a sexy look.

“Maybe.” My reply was casual as I stared right at her. “I'm curious to know what you

read about us on your precious internet,” I added.

She chuckled softly. “Are you now?”

My smirk widened as I discreetly checked her out, drinking in her gorgeous body and pretty face.

“Well, from what I've gathered, the Tarasov family is a highly influential and respected business dynasty in Chicago—not to mention feared. I'm not sure why, but a lot of people seem to be afraid of your last name.”

That remark gladdened my heart.

She continued, “Your family's influence extends far and wide with interest in virtually every major industry in the city and has also established itself as a dominant force in American business.” Julia's lips curled into a smile. “If you ask me...that's fascinating.”

I didn't think I'd met anyone who praised my family the way that she did, and her words warmed my heart. She left out the mafia part of the family—the most important part.

Two things: Either she purposely avoided the subject, or she simply had no clue who we truly were.

“Anyway,” she said, adjusting in her chair as she cleared her throat, “I, uh...I asked to meet up with you because...I'd like to apologize for my behavior lately—especially the way I acted the other night at the club.” Her eyes dropped to the floor, then returned to my face.

My brows rose in surprise. “I'll be honest with you; I wasn't expecting that.”

When would I ever get to understand her? The woman was a piece of work.

“Well, the way I spoke to you was unethical and....” She paused, taking her eyes off me for a moment, her voice dropping to almost a whisper. “I was outta line, and my behavior was inexcusable. I let my emotions get the better of me, and for that, I'm sorry.” She exhaled softly. “Please, don't fire me. I need the job.”

The corners of my mouth twitched, and I was sure a hint of amusement was dancing in my eyes as I held her gaze. “Apologizing, Julia?” I scoffed, my voice dripping with sarcasm as I leaned in my chair. “I didn't think you had it in you.”

“I've got bills to pay, and my pride won't cover them,” she said, her lips quivering as she tried to suppress a smile.

“I never had any intention of firing you, Julia,” I replied, my gaze unwavering. “You're a valuable asset to the club, and I'm not about to let you go.” My expression softened, eyes boring into hers.

A bright smile spread across her face as she relaxed in her chair. “Do you mean as my boss or...” she trailed off, leaving the question hanging.

I felt her foot slowly teasing my leg underneath the table. Her eyes sparkled with mischief, and her lips curled into a sultry, inviting curve.

The warmth of her gaze enveloped me, prompting a faint grin on my face as I looked at her with furrowed brows. “You're looking for trouble, girl,” I said, feeling the jolts of electricity surging through my blood.

She looked me dead in the eyes and smirked, her eyelids drooping slightly as she stared with a newly found sensation. “What if that's exactly what I'm looking for?”

My gaze locked on her, captivated by this sudden switch in her countenance.

She took her foot off my leg and laughed, picking up her cutlery. “Let's eat, shall we?”

Did she just tease me?

I scoffed, shaking my head as I grabbed my fork, ready to feast.

## Page 14

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:15 pm*

So far, I wasn't entirely sure who was in control anymore—Julia Sawyer, who was starting to feel a certain way for the enemy, or Julia Gray, the one who resented the enemy for what he'd put her through.

Each day, it was a tug of war between the two personalities, as one would always remind the other of the mission.

However, despite the conflict within me, one thing was certain: the plan was working. The third way to get into a man's heart was through romance, and up until now, everything had been smooth.

Roman was fascinated by me, and he wasn't hiding it anymore. Every now and then, he'd reach out to see how I was doing. No matter how hard I tried to ignore this newborn habit of his, I simply couldn't.

I hated how I'd grown to anticipate his call, how I'd constantly check my phone for at least a glimpse of his name or a text from him. I loathed the feeling of joy and bliss that his voice offered.

Yet it couldn't be helped.

However, the good part was that he was starting to get attached, and I knew that with each passing day, I was drawing closer to the day of reckoning—the day I would have my revenge.

If I could get rid of these pesky distractions—my attraction to him, the thing with the baby—I would successfully complete this mission. I just needed to stick to the plan

no matter what.

“Here you go,” Mike said, his voice drawing me out of my thoughts.

He squinted, handing me a tray laden with crystal glasses and top-shelf liquor.

My mind had wandered, but his words shattered my reverie, anchoring me to the present, where the club was pulsating, bustling with patrons who were dancing and laughing.

My lips curled into a small smile as I accepted the tray. “Thanks, Mike.”

“You okay?” he asked, brows furrowing subtly.

“Yeah. Why?” I looked at him, retaining my smile as my eyes flickered momentarily to the side.

“I’m not sure,” he said, frowning. “There’s just something different about you lately.”

I tilted my head, eyes narrowing as I tried to figure out where he was going with this.

“Don’t get me wrong. It’s a good difference,” he added swiftly, hands pulled out in front of him in a defensive motion.

“Uh...thanks?” I said, the last word raising into a question as I arched an eyebrow.

“You’re welcome.” A playful grin spread across his face as he returned to work.

I chuckled, weaving through the crowd, my cheeks flushing as I wondered what it was about me tonight that others could see that I couldn’t. Mike wasn’t the first to insinuate that something was different about me recently. Even Harriet, who was



never one to offer praises, had made a similar remark—a concession that must have cost her.

With a smile playing on my lips, I headed upstairs to serve the guests in the VIP lounge.

A gentle push swung the door open, and I walked in, my heels clicking against the floor. The three men were engrossed in their conversation, the air thick with their banter and laughter. They all seemed to be in their late twenties.

One was clad in a navy suit, legs crossed as he sat on a sofa, his siren eyes locked on me. Across from him was the second guy—a man in a pair of faded jeans and a crisp white shirt that clung to his form like a second skin. The third guy was sitting on a single sofa, his charcoal turtleneck shirt highlighting his muscular build.

“Here you go,” I said, bending over to set the tray on the table.

“Damn, girl, you fine!” the one with the turtleneck said, his tone dripping with more lust than admiration.

I could feel the intensity of their gazes on me as their voices and laughs gradually faded away. The way they all had their eyes roaming my body was unsettling.

“Thank you,” I said softly, forcing out a smile as I swiftly served their drinks, eager to leave this foreboding atmosphere.

“Man, check out that ass,” the one in faded jeans said, his voice low and thick as he licked his lips, his head tilting for a better view.

I felt a pang of irritation swelling up inside me, and it caused my skin to crawl. My brows furrowed at his remark, which further prompted me to be done with their

service and leave.

I emptied the tray and straightened, ready to step outside.

“What's the rush, sweetheart?” the one in the navy suit asked, his tone tinged with flirtation. “Do we repulse you?” His eyes were fixed on my breasts.

As a matter of fact, you do, I thought, though I stayed professional. “Not at all, sir.” I flashed him a courteous grin. “I'm just in a hurry.”

“How much for you to strip naked?” the turtleneck guy chipped in. He stroked his chin, his gaze locked on my body.

His statement reverberated through me, leaving a bitter taste as I shot a glare at him. “Excuse me?”

“Name your price, and it'll be yours,” he said, leaning back on his couch. “I just wanna see what's under that dress.”

I'd never seen a more disgusting look in a man's eyes before.

I gritted my teeth and arched my brows at him. “I'm sorry, sir. I can't do that,” I said, my voice polite and a plastic smile on my face. “But I can get you a stripper if you want. I'm sure she'd be delighted to serve you.”

He rose to his feet, eyes darting across my figure, his imposing height towering over me as he approached.

My chest was heaving subtly as I jerked my head to look at him, hoping he wouldn't attempt anything silly. I balled a fist, ready to swing a punch if it came down to it. It wouldn't be professional, but neither was molesting a staff member.

He halted in front of me, lust flickering in his eyes. “I don't want any strippers. I don't want anyone that isn't you.”

“Sorry. But I'm off the menu.” I cast a stern glare at him before walking out.

My blood was boiling at his disrespect as I stormed down the corridor, heels clicking in rapid succession. “Who the hell does he think he is, asking me to strip?” I seethed, my voice barely above a whisper. I could feel the rage surging through me.

“Jules, hey...!” Eric's voice came from behind me, prompting me to slow down my pace.

He was my manager—a bald, portly man who always found pleasure in criticizing literally every staff member under him. The man had a talent for belittling people, and his gruff demeanor, together with that signature scowl on his face, made him universally disliked.

I really wasn't in the mood to entertain his snide comments on whatever it was that I might have done or failed to do.

But hold on...did he just politely call me Jules ? What happened to his usual condescending, “Hey, Sawyer?”

Intrigued by the calmness of his tone, I swiveled to face him, and my brows rose at the sight of his smile.

Okay, what's going on here?

“You okay?” He halted in front of me. “You seem upset.” His brows knitted, voice laced with concern. “What happened? Did anyone offend you? Talk to me.”

I blinked, taken aback by his unexpected empathy. Usually, he wouldn't care even if I was bleeding from my ears and nostrils.

I cleared my throat, rubbing my eyes as I tried to process the smile on his face. I'd never seen him smile before. Never. In fact, no one had. Yet there he was, a broad grin on his lips.

“Uh...it's nothing, Boss. Just some assholes being rude in the VIP lounge,” I said, watching a glint of irritation rise in his eyes.

“Those sick fucks.” He looked away, cursing under his breath, before returning his gaze to me. “Did they hurt you?”

I shook my head, squinting at the worry etched on his face. This was the strangest thing that had ever happened to me since I started working at Jupiter. I couldn't wait to tell Wren and Mike all about this.

He glanced at his watch. “You know what?” Eric began. “Why don't you just take the rest of the night off—go home, relax?”

My eyes widened, brows furrowing at his suggestion. Okay, something was definitely going on that I didn't know about because Eric would never be this nice to anyone.

“Pay no attention to those dogs.” He patted my shoulder and walked past me, but not without a smile.

A scoff escaped my lips. I had a feeling that Roman was behind this. It was the only logical explanation.

I took his advice and headed home.

The streets were deserted, eerily silent by this time of night. As I strolled down them, my bag slung over my shoulder, street lamps cast long shadows on the sidewalks, their lights flickering intermittently. A gentle wind whispered through, rustling pieces of paper scattered around. The air was pierced with the lone bark of a dog who just wouldn't shut up.

I'd walked down this street at this hour more times than I could count. But tonight, something seemed off. I had this gnawing feeling in my mind that I wasn't alone—like I was being followed.

Every now and then, I glanced over my shoulder, but each time, no one was behind me. As I continued my journey, my eyes roamed the dark alleys and shadows that lurked within.

As I rounded a corner, my apartment building came into view, and just as I was about to take another step, I heard the sound of a snapping twig.

I spun around with a swift motion, my heart skipping a beat. “Hello?” I dared to call out.

The darkness remained silent.

“Anyone there?” I flipped on my phone's flashlight, the beam of light cutting through the night, illuminating a small radius around me.

All I heard was the wind and the incessant barks of that dog.

I'd seen way too many horror movies to know standing here was a bad idea. Without wasting much time, I took off, hastening my pace until I got to the entrance of my apartment building.

I opened the door and rushed inside, heading straight to my place.

Once in my room, I tossed my keys on the table by the entrance and flung my bag onto the nearest couch, grunting as I made my way to the fridge.

Without stopping in my tracks, I slipped out of my heels with practiced precision, my bare feet chilling against the floor as I rolled my neck in a massaging motion.

I opened the fridge and helped myself to a bottle of water before taking off my jacket and gliding to the bathroom.

Shedding my dress, I stepped inside, and after having a warm bath, I stepped out, sliding into a white robe. With my hands ruffling through my wet hair, I strolled out of the bathroom, and as I jerked my head, I froze in shock at the uninvited visitor in my living room.

My eyes widened in fear as I saw one of the men from the club sitting on my couch: the turtleneck guy.

“Hello, love.” He smirked at me, his eyes sparkling with mischief. “Ready to strip yet?” His expression tightened.

This was not the time to wonder how he got inside; his presence meant trouble, and now my heart was racing like a galloping horse.

“Get out of my apartment,” I mustered the courage to say, my hand flying toward the door.

“I’m sorry, love, but you don’t call the shots around here,” he said, rising to his feet. “I do.” A solemn look settled on his face. “Boys...?”

Before I could think about what was happening, I felt weightless as someone whisked me into the air.

“Let me go!” I struggled, positioned on his shoulder, my hands slapping against his chest.

He threw me to the ground, taking a stance behind me with the other man as the turtleneck guy advanced toward me, his steps slow and menacing.

My chest was heaving rapidly, eyes wide. “Stay away from me!”

“Hold her down,” he instructed his boys.

I felt their strong arms grabbing my shoulders from behind, and in the next second, I was forced to lay on my back. I tried to scream, but one of them covered my mouth with a handkerchief while the other held both my arms, his grip tightening against my flesh.

“You should've just taken the money and stripped,” the turtleneck guy said, fingers unfastening his belt.

No, no, no, no, no. This can't be happening . I was so terrified that my eyes felt like they were about to pop from their sockets, and I was hyperventilating behind the handkerchief, my chest heaving.

He unzipped his pants and stepped forward, holding out his cock. It was so disgusting, and I knew I couldn't let him stick it inside me. I continued to struggle against their restraints, but the more I tried to free myself, the more powerless I felt.

He laughed, and as he bent over, I flung my foot into his face with all the strength that I could muster. He staggered back, hands flying to his bleeding nostrils as he

groaned like a wounded lion. “The bitch broke my nose!”

By now, the others’ hold on me had loosened slightly. It was my opportunity, and I immediately seized it. I managed to bite the hand of the one covering my mouth, my teeth sinking into his fingers.

He wailed in agony, withdrawing his hand with a reflex move. I sighted my heels lying at a reachable distance, and without a second thought, I forced my hand out of my oppressor’s hold and grabbed one.

I swung the heel with treacherous precision, and in a swift arc, I delivered a strike—its pointed tip sinking into the man's thigh with ruthless efficiency.

As he groaned in pain, I sprang to my feet, bolting toward the door.

“One more step, and I swear to God, I’ll pull the fucking trigger!” one of them threatened, cocking his gun.

I stopped in my tracks, hands raised in surrender as I shut my eyes, afraid of how this was going to end. I was helpless and alone against three sex-hungry maniacs, each of whom I’d inflicted physical pain upon.

They were furious, and only God knew what they'd do to me.

“Now, we can either do this the easy way, or we can do it the hard way,” the turtleneck guy said, the roughness in his voice hinting at his agony. “Either way, we get what we want.”

My body was shuddering, my mind flooded with a myriad of the possible horrors they would inflict on me.



Slowly, I turned around, lips quivering as I met his gaze.

“Not so feisty now, are you?” He snorted and glanced at his boys, each of them laughing. He returned his gaze to me, his gun still pointing at my face.

This was my first time being at gunpoint, and I was fidgeting, trembling, as I wondered if this was how my parents felt the night they were killed—so overcome with fear that they could barely process anything else.

“You're gonna strip, and I'm fuck you until you pass out,” he bit out, his voice dripping with venom.

The other two laughed, adding a chortled, “Yeah!”

Psychos. They were psychos, and I'd never been as in dire need of saving as I was right now.

Instantly, the door behind me burst open, and I flinched, dropping to the ground at the sound of the gunshot that claimed the life of one attacker

Heavy footsteps pounded into the room, accompanied by thick grunts and more gunshots, followed by an eerie silence.

“Are you okay?” a familiar voice came through, so gentle and comforting.

How did he know that I was in trouble? I wondered, raising my head to see the man who'd saved my life.

“Are you okay?” Roman squatted to my level, his palm rubbing through my hair. “Did they hurt you?” As he looked into my teary eyes, his lips tightened.

I shook my head, shifting my gaze to the dead men lying in pools of their own blood.

My heart skipped a beat, and my breath ceased for a moment as the gruesome sight flooded my mind with the memory of my parents' lifeless bodies. It was like déjà vu.

My gaze locked on the sight as those disturbing images of my parents' corpses flashed through my head. My chest was heaving rapidly, and I couldn't catch my breath. My entire world seemed to be collapsing.

I felt weightless as Roman lifted me bridal style in his strong arms, his eyes boring into mine. "It's okay. You're safe now." His lip curled up into a smile. He took his eyes off me and gave an order to the men who had come in with him. "Clean up this mess."

One nodded. "Yes, Boss."

"Let's get you outta here," he said to me, his tone soft.

His words were soothing to my soul, and I couldn't help but wonder why I felt so safe around the man who had killed my parents.

With tears in my eyes, I melted into him, resting my weary head against his chest as the familiar scent of his cologne enveloped me.

## Page 15

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:15 pm*

It had been two days already since I saved her from those sex-hungry bastards.

Even now, while seated in my office at home, the thought of those maniacs having their way with her made my blood boil with anger.

As I recalled the statement one of them had made about fucking her until she passed out, my fists clenched. My jaw tightened, and I gritted my teeth.

My only regret was granting the imbecile a quick death.

I should have captured him and tortured him every single day for the rest of his miserable life until he begged for death.

Taking a bullet to the head was more mercy than the bastard deserved. At least the world was better off without the likes of him. I was certain Julia wasn't the first woman they'd done that to; however, she was the last.

They'd messed with the wrong woman, and they paid the price for that with their lives.

My mind was flooded with different scenarios of how it would have turned out if I hadn't gotten there in the nick of time. The idea that she would have been raped and probably killed filled me with so much rage, the emotion pooling like molten lava in the pit of my stomach and nearly consuming me.

I sat in my chair, seething silently, my chest heaving—swelling from all the anger that surged through my blood. If those filthy dogs had had their way with her, I

wasn't sure what I would've done.

But one thing was certain: I'd have raised hell. I'd have haunted those God-forsaken bastards to the ends of the Earth. I'd have reveled in their screams while unleashing hell's fury. I sought comfort in the thoughts of how I'd have tortured them.

However, they were dead and would never be a threat to anyone ever again.

I heard Boris's muffled footsteps through the corridor, and as I lifted my head toward the entrance, I saw him walking in.

“Boss,” he greeted, halting in front of my desk with a file in his hand.

I leaned back in my chair, eyes fixed on him as he dropped the file on the mahogany table in front of me.

“This is all we have on the three men from the other night,” he said, sliding it over to my side.

Effortlessly, I snatched it off the surface, my eyes scanning through the document. “Who are they?”

“Jack, Dean, and Cypher,” he replied, arms across his chest. “Cypher is the real deal—a social media influencer. He's the son of Henry Cypher from Cypher Corporation.”

The Cypher family was one of the most influential in the city—powerful, with friends in high places. But that didn't bother me at all. He'd gotten what he deserved.

I stole a glance at Boris. “And the other two?”

“Nobodies,” he replied. “Just two idiots who followed Cypher around wherever he went. Bet no one's gonna notice they're gone.”

“They never should have messed with Julia,” I said, tossing the file back on the table. “She's off limits.”

Boris was silent for a moment. “The Cypher family might want to look into this,” he said, his tone hinting at his curiosity to know my plans.

“I know,” I replied, my voice low and confident. “And that's why Julia's still here with me. I can't risk anything happening to her.”

Again, Boris was silent, his gaze lingering on me like he had something in mind he wanted to share or ask.

My brows furrowed, eyes narrowing as I studied him. “Spill,” I said, my gaze unwavering.

“It's just....” He paused for a moment before continuing. “You care so much about her. Don't you?”

I shifted my focus from him as I thought about his question. I'd been wondering the same thing for quite some time now, and this situation made me realize that I cared for her more than I wanted to admit.

A knock on the door whisked me out of my thoughts, stealing my attention. My eyes darted across and settled on Julia standing by the entrance.

My gaze traced over her as she slowly walked in, wearing an oversized T-shirt that drowned her petite frame. I'd offered her the shirt when I brought her here.

Today, she seemed better than how she was two days ago; her eyes, once haunted by the shadows of trauma, now shimmered with a glint of hope. She was more relaxed, exuding more confidence than before, and her beauty was no longer shrouded by fear.

Her hair fell delicately on her shoulders, framing her face and highlighting her striking features. She held my gaze, her alluring eyes staring into my depths.

“Leave us,” I said to Boris without breaking eye contact with Julia.

“Yes, Boss.” He picked up the file and headed out, shutting the door behind him.

“Sorry to have interrupted,” she said, her voice soft and smooth.

I smiled, admiring her humility and beauty. “It's okay. We were done anyway.” I got out of my chair and walked over to the front of my table, leaning my back against the edge.

Her eyes dropped to the floor as she stood in front of me, pushing a lock of hair to the back of her ear.

“How're you feeling today?” I asked, my gaze fixed on her.

She jerked her head and looked at me. “Better.”

“I can see that,” I said, eyes darting across her body as I drank in the beauty before me.

Damn! She was hot—so sexy—and the T-shirt revealed a tantalizing view of her alluring thighs.

“Quick question,” she began, curiosity flickering in her eyes as her brows narrowed.

“How did you know that I was in trouble?”

I scoffed, half-sitting on the edge of the table. “Eric,” I said. “Your manager.”

I'd asked him to keep an eye out for Julia and keep me informed if she ever faced any challenges at work.

Her brows arched at my response, a smile gradually spreading across her face. “So, you're spying on me now?” she asked, her voice dripping with playfulness.

“Not really,” I replied, unable to hide my own grin.

She chuckled, her face lighting up. “Well, that explains why he was so nice to me that night.”

Seeing her in such an excited state melted my heart, especially with that charming smile she wore.

“Anyway,” she added, taking cautious steps forward, her eyes pinned on me, “I, uh...I just wanna say thank you for being there for me when I needed you the most.” She halted barely inches from me, her tone low and laced with sincerity.

“When you needed me?” My lips curled up into a smile as I teased her.

Her eyes crinkled at the corners, her gaze unrelenting. “If you hadn't arrived when you did, I don't know what would've happened,” she said, her breath brushing against my skin. “You saved my life, Roman. Thank you.” She jerked her head, gazing deep into my eyes, as though searching for something.

However, in the depths of hers, I saw the same thing I did back at the auction—guilt. Her eyes revealed just a glimmer of it, but it was there. Why? What was she guilty

about?

“You saw what I did to those men, didn't you?” I asked in an attempt to have a better understanding of her thoughts on it. “That's who I am, Julia. A killer.”

She placed a palm on my cheeks, her eyes boring deeper. “I know.”

I tilted my head, amused by how unphased she was. “I'm not just a businessman,” I said, feeling her soft skin grazing against mine. “I run the Tarasov Bratva.”

“I know.”

Both of her hands roamed over my shirt, tracing the contours of my chest.

Clearly, she'd intentionally not mentioned her knowledge of this on our first date. She'd known this entire time, yet she wasn't afraid of me like most people were.

“It doesn't scare you...? I don't scare you?” I asked, pulling her by the waist, our gazes still locked.

She shook her head, her body tensing. “I know who you are, Roman,” she said, her hand traveling down to my groin.

My cock was swelling in my pants in reaction to her touch and the hunger that I saw in her eyes. Her hand settled on the print of my erection, and she rubbed the length over my pants.

“Julia—”

“I want this,” she said, interrupting me as she continued working on my cock. “I know you want it, too,” she added, pushing against me. “Make me forget what I



saw.... Give me something else to remember.” Her voice was so sexy, barely above a whisper.

The air was thick with sexual tension, and the burning desire in both our eyes was threatening to consume us.

Without hesitation, I claimed her lips, sealing them with a fervent kiss as we exchanged breaths. Grabbed her ass, my fingers dug into her flesh as our heads tilted, tongues dancing in our mouths.

I lifted her off the ground, and her arms wrapped around my neck as I set her on the table, our kiss leaving us breathless. Her fingers struggled with the buttons of my shirt and vice versa as we undressed each other in the heat of passion.

She took my shirt off and edged closer, her lips kissing my chiseled abs, her hands traveling all over my body. Julia shot her head up, sticking her tongue out.

I bent over and took it in my mouth as I tore her shirt off her, her gorgeous body coming into view. My palms grabbed her breasts, squeezing them both at the same time before sliding one hand down between her spread legs.

She moaned in my mouth as I pushed a finger into her pussy—fuck! She was wet already. Julia's hands dropped to my waist as she unbuckled my belt and unzipped my pants. Digging her hand into my pants, she withdrew my hard cock, stroking it while I was fingering her cunt.

The fervency of our kiss muffled her moans until she broke free from my lips, letting it all out.

I lowered my head to her chest, taking her left breast in my mouth as I reveled in the delicious sound of her moans. I sucked on one nipple, pinching the other

simultaneously as I groaned at her incredible handjob talent.

Julia leaned back, spreading her legs with a flirty grin on her face. I flashed a smirk and went down on her, her fingers circling over my buzz cut.

Basking in her moans, I ate her up, savoring the taste of her juice. I'd almost forgotten how good she tasted—how amazing she made me feel.

“Yes. Yes...right there,” she gasped sweetly, her muscles tensing as she writhed in pleasure.

Her desire-filled murmurs were driving me crazy as I ate her pussy, simultaneously fingering her.

“Oh, my God, you're gonna make cum,” she cried out, her voice dripping with ecstasy. Her hips bucked, and her hands pushed my head deeper between her legs. “Don't stop—don't stop!” She vocalized her desires.

My free hand caressed her skin, traveling up to turn her nipples.

“Fuck...I'm gonna cum—I'm gonna cum!” she announced, her body shuddering and legs trembling.

I took my mouth off her throbbing cunt, and a squirt came forth like water from a fountain as I watched her quiver in sheer pleasure. I pulled her to myself and inserted my cock inside her.

Shit! She was so warm and slippery.

She let out erotic whimpers as her pussy swallowed my cock, her hands caressing my back, fingers raking my flesh.

Her titties bounced back and forth as I rammed her hard, my groin slapping against hers. She tried to hold my gaze, her eyes shining with desire, hinting at how much she craved me.

The feeling was mutual, and I couldn't get enough of her. The more I buried myself in her, the more I wanted her. Her cries were fueling my passion, and I wouldn't stop thrusting vigorously.

“Faster,” she whispered, eyes locked on mine as her body arched at my action.

I did as the lady wanted, my hand grasping her neck. She giggled, throwing back her head and sticking out her tongue.

“Choke me,” she panted, pleading with her eyes. “I can take it.”

I could barely recognize this woman, but I'd be damned if I said I didn't love who she was today. Julia was a lioness, a hungry one, and she wasn't shy about showing it. She was all in and wasn't holding back.

I loved it.

My fingers wrapped around her neck, delicately choking her as she wanted. Her eyes had turned white in ecstasy, her hand gripping the edge of the table.

I continued to push inside her—harder and faster—as she breathed heavily, trembling with each thrust.

Her body was slippery, as was mine, covered in sweat. The more I rammed into her, the louder she moaned.

A primal growl signaled my cumming, and I felt her feet lock behind me. She leaned

forward and wrapped her arms tightly around my neck, whispering in my ear, “I want it. Give it to me.”

With a thick groan, my body jerked as I shot my load, filling her pussy with my essence. She held onto me, her body pressed against mine as she accepted every bit of me.

In the end, we were both spent—breathless and panting as we stared at each other, our gazes intense.

Fuck. I think I'm falling for her.

## Page 16

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:15 pm*

I think I'm starting to fall for him, I thought, laying naked under his sheets, biting my lower lip as I reminisced on the amazing sex we had all night long.

Images of our bodies writhing in sync and the sounds of his primal growls flooded my mind, leaving me wet. I could still feel his hands over my skin, and my pussy tingled at the thought of how his tongue and fingers had made me squirt.

No man had ever made me feel the way Roman had. He'd somehow managed to unlock something within me. He'd awakened the wildest parts of me, and despite my reservations, I couldn't find it in me to hold back on expressing my desires.

None of that was fake. I loved every bit of it. And although I'd been ashamed to initiate the dirty talk at first, I was glad that I did. It was the best medium to express how good his cock made me feel.

I was delighted that he reveled not only in my moans but also in my words. It was like neither of us was holding back. I gave him all of me, and he did the same.

We'd started out in his office, then later on, we moved over here—to his room. Roman fucked my brains out in ways I never thought possible. He'd rammed me in more ways than I could remember, but my favorite was the doggy.

I fondled my breasts, my hand traveling down my legs as I recalled the way his groin had slapped loudly against my butt.

“Fuck me harder! Yes, yes, yes...!” I cried out, positioned on all fours—naked—and arching my ass with my chest flat against the bed.

“You like that?” He spanked my butt, his cock rapidly pounding me from the back.  
“You like that, don't you?”

“Yes, please, don't stop!” I trembled, my skin flushing with desire.

His slaps on my ass brought more pleasure than pain, sending sweet sensations to my brain. The faster he plunged into me, the faster my nipples grazed over the sheets, accentuating the rapture coursing through my body.

As I lay on the bed, reminiscing, my body writhed in ecstasy.

Rapidly, I brushed four fingers over my clit, my hips bucking as my hand flew to cover my mouth in an attempt to muffle my moans. My eyes widened at the overwhelming feeling that jolted through my veins like electricity.

My body slumped on the bed as I panted, realizing how deeply attracted I was to him.

But what I felt for Roman was beyond sexual attraction. I wasn't sure what love felt like...but could this be it?

He'd been more of a lover to me than anyone, and whenever I was around, I always felt secure. Why was that?

If he was such a bad person—and I knew he was; I'd witnessed him kill without remorse—why couldn't I hate him?

He had killed for me, though.

Whatever I was feeling toward him was mutual; that was a fact.

Roman had been kind to me, romantic in his own way, and he'd just proven that I was

someone he was willing to do the unthinkable for.

But I couldn't be falling in love with him.

I cupped my face in my palms, letting the guilt flowing through me take its course. The struggle between how I should or should not feel about this man inflicted me with a severe headache that quenched the sexual desire that had been burning within me seconds ago.

He'd killed my parents. Harboring feelings for such a cruel man was a bad idea.

But how sure was I that he truly did it—that he killed my parents?

Roman was a ruthless killer. Agreed. He hated my father. Agreed.

But did he hate him enough to kill his wife as well? That was the million-dollar question, and a part of me—the revenge-seeking part—hated this newfound skepticism about the mission.

I was starting to question a lot, especially now that I was beginning to understand the type of man he was. As cruel as Roman was, he didn't strike me as someone would kill a defenseless woman.

Was I really on the right track? Or was I just letting my emotions get in the way of the mission?

I let out a soft sigh and got out of bed, feeling the cold floor beneath my bare feet as I slipped into my oversized T-shirt. With shut eyes, I drew in a deep breath, savoring the scent of his cologne that filled the air.

My stomach rumbled, gnawing at me. Considering how many rounds we'd gone last

night, it was only logical for hunger pangs to twist through me.

I dispelled the illicit images creeping back into my mind on the mere thought of our amazing time together—our multiple rounds.

I'd had my fair share of distraction this morning; it was time I stepped out. Swiftly, I swept my hair atop my head, securing it with a nearby pin from his table.

I glided out of his room and located the kitchen downstairs, but as I made my way through the house, I realized that I was home alone.

Roman must have headed out while I slept, but I wasn't sure when he'd be back.

I paused in my tracks in the living room, eyes darting upstairs toward his office. My brows knitted together, realizing that this was the chance I'd been waiting for. The whole reason for manipulating him was to get close enough to find something against him.

This was it. This was my opportunity to get the evidence that Agent Anderson and I needed.

With cautious glances, I looked around the space to be sure I was truly alone before rushing back upstairs, my feet pounding as I ascended.

I quickened my pace through the corridor until I halted in front of his office, my heart humming like a live wire. My eyes dropped to the door handle, but I hesitated for a moment, my hand hanging mid-air. I held my breath, paralyzed, as I stared at the handle, wondering if this was a good idea.

What if I get caught? What if he returns and finds me snooping around in his office? Then what?



The more time I spent contemplating my next move, the closer I got to jeopardizing everything.

I drew a deep breath and grabbed the handle, but it was locked. As expected.

Unfazed, my fingers flew into my hair, retrieving the slender pin that held my makeshift bun. My hair fell loosely on my shoulders as I extracted the pin, and with practiced ease, I inserted it into the lock.

Picking locks was one of the skills I'd picked up during my training—I'd anticipated facing this challenge, and now I was prepared.

After seconds of expertly manipulating the mechanism, the door released a soft click. I grabbed the handle, turned it, and the door creaked open.

I walked in and shut it behind me, my pace hastening as I headed to his desk, sinking into his plush leather chair. “Okay, okay....” I dialed Agent Anderson's number. “Come on, pick up, pick up....” I muttered the words in a rush, my heart pounding in the fear of getting caught.

“Jules, hi,” his voice came through the phone.

“I'm in his office,” I declared, my tone hushed but audible, my eyes constantly glancing at the door.

“Amazing,” he said, pride flickering in his voice.

“I just need to get access to his laptop.” I flipped it open. “It's password protected.” My fingers rattled across the keyboard as I attempted to hack into it. “It's an alpha-numeric code, and I'm gonna need your help,” I said, eyes roaming the lit screen like a pro.

Hacking was yet another skill I had to learn in order to execute this mission. Looking back, I just realized how much knowledge I had acquired in the name of revenge.

Anderson guided me throughout the process, helping out where I got stuck until, finally, I had access.

“I’m in,” I said, unable to hide the note of triumph.

“Atta girl,” he praised. “Now, all you have to do is find evidence linking him to your parents’ murder.”

“On it.” I straightened my back, my gaze fixed on the flickering screen as I navigated through a maze of files.

My eyes narrowed as I hurriedly went through them one by one. “I’m not seeing anything about my parents here,” I said, still searching.

“Keep looking; it has to be there,” he encouraged me.

I searched everything, including his recycling bin, but there was nothing on the Grays.

However, I did see more than a few files on the people he’d killed, money the Tarasov Bratva had laundered, and a whole lot of other crimes. It would be enough to put him away for good.

This was all the evidence Anderson needed to burn Roman to the ground. If he got his hands on this....

I leaned back in the chair, rubbing my eyes as I struggled with this pang of guilt that wouldn’t stop gnawing at me.

“You know what?” Anderson's voice pierced my thoughts. “Copy everything and send them to me. I'll sort them out myself.”

My heart skipped at his instruction, causing my breath to hitch in my throat.

Was I ready to see Roman get in trouble when there was a chance that he didn't kill my parents?

“Jules, are you there? Did you hear me?” The urgency in Anderson's voice was palpable. “Jules.”

Another call came in immediately—a call I could never ignore. It was the hospital. It was the perfect distraction from this difficult choice that I was faced with.

“I'm sorry, Anderson, I have to take this,” I said, watching the incoming call.

He was still protesting, saying stuff like this was our only chance, when I accepted the hospital's call, ending his. “Hello?”

I went silent for a moment, listening to the doctor on the other line with gradually widening eyes. “What?” My brows arched in disbelief. “I'll be right there.”

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The door swung open, and I dashed into the ward, eager to see for myself what the doctor had told me over the phone.

My palm flew to my mouth, and my bag fell out of my hand. I stood frozen in shock at the sight of my brother standing by the window, gazing outside.

With misted eyes, I stepped forward, legs shuddering as he turned to face me with a

small smile on the corner of his lips.

“Oh, my God, Tommy!” An abrupt sob escaped me as I rushed to embrace him tightly, overwhelmed with joy, tears trickling down my cheeks.

I examined him, eyes roaming his body with wonder flickering in their depths. “How?” I raised my head, acknowledging the doctor's presence.

“It's quite a miracle, Julia,” Doctor Wells said, smiling. “He, uh...he just woke up and started talking. His words are a little mixed up, but that isn't too much of a big deal. We can work on that with time.”

What mattered most was that he was finally awake and on his feet.

I returned my attention to him and helped him sit on the edge of the bed.

Squatting in front of him, I ruffled his hair, looking deep into his eyes with a grateful heart.

“I'll leave you two alone,” Doctor Wells said.

“Thank you, doctor,” I replied, jerking my head toward him.

He nodded and stepped out, shutting the door behind him.

“Hey, Tommy.” I took his hands, gently squeezing his hands with a radiant smile. “I'm here now.”

“Big. Gun. Blood. So much blood,” he said, looking at me, his expression blank.

I squinted, puzzled at his words. “Tommy, what're you saying?”

“Big. Gun. Blood. So much blood,” he repeated in the same sequence.

My brows furrowed as I watched him say the same words in the same sequence over and over. He was definitely trying to tell me something. This was a message.

“Tommy.” I drew closer, my gaze unwavering. “Are you talking about that night?”

He nodded.

I let out a sigh of relief at the fact that he understood me. “Okay. Did you see something—someone, maybe?”

Again, he nodded.

Now, my heart was racing in my heaving chest at the possibility of who he might have seen. I withdrew my phone from my pocket and fetched a photo of Roman and a few of his family members—brother, cousins, and an elderly man who, from my research, I knew to be his uncle.

I'd studied the Tarasov family, and I knew a thing or two about everyone in that picture.

“Here,” I said, showing him the photo. “Can you identify the man you saw that night?”

Tom raised his hand, pointing at one of them, and I traced his finger to Roman. My heart shattered at this realization, which caused my lips to tremble. I'd seriously been hoping that it wasn't him—that way, I'd feel less guilty—but my hope was snuffed.

Hold a minute , I thought, eyes narrowing as I traced his finger again. It wasn't Roman he was pointing at. But I needed to confirm.

“This man?” I asked, zooming in on Roman's face.

Tom shook his head, and immediately, a wind of relief blew across my face, pulling a deep sigh out of me. With one hand, I smoothed my hair backward, overwhelmed with gratitude. I was more focused on the fact that Roman wasn't the enemy than I was on who actually was.

I traced Tom's finger to a mean-looking man at the back of their Uncle Ivan. “Him?”

Tom nodded.

That was Ivan's bodyguard, the one they called Jorah.

From what I gathered about these men, Jorah only answered to Ivan. And if he were the one who had pulled the trigger on my parents, that would only mean that Ivan was the one who had pointed the gun.

Ivan was the mastermind behind the attack on my parents. But why?

It didn't matter why.

He was the enemy, not Roman.

I'd been chasing after the wrong man this whole time.

Tom slipped into my embrace, holding on to me with a tight hug that melted my heart. I tossed my phone on the bed, wrapping my arms around him. “I've missed you, little brother.” I kissed his head, sniffing as I fought back the tears in my eyes.

I had two reasons to be glad today: My brother was finally awake, and the man I was falling for wasn't the one who'd killed my parents. He wasn't the enemy.

It was time to end this mission.

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:15 pm*

The humming sound of the engine filled the car's cabin as I drove to Julia's place to pay her a surprise visit.

I'd received a call from my house guard saying Julia had left the house in a hurry, and now I was curious as to why she'd stormed out without notifying me.

But I figured maybe she needed to get some stuff and that she would return once she got what she wanted. However, I couldn't head home directly from work, knowing that I could stop by her place and see for myself what she was up to.

Should her luggage be too heavy, I'd be more than happy to help. I wouldn't mind her staying at my place for as long as she wanted. She wasn't safe back at her apartment, at least not until the thing with the Cypher family was completely swept under the rug.

As I drove to get her, images of our time together last night kept flashing in my mind. Her moans echoed in my head, making me hard in my pants as a shiver ran through my body at the thought of how she was all in.

No restrictions, no reservations—Julia had given herself completely to me. She'd surrendered, fully submitted, and never held back on expressing that desire that filled her heart.

My hands rubbed over my face as I continued my journey, eyes fixed on the road, struggling to stay focused. These erotic scenes replaying in my head weren't helping; they were a distraction, a dangerous one that could cost me my life if I continued to entertain them.



I shook my head as though literally trying to shake them off, my grip tightening around the steering wheel. I drew a deep breath, making the decision to focus for now and sink back into my thoughts at a later time.

I would be no good to her or the Bratva or anyone at all if I was dead, dying in a car crash.

In no time, I regained control of my mind, seeking comfort in the possibility of getting laid at her apartment. We'd fucked all night at mine, from my office to my bedroom; it wouldn't be a bad idea to do the same at hers. Perhaps from her living room to her bedroom.

Fuck, that would be so hot.

I was losing myself with Julia, displaying acts of emotions when, deep down, I knew that I was playing a dangerous game. I wasn't sure exactly who she was—nothing about her was certain to me. Yet, I ignored my voice of reason and chose to give in to this...whatever this was.

Outside her apartment, I pulled over and killed the engine, eyes darting up toward her window, hoping to maybe catch a glimpse of her.

I exited the car and headed into the building, imagining the look she'd wear upon seeing me. My lips curled into a small smile just thinking about her reaction to my surprise visit.

Upstairs, my shoes clicked softly on the floor as I glided over to her door. I raised my hand to knock when my eyes dropped to the hinges, and I noticed the door wasn't locked.

My brows knitted together. Considering the situation at hand, she shouldn't have left

the door open. What if I hadn't been the one at the door?

I grabbed the handle, turned it, and opened the door, revealing the clean interior. I walked inside, scanning the room with my sharp eyes. Everything was in place, neat, and smelled nice compared to the last time I was here.

The rug in the living room, once stained with the blood of my victims, was replaced with an identical one—Boris had cleaned up the entire place, leaving no traces of us behind.

I walked around the house—her living room, kitchen, and bedroom—but she was nowhere to be found. In fact, I didn't think she'd been here since the incident.

If she left my place in such a hurry and didn't come here, where the fuck did she go then?

I clenched my jaw, a scowl settling on my face as I felt a pang of jealousy swell up inside me. Was she with another man? My teeth gritted as I stood in her room, wondering where on Earth she might be.

Withdrawing my phone from my pocket, I called her number, clasp the device over my ear. It was ringing on the other line, but she wasn't picking up.

My frown deepened as I called her back a second time. Still no answer.

“Fuck,” I mustered, harboring a series of unhealthy thoughts in my mind.

The idea that she might be with another man and the fact that I was completely in the dark about her current whereabouts was infuriating.

I resorted to texting Boris, telling him to find out where she was. After hitting the

send icon, I shoved my phone back in my pocket, and just as I was about to leave her bedroom, my eyes caught something sticking out of a wallet resting on her bedside table.

My eyes narrowed at it.

It was a picture, and it piqued my curiosity, prompting me to step over to her table. I did, towering over it as I withdrew the photograph, my eyes widening in shock at the man and woman in that picture. It was Anthony and Margaret Gray with their two kids—a teenage girl and a boy of about ten.

My chest expanded, lips pressed into a thin line.

Why does she have a photograph of the Gray family?

My forehead creased in shock and bewilderment.

Peering closer, I realized that the teenage girl in the photograph had a pair of hazel eyes and silky dark hair. Instantly, I felt my temperature rising, my breaths quickening as I realized the girl in the picture was actually Julia. She was a lot younger then, but it was her. I was certain.

“What is this? What's going on here?” I wondered, my voice low and laced with a mix of shock and fury.

I recalled that night at the restaurant when I asked her about the Grays. It suddenly made sense why she got nervous, triggered by my question.

“Why did you hate him so much—Anthony Gray?” her voice echoed in my head.

I remembered seeing a glint of resentment in her eyes, but I'd ignored it.

Hit by a wave of consternation, I staggered a bit, reminiscing on how we'd met—how she'd seduced me at the club.

Julia had targeted me that night, and she'd been using me all this time.

My jaw tightened, fingers balling into fists. The scowl on my face deepened, as did the creases on my forehead. I blamed myself for getting carried away by her charms and ignoring all the signs my senses had picked up.

How had I let this happen?

Julia was clearly an enemy, and with the accuracy of her execution, I concluded that she'd been planning this for a long time.

Everything I thought had happened by chance, she'd orchestrated. She tricked me, fooled me, used me. Why? Because she thought I had a hand in her parents' death?

How dare she manipulate me?

My rage was a living thing, pulsing through my veins and expanding my massive frame. Adrenaline surged through me, causing my muscles to tremble as I scrunched up the photo in my fist.

My hands shook, shoulders tensing as I unleashed a feral grunt, slamming into the wall—leaving a deep dent in the surface.

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:15 pm*

I sat in the backseat of the Uber with a smile playing on the corners of my lips as I found comfort in the established fact that Roman wasn't the enemy.

My heart was overwhelmed with relief, and I hadn't felt so light in a long time. Finally, there was peace within me, and for once, the voices in my head all agreed on one thing: that Roman wasn't the bad guy.

It would have been catastrophic if it had turned out that I'd been right this whole time—that he was who I thought he was. Falling in love with the man who had murdered my parents in cold blood and carrying his child would have been a next-level disaster.

I'd never been happier about being wrong. Realizing my mistake lifted so much weight off my shoulders, freeing me from its burden.

I rested my head against the glass, absentmindedly gazing out the window as I headed back to Roman's.

That he wasn't responsible for my parents' untimely demise didn't mean he wasn't guilty of a whole lot of other crimes. But I didn't embark on this mission because I thought he was a bad man who needed to face justice for all his atrocities. That was Anderson's reason. I, on the other hand, was only after him for revenge—I just wanted to make him suffer for what he'd supposedly done to my family.

The unveiling of this truth had changed a lot of things, and I no longer saw the need to harm Roman or incriminate him anymore. I was no hero, just a hurting girl on a revenge mission.

The mission itself hadn't changed, though; the target had.

Roman hadn't killed my parents, but the perpetrator was still out there. Ivan Tarasov.

I'd vowed to exert revenge on those who hurt me, and I didn't intend to break that vow—especially now that the real culprits of that inhumane act didn't mean shit to me.

I just needed to shift my attention in the right direction and draw up another plan to take Ivan and his bodyguard down.

Do you think Roman knows that his uncle's actually behind the fall of the Grays? I thought, asking myself.

My brows knitted, mirroring my bewilderment.

Roman and my father had been direct rivals who never saw eye to eye. If Roman had wanted him dead, he'd have done it himself, not asked his uncle to take care of his problems for him. He wasn't a coward, nor was he one to let others do his dirty work. He was always ready to stain his hands if it came down to it.

So, no. I didn't think he was aware.

I didn't care what Ivan's reasons were for ending my parents' lives, but one thing was certain: I would have my revenge. I would take from them what they took from my mom and dad: their lives. I wasn't sure how I would go about that yet, considering I hadn't even come up with a plan.

But in that moment, filled with rage, I seethed in silence, promising myself that neither of them—Ivan or his bodyguard—would live long enough to see the end of the year.

I heard my phone ring, snapping me out of my thoughts. It was Agent Anderson. Just the man I was about to call. “Hey, uh, I’ve got news,” I said amidst chuckles, fingers rubbing my eyes.

“None of that matters right now,” he cut me off with a sense of urgency that caused my heart to skip a beat. “Where are you?”

I swallowed, sitting up with the phone clasped to my ear. My eyes widened at the concern laced in his tone. “I’m heading back to Roman’s. Why?” I asked, brows furrowing as fear slowly crept into my mind.

“Don’t!” he snapped in warning.

I felt a shiver run down my spine as I asked, my heart pounding in my heaving chest, “What?”

“Turn around now!” he exclaimed, voice rising with intensity and accentuating the seriousness in his tone.

My breath hitched in my throat, a hand flying to my forehead as I struggled to stay composed. “Anderson, you’re scaring me,” I confessed, my lips trembling at the horror his desperation had inflicted on me.

“You should be scared, Julia,” he blurted out. “He knows.”

I blinked rapidly, trying to process what I’d just heard. “What?” My eyes widened, my feet turning to jelly as I panted.

“Roman knows who you are,” he said lowly. “While you were at the hospital, I trailed him as usual. He stopped at your place, and when he left, he was mad—like really mad.”

As Anderson spoke, a sudden chill enveloped me, causing my body to shudder. A dryness in my throat made it difficult to swallow as my eyes darted wildly as if searching for escape.

No, no, no, this can't be happening. Not now.

My hand settled on my head in a reflexive move as I prayed that this was all just a bad dream—that I would wake up soon.

I pinched my thigh.

It wasn't a dream. This was real

Anderson continued, “I needed to know what got him so upset. So, I went upstairs to your place. Your door was open. When I got in, I saw your family photo crumpled on the floor.”

“Shit,” I muttered, petrified, fingers digging into my temple.

“Yeah. Shit is right,” Anderson said. Almost immediately, he added. “Please, tell me you copied those files.”

I swallowed hard, struggling to catch my breath and overwhelmed with anxiety. “No...” I whispered, too numb to speak.

“Goddamn it, Julia, that was our only shot at taking down that family!”

The disappointment in his tone couldn't be any more glaring.

I'd never been so scared in my life, and my mind was flooded with the possible ways he'd make me suffer. My chest was heaving rapidly. With quivering lips, my eyes



misted in fear as I realized he'd soon be coming for me.

Men like Roman weren't exactly known for their forgiveness—especially when betrayed. He must hate me now, and God only knew what plans Roman had cooked up already.

“What...what now?” I stuttered, struggling with the dryness in my throat.

He hesitated for a moment before uttering the words that amplified my fear, sending panic coursing through me.

“Run, Julia...run.”

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:15 pm*

My blood boiled with rage as I sat back in my chair with Uncle Ivan seated across from me in the visitor's chair. His bodyguard and right-hand man, Jorah, stood by my office's bookshelf, arms folded.

It had been a little over seven months since that manipulating spy slipped through my fingers. Yet, my resentment toward her had never softened, not even for a day.

She was good. I had to give her that. It wasn't every day I met a woman who outsmarted me. She targeted me and got me to feel something for her just so she could get close enough to execute her devious plan.

I'd been beating myself up since the day I realized I was being used by a revenge-seeking, cunning woman who was willing to go the extra mile to see me crumble.

She'd given up her virginity just to get my attention. Her most prized possession, and she gave it to a man she despised. How did she manage that?

That was cold and downright evil. I admired it but hated that I was the victim.

Like a serpent, she'd snaked her way into my stony heart, leaving deadly chills that seeped into my bones, her venom crippling my defenses with time.

Her delicate touch was not so delicate after all; it was sweet and cool but laced with poison—the kind that would gradually kill its victims without them realizing that they were dying.

If I hadn't gone to check on her that day, I wouldn't have found out the truth until it

was too late.

Julia was the perfect example of never judging a book by its cover.

She seemed like an angel, appeared harmless, and was always cheerful and friendly with everyone. Her eyes were vibrant and full of life, her soul pure and innocent. But scratch the surface, and a demon lurked within—an intelligent one.

I couldn't manage to wrap my head around how I'd been so carried away by the mystery surrounding her that I lost sight of the danger she posed.

Her charms had been strong; they kept drawing me to her like a fucking moth to a flame. After our first night together, it was as though she'd planted something in me that clouded my judgment.

I'd seen the subtle signs in her words, her reactions to the subject of the Gray family, but for some reason, I ignored them all. I didn't stop to think about how fast I was starting to fall for her.

She must have done her homework on me because she knew the exact kind of woman I was attracted to and disguised herself as one. Smart. Beautiful. Mysterious.

It was still a wonder how she'd orchestrated all of this so perfectly. She awoke something in me—a little flame—only to snuff it out with her betrayal.

Had any of it ever been real?

She'd faked her affection for me, and now I was left to ponder what else she might have faked.

Had she faked her moans, too?

Had she ever even enjoyed sex with me, or was it all just a part of her scheme?

What an Oscar-deserving performance!

I was overwhelmed by a mix of emotions: anger, disappointment, and a glimmer of admiration for how she'd managed to make me a pawn in her game without my knowledge.

It took an extraordinary person to pull that off.

But my admiration could not be compared to the rage that swelled up within me, the resentment that grew in my heart with each passing day.

"The Gray girl is a fierce one. I'll give her that," Uncle Ivan's voice cut through my thoughts.

Snapping back to the present, my eyes settled back on him, fingers quietly drumming on the table between us.

There was a glint of amazement flickering in his eyes as he continued. "It takes guts to trick a Bratva Pakhan."

"I know that, Uncle." My scowl deepened, as did the creases on my forehead. "As impressive as that is, it still doesn't change the fact that she crossed a line." I gazed at him, eyes blazing with fury. "She fucking used me, Uncle Ivan."

"Never underestimate the power of revenge, nephew," he said, his voice low but stern. "People can do the unthinkable in the name of protecting or fighting for something they love." He paused as if letting the words sink in. "Trust me. I know."

"She better watch her back," I said, fingers clenching on a fist, my nails digging into

my flesh, “because I will haunt her to the ends of the Earth, and I will not rest until I find her.” My jaw tightened.

Uncle Ivan's lips parted into a faint smirk, his eyes narrowing ever so slightly. “The girl messed with the wrong family,” he said, adjusting in his chair. “You know what I find funny?”

I jerked my eyes up at his rhetorical question.

He continued, “It’s how she actually blames you for her parents’ death.” He laughed, an arm resting on the handle of his walking stick. “I mean, Anthony Gray was a douchebag—an annoying one, at that. But being as smart as Julia is, she should've known that killing a man simply because he was competition was below the Bratva standard.”

My gaze remained locked to him.

“And killing his wife?” Uncle Ivan's brows arched in disbelief, tongue clicking in disagreement. “The Bratva has strict rules against hurting women and children.” His eyes darted toward the bookshelf. “Isn't that right, Jorah?”

The response was a cold silence.

Jorah was a man of few words, and I'd only heard him speak once.

“But women like her,” Uncle Ivan continued, a solemn expression gradually settling on his face as he spoke, “women who plot against the Bratva and trick its members—its Pakhan...” His voice seeped with rage, accentuating the resentment in his eyes. “To them, we show no mercy.”

I tightened my fist, brows furrowing as I sought comfort in the horrors I'd inflict on

her. I would make her suffer until she begged for death.

He leaned back in his chair. “What's the update on her whereabouts?”

“The men are still looking,” I replied with narrowed eyes, feeling a pang of frustration at how she'd managed to stay hidden for almost seven months.

Who the fuck had trained her to be this good at what she did?

“What about her brother?” he asked.

“Vanished from the hospital the same day she ran,” came my reply.

He went silent for a moment before edging closer, his eyes boring into mine. “For months, the Tarasov Bratva has put a lot of resources into finding her, yet all of our efforts are futile.” He paused, his gaze unwavering. “She's completely off the grid—a ghost that we have no means of tracking down. It's like she doesn't exist.”

I tilted my head, squinting as I flowed with him, getting a hint of what he was driving at.

“Do you know what that means?” he questioned, his voice low and husky, anticipating my response.

I was quiet for some time, gritting my teeth as the realization hit me. “She's not working alone.”

“Exactly.” His lips curled into a smirk, his back sinking into his chair. “Julia Gray is in league with someone powerful enough to hide her from the Bratva.” He let out a dismissive laugh. “The little devil has friends in high places.”

“Enemies of the Bratva,” I hissed, my tone dripping with venom, my heart filled with hatred.

My chest heaved slowly, a streak of rage jolting through my body.

I hated her—I hated that woman with every fiber of my being—and I wouldn't stop until I found her.

I will find you, Julia Gray. And I swear I will make you suffer .

My jaw tightened, mirroring my resentment toward her.

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:15 pm*

In the shielding comfort of my soft, oversized sweater, I stood by the window, watching the snowflakes dance outside, arms wrapped around myself. The bulk fabric hung over my curves, concealing my swollen belly and adding layers of warmth.

Bigfork, Montana, had been my safe haven, my hiding place, far beyond the reach of Roman and his family.

This was the last place anyone would ever think to look for me. It was all thanks to Agent Anderson for pulling the strings to get me out of Chicago as soon as the mission went south.

I owed him a lot—my life included.

Anderson hadn't hesitated for one second to help out with everything that I needed to get settled in this small cottage house—away from Roman's reach.

I knew he was disappointed in me for not getting the files when I had the chance. I knew he was unhappy that I blew the mission. But he'd never mentioned it, never made me feel like it was my fault the mission failed.

However, deep down, I didn't need anyone to tell me that I'd caused all this. I created this mess, and now, Anderson was the one cleaning it up. Maybe it was because he blamed himself for dragging into this fight, to begin with. I wasn't sure. But one thing that I was sure of was that there was enough blame to go around.

Every day for the past few months, I'd battled with my guilt, and every day, I lost, over and over again.



Everything was going well; the plan was progressing, and I'd just had a big breakthrough—a realization so massive it would've changed my story. Well, it did, just not in the way that I would have wanted it to.

This quest for revenge had put me in a tighter spot than I'd anticipated.

While prepping for this mission, I hadn't ruled out the possibility of having to be on the run, considering there was a twenty percent chance of failure.

However, I never thought I'd jeopardize the mission by allowing my emotions to get the better of me. Nor did I ever think I'd get pregnant in the process.

This would have all played out differently if I hadn't been so clumsy with my secret. I should never have left my family photo in the open like that.

In my defense, though, everything had happened so fast, with the men from the club and Roman saving me. There was no way I could have known what was about to happen and prevented it.

If those men hadn't shown up at my place, Roman would never have had the chance to drop by unannounced and go through my stuff.

But none of that mattered. The mission had failed, and it was my fault.

I was trained to be perceptive, to anticipate every possible outcome of events beforehand. And for a long time, I did that, but the one time things spiraled out of my control, everything came crumbling down.

Years of training, planning, and strategizing all gone in a flash because of one stupid mistake. Everything we worked so hard to build went down the drain in seconds.

I should have been more careful.

He must hate me now, and that alone pierced my heart each time the thought crossed my mind.

I'd never been so scared of anything or anyone in my life. Roman terrified me—haunting my dreams and making my nights a living hell. A man such as himself, powerful and influential, would never stop until they repaid evil with evil. He wasn't the kind to turn the other cheek, nor was he the kind to forgive and forget.

The idea that he was still out there, using everything in his power to track me down, always sent shivers down my spine.

Although Bigfork had kept me safe for more than seven months now, I couldn't shake the feeling that my days of safety were numbered.

Roman wouldn't give up on finding me. I was certain of that. But for how long was I going to keep running?

It was already difficult having to worry about myself and my brother. And now, in less than a month's time, I'd have to worry about my newborn baby as well.

I heaved a sigh, rubbing a palm over my belly, eyes darting down at it. I couldn't make up my mind to go for an abortion; I couldn't find it in me to deprive this child of a chance at life. That was the best decision I'd made so far, and I couldn't wait to give birth, to finally meet my child.

A smile spread across my face at the thought of how handsome or beautiful it'd look in my arms. With each passing day, my love and affection for the baby in my womb grew sporadically, fueling my anticipation for the big day. I wasn't worried about the pain of childbirth. No. I looked beyond, finding solace and comfort in the joy after

labor.

I had enough to lose now, and that shit scared the living daylight out of me.

My shoulders slumped, fingers pinching the bridge of my nose as I fought against the fear of Roman eventually finding us. I had no idea what he'd do to me or Tommy. Honestly, I wasn't afraid for my life—it was my brother's and my child's that were more of a concern to me.

He could drag me down to the pits of hell if he wanted; I couldn't care less. I just couldn't stomach him hurting my loved ones. He'd have to kill me first.

I turned from the window, eyes settling on Tom, who sat engrossed on the couch. He was clad in a sweater I'd woven for him—a new skill I'd learned in these months of isolation and idleness.

His gloved hands moved rapidly, twisting the corners of a Rubik's cube, his brows narrowing with rapt attention.

Tom's health was so much better these days; he could speak more fluently now, although he still wasn't fully out of his shell yet. He was more introverted, satisfied with his own company, and developed a liking for solving puzzles.

There was nothing I wouldn't do just to see him smile, and most of the time, I'd join him in playing chess, even though he would always destroy me in the end. He was good at it, and so was I, but I'd intentionally let him win so I'd bask in the joy that came with watching him smile.

At the moment, he was my world—the only family I had left—and I was determined to make him happy despite my own brokenness inside.

Tom must have felt my gaze; he jerked his head and caught my eyes, his lips curling up into a smile.

With a warmth spreading across my chest, I glided over to him, my swollen feet cautiously carrying me across the room. “Hey,” I called, my voice barely above a whisper.

“Hey,” he replied with the same tone, lowering his Rubik's cube to indulge me.

I loved how much he respected and adored me; it always melted my heart. He'd told me a few weeks ago that I was his mom now and that my efforts to keep us safe from the bad men hadn't gone unnoticed.

His words that evening had charged my tear glands, flooding me with more emotions, especially after he slipped into my bosom.

Tom didn't know the full story; he just knew that we were hiding from some very dangerous men.

“Would you like some hot chocolate?” I asked, unable to stop myself from smiling at the handsome young man looking at me.

Tom had Dad's blue eyes, the same nose, and the same smile. It was like looking at a younger version of Anthony Gray.

“You're pregnant, Jules,” he said, rising to his feet and leaving the cube back on the couch. “You shouldn't be worrying too much about me,” he added, eyes crinkling at the corners. “Now, would you like some hot chocolate?”

My expression softened, a smile brightening my face as I nodded, overwhelmed by his thoughtfulness.

He mirrored my reaction and slowly stepped away, heading to the kitchen.

I turned around and watched him leave, thinking I couldn't have asked for a better sibling.

I couldn't lose him. I couldn't lose this baby inside me. They both meant the world to me.

The fear of getting found by Roman and the heartbreaking thoughts of the inhumane things he'd do to us crept back into my mind.

Anderson planned to sneak Tom and me out of the country under false identities. According to him, my fake passport was ready, and he was working on my brother's.

The good news was that a week from now, we'd be halfway across the world.

God, I hope this works , I thought, staring at my reflection in the mirror.

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*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:15 pm*

In the front passenger seat, my chest heaved slowly, eyes narrowing down the road as Boris accelerated onward, recklessly speeding through the snow-covered streets of Bigfork, Montana.

Behind were more black vehicles—my men following up with the same speed. Our grand arrival prompted the few people lingering here and there to turn their heads at us.

Did she really think that I wouldn't find her anywhere she hid?

It had taken over seven months, but eventually, my men were able to track her down to this small, quiet town in Montana. She'd hidden long enough; it was time she paid for her sins.

Julia had cost me a lot of money just to find her, and now that I finally knew the exact place she was staying, I wasn't leaving here without her.

I hadn't given much thought to what I'd do once I set eyes on her again after all this time, but one thing was certain: She wouldn't slip through my fingers anymore.

My jaw clenched as I sat there in silence, patiently waiting for the time we'd arrive at her place. The further into Bigfork we traveled, the more my anger amplified.

I couldn't wait to see the look of shock and surprise on her face when she set eyes on me. I'd savor that moment—the moment I'd have my pound of flesh.

The sound of roaring engines filled the air, echoing across the landscape and the

rocky mountains that surrounded the town. Our vehicles glided over the road that snaked through the settlement with delicate curves and gentle slopes.

Almost at the outskirts of the town, Boris rounded a corner with a sharp, precise swerve, tires screeching against the tar.

A small cottage house came into view, and just in front of it, he brought the car to a swift halt. “We're here,” he announced, his voice low and smooth.

My scowl deepened as my eyes flew across the building up ahead. The car door gave a soft click as I opened it and stepped out, my feet stomping on the snow.

The other vehicles arrived, their tires screeching to a stop outside the building while I made my way to the entrance, balling both hands into fists.

With all that rage surging through me like jolts of electricity, I lifted a leg in the air, and seconds later, I kicked against the wooden front door. The impact was so strong that it knocked the door from the hinges, revealing the cozy interior.

The wind whispered into the house, carrying particles of snowflakes, its faint whistle filling the air.

“Tommy, get behind me!” Julia yelled, quickly grabbing a shotgun from the wall.

The boy ran to seek shelter at her back as she pointed her weapon at the entrance, ready to pull the trigger.

Impressive.

But pathetic.

“Stay back!” Her hand moved deftly, cocking the gun in place, the sound echoing across the room.

I watched the fire in her eyes dull, draining the courage from their depths the moment she realized who was by the door. Her breath caught in her throat, her chest swelling in fear as her hands trembled on the gun.

My shoes clicked against the wooden floor as I waltzed inside with menacing steps, savoring the terror in her gaze.

She stood frozen in shock, barely able to maintain her grip on the shotgun.

“There you are,” I whispered, my tone laced with hatred and fury, my blazing eyes narrowing at her. “I’ve waited a long time to see that look on your face.”

Boris and a couple of my men walked in, surrounding the living room, while the others guarded the vehicles outside.

“Drop the gun, Julia,” I said, my intense gaze never leaving her terrified face.

Without a moment of hesitation, she let the weapon fall from her hold, her protective arms flying behind her back, shielding her brother from us.

Their matching oversized sweaters and woolen hats—a testament to their connection—struck me with the perfect idea to begin her torture.

My brows furrowed as I watched her stand like a human shield, hands wide apart, protecting her little brother like a mother hen.

Excellent.



“Get the boy,” I ordered, basking in her reaction.

“What? No! No, no, no...!” The words burst out of her mouth in a nervous rush, her eyes widening in fear.

Boris stepped forward and grabbed the boy by the arm against her futile struggles.

“No, let him go! Let him go, please—he has nothing to do with this!” She launched what seemed like an attempted attack, her hands fists bouncing off Boris's rigid form.

The boy wept, his body shuddering as he was being held down to the ground, Boris pointing a gun at his head.

Julia dropped to her knees, eyes misting as her palms closed in together in a pleading gesture. “Please...don't hurt him. He didn't do anything.” She held my gaze, tears rolling down her cheeks. “I'm begging you, Roman,” she said amidst sobs. “I'm the one you want, and you can do whatever you want to me. Just please...let my brother go. He has nothing to do with this. Please, Roman. Take me instead.” Her voice broke as she spoke, pleading with her teary eyes.

As monstrous as she thought I was, I'd never kill a kid, but she didn't know that, and I was going to keep it that way. Putting the idea in her head that I could take his life at any time was just the beginning of her torment.

“On your feet.” I tightened my jaw, unfazed by her emotional breakdown.

Something was different about her, but I couldn't figure out what—I was too angry to think about that. But she did look bigger, or maybe it was just the bulky fabric that hung loosely over her form.

She got up, sniffing, her eyes tinged red from crying.

Quietly, I stepped forward, gritting my teeth in an attempt to control my anger. She retracted, shrinking in absolute fear the closer I drew toward her. Her throat wobbled as she swallowed hard, terror flickering in her gaze.

“Not so brave now, are you?” I questioned, casting a glare at her.

She hit her back against the wall, her lips quivering as I halted in front of her, my gaze still lingering, feeding my eyes with the horror in hers.

“You targeted me because you wanted my attention,” I began, my voice thick and threatening. “Now, you have it. You have my full attention, Julia Gray.”

Tears wouldn't stop flowing as she shook her head, muttering silent words I assumed were pleas.

“Who're you working for?” I asked, “Who sent you?”

She swallowed, her eyes boring into mine as if searching for something, but the only thing in their depths was fury. “No one,” she said.

My rage was amplified by her lie, causing my forehead to crease. “Don't bullshit me, Julia!” I thundered, almost losing my cool, my hand slamming against the wall behind her.

She flinched reflexively, shutting her eyes momentarily. “I swear I'm not working for anyone.”

I frowned, stealing a glance at her whimpering brother. “Boris,” I called, my tone hinting at an instruction.

Boris got the message and cocked his pistol, the barrel still pointed at the boy's head.

“No, no, no!” she shrieked, hands flying up in surrender. “Okay, okay...I'm not working for anyone—but I'm working with someone,” she confessed, her eyes focused on her brother, who was shaking on the ground. “Please, don't hurt him.”

“Who are you working with?” I rephrased.

She returned her gaze to me. “An FBI agent who's spent years looking for a way to bring you and your family to justice.” She paused, panting with a heaving chest. “I swear, the only reason I was in on the plan was because I thought you killed my parents—you'd do the same if you were in my shoes; you'd want revenge, too.” She wept, drying her tears with intermittent sniffles.

She was trying to toil with my emotions, to get me to sympathize with her—to see things from her perspective. Despite my anger, I knew deep down that she had a point, but her betrayal was all that rang in my head.

“I didn't kill your parents, Julia,” I said through gritted teeth, my heart burning with hurt. “Anthony and I had our differences, but I didn't have any reason to kill him, let alone his wife....” I felt a flicker of disappointment at how lowly she thought of me.

In spite of our ruthlessness, the Bratva had rules; we weren't mindless animals who did things without considering the consequences. We killed only when necessary, and that wasn't the case with her family.

“I know.” She nodded, her voice soft and barely above a whisper.

My brows knitted together, accentuating the puzzled expression on my face. What was she talking about? What did she mean?

“The day I found out that it wasn't you was the same day you found out who I truly was.” She fixed her gaze on me. “So...I ran.”

“If I didn't do it, then who did?” I asked, my eyes narrowing to highlight my piqued curiosity.

Her breath hitched in her throat, and her eyes widened at my question. I could almost hear the sound of her heart pounding in her chest. It was like she was afraid to say the name of the one responsible for her parents’ death. Her lips twitched at the corners but produced no words.

“Answer me!” I thundered impatiently.

“Your Uncle Ivan!” She raised her voice, blurting out the words that struck me like lightning.

For a second, I stood frozen in shock at this insane revelation. My pulse quickened, and I could feel the deep creasing lining of my forehead. My lips pressed into a thin line, and my shoulders tensed as my chest expanded in anger.

“How dare you?” My hand flew to her face, fingers digging into her jaw as I glared at her, feeling the adrenaline pumping through me.

She panted, holding her breath as tears trickled down her cheeks. Her nostrils flared at the pain I was inflicting on her jaw. She knew it was futile to try and resist—my grip was too tight.

I edged closer so she could see the rage flickering in my eyes. “You dare accuse my uncle? You must have a death wish.”

She slowly shook her head, her tears flowing like a river. “I'm accusing him. It was your uncle...I swear.” Her voice was barely audible as my grip against her jaw restricted her ability to speak.

It wasn't until I leaned forward that I felt her protruding stomach, prompting me to pause for a moment. My eyes darted down to her belly and then returned to her face, but now, she wouldn't look me in the eyes.

Julia did her best to avoid my gaze.

What mystery did she have going on this time?

My brows narrowed, and a gasp came forth as I let go of her, taking a single step back. Her body was tensing, her breathing growing heavier by the second as she rubbed her jaw in a massaging motion. Her head was bowed, and her shoulders were slumped.

She was nervous.

I dropped my eyes to her belly and swiftly tugged up the hem of her bogus sweater.

That instant, my brows arched in surprise. “You're pregnant?” The words jumped out of my mouth as I returned my gaze to her bowed face.

Julia still avoided my eyes, and she wouldn't lift her head.

“Look at me, goddamn it!” I jerked her chin, forcibly staring at her.

She was weeping with quivering lips; her entire body was shuddering as she stared back at me, stunned, immobile.

My heart was racing. One hand balled into a fist as a myriad of thoughts overlapped in my mind.

Has she been with someone else while on the run from me?

Jealousy crept in, fueling my rage.

My chest heaved heavily, veins bulging. “Who is he?” I asked through gritted teeth. “Who's the father?”

With that kind of rage swelling in me, if I saw him in the house, I'd use her shotgun to rip a hole right through him.

“You are,” she declared, looking deep into my eyes. “You're the father, Roman. You.”

Her words hit me like a live grenade and sent me stumbling on my feet—speechless. Literally.

“Don't believe her, Boss. She could be lying again,” Boris said, his tone dripping with disbelief.

“I'm not,” she replied without taking her eyes off me, like she wanted me to see the truth in their depths.

I didn't expect this revelation, and I'd yet to wrap my head around it. But we'd find out soon enough whether or not she was lying.

Then, I'd figure out what to do with her.

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:15 pm*

“Let me out! Let me outta here!” I pounded my palms against the door, my mind racing.

Roman had captured me and my brother, forcing us to return to Chicago with him. It wasn't like we had a choice anyway. I couldn't resist his order—couldn't jeopardize the life of my younger brother.

I was trapped in a room at his mansion, locked away from the rest of the world and having no idea where my brother was. I didn't know whether or not he was safe, and I had no clue what Roman would do to him.

My safety wasn't really my concern at the moment; I knew the last thing Roman would do was hurt me while I was carrying his baby. He was furious at me and probably even hated me, but I doubted that he'd do anything to harm his unborn child.

He'd made sure we stopped at a hospital for a paternity test, the results of which would usually take about 3 to 5 days. But knowing Roman's influence and power, he must have paid a premium to secure immediate processing.

Roman's expression was stoic even after the results, but for a fraction of a second, his mask slipped, and I caught a glimpse of an emotion he struggled to conceal.

In his eyes was a fleeting spark, barely perceptible beneath his icy stare. But I was fast enough to catch it—hence the reason I knew he wouldn't harm me. At least not yet, for the sake of the baby.

My brother, on the other hand, was way beyond my reach, and the fact that I had no

idea where he was or how he was doing was killing me.

I glared at the door, resuming my noisemaking, relentlessly slamming my fist despite my aching palms. “Let me outta here! Let me out!” I screamed, almost losing my voice.

The knowledge that, for now, I was somewhat safe from Roman's wrath—thanks to the baby in my womb—was the determining factor for my behavior. I wasn't going to stop until someone eventually got tired of my drama and came to answer me.

I could do this all day.

I'd been at this for the past one hour, and honestly, I was just getting started.

“Let me...!” I hadn't completed the sentence when I heard the door click from outside.

Finally.

I drew back, my chest swelling at the thought of who my noise had pissed off. Was it him?

What's he gonna do to me?

I swallowed hard, feeling the dryness in my throat.

The door opened, and two women—both in their late forties—waltzed into the room clad in matching black and white outfits. I assumed they were Roman's maids, and I wasn't wrong.

They glided over to me, one wearing a blank expression, the other flashing me a faint



smile with a tray of fresh clothes in her hands.

“Why have you decided to disturb the peace of the house?” a thick, masculine voice spoke from the entrance, a dark whisper that sent sudden chills coursing through my veins.

My heart skipped a beat as the low, gravelly tone washed over me, causing my breath to cease for a moment. I jerked my head at the heavily built man standing by the door, imposingly tall.

As we locked eyes, his cold and hollow depths bore into mine in a way that made my skin crawl with unease. The scowl on his rugged face was so deep that I felt a tremor sprint through my very core, awakening a primal fear.

It was him. Boris, aka “The Bull.”

I’d researched him while prepping for my mission. He wasn't someone I wanted to mess around with. Boris was the man who held my brother at gunpoint when Roman had invaded Bigfork, Montana. Clearly, he had the answers I was looking for.

“Where's my brother?” I summoned the courage to ask, struggling to hold his intimidating gaze.

He stood sentinel at the door, his hollow eyes never leaving my face. I was terrified by his icy stare, but I wouldn't let him see my fear. Despite my heaving chest, I struggled to maintain composure.

“Where's Tommy?” I repeated, ignoring the maids standing beside me. “I just wanna know that he's safe.”

“If you do not wish for anything bad to happen to him, then you will do as you're

told,” he said, his tone dripping with authority as he shifted his gaze to the maids beside me. “Get her ready.”

I squinted, brows narrowing. “Ready for what?”

He ignored me and dematerialized, leaving me with the maids.

I turned to face them as they were already taking off my clothes, their hands flying all over me.

“What's going on?” I asked, my confused eyes darted between them.

The next thing I knew, I was stripped down to my underwear. My brows furrowed as I stepped away from them, uncomfortable with my ignorance. “Stop. What're you doing?”

“We're here to get you ready, and we need to bathe you first,” the one with the blank expression said to me.

My brows arched instantly, mirroring my shock, and bewilderment settled on my face. “What do you mean, bathe me ? I can bathe myself. What are you getting me ready for?”

“Shh.” The smiley one shushed me, index finger pressed over her lips. “Do as you're told, remember?” Her voice was barely above a whisper.

I was perplexed by everything happening at the moment, but she was right. The instructions for my brother's safety were to do as I was told.

I heaved a sigh, letting my guard down.

The maids led me to the bathroom and bathed me with warm water. Their delicate hands sponged my pale skin in the bathtub, and it was weird at first, but with time, I loosened up a little.

Once done, they dressed me up in a nice, flowered, knee-length white dress. They applied a light layer of makeup to my face, blending it seamlessly with my skin tone.

“You look beautiful,” the smiley one said, her lips curling into a grin.

I stared at my reflection—indeed, I was with my silky black hair styled to perfection. “Thank you,” I replied, feeling a faint warmth on my cheeks.

Resisting the urge to ask what was really going on was a hard thing to do. I knew I could get through to the smiley maid, but the one with the blank expression was cold as ice. I felt like she was there to make sure I remained oblivious to what was happening.

I left the room and joined Boris, who was already waiting for me, standing outside a sleek black Mercedes Benz.

All through the drive, there was radio silence in the car's cabin, punctuated only by the sound of the humming engine. I was seated at the back, wondering where he was taking me and too afraid to ask. My heart was pounding in my chest. This uncertainty was gnawing dangerously at my mind.

After a short drive, Boris pulled over in front of the Chicago County Courthouse, the magnificent building looming before us.

My breath hitched in my throat when he opened the door and stepped out, gesturing for me to do the same.

I hesitated for a moment, thinking of so many reasons why we were here, but only one seemed to make sense to me. But no. It couldn't be. Could it?

My chest suddenly became heavy as I exited the car, eyes drinking in the building's imposing stone facade, ornate windows, and soaring clock tower.

We stepped into the courthouse, enveloped by the grand foyer's high ceilings and ornate chandeliers. My heels clicked against the fine marble floor, polished to mirror one's reflection as Boris led me through a bustling hallway.

We passed rows of wooden benches and courtrooms, then ascended a large staircase, gliding over to a room labeled "Wedding Chapel."

Before I could process what I'd just read, the door before me swung open, and as we stepped inside, my heart sank into my chest.

I stood frozen in shock as I locked eyes with Roman, dressed in his usual black suit, standing before a judge. A stern expression was plastered on his face, leaving no room for objection.

A few of his men were present, scattered here and there, all wearing serious expressions.

I didn't need anyone to tell me what this was.

It was a fucking court wedding.

That faint voice in my head that had, a few minutes ago, whispered the possibility of this event now screamed at me to run.

I flinched at the sound of the door locking behind me, and instantly, I turned around,

only to see Boris manning the exit, arms across his chest.

“Please, let me through,” I said, eyes misting at the dawn of my reality.

He ignored me, his gaze unwavering.

I glanced back at Roman, my hands trembling and my throat so dry that I found it difficult to swallow. With an instinctive move, I jolted back toward the door in a failed attempt to escape.

Two of his men grabbed me by the hands and pushed me toward the mean-looking man standing before the judge.

I could hear my heart pounding in my heavy chest. My lips quivered as I struggled to move my jelly legs forward, eyes fixed on Roman.

It was foolish to resist.

Roman's glare was intimidating enough, and his men surrounded me. There was no way in hell that I could make it out of here without obliging to his will. He hadn't said a word to me yet, but his gaze seemed to dare me to resist.

This wasn't a fight that I could win, and I wasn't going to let my stubbornness get in the way of Tom's safety. I'd been asked to do as I was told if I wanted nothing bad to happen to him.

Was this the price I was going to pay, going into a forced marriage with someone who clearly hated me?

My heart shattered into a million tiny pieces as tears rolled down my cheeks at the realization that my fate had been sealed. I was doomed.

But why was he marrying me when he despised me so much?

It was the baby that I was carrying.

I'd read about the Russian tradition and how a man was supposed to wed the woman carrying his child.

I finally stopped beside him, shoulders slumped, my body language screaming defeat as the weight of my circumstance bore me down. My gaze dropped to the floor, unable to meet Roman's or the judge's, while I trembled uncontrollably. Staying still was difficult as the shaking betrayed my inner turmoil.

“Gentlemen, we are gathered here today to witness the marriage of Roman Tarasov and Julia Gray,” the judge began, his voice cutting through my thoughts. “By the authority vested in me by the laws of the state, I will hereby join these individuals in marriage.”

I shut my eyes, and tears flowed like a river. This was really happening, and there was nothing that I could do about it. If this would make Roman spare Tom's life, then I would gladly succumb to his will. I would be his toy, a container carrying his child.

All through the ceremony, I wept in silence, and no one gave a shit—not even the judge, whose voice I'd drowned out until now.

“Julia Gray, do you take Roman Tarasov to be your husband and to accept the responsibilities of marriage as provided by law?” he asked.

I lifted my eyes and hooked my gaze upon Roman's stern stare. “Yes, I do.” My voice was barely above a whisper, lips twitching at the corners as I struggled to hold in the urge to burst out crying.

The judge's gaze shifted to Roman, and he asked the same question.

“I do,” Roman replied, his expression blank.

“By the power bestowed upon me, I now pronounce you husband and wife,” came the judge's final declaration.

His words pierced my heart and crushed my soul, prompting my eyes to shut and my shoulders to slump in dismay.

“You are hereby declared married, and your union is recognized as valid and binding under the laws of the state,” he said, his voice dripping with finality.

I flinched at the sudden bang of his gavel that sealed my fate.

A document was handed down, and Roman withdrew a pen as he accepted it and signed it before passing it to me. I didn't have a choice but to put down my own signature, signifying my agreement.

We were both escorted out of the building to Roman's black Ferrari, where he slipped into the driver's seat, with me riding shotgun.

As he drove away from the courthouse, an awkward silence settled between us until I summoned the courage to break it.

I turned to face him, his eyes fixed on the road. “Did you really have to do this? Did you have to force me into spending the rest of my life with you, knowing that you hate me so much?”

“I do hate you,” he replied keenly, his words digging into my heart like a sharp blade as he stole a glance at me. “But this is beyond me and you. My tradition obligates me

to marry you for obvious reasons.” His eyes dropped to my swollen belly. “And I intend to honor it.”

I met his cold gaze for a fleeting moment, my breath hitching in my throat.

His voice fell to a deadly warning, a low whisper that shattered my nervous system. “Make no mistake, Julia Gray. Just because you carry my child doesn't mean that I won't make you suffer for what you did. I have a million different ways to torture you and make your life a living hell.” He paused, as if savoring the fear in my eyes. “You're mine now. I own you.”

His last words scraped against my nerves, sending shivers through my core. I swallowed, eyes widening at the awareness of my reality.

We were only bound by paper; outside that, we would be two strangers living in the same house.

He wouldn't regard me as a wife, and he'd spend most of his time with his whores while I remained locked up in his mansion.

My biggest fear wasn't about how he'd treat me or the horrors I'd have to endure in this union. No. My biggest fear was what would become of our child when they came of age. They'd be a part of this life of violence, surrounded by the men who ruined my life.

They'd learn their father's cruel ways and become yet another brute. What was to say he wouldn't kill me when he no longer needed me to raise the child?

The thought of this possibility broke my heart, and a fresh stream of tears started to roll down my cheeks.



I'm fucked.

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:15 pm*

I hadn't fully digested the idea that I was going to be a father sooner than I expected. I'd think about that later, but for now, something else occupied my thoughts.

Her words still lingered on the fringes of my mind, infusing me with doubt. I'd tried to the best of my ability to push back the possibility of her claims, but I couldn't.

Clearly, she was wrong. There was no way that Uncle Ivan was behind the murder of her parents.

But why would she lie?

Why would she jeopardize her life if she wasn't so sure?

Julia knew how much I idolized and respected my uncle; she knew I wouldn't take it lightly if she spoke ill against him. Yet, she risked everything to say what she did.

Was she trying to turn me against Uncle Ivan?

Was this still a part of her evil plan to take me down?

A family divided against itself would not stand—maybe that was her agenda: to divide us. It didn't make much sense to me. Nothing did.

I cupped my face in my palms, leaning back in my chair as I waited for Boris's arrival. With each passing second, my patience wore thin as I anticipated what he was able to find.

Just to prove to her and myself that Uncle Ivan wasn't guilty of this crime, I'd had Boris do a little digging. It was his thing, and he always returned with answers when sent on strands like this.

I was certain that Julia was playing me, and when I had proof of her lies, it'd be her brother who'd suffer the consequences. I'd make her watch as I tortured him bit by bit—not too much, but enough to keep him alive.

That would teach her not to mess with the Tarasov family. I owned her now. Her life, her body, and her mind were all mine, and the sooner she understood that, the better for her.

There was a faint voice in my head, urging me to recall the look in her eyes when she told her truth. I tried to drown it, but it wouldn't quit until I did, her face flashing in my head.

Beyond the tears in her eyes that day, there was a beam of conviction within their depths. She was certain of what she said; she believed it in her bones.

Despite this, though, Julia had proven to be such a good actress and a brilliant liar. For all I knew, she could have been lying, just as she'd been from the very beginning.

I couldn't trust any word that came out of her poisonous mouth. How could I trust a woman who tricked me for months? A woman who outsmarted me once and toiled with my emotions? I wouldn't let her fool me again.

Julia would do anything to bring down my family, and this was one of her schemes.

It had to be.

Right?

My fingers dug into my temple in a massaging motion as the inner struggle continued—my heart against my brain.

As cold and stoney as my heart was, it was of the notion that there was a possibility of truth in Julia's claims.

My brain, on the other hand, had a lot of calculations to make, lots of analyses on how this could be one of Julia's plots.

The two sides had constantly been at war since the day I found her in Bigfork, Montana.

A knock on the door cut through my thoughts, capturing my eyes in time to see Boris walking in, his boots clicking on the floor.

I sat upright, adjusting my coat as I watched him halt before my desk.

“Evening, Boss,” he said, clearing his throat.

“Did you find anything?” I asked.

Boris tucked his hand in his pocket and withdrew a USB drive. “Went through a lot of trouble to get this.” He passed it across the table. “It contains a comprehensive list of all of Uncle Ivan's successful kills.”

I edged closer, reaching out to accept it. “Did you go through it?”

He shook his head, placing the drive in my palm. “You don't really believe her, do you?” he questioned, locking his gaze on me.

I inserted the drive into my laptop and raised my head. “No, I don't.”

“Even if he did—which I know he didn't—his actions benefited the Bratva,” Boris said, arms across his chest.

“It’s not a question of whether he did it or not; I just wanna be sure that he didn't break the rules and lie about it,” I replied, navigating through the contents of the drive, my eyes narrowing on the flickering screen before me.

“So, you do believe her, then,” he said, his tone sounding more like a statement than a question.

Deep down, there was a part of me that wanted to believe her, but I couldn't risk it. I couldn't risk her disappointing me a second time.

He didn't do it. Uncle Ivan was innocent of this particular crime.

I just needed to prove it to myself and uproot this seed of doubt she'd planted in my head.

There were so many names on that file, so many folders to check, to go through. It took me some time, and just when I was about to give up, my eyes settled on a folder labeled “The Grays.”

My brows furrowed, my chest slowly heaving as I dared to open the folder just to confirm, even though every name on this drive was his victim.

On the first click, photos of Anthony and Margret Gray's lifeless bodies, lying in the pools of their own blood, were plastered all over my screen.

With bated breath, I stared at the evidence right in front of me, eyes widened at this shocking revelation.

A wave of disappointment washed over me as I sank into my chair, a palm swiping over my face. I was struggling with this ugly truth despite seeing it for myself.

The photos were sent from Jorah as proof of a job well done.

“Shit,” Boris whispered.

With my reaction, he didn't need anyone telling him what I'd just found out.

Uncle Ivan had lied to me—he was the reason Julia embarked on her revenge mission in the first place.

He'd broken the rules; the Bratva had a strict policy about killing women—especially innocent women like Margret, who I had no beef with.

Fuck!

Julia was right.

Uncle Ivan knew that she was only out for revenge, yet he wanted me to kill her even though I'd decided to torture her first.

Killing her would've covered his tracks, and I never would've found this out.

I was still trying to process how messed up this was when my eyes caught a file labeled “Emily Clarkson.”

“No,” I muttered, feeling my stomach turn as I leaned closer, my gaze fixed on the name.

The scowl on my face deepened, my jaw tightening as I opened the file. It had no

photos of her, but the write-up was about Jorah neutralizing the threat.

Threat? I raged, my fingers balling into fists. Emily was no threat; she was my lover, and for eighteen years, I'd lived with the false fact that she was killed by an enemy.

Why, Uncle?

My chest expanded as my initial disappointment transformed into a blazing fury.

Losing Emily was the worst thing that had happened to me; her death had been the pivot point that anchored me to this path of ruthlessness. I lost my emotions and ability to feel compassion the day I lost her.

The fact that the man I idolized the most in this world was the one behind all of these atrocities made my skin crawl.

All that hurt, pain, and anger from eighteen years ago came rushing back to the surface, threatening to rip my mind apart.

My jaw tightened, as did my fists, and a wave of rage washed over me, prompting me to drill a punch into the laptop screen.

I jerked my head up, trying to steady my breathing. “Get the car ready, Boris. We're going to pay Uncle Ivan a visit.”

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:15 pm*

“Is there anything else you would like me to do for you?” Aida's face lit up with her signature smile as she stood by my bedside, eyes lingering over me.

Aida was by far the nicest person to me—in fact, she was the only person who was good to me in this house. Not that there was anyone else other than Roman and his men, anyway.

Bianca, the other maid, wasn't the kind to talk much; she was always so serious and all about her business. If it wasn't about work, she wasn't interested.

I'd never seen her smile, and I'd been living in this prison for about two weeks now. For a woman, Bianca really needed to loosen up.

But that was none of my concern. I had my own problems to deal with.

Lying in bed, I jerked my gaze at the woman towering over me, my lips curling into a genuine grin. “Thanks, Aida. But I'm okay.”

Her eyes crinkled at the corners, her head slightly bowing. “If you need anything, don't hesitate to call me. I'm just down the hallway.” She took a step, ready to dematerialize.

“Aida,” I called, my voice barely above a whisper.

She paused and returned her focus to me, retaining her smile. “Yes?”

“Why are you doing this?” I asked, holding her gaze.



Her head tilted a little, brows knitting together—a subtle gesture that accentuated her puzzled look. “Doing what?”

“Why are you so nice to me? Not that I'm complaining, but...why?” I insisted, my gaze unwavering as my curious eyes never left her face.

Aida let out a soft scoff. “Because you deserve it and more.” She added almost immediately, “And I'm not saying this to sympathize with you. No. You deserve to be happy.” Her shoulders shrugged. “I'm just playing my part.”

“But you barely know me,” I said, my curiosity longing to hear more.

“Maybe,” she replied. “But I've been around long enough to know a good girl when I see one.” She stepped forward, my voice dropping a little lower. “Can I tell you something?”

She poked my interest with her question, and my brows furrowed as I watched her sit on the side of my bed.

“It doesn't seem like it, but he's not as horrible as you think he is,” she said, looking into my eyes as she held my hand. “And your life doesn't suck as much as you think, either—”

“Aida—” I tried to cut her off, but she wouldn't let me.

“I know how this looks—trust me, I do,” she interrupted my interruption and continued. “But take it from a woman who's seen a lot.... It'll all work out in the end.”

I honestly wanted to believe her, but I couldn't see the possibility of it happening, not in a million years. The certainty in her tone was admirable, but she clearly didn't

know the whole story, the hatred Roman had for me.

“Get some rest.” She concluded her speech with a gentle squeeze of my fingers.

Aida rose to her feet, hit me with another dose of her enchanting smile, and then headed out the door. She took one last look at me before shutting it behind her.

How could she say that my life didn't suck as much as I thought it did?

For Christ's sake, I was literally a prisoner in this house. Sure, I was allowed to roam around the mansion, but I couldn't leave.

Even if I had an escape plan—which I didn't—it would be impossible to execute.

The damn place was swarming with guards, serious-faced men armed to the teeth.

Plus, I needed to be on good behavior for the sake of my brother, whose whereabouts I was still unaware of. Whenever I summoned the courage to ask Boris about Tom, he always said, “He's fine.”

Goddamn it!

That wasn't enough.

I needed more. I needed details.

I needed to see him with my own eyes to make sure that he was truly okay.

Relying on the words of a man like Boris did not help my situation at all. His tone, whenever he replied, was always flat, his expression unreadable.

How was I supposed to get assurance from that?

This suspense was killing me slowly, and that was what Roman wanted.

This was his own way of punishing me; I knew that. Yet that knowledge didn't make it hurt any less.

He couldn't torture me physically, considering my condition, but he sure as hell could torture me emotionally.

He must be basking in the satisfaction that came with seeing me suffer.

I felt a nasty sting in my eyes as they misted on the thought of the blissful moments we shared together—however brief.

It was hard to picture the times when we were lovers...sort of. Yes, I did have my agenda back then, but something about him had managed to slowly creep into my heart.

There was a time during my mission when I'd zone out at work, thinking about his touch and the way he made me feel safe and secure.

Ironic how the same man today was the reason for the fear that overwhelmed me completely.

He'd forced me into marrying him—although without using brutal force—sealed our union on a piece of paper, and then locked me up here.

I barely saw my “husband” twice a week despite living in the same house, and it was always by chance.

Sometimes, I'd be walking around the house when I'd see him on the phone, heading out. Or I would be in the kitchen with Aida when he'd be driving in or out of the compound.

He hadn't said a word to me since the wedding at the courthouse, and up until now, his threats still echoed in my head.

A part of me was satisfied with him ignoring me, acting like I didn't exist. At least that had saved me from his wrath. I didn't have to put up with his anger, disdain, hatred, or resentment toward me.

Then there was the softer part of me that just wanted to see him—to have a decent conversation with the man I'd once felt something so intense for.

I wasn't exactly sure what the feeling was, but Roman had awakened something in me, something that felt genuine.

Deep down, this part of me wanted things to go back to the way they were, but I knew better. It was impossible.

His hatred for me seemed to bloom with each passing day, and every morning that I woke up, my fear intensified.

Roman had become the scariest and coldest living creature I'd ever seen, and I was trapped in the same house with him.

So, Aida, with all due respect, you're wrong. I've accepted my fate, I thought, tossing the sheets aside.

I drew in a deep breath, placing my feet on the fluffy rug at the base of the bed with my fists pressing against the foam as I struggled to stand.

My stomach was so heavy that it made literally everything difficult, including standing. I had to hold on to one of the bed's four posts before getting on my feet.

I groaned at my aching body, both hands reflexively flying to my waist to support my protruding belly from the back.

With careful and cautious steps, I walked toward the door with the intention of stretching my legs.

However, I hadn't even moved five paces away from the bed when I felt it—a sharp pain in my belly that forced me to bend.

An agonizing groan escaped my lips as I reached back toward the post for support. At first, I thought it was just the baby kicking as it usually did, but this pain was a lot worse.

I could feel my legs trembling, my hands shaking with a palm on my stomach. I grabbed a bedpost, tightening my grip around it with wide-open eyes and sharp breaths. I remained like that, frozen, unable to move.

This searing pain clenched my abdomen like a vise tightening around my swollen belly. The contraction rippled through my shuddering body, jolting to my lower back. I gasped painfully, my breath hitching in my throat as I felt it sprint down to my pelvis.

This was definitely not the baby kicking.

I was going into freaking labor.

Suddenly, a warm gush flooded between my legs, trickling down my thighs. My gaze dropped to the floor, where the liquid pooled beneath my feet.

My eyes widened in a mix of shock and fear at the realization that my water just broke.

Fuck. The baby was coming.

“Aida!” I shrieked at the top of my voice.

In a flash, the door burst open, and she came rushing to my aid.

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:15 pm*

The front door swung open, and I barged into Uncle Ivan's living room, eyes blazing with fury.

His men, about four of them, reacted instinctively to the way I stormed in, guns out and ready to fire.

He raised his hand, and they all lowered their weapons after recognizing who I was.

I halted before him, seething in silence, Boris standing a few paces away. My jaw clenched tighter as I glared at my uncle, unsure how this confrontation would end.

From his sofa where he sat, one leg across the other, Uncle Ivan lifted his gaze and locked eyes with me. He squinted, his forehead creasing slightly to indicate his dislike at my approach.

“I’ll excuse your behavior because you’re my nephew,” he said, his voice menacingly low. “Do you mind telling me why you’re looking at me with so much rage in your eyes?”

“Don’t bullshit me, Uncle,” I growled, throwing away my respect for him.

Jorah’s brows knitted from where he stood at a corner of the room. He rose to his feet and stepped forward, his gaze pinned on me.

I heard Boris’s boots clicking against the floor as he moved closer, taking a defensive stance beside me.

Ivan's men were now on their feet, casting threatening glares at me as the air charged with tension.

“You will address me with respect, boy. Do you understand?” Uncle Ivan's face twisted into a deadly frown.

With gritted teeth, I took a step forward, unfazed by his displeasure. “You lost that respect when you broke the rules...when you crossed the line,” I said, intentionally stalling so I could gather my emotions and not act out of impulse.

He was still my uncle.

His brows arched, eyes boring into mine as I boiled with rage. His face softened ever so slightly—almost undetectable—as he finally realized the reason behind my fury.

“That's right,” I hissed, my gaze unwavering. “I know. I know what you did, Uncle.”

With a deepened scowl, he rose to his feet. “You're gonna have to be a little bit more specific than that. I've done a lot of things,” he said, his tone unapologetic.

“You killed the Grays,” I muttered, my hands trembling with anger and my lips twitching at the corners. “Why?”

“You ungrateful fool,” he spat those venomous words. “You should be thanking me. I did the Bratva a favor by eliminating a threat...!”

“He was no threat!” I snapped, losing my cool. “Nor was his wife, and you killed them in cold blood!”

“Watch your tone, boy!” he thundered, his face inches from mine, spittle sprinkling on my skin. “I am still your uncle. Show some respect!”



I paused for a second, my voice leveling out. “Respect?” My brows arched at his effrontery, incredulous. “You mean like you showed me when you ordered the hit on Emily Clarkson?”

Uncle Ivan's face paled momentarily, the anger draining from his eyes.

“You knew how much I loved her,” I continued, my tone low, dripping with pain and betrayal. “Yet, you had your Terminator end her life.” I stole a glance at Jorah standing poised behind him before returning my gaze to Uncle Ivan. “And then you lied to me...for eighteen years.” My jaw tightened.

“It was a necessary evil,” he said, his face hardening without remorse. “Emily had to die for you to become the man that you are today.”

I unleashed a primal growl, triggered by his lack of remorse, as I seized him by the collar and slammed his back against the wall. I heard the sounds of cocking guns but didn't flinch.

“There you are!” he bellowed at me. “That's the monster I created! The monster that should've ripped that Gray girl limb from limb for daring to trick him!”

I yelled out, my rage finding expression as I struggled with the urge to drill my fist in his face.

“You were becoming weak, Roman!” he began, his voice rising as he fixed his eyes on me. “Your affection for that Emily girl was clouding your judgment. You were willing to give up the Bratva cause for her. You were losing yourself, nephew; I had to do something!”

My grip around his collar tightened, my arms trembling at the amount of rage jolting through my body.

“You're courageous enough to stand up to me now because I made you who you are,” he said, his voice dripping with icy control. “People fear you because of me.” He knocked my arms off effortlessly. “Everything I did, I did for the Bratva, and I don't regret it. And that's more than you can ever know.”

He walked away from me, heading into his office.

“I know enough,” I said, my voice causing him to stop in his tracks. “I know what happens to people who break the Bratva laws, irrespective of who they are.” I moved closer and halted in front of him. “You know that, and that's why you lied to cover your tracks, to save your own skin.”

He locked eyes with me, his face contorting at my words. He gritted his teeth.

“You're a coward, Uncle Ivan. And you will face the consequences of your behavior in accordance with the Bratva law.” My tone was glacial, my voice laced with menace.

His brows knitted, eyes flashing with anger and...fear? He stumbled backward, his face draining of color. “You dare threaten me?”

“If I threatened you, Uncle, you'd already be dead.” I smirked coldly. “I'm merely forecasting your future.”

Uncle Ivan's eyes bulged, a vein throbbing in his temple. His lips twitched at the corners but produced no sound until he snarled, “Jorah! Get them out of my house!”

My smirk widened, satisfied by the discomfort my words had inflicted him with. Uncle Ivan headed into his office, and as soon as the door slammed shut, his men surrounded Boris and me.

It was dishonorable to take down two defenseless men, so they all lowered their weapons, taking fighting stances.

The air thick with tension as we anticipated the chaos about to erupt like molten magma from a volcanic mountain.

Instantly, the men charged in at us, and while Boris was handling them, I faced off against the mighty Jorah. He was bigger than me, older, and probably even more experienced.

But at this point, I was angrier, smarter, and faster. Uncle Ivan might have pointed the gun, but Jorah was the one who pulled the trigger. He was the reason Emily was dead, the reason Julia's life was ruined.

I lunged at him with all that rage surging through me, our hands a rapid blur of movements. Blows and kicks were exchanged in a heated brawl that filled the air with the sounds of thick grunts and crashing objects.

In the background, I could hear the wails of Boris's victims—the four of them were clearly no match for him.

Bones snapped, and flesh tore in this intense fight.

Jorah, noticing how formidable I was against him, resorted to arming himself with a switchblade. At first, I didn't see it until he charged, the blade slicing through the air. I dodged the deadly strike by a hair's breadth, countering with a swift jab that he deflected.

With lightning-speed reflexes, I evaded Jorah's slashing blade and soon landed a solid kick to his chest.

He stumbled backward and regained control before lunging at me. Swiftly, I sidestepped, trapping his arm in mine, and with a practiced motion, I twisted until his arm snapped from its joint like a twig. He dropped the blade, groaning in agony, and before he could reconcile with the pain, I slammed my knee into his groin.

Jorah bent over instinctively, and seizing the opportunity, I grasped his legs, lifting him with a quick, brutal motion. With a savage force, I hurled Jorah backward, and his body arched as he crashed on the ground, his neck snapping in the process. The sickening crack of breaking bone filled the air as his head struck the floor.

I turned around, and he was lying motionless, his limp body crumbled, eyes frozen in a permanent stare.

Boris struck down his final opponent and jerked his head at me, as if wondering what I would do next.

I glided toward the office and kicked the door open, only to find Uncle Ivan sitting in his chair with a gun to his head.

“I can't tarnish my name, Roman,” he said, holding my gaze as I slowly stepped into his office. “Turning myself in to be judged will ruin everything I spent so many years building.” He shook his head. “And I can't have that.”

“Put the gun down, Uncle,” I said, cautiously approaching him.

“Why, so you can tell everyone my secret?” he questioned. “I don't regret setting you on this path, Roman. But I'd rather die the hero our family thinks I am than live to jeopardize that legacy.”

I flinched subtly when he cocked the gun pointed at his temple.

“For the Bratva.”

Uncle Ivan pulled the trigger.

His body fell back in his chair, and the gun slipped out of his hold.

I froze for about a minute. He deserved it for the innocent lives he'd taken, but a part of me still felt hurt. He was family, nonetheless.

My phone rang in my pocket, and I withdrew it, staring at the screen. It was Aida.

I answered the phone, and my heart melted instantly at the cry of a baby in the background. Aida explained that Julia had just been put to bed, and my breath hitched in my throat.

In a twist of fate, I lost my uncle and gained a new life—a baby—on the same day.

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I quickened my steps, my shoes clicking on the floor as I pushed the door open and walked into the ward.

My eyes widened at the sight of Julia, dampened in sweat, holding a baby in her arms. She was sitting on the bed with her back against the wall, eyes trained on the infant in her arms.

It was undeniable how beautiful she looked, especially when she raised her head, and her face brightened with a smile I hadn't seen for ages.

I'd stopped by the warehouse where I had her brother in good condition under surveillance and asked him to come with me. I was never going to hurt the boy—I

just needed to punish her a bit.

Her eyes misted when she saw him poking his head from behind me.

“Oh, my God, Tommy!” she shrieked, her voice dripping with excitement.

He rushed over to the bed and carefully hugged her, kissing her head.

“How...?” she asked, speechless, her eyes roaming his body as if searching for injuries.

His lips curled into a smile. “I’m okay. I’m okay.”

She shifted her gaze toward me, a grin spreading across her face as I glided over to her, my attention fixed on the infant in her arms.

I’d never made time to digest the fact that I was going to be a father. But right now, seeing this cute little creature unlocked a different dimension of my emotions.

“Would you like to hold her?” Julia asked, her tone barely above a whisper.

I jerked my head, meeting her eyes, and in that moment, everything I’d once felt for her came rushing back. She held my gaze, her magnetic stare reminding me of the good times we spent together.

And just like that, all that anger, rage, and resentment dissipated, vanishing like mist in the sun.

I stretched out my hands, and Julia placed the baby in my arms. Straightening, I watched the little thing lay comfortably in my hold, its hazel eyes sparkling like diamonds.

“It's a girl.” I smiled at the mother, only now processing the pronoun Julia had used.

Julia nodded, sniffing as she dried her tears. I returned my gaze to the cutest baby in the world, my heart warming at her arrival.

This was a game changer—a new chapter in our lives that I couldn't wait to explore.

I'm a father .

I chuckled, unable to tear my gaze off my little angel.

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:15 pm*

There was a flutter in my chest that prompted a smile on my lips as I laid our baby girl in her cradle.

I had two reasons to be glad today: the arrival of our child and the fact that for the first time in forever, Roman had actually smiled at me.

The look on his face when he carried the baby in his arms was priceless—I'd never seen that much sparkle in his eyes before. Never.

All through the drive home, he'd been nice and smiley with me, asking if I was feeling alright. This gesture had warmed my heart, and I almost shed tears at his genuine concern.

I couldn't have guessed the sudden switch in his attitude—at least not this quickly—and now I was wondering what had changed. Not that I was complaining, but it came as a shock. A pleasant shock.

Hold on, does that mean Aida was right when she said he wasn't as bad as I thought he was?

What was he up to?

My heart was racing with anticipation, and it felt like there were butterflies in my stomach.

He'd been watching me by the door as I put our girl to sleep, and each time I glanced over my shoulder, I'd see him smiling. Just a minute ago, he'd said he'd be waiting



down in the living room, that we needed to talk.

Once I was done putting the baby to sleep, I heaved a sigh, a broad grin spreading across my face. Within the next few seconds, I watched the cutest little thing in the world, laying in her cradle, her tiny eyes shut.

I rose to my feet and carefully walked out of the room, closing the door behind me. With a sharp exhale, I glided over the staircase where I saw him sitting alone, elbows resting on his knees, his face cupped in his palms.

Roman seemed tensed up about something—his foot tapping against the floor in an absentminded motion.

I descended the steps, my gaze fixed on him, wondering what exactly was going on and why he seemed disturbed.

He lifted his head, and the moment we locked eyes, I couldn't stop my lips from curling into a smile. A faint one appeared on his face as he rose to his feet, acknowledging my presence.

“Hi,” I said, my voice dropping to a gentle murmur, a finger pushing my hair to the back of my ear.

I avoided his piercing gaze, my eyes darting to the floor as I heard his approaching footsteps. My heart pounded in my chest as anxiety washed over me.

He halted in front of me, his cologne enveloping the space around me. “Am I that horrible that you can't look me in the eyes?” he asked in a soft, quiet breath.

I fidgeted with the hem of my dress, shifting my weight from one foot to the other. My neck seemed to suddenly weigh a ton as I struggled to raise my head, my

shoulders tensing. Finally, I bit my lip, releasing it slowly as I managed to jerk my head.

My eyes bore into his in a moment of awkward silence, and in their depths, I saw a glimpse of pain. It was subtle, but I saw it.

“Are you okay?” I asked, letting my emotions take the wheel, my gaze unwavering.

His eyes narrowed slightly. “You were right.” The words escaped his lips in a hushed sigh.

My brows arched at this shocking confession that piqued my interest and amplified my curiosity. “I’m sorry, what?”

He rubbed his eyes, letting out a soft exhale. “I didn’t....” He paused, as if choking on the next words. “I didn’t want to believe that my uncle was capable of breaking the rules the way that he did.” Roman lowered his head, fingers pinching the bridge of his nose.

His words stole my breath, and I stood frozen, watching him struggle with the weight of this confession. I was relieved that he’d finally believed me. But the memories of the trauma I had to suffer kept flashing in my head, misting my eyes.

“He never should have gone after your parents—never should have gone after Emily Clarkson.” Roman’s voice sank into a whisper, his tone laced with pain and hurt.

My chest heaved slowly as I blinked back my tears, wondering who the woman was. “Emily Clarkson? Who’s she?” I asked.

He was silent for a minute, his teeth discreetly gritting. “She was my first love,” he confessed.

I arched my brows in shock, eyes widening at the awkwardness of how the word sounded in his mouth. He didn't strike me as one who understood the concept of love.

“I wasn't always like this, cold and devoid of emotions,” he began, his narration holding my attention. “Eighteen years ago, I was what you would call...a lover boy.”

It was difficult to paint that picture of him in my head, but okay.

“It's hard to believe, but it's true,” he continued. “I did feel something for her. But clearly, my affection for Emily was stronger than my loyalty to the Bratva, and that was terrible.”

“What happened?” I asked after he paused, watching my face.

“She was killed by a rival gang.” He added almost immediately, “At least, that was what I thought for eighteen years. Turns out my uncle saw my affection for Emily as weakness, so he had her killed.”

My chest constricted as if squeezed by an invisible fist, and I felt a stinging sensation like tears welling up. My breath hitched, lodged in my throat, and my heart sank, weighed down by his words.

I knew how much he idolized his dear old Uncle Ivan—the entire Tarasov family did. I could only imagine his agony at this realization.

“Killing Emily was the event that created this cold, emotionless monster standing in front of you,” he said, his voice steady and calm as he masked his pain. “I closed myself off to feeling anything for anyone.” His gaze on me intensified. “And for a long time, it was so. Until you came along.”

I drew a deep breath, my eyes fixed on him.

“I never should have treated you the way that I did,” he said, firm and resolute. “It was unfair, and I should have handled the situation better.”

Hold on a minute. Did he just apologize? I thought, pushing my head back in surprise.

“Yes. I just apologized,” he said, as though he'd heard my thoughts, his eyes still locked on me.

My brows arched instantly. “What, you can read minds now?” I teased, a small smile spreading across my face.

He let out a scoff, mirroring my gesture.

Time seemed to suspend as his apology hung in the air and my eyes roamed his face, searching for any sign of insincerity. But I found none.

His words were genuine.

My lips parted, and for the moment, words failed me as shock and surprise wrestled with gratitude, leaving me breathless.

Memories of all the pain I'd had to endure because of him came flashing in my mind, triggering my tears. But I wasn't the only victim here; I had a hand in this as well.

I blinked rapidly, attempting to hold in my emotions. “It's okay. I'm sorry, too.” A sigh came forth. “I targeted you, tricked you, and played with your feelings. That was wrong, and I regret my actions,” I said, my voice barely above a whisper.

“You were only seeking revenge for a wrong done to your family.” He inched closer. “There's nobility in that, and you should take pride in how successful your plan was.”

His lips curled into a grin. “Well... almost successful,” he teased, air-quoting the word.

A hesitant chuckle escaped lips, punctuated by a heart-wrenching sob. “You just couldn't let me have that.” I searched his eyes again, hoping the flicker of emotions dancing in their depths was genuine. “Is this real?”

He quietly took my hand, squeezing gently against my fingers. “Do you feel that?” His voice, low and husky, sent shivers down my spine.

I nodded, my lips trembling as I fought back the urge to cry. “Despite everything that's happened, I...” My head shook, tears trickling down my cheeks. “I can't stop myself from feeling what I feel for you. I've tried to shake it off but I can't and it scares me.” I paused, looking into his eyes. “I think I'm in love with you, Roman.”

His expression softened, eyebrows slowly arching as he held my gaze.

“If we had met under a different circumstance, I'm sure that I would've loved you without fear—without compromise—because you, Roman, have unlocked something in me. You've awakened a part of me that's been asleep all this while,” I confessed amidst sobs, wiping my tears with the back of my hand. “I want this to work, but I'm afraid.” My eyes dropped to the floor.

He closed the distance between us, his finger gently lifting my chin. With a delicate motion, he swiped his thumb over my cheek, wiping my tears.

Roman stared into my eyes and said, with a voice so calm and comforting, “There's no need to be afraid, Julia.”

My heart raced as I watched him smile at me, his eyes shining with something that looked like excitement. The anticipation of his next words had me frozen, my breath

lodged in my throat, as I hoped he was about to say what I thought he was about to say.

“You can love me without fear,” he muttered, his forehead resting on mine. “Because I know I will...if you let me.”

My tears wouldn't stop flowing, and my heart was leaping with joy, eyes widening at his confession.

His hands cradled my face. “I love you, too, Julia. You complete me, and I would love to spend the rest of my life with you,” he whispered, his gaze burning with sincerity.

I felt the tension in my body release, my heart swelling with excitement. A soft sigh escaped me as my eyes fluttered closed, lips twitching at the corners. “Don't say those words unless you truly mean them.”

He wrapped his arms around my waist and pulled me closer to himself. “I mean every word, Julia,” he reassured, eyes boring into my soul.

I wasn't dreaming.

This was real.

Roman had just confessed his feelings for me, and it was overwhelming—in a good way.

I melted into his arms, hugging him tightly with my arms wrapped around his neck. His strong, protective hands enveloped me like a shield, and I found peace, comfort, and safety in his warm embrace.

Letting out a satisfactory sigh, I felt all that anxiety leave my body like a gentle breeze. I jerked my face to the head of the steps and caught Aida smiling as she looked down at us.

I guess she was right, after all; everything is finally falling in place.

But wait.

What about Uncle Ivan?

I can't ruin this moment. I'll ask Roman later, I thought, tightening my hold around his rigid form.

With my eyes shut, I drew in the scent of his cologne, a broad smile playing on my lips.

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:15 pm*

~ One Year Later

Fingers intertwined with mine, Julia stood by my side at Uncle Ivan's gravesite, her heels sinking into the earth. Clad in a somber black dress, she bowed her head, her dark hair pulled back in a ponytail with shades that concealed her eyes.

Dressed up in my finest black suit, surrounded by the entire Tarasov family, all in black, we paid our respect to a fallen hero—a man admired by a few and feared by most.

His sudden death was a shock to the Tarasov family, especially since it was death by suicide. For over a year now, the question lingered about why he'd take his own life and why he'd kill Jorah first before doing that.

No one other than me, my wife, and Boris knew the ugly truth behind his demise. I could easily tell the others about what truly happened, but that would tarnish his reputation and name.

He might have been a terrible uncle, but he was still family, and I couldn't take away the respect we all had for him. He'd done so much for the Bratva, so much that the Tarasov accomplishments wouldn't be complete without mentioning Ivan Tarasov.

In the end, he got what he deserved and paid for his atrocities, and I spared the rest of the family this disappointment. They still remembered him as a hero; that was his final request, anyway, the reason he chose death over serving his time.

The cemetery exuded a peaceful silence, the crisp air filled with the sweet fragrance



of fresh flowers—roses and lilies that adorned the granite headstone.

Soft sunlight filtered through the trees, casting dappled shadows over the lush grass—well-manicured—as songbirds filled the atmosphere with their gentle melodies.

Once the ceremony was over, the family members, one by one, moved away from the gravesite with hushed conversations.

I felt the gentle squeeze of Julia's fingers against mine as she looked at me. "I'll be with you in a minute," I whispered softly, stealing a glance at her.

She flashed a faint smile and stepped away, leaving me to my thoughts alone at the gravesite.

"He's in a better place, you know," Artem said, gliding over to stand beside me.

"I know," I replied without taking my eyes off the granite headstone.

He heaved a sigh, both hands tucked into the pockets of his pants. "Uncle Ivan's death was mysterious. I still can't wrap my head around it, even after one whole year." He paused for a moment.

"Yeah, me, neither." My voice dropped to a hushed tone, and my fingers rubbed my eyes.

Artem drew in a deep breath. "Justice can be a funny thing sometimes," he began, his voice leveling out as he spoke. "There are days it would require...well, unconventional paths." He turned to look at me, his expression soft and eyes sparkling with mischief.

My brows knitted together, mirroring the confusion that settled on my face.

“The world's a complex web, Roman. We all play our roles, and sometimes, the threads get tangled, leaving us with no choice but to compromise,” he added, his words carrying a hidden meaning.

Did he...?

No. He couldn't possibly....

My brows narrowed as we stared at each other, Artem's eyes holding a deep understanding that left me perplexed.

“We all make choices—some harder than others—but in the end, they shape us nonetheless.” He clasped his dark shades on and patted my shoulder. “See you around, cousin.”

I watched Artem walk away with graceful steps, a hand in his pocket as he joined Mikhail and Afanasy by their cars. He'd always been a wise one—that was why he was such a good Pakhan .

My eyes returned to the gravesite as I let out a soft sigh. “Until we meet again, Uncle.”

I stepped away, heading toward my family.

Julia chattered with her old friend, Madelyn, laughing about God-knows-what. My wife looked so beautiful and charming as time seemed to slow down, allowing me to bask in her glowing essence.

My eyes shifted toward our little angel, Yelena, and my lips curled into a bright

smile.

Aida, now my wife's closest friend and Yelena's nanny, stood by our car with our one-year-old daughter in her arms.

Yelena's adorable hazel eyes locked on me as she burst into a toothy grin. "Da-da," she squealed, stretching out her chubby arms.

"Hey there, sweetheart. Miss me?" I laughed, halting in front of Aida.

She smiled, transferring the leaping toddler into my eager arms. "She's been calling for you," Aida said.

"Is that so?" I asked, locking my gaze on the cutest baby in the world.

Yelena, with uncontrollable heart-warming smiles, wrapped her tiny arms around me, planting wet kisses on my cheeks.

"You missed Da-da, didn't you?" I chuckled, spinning her around in a gentle circle.

Yelena giggled, reaching to grab my nose, her black ponytail bouncing as I twirled her.

"Having fun without me?" Julia asked, her tone playful as she approached. "I'm jealous."

"Mama," Yelena squealed, still resilient in her attempts to drag my nose.

"Hey, princess." Julia's voice dropped to an adorable whisper, and she edged closer to kiss Yelena's forehead. She looked at me with a smirk. "Hey, handsome." Julia then reached to plant a kiss on my lips.

“Oh, please, get a room already,” Afanasy's voice cut through the air as he approached us alongside Mikhail.

My wife and I exchanged smiles as we turned to face them.

“Pay no attention to him. He's just jealous 'cause he doesn't have what you do,” Mikhail teased, patting his shoulder as they halted in front of us.

“You're one to talk. You haven't gotten laid in over a year,” Afan shot back, striking a response that prompted us to laugh.

“Hey, watch your language. You're in the presence of a princess,” I said, staring at my baby girl.

“Apologies, Your Highness.” Afan sketched a bow, delicately taking Yelena's tiny hand. “Or is it my lady ? I never know the difference.” He raised his head and smiled at her. “She's growing so fast,” he said, shifting his gaze between me and Julia.

“Yeah, she is,” Julia said, her voice dripping with pride. “Soon, she'll be running circles around me.” She chuckled.

Kostya and Madelyn joined us, and while the Tarasov family reunited, chattering and laughing, I felt a presence looming over us.

Someone was watching us, and I could literally feel their stare. I shifted my attention from the bliss and happiness unfolding before me and meticulously scanned the environment until my eyes fell on a figure lurking behind an oak tree at a distance.

I squinted, discreetly peering for a better view as the figure stepped out into the open.

It was Julia's old partner, Agent Anderson. The man just wouldn't give up. He was

still looking for ways to bring me down.

Julia had decided to ditch him completely after realizing that he'd been using her grief to further his personal vendetta.

I knew he wasn't going to stop coming after me, and I didn't give two fucks. He could try all he wanted, but eventually, he'd realize that my family and I were untouchable.

For now, though, let him have his fun digging into me.

As everyone returned to their cars, bidding one another farewell, my wife's phone rang, and her face lit up with a smile.

“Hey, Tommy,” she answered, stepping into the backseat of our vehicle.

Tommy was doing well these days; he'd been adopted by a foster family and was getting the required therapy, which had proven to be quite helpful.

I hadn't had a problem with raising him, but Julia didn't want her brother getting involved in the mafia business. I respected that.

She would occasionally go to visit him and vice versa.

As I walked over to the other side of the car, I turned to take one last look at Agent Anderson, but he was gone. I let out a scoff and stepped into the vehicle, shutting the door behind me.

Boris started the engine and drove away.

“How is he?” I asked my wife as she got off the phone with her brother.

“He's fine.” Her face lit up with a smile. “Very fine, actually. Thank you.”

Yelena was lying peacefully in her mother's arms as Julia stroked her back, cajoling her to sleep.

I closed the distance between us, eyes fixed on my wife. “What're you thanking me for?”

“Everything,” she whispered, holding my gaze. “You've been such an amazing father, uncle, and, most importantly, an amazing husband this past year.” She paused for a moment, exhaling slowly. “I'm the happiest woman in the world today, and that's because of you, Roman. So...thank you.”

“Whatever I learned, I learned from you, Julia,” I said, my voice calm and my words measured and deliberate. “You did what no one else could. You brought out the best in me, and I should be the one thanking you.” I reached out, cradling her face with an unwavering smile.

She melted into my touch, her eyes shutting momentarily before she looked at me with an intense gaze laced with emotions. A smirk played on my lips when she mouthed, “I love you, Roman.”

I inched closer and kissed her lips, tongues slowly gliding into both our mouths. She giggled, her body shuddering at my touch even after all this time.

God, I loved his woman!

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:15 pm*

We strolled hand-in-hand by the shore, our bare feet feeling the sand beneath us. My laughter echoed through the beach, and my hair danced in the ocean breeze.

The scent of salt water wafted through the air as seagulls squealed overhead. The sunset in the west cast its warm glow across the horizon, enveloping everything in its path.

Roman looked hot and sexy in his crisp white linen shirt, unbuttoned to tantalizingly reveal a hint of his broad chest, while his khaki shorts accentuated his strong legs.

I, on the other hand, wore a flowing flowered sundress that fluttered in the ocean breeze.

This was day two of our tropical getaway, and so far, it had been an amazing experience loaded with lots of adventure and sex. Plenty of sex. It was as though we couldn't get enough of each other, and I loved how much he adored my body.

Even now, while strolling the beach with him, images of how he fucked me all night kept flashing in my head, causing my pussy to tingle.

He turned and caught me staring at him, biting my lower lip. "What?" he asked, stopping by the waterside, eyes sparkling with warmth.

"Nothing," I replied, my voice dropping to a whisper as my gaze hovered over his masculine form. "You just look so edible right now." My lips curled into a smile.

"Is that so?" A smirk spread across his face as he grabbed my waist, pulling me

toward him.

I looked deep into his eyes, and my arms wrapped around his neck, his breath fanning on my skin.

“You shouldn't say stuff like that in the open, Julia,” he whispered, fingers digging into my ass. “I just might as well lose control.”

I giggled, pushing closer to feel his erection as my head jerked backward with his lips pressed against the nape of my neck. “Maybe I want you to lose control,” I said amidst chuckles, my hand traveling down to his groin.

His cock was already hard, swelling in his khaki shorts. I smiled, stroking the print. “I've always wanted to get fucked by the beach,” I confessed, breathing heavily at the pleasure of his hands all over my body.

He looked at me, his fingers daring to go up the hem of my dress and travel up my thighs. He smiled, watching me shudder at his touch. “Well, you're in luck because we're alone at a private beach...under the sunset.” His voice, a low, sexy whisper, jolted across my body.

A soft moan escaped my lips as his fingers settled on my underpants, caressing my tingling pussy.

Roman claimed my lips, sealing my gasps with a fervent kiss that left us both breathless. Between my legs, his fingers were relentlessly sliding up and down my entrance.

I pushed my tongue into his mouth, and he did the same. Roman lifted me in his strong arms and locked my feet around his waist; my head stayed bent over to continue kissing him.



Breaths were exchanged in the heat of passion. Tongues twirled in our mouths, our heads cocking sideways to the rhythm of the sensation that coursed through us.

Gently, he lowered me to the ground, my back resting against the sand, and his lips never left mine.

As his hands brushed against my dress, I felt a sudden jolt. His hand grasped the fabric concealing my chest, and with a gentle tug, he pulled it down, exposing the delicate curves of my breasts.

He left my mouth, and his eyes darted down at my bare chest. Roman licked his lips, his gaze fixed on my breasts before going down to suck them.

My hips bucked at the feeling of his mouth on my hard nipple. The chill of his tongue sent jolts of electricity surging through my body.

Roman grabbed one boob with a delicate squeeze while simultaneously sucking on the other. His groin was pressed between my spread legs, his hard erection causing my inner muscles to clench, pulsing around him.

He released my captured breasts and kissed my lips some more before going down on me. With his teeth, he withdrew my panties and stuck his head back between my legs.

I arched my back in response to the pleasure rippling through me; my toes curled, and my eyelids fluttered closed, lost in an ocean of passion.

My shoulders relaxed, surrendering to his touch as he licked my clit and ate my pussy. His drool mixed with my wetness, my juice, prompting the word “Yes” to tumble from my lips, urgent and eager.

I could hear the ocean waves overlapping and feel the breeze brushing against my skin, accentuating Roman's touch. I squeezed against the sand, my hips tilting and

brows furrowing in pleasure.

My palms rubbed over his buzz cut, pushing his head deeper between my legs. “Oh, my God, yes!” I whimpered. I rested on my elbows, eyes looking down at him as he continued to eat. “Roman! Oh, Roman,” I whispered his name, a plea for more.

My mouth softened, a gentle smile spreading across my face as he raised his head to look at me, wiping my juice off his lips.

Positioned on his knees, he unzipped his pants as I slowly crawled on all fours and stopped in front of him. Dusting the sand off my palms, I took his cock and stroked it for a while without breaking eye contact with him.

He released a growl, throwing his head backward as I took his veiny organ in my mouth. He rose to his feet as I remained on my knees, gliding my mouth over his cock, choking, gagging, and drooling.

I then stood, reaching to kiss his lips as I shed his shirt, and he took off my dress. Roman spread the dress over the sand as a makeshift sheet as he pulled me to himself, kissing my lips and fingering my cunt at the same time.

“This is insane,” he whispered, working my pussy as his eyes fixed on the expression on my face.

“I know,” I moaned. “But I love it. I love the insanity.” A soft cry came forth when he dug deeper.

I pushed him over, and he fell on the makeshift sheet, eyes roaming my naked body as I towered over him. “You're beautiful.” He smirked, stroking his hard cock.

My cheeks flushed at his remark, and I lowered myself onto his groin.

He threw his hands to the back of his head as I grabbed his cock, positioning it over my pussy. Slowly, I straddled him, his cock traveling up my mound as my breathy gasps filled the air.

Once settled, my hands braced against his broad chest, my hips rocking in a gentle, soothing rhythm. My body swayed like a pendulum, back and forth, as I held his gaze, savoring the look of ecstasy etched on his face.

He reached out and grabbed my breasts, fondling them, squeezing, and molding. I continued to glide up and down, back and forth, my waist grinding over his cock, my body twisting and twirling. My hands flew into my hair as I rolled my head, basking in the intensity of our connection.

As my desire amplified, my moans grew louder, and my pace quickened. My waist rotated and ground faster and more vigorously as I sought a deeper connection.

He grabbed my slender waist, his groin writhing as he plunged mercilessly into my throbbing pussy. My breasts bounced up and down.

“Oh, my God, I'm cumming!” I announced, my hands dropping to his chest for support. “Don't stop, I'm cumming!” I moaned loudly, my cry echoing across the horizon.

He let out a deep groan, his cock relentlessly pounding into my pussy. Roman's grip around my waist tightened, fingers digging into my flesh.

His primal growl signaled his arrival, yet he wouldn't stop ramming my cunt, and I wouldn't stop moaning.

“Give it to me—give it to me. I want it!” The words rushed out of my lips, eager to feel the warmth of his cum filling my pussy.

Roman's body tensed, his eyes locking on mine, and with a low, guttural growl, he released his passion, pouring himself into me.

“Yes, yes!” The soft whisper tore from my lips as I trembled, accepting his torrent of desire that bathed my innermost depths.

So warm.

So satisfying.

Our bodies merged in a frenzy of release as I shuddered, squirting with an intense orgasm. He emptied his load deep inside me, his groin wet from the liquid that burst out of me.

Drained, my body slumped on his as we lay there, breathless.

“That...was amazing,” I said, my voice low and faint, a smile playing on my lips.

He grabbed my head and positioned me to look into his eyes. “No , you're amazing,” he whispered with a grin of satisfaction.

My cheeks flushed as I lowered my face and kissed his lips before resting my head on his chest with a deep sigh.

Roman was all I wanted in a man, and although our story was twisted, it worked out fine in the end, just like Aida had said.

“I love you, Roman,” I said, my tone hushed as I listened to the sound of his beating heart.

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THE END