



Her Russian Billionaire

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Page 1

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Prologue

ALEXEI Rustanov hailed from a land where one could spot ex, current, and future supermodels walking down the same busy Moscow streets. But in his opinion, the most beautiful woman he had ever seen was currently sitting on the mattress they called their bed in his dumpy efficiency apartment.

When he came out of the bathroom that morning, he found her in nothing but the bikini bottoms from her yellow, polka-dot swimsuit, leaning into the nearby fan's direct path, blissfully receiving its lackluster breeze on day six of one of the hottest heat waves on record in Dallas history. He ran a hand over the dark beard he'd been considering cutting if the heat wave didn't break soon, and let his eyes roam over his girlfriend in quiet appreciation. Her ebony skin glistened with damp heat, and her thick, natural hair had been thrown into two haphazard, chunky French braids that barely reached below her ears. It wasn't the most glamorous look, but he still felt himself go instantly hard, envisioning taking each of her breasts, which were beaded with sweat, into his mouth and lavishing them with the attention they deserved.

Though they'd been living together for almost three months, he could barely believe she belonged to him, that this beautiful and kind woman had chosen him, despite the shabbiness of his un-air conditioned apartment and the two-digit state of his bank account. She made him feel like the luckiest guy in the world.

As if sensing his gaze on her, her own eyes popped open and she unleashed that gorgeous smile of hers, the one that always stopped his heart.

"Hey, baby," she said, her Texas accent lively as always despite the heat. "I didn't

hear you come out of the bathroom. You know, for such a big guy, you move like a cat.”

“I will replace your female-sounding ‘cat’ with ‘panther’ and agree,” he said, moving his six-foot-six frame to stand closer to the edge of the bed.

He wanted badly to join her in front of the fan, but he still had to get in his daily workout and another shower after that before his security guard shift at the School of Social Work began.

However, she made it hard for him to stay focused on his plans for the day when she looked up at him with a sexy grin and asked, “Are all you Russians trained to move like panthers?”

That gave him a moment of pause. Having grown up the scion of the Rustanov crime family, there were indeed talents he had that many other Russians did not. He could shoot several different kinds of guns, from the simple-to-shoot but easy-to-hide Walther PPK to the much more complicated Uzi. Thanks to the tutelage of his father and uncle, he could also sell those same guns to any interested party with a mixture of charm, marketing, and not-so-subtle aggression.

The reason he moved so quietly was because his father had made him start accompanying his uncle, Sergei, their family’s main enforcer, on retaliation killings at the age of twelve.

“The secret is to value the quiet above all things,” his uncle had told him outside the apartment of a man who had sold valuable information about their organization’s inner-workings to another crime family. “Become the quiet. People cannot prevent what they cannot hear coming.”

Five minutes later, he’d watched from a dark corner as his uncle snuck up behind the

target in his own kitchen and slit his throat with only a whisper of sound. He'd then pulled out a GSh-18 with a silencer attached to it and shot the man, who was grasping at his bleeding throat, twice in the chest and then once in each knee cap, an intentional style of killing that had been in the Rustanov family since the early 1960s.

Alexei had barely made it to the street below the apartment before losing his dinner on the sidewalk. But his uncle had given him a few hearty slaps on the back, congratulating him on throwing up outside of the apartment, and therefore leaving no DNA behind for the Russian police. As with most of their killings, Sergei wanted everyone to know they'd done it, but they didn't want any evidence left behind to officially attach the Rustanovs to the crime. Later, Alexei's father told him he had also thrown up after witnessing his first killing.

"I will tell you as your grandfather told your uncle and me, if you are to order an execution, you must understand what you are doing. I will not have you be one of those spoiled princes who tell their men to murder like they are putting in an order for lunch."

Six years later his father had been killed by one of those spoiled princes, a young man, Igor Stavnof, whose own departed father had been considered a friend to the Rustanovs. Igor and Alexei had attended the same private secondary school, and had even shared a bodyguard for a few hours once, when Igor's fell sick during a snowstorm and a new one couldn't immediately be sent out. But the Rustanov-Stavnof alliance came to an abrupt end when Igor had Alexei's father gunned down outside a restaurant where they were supposed meet. Igor had meant this as a display of power, a warning to any enemy who thought his young age might make him any less of a force to be reckoned with than Stavnof senior. However, the move only served to seal Igor's fate as someone who would die young.

After putting his father in the ground, Alexei had quietly hunted down the new crime lord, slit his throat, shot him twice in the chest and once in each knee cap.

His uncle had been very proud of him, but in order to avoid a full-out war with their former allies, he'd taken over as their family's interim head and arranged for Alexei to come to the states for college. Sergei found the day-to-day business affairs of running a mostly criminal organization distasteful, so the plan had been for Alexei to come back and take his place in four years. Staying on for grad school had been Alexei's idea, and his uncle had not approved. He'd withdrawn all financial support, telling Alexei he could either come home and take his rightful place in their family's organization or starve in America.

Alexei had enrolled in UT Dallas's MBA program anyway, vowing to get the education necessary to make his family's business legitimate and stop the killings that had claimed the lives of both his parents, and many of the people who worked within the Rustanov organization. But then he met Eva and a whole new path opened up for him, one in which he left the family behind forever, forging ahead as a businessman in America, someone who had nothing to do with the Rustanov crime family, someone who could live a simple life right here in Texas with the woman he loved most in the world.

"Lexie?"

He came back to the present day with a jerk. Only his Eva called him by this nickname. No one else would dare. His size and general demeanor didn't invite joking or teasing of any kind from most people. But from the moment they'd met, Eva had displayed a talent for crossing him on certain things, and somehow getting away with it.

"What were you thinking about?" she asked.

He pushed thoughts of the life he'd lived before coming to Texas to the back of his mind. "I am thinking you deserve more than this shit apartment," he said.

“Stop it,” she answered with a roll of her eyes. “A few of my clients would consider this place a palace. At least you have heat in the winter.”

That was Eva’s answer to everything meager in their lives, to joke that at least they had it better than the people she worked with in the field as a grad student, finishing her Masters in Social Work. But he knew better. She had grown up the pampered youngest daughter of the mayor of Drummond, a small oil town about three hours away. Before her father had cut her off for dating Alexei, she had lived in a two-bedroom apartment with air conditioning and hardwood floors, in a building with an onsite gym and several other amenities she no longer had access to thanks to falling in love with him.

“I will pay to landlord visit before I go to gym.”

“Why? He said the repairman can’t get to us until the end of the week. It’s a heat wave, so it’s got to be hard to get them out to fix one lil’ old window unit.”

“I will talk to landlord and he will fix window unit today. I do not like to see you suffer.”

“I’m not suffering, baby. The only reason I’m still sitting here is because I don’t have anything clean to wear, except for a miniskirt and a couple of tank tops. I have no idea what I’m going to do for underwear.”

His dick pulsed at the image of her in a miniskirt with nothing on underneath.

And as if sensing his desire, she crawled over to where he stood at the edge of the mattress and unwrapped the towel from around his waist. “Maybe instead of talking to the landlord, you could be my honey bee and do a couple of loads of laundry for me before you leave for work?”

She brought her face just close enough to his penis that he could feel the heat of her breath as she spoke.

Few people hated doing laundry as much as his Eva did, and after three months of living with her, he had learned to recognize the beginning of a negotiation to get him to take care of her dirty clothes yet again.

“Now you don’t want me prancing around the School of Social Work in a miniskirt with no underwear, do you?” she asked, her Texas accent become even sweeter as her words got dirtier. “What if I forgot I wasn’t wearing any and accidentally bent over in front of one of them horny security guards there?”

Page 2

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 10:09 am

He shook his head in disbelief. “You are using sex to ask me to do laundry again?”

She shook her head, grazing his dick with her cheek as she did so. “No, darlin’, I’ll have sex with you even if you don’t agree to be a prince and do my laundry instead of threatening your landlord.” She stuck out her tongue and ran it across the sensitive ridge of his large penis, taking its bulbous head in her mouth for just a second before saying, “But if you agree to wash just two loads of my clothes, I can guarantee the sex will be even hotter.”

He wasn’t a laughing man by nature, but he’d be damned if Eva didn’t make him smile. “In my country, the girlfriends not only do their own laundry, but also that of their boyfriends.”

“Mmm-hmm...” This time she took his dick in her hand and closed her mouth around it, giving it three languorous sucks before letting it go again. “You probably wish you had one of them Russian girlfriends right now, don’t you? I’m sure they always have clean underwear to wear under their miniskirts.”

“You are vixen. You should wash own clothes every week as I do. And not wait until last minute.”

She took him in her mouth, and this time she suckled him for long minutes until he forgot all about the gym and instead took her by the back of the head, holding it steady as he pumped himself into her mouth, while an urgent need built up inside his groin.

But all of a sudden, she stopped and forcibly withdrew her mouth from his penis. She

then dodged his seeking hand when he tried to pull her back down to finish what she had started.

“I think I should demonstrate what might happen if you send me off to school with no panties today,” she said before dancing away to open a dresser drawer, from which she pulled out a miniskirt. She turned her back to him and hooked her thumbs into the sides of her bikini bottoms, pushing them down over her hourglass hips and deliciously round derriere, before stepping out of them and pulling on her miniskirt.

“Cuz maybe I’m just being silly. I might not have anything to worry about, right?” She knocked a pen off the dresser and gasped with a faux innocent look. “Oops! I dropped this pen. I better pick it up.”

She bent over at the waist, giving him a tantalizing peek of her glistening wet pussy. “You can’t see anything can you? Nothing that would attract any unwanted attention from a School of Social Work security guard, right?”

Before he could even try to reason himself out of her sexy trap, he was behind her, sinking his dick—still wet from her mouth—into her soaking pussy. “I will do your laundry, kotenok, but only if you promise to be waiting for me in this exact same position when I get home.”

She braced herself against the dresser as he pistoned into her. “Oh, baby, I will let you do whatever you want to me tonight. Thank you, thank you, thank you!” she said, in such a way that Alexei couldn’t be sure if she was talking about the laundry he’d just agreed to do, or the sex they were currently having.

He pulled her skirt-covered hips into his, riding her and loving the way she let her chin drop to her chest in delicious abandonment, as if his sex was some kind of heroin-like drug that made her feel loose all over. The wet sounds of their bodies slapping together filled the apartment until she came with a loud cry and he released

into her with a stream of Russian words.

She laughed as she came down. “I have no idea what that means, but I for sure agree.”

He pulled out of her but kept a hand cupped over her pussy, which was now leaking with his seed. “When we do this again tonight, one hand will be here...” He brushed his right thumb against her still-swollen clit and took a hold of her left breast in the other. “And one hand will be here on this breast. And I will not let you come until you are screaming my name. My full name, not pet one you insist on using.”

She laughed again and rubbed her ass against him. “In that case, I can’t wait until you get home.”

He nuzzled his face against the back of her neck, savoring the way she smelled, like sex and sandalwood soap, and her Russian boyfriend. “I love you very much. You know this, yes?”

She turned in his arms, pulling her miniskirt down before stringing her arms around his neck. “I know this. And I love you right back, baby.”

He kissed her, “Good. I will make you prove tonight.”

But when Alexei arrived home that night, he did not find Eva waiting for him as she had promised. In fact, the apartment was dark when he came in, filling him with worry. She had also not stopped by the school’s security desk, where he usually sat with one of his thick Economics textbooks, to visit with him. He also hadn’t seen her while making his rounds, which he was required to perform every hour on the hour.

Halfway through the day, he peeked into the window of her Non-Violent Conflict Resolution classroom, which was the seminar he thought she took on Friday

afternoons, but no Eva. And when he called the apartment's landline to tell her he was on his way home, she hadn't answered.

As he walked home from campus, he vowed to haul Eva down to the nearest electronics store to get her a cell phone the next morning. Her father had shut hers off when she insisted on staying with Alexei. And whenever Alexei talked about adding her to his plan, she pointed out that they couldn't afford it. Eva hadn't taken out any student loans, because her father had been covering all of her expenses. And when he cut her off, it was too late to apply for any work-study jobs.

She had wanted to get a part-time job, but Alexei had talked her out of it. With her summer credits, she'd only one more semester to go versus the remaining full year of B-school he had left. Also, she had enough to deal with, having to get field-work hours in on top of a full class load. He'd just have to figure out a way to afford adding another person to his plan. Maybe he could take on a second work-study job.

He tried to keep his thoughts on her lack of a phone as opposed to letting them stray to other territories. Territories that included the kind of foul play that had gotten his mother killed when he was four and his father shot down when he was eighteen.

So when he arrived home and found their apartment empty, rather than panic, he chose instead to focus on finding her. As he flipped on the lights, he forced himself to think about the simple gold band, which had been sitting in his sock drawer for almost a month now. Its price tag was the reason he'd only had forty-two dollars left in his bank up until today. He'd wanted to take her to a nice dinner after he proposed, so he'd had to wait until he got paid. It troubled him that he had to wait just to be able to afford to take her out to a decent meal, and even more so that he wouldn't be able to truly provide for her until he was finished with his program.

But he hoped Eva wouldn't care about the current miserable state of his finances. He imagined her only condition to marrying him might be his promising to do her

laundry at least once a month, a condition he would gladly meet if it meant he'd get to spend the rest of his life with her.

But now, standing in their empty apartment, a new, uneasy feeling came over him, and he realized why when he looked around. The two loads of laundry he had done for her that morning were no longer sitting on top of the table where he'd left them. Usually she had to be badgered into folding and putting away her clothes in a timely manner. But now the table was completely cleared off and the laundry basket was nowhere to be seen. If she'd been kidnapped, or even if he'd just beat her home, there'd still be laundry on the table. No, something about this wasn't right.

Like a player in a bad romantic drama, he yanked open the top drawer on her side of the dresser and found it empty, then the next drawer, and the next. He opened the closet with trembling hands, not wanting to believe what was beginning to become obvious. But the closet was empty, too. Her dresses, hats, and other items were missing, the empty space giving no indication that anything had ever been there. And when he went into the bathroom, he found all of her toiletries gone. She'd even taken her toothbrush and dental floss.

He eventually found her note, hanging on the refrigerator door, written in the loopy handwriting he'd thought so endearing up until that moment.

Alexei,

I'm sorry, but I can't live like this anymore. I want my old life back. My father was right. I can do better than you. Please take care of yourself. You're a hard worker, and I know you can make it if you put your mind to it. Please concentrate on trying to better yourself, and don't try to find me. I've made up my mind, and I'm sure this is for the best.

Eva

Years later, business pundits would ponder onscreen and off what had made Alexei Rusakov the absolutely ruthless businessman he became after graduating from business school. Many would point to the untimely death of his father or the temporary estrangement from his Russian crime family.

But Alexei would always know the hidden truth. A silly black girl from a small town in Texas had ripped his heart out one night when he was least expecting it. And after that, he'd found it rather easy to be heartless.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 10:09 am

Chapter One

Eight years later

WHILE everyone else at Layla's New Year's day wedding was either dancing, drinking, or mingling, Eva stood in a barely lit corner in an alcove near the Sinclair Mansion's first-floor bathroom, texting with Aaron, the love of her life.

When are you coming home?

Soon, sweetness. I'll be back tomorrow.

Okay.

He didn't say, "I miss you." He had never been one for big shows of affection, but the fact that he was text messaging her as opposed to playing a video game or watching some mindless television show, like he usually did when they were both home at night, meant he missed her very much. Still Eva liked to hear the words, so she texted, "I love you."

"Love you too."

Eva sighed and lowered the phone, once again feeling guilty about having left him in Texas during the holidays to attend Layla's wedding. She would have brought him, but weddings really weren't Aaron's scene. He detested wearing a suit, and having to stand around while she made small talk with people he didn't have much in common with.

But she couldn't just skip the wedding. Layla and she had met in a CPR class, a requirement for both her Masters in Social Work and Layla's degree in physical therapy. And though they hadn't known each other all that well, Layla had proven to be a godsend when she'd decided to leave Alexei. She put Eva up for the few weeks it had taken to get the rest of her summer field-work hours done, so she could transfer her credits to the University of Texas-Arlington and do the last semester of her social work degree there.

And Layla had really come through during the time when Eva's father was still refusing to talk to her because of what had gone down with Alexei. She'd helped Eva figure out the student loan process and get set up in an apartment. Most importantly, Layla had constantly assured her everything would be all right, even when Eva called her in the middle of the night crying for reasons she could never fully explain to her compassionate friend.

In exchange, Eva had taken Layla under her wing, making sure she didn't get taken advantage of during her years at UTD. This was a constant danger with Layla as the kind of instinct that made her go all out for some random woman she had met once in a CPR class, made her a target for deadbeat guys and toxic friends. Theirs had turned into a beautiful friendship, but Layla was kind to a fault and would have had every lazy classmate, clueless sorority girl, and lost-cause politco sponging off of her goodness, if Eva hadn't protected her from them. So when Layla had called and said she'd be marrying the Pittsburgh steel magnate, Nathan Sinclair, she'd come partly to support her best friend and partly to make sure this Nathan was on the up and up.

So far, she'd overheard a lot of her fellow attendees gossiping about what a strange match the sugary-sweet Layla and the hard-as-nails Nathan were. But finally meeting the no-nonsense businessman had given Eva peace of mind where her friend was concerned. She could tell he would never let her friend get taken advantage of again. Anyone with eyes could see how much he adored her, and she was happy Layla had found a safe harbor in him.

She glanced at the clock on her phone. The wedding reception had started two hours ago, so she was probably safe to go home and curl up with a Kimani romance novel in her hotel room. Her heart filled with a deep longing to see Aaron again. She wasn't used to being away from him for so long, and found herself missing their domestic routine. She didn't know what she was going to do when he went to Italy this summer. Probably die of loneliness.

But enough of this pity party for one, she decided, pushing herself off the wall she'd been leaning against and throwing her phone into her clutch. She'd find Layla and Nathan, congratulate them, and head on out...

Suddenly, she stopped short. A chill came over her, and the hairs on the back of her neck stood up straight. Which was strange, because that's the reaction her body used to have when Alexei was nearby. But he wasn't at Layla's wedding. Was he? Her heart now pounding in her ears, she looked around just to make sure.

And that's when she locked eyes with her ex-boyfriend and current billionaire, Alexei Rustanov.

* * * *

Alexei's date, Caroline, a sleek New York stage actress in her early twenties wasn't the type to complain of boredom, but she didn't look thrilled to be at the wedding of his business associate, Nathan Sinclair. She wasn't pouting, but her folded arms and the blank expression on her beautifully sculpted face, made it plain there were other places she'd rather be.

Or maybe she was having a perfectly nice time. Caroline wasn't exactly what one would call animated, which was perhaps why she'd had more success as a mistress to high-powered men than a stage actress. In any case, he knew she'd never suggest they leave or put her needs before his in any way. When attending events with him, she

always remained as unobtrusive as possible while looking as beautiful as she could. That's why powerful men liked her. She was arm candy that didn't talk back and seemingly had no needs of her own.

And like just about every woman he had dated for the past seven years, she was the exact opposite of Eva St. James.

Still, Alexei was ready to leave. He had accepted the invitation as a courtesy to Nathan Sinclair, who had helped him make the right contacts when he had decided to expand his own steel business into the United States market. That had proven to be a very lucrative list of contacts, and eventually Alexei had won enough contracts for steel and a few other divisions of Rustanov Enterprises that he'd been able to open his current headquarters in New York. The least Alexei could do was attend the man's wedding.

But he hadn't been prepared for how in love Nathan seemed to be with his pretty African-American bride. It reminded him of the silly hopes and dreams he'd harbored for Eva and himself before she left him for not being rich enough. Though he'd tried to forget her with a string of women and business successes throughout the years, the old bitterness returned on Nathan's wedding day, threatening to consume Alexei as he watched the happy couple slow dancing to a fast song, as if they were the only people in the Sinclair mansion's ballroom.

"Are you ready to go?" he asked Caroline.

She nodded and stood up, smoothing out invisible wrinkles in her tight, black designer evening gown before asking. "Do you mind if I powder my nose before we leave?"

For a moment Alexei marveled at the fact that he had gone from the thuggish offspring of a Russian crime family to a legitimate businessman, so powerful and rich

that beautiful women asked him if it was okay to go to the toilet.

“It’s on our way out,” he said.

He’d already extended his congratulations to Nathan, so he guided Caroline toward one of the main floor’s guest bathrooms. After she disappeared inside, he looked around for a place to sit while he waited for her. He knew from experience that a bathroom break for most of the women he dated included resetting make-up so they’d look just as flawless on the way out as they did on the way in. This meant Caroline would be in there for a while.

But there were no benches in the hallway. He spotted a darkened alcove at the other end of the hall, and though it didn’t look like it was meant to be used by the party guests, he could make out a figure in its dark shadows, her face illuminated by the glow of her phone. She was typing something into it with a fond smile on her face.

For a moment, it looked like...

No, it couldn’t be. Eva’s hair had been thick and natural, but this woman had straight hair that fell past her shoulders. And why would Eva St. James, of all people, be in Pittsburgh?

But she was also wearing a yellow evening gown and bright red cowboy boots to a formal winter wedding. And who else but Eva would do that?

He took a step toward her, pulled forward by an invisible string that compelled him to make sure it wasn’t her, even though he technically never wanted to see her again.

All of a sudden, she seemed to sense his presence, because she looked to the left, then to the right, then straight at him. And that’s when he knew for sure. Yes, this was Eva. Eva St. James, the gold-digging witch who had torn his heart out eight years

ago.

* * * *

For a couple of long moments they just stared at each other, and during this time, Eva took in every detail of Alexei. He had apparently been keeping up with his workout regimen, because he was still massive, with no indication that there was anything but muscles and skin underneath the tux he wore. His wavy dark brown hair was cut much shorter than it had been when they had been together, and his beard was gone. But his jaw was just as square, and his distinctive green eyes were just as flinty as she'd remembered. Those, paired with the semi-permanent scowl he'd always worn on his face, told her exactly who she was staring at in person for the first time in eight years.

Back when she'd first spotted him in the School of Social Work's lobby, bent over a textbook at the security desk, she'd found his scowl endearing. It had felt at that moment like she had been put on this Earth to wipe it off and make him smile. But now in the Sinclair Mansion's hallway, the scowl felt dangerous, like she was a small rabbit trapped in the angry gaze of a very large predator.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 10:09 am

One word formed in her head, distinctive and clear, Run!

Schooling her face into the best look of nonchalance she could muster under the circumstances, she cut left and tried to oh-so-casually walk away, like she did not recognize him, like she had no idea who this Russian man staring her down in the hallway was.

He'd probably let her get away, she reasoned. After all, he was a bajillionaire now, and she was just some social worker from Drummond, Texas. He was probably embarrassed he'd ever dated her. As far as he'd gone in his career, he probably thanked the stars every night he had dodged the Eva-shaped bullet—

She didn't make it three steps before he was on her. He grabbed her arm and in two swift moves, had her pressed against the wall where she'd just been texting Aaron, her arms pinned above her head. She could feel his erection against her stomach even as his eyes scanned her face with furious efficiency, as if he was trying to memorize this new version of it.

At first she kept her own eyes averted and to the side. Some primal instinct told her this was the best way to avoid riling him further, like playing dead with a bear. But she could feel his hot breath on her face. He was so close. In the end, she couldn't resist taking just one little peek. But almost as soon as her eyes met his, she was locked in. She couldn't look away, even when he crashed his mouth down onto hers, swallowing any protest she might have made, and enveloping her in a storm cloud of lust and anger.

Chapter Two

SHE had tried to walk away from him. From him, Alexei Rustanov! The only reason she'd even made it three steps was because it had taken him that long to process what she was attempting to do.

And before he knew what he was doing, he had her pinned against the wall. But when he got her there, he found himself without words. Seeing her like this again, close-up, made it feel like he'd just found the break-up letter yesterday. Opposing feelings warred inside him, effectively striking him mute. He wanted to yell at her for what she did. He wanted to caress her face and let her take him in her arms like she used to. He wanted to show her he had made it and could now do better than her any day of the week. He wanted her to smile at him in that beautiful way of hers and say it had all been a mistake, a huge misunderstanding.

But most of all, more than anything, he wanted to not be hard as a rock after only a few moments in Eva's presence. He'd been soft just a few minutes ago, even though he'd known what he and Caroline would do once they got back to their hotel room. But now his dick was straining so hard in his pants he could feel the outline of his zipper through his briefs. And he could barely think straight, knowing Eva's dark triangle was just a few tantalizing inches below his erection.

He had to let her go. He understood it was inappropriate to pin any woman against a wall like this in public, even one who had hurt him as badly as Eva had. But just as he was beginning to get himself under control, she chose that moment to stop looking like a frightened rabbit with her eyes purposefully averted and peek up at him.

Their eyes locked. Hers were curious, like this was some fun little game they were playing. What else could he do but kiss her? It seemed like the natural conclusion, the only way to control her that he'd ever known.

At first she just took his kiss, her shock evident in her non-response. But then she opened her mouth wider and pushed her tongue into his, moaning as she did so, as if

she had been waiting years to kiss him. This should have felt like a win for him, but her acquiescence stripped away the last shreds of his usually iron-clad control. And what had started out as a power move on his part became his undoing.

He hiked the soft chiffon of her evening gown up just far enough to position one of her legs around his waist, then he ground his hips against her silk clad mound in a frenzy of need that wouldn't even allow him to unzip his pants.

For minutes all that could be heard in the darkened alcove was the sound of fabric rubbing together and their frantic breathing as they kissed, her body flush against his, the heat of her hot pussy beckoning him through three layers of clothing. He was a grown man who had made sexual conquests all over the world, but here he was just a few minutes away from coming in his pants.

As if compelled by his thoughts, she moaned against his lips and then cried out in surprise when she ed. They were so close, he could feel the orgasm shuddering through her body, radiating from her pelvis, and it caused him to grind against her even harder so he could join her in that special place, self-control be damned.

“Lex?”

She was calling his name. But she sounded irritated, like she wanted him to stop. He slowed down.

“Lex?”

He opened his eyes and found Eva staring back at him, her own eyes wide with confusion, her mouth partially open in an “oh” of surprise.

“Lex!”

The voice was much harder now, and he realized it didn't belong to Eva, was in fact coming from behind him. Caroline. He closed his eyes, slowly blinking himself back to reality, where he could see the scene for exactly what it was: him dry-humping his ex-girlfriend against a wall and getting caught doing so by his current mistress.

Eva seemed to be putting together what had happened, too. She quickly withdrew her leg from around his waist, and tugged her arms down, trying to release herself from his right hand, which was still gripped around her wrists, pinning them to the wall.

In a state of shock, he released her and turned toward Caroline, who took in the scene with cynical aplomb before saying, "Will she be joining us in the hotel room?"

* * * *

"Will she be joining us in the hotel room?"

Eva came crashing back to reality with a heart-wrenching thud. She had just let Alexei Rustanov dry hump her to an orgasm against a wall and in public where anyone could see. And now his date or girlfriend or mistress or whatever was proposing a threesome.

This time, she didn't try to walk away. She ran. And she didn't stop running until she reached the valet station.

The Pittsburgh winter air hit her with a brutal force, unlike anything she had ever experienced in her hometown, which occasionally got cold, but not this kind of wet, grey cold. Outside, she began to feel even more remorse for what she had just let happen inside. Her thoughts landed on Aaron, the love of her life, the person she'd pledged her heart and soul to. She couldn't believe she had betrayed him like that.

She pulled her claim ticket out of her clutch and handed it to the valet. "Please

hurry,” she said, hugging herself and running her palms up and down her bare arms. “I left my coat in the car.”

That wasn’t true, but she was more than willing to abandon her favorite long coat inside the Sinclair Mansion if it meant getting away from Alexei.

To her great relief the valet guys took pity on her and brought around her economy rental in record time. She sped away, just as Alexei was coming out of the mansion, that gorgeous woman by his side.

Eva tried not to look, but once again, she couldn’t help it, even though she had just been berating herself for this same kind of nonsense a few moments ago. She looked anyway and what she discovered was Alexei staring right back at her, his scowl set in stone.

* * * *

She’d run. The first chance she’d got, she’d run again. He would have gone after her, but Caroline caught his arm before he could.

“Lex, what’s going on?” she asked. Even seasoned mistresses didn’t expect to come out of the bathroom to find their dates on the verge of an orgasm with someone else.

“I’m sorry,” he said, turning back to her, despite wanting nothing more than to hunt down Eva, throw her on the ground, and bury himself inside of her. One of his business rules was he could be an asshole all he wanted to his peers and rivals, but he treated those who worked for him with respect.

Caroline didn’t necessarily work for him, but he did have the upper hand in terms of their relationship. He’d bought her a two-bedroom on the Upper East Side in a building with a doorman, and put a substantial sum of money in her bank account

each month to keep her in designer clothes, gourmet meals, and whatever other luxuries she wanted. In exchange, she made herself available as his date or bed partner wherever and whenever he wanted her.

But standing there in the hallway with her in the wake of what had just happened with Eva, he knew that they would be spending the rest of the evening together.

When their limo arrived back at the hotel, he said, “I’m sorry, but some unexpected business has come up. I won’t be available tonight. You can stay in the hotel and I’ll send the jet to take you back to New York first thing in the morning. Call Emilio. He’ll set it up.”

She cut her eyes, obviously stuck between the understood terms of their relationship and her own confused annoyance. “Are you dumping me?” she asked, disbelief ringing in her voice. For Caroline, who could have just about any man she wanted due to her looks and general mien, it was probably hard to fathom being dumped for a random black woman in a yellow party dress. “Who is she?”

Page 5

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 10:09 am

“She’s unfinished business. And I’m not dumping you for her. I want to take care of this tonight, but Emilio will call you when I get back to New York and we’ll go out to dinner.”

Caroline gritted her teeth. He could tell she craved answers, but didn’t want to press for them for fear of talking herself out of the set-up she had with him. But he knew she would cave to his commands. All women could be manipulated with money. Eva had taught him this the hard way.

“Fine,” she said. “I’ll call your assistant when I get back to the room.”

He nodded to the hotel’s doorman who had been standing patiently on Caroline’s side of the limo for a few minutes. He opened the door for her, and that was it. She was out of his space, leaving him free to deal with Eva St. James.

It only took his assistant, Emilio, about thirty minutes to track down Eva’s reservation at a chain hotel just a few blocks away from the one he’d just abandoned Caroline in. But a few minutes later, Emilio informed him she’d already checked out and a few minutes after that, Alexei found out she was on a plane back to Dallas.

Hearing this made Alexei’s usual scowl deepen. Just like eight years ago, when Eva ran from him, she really ran. Back then he hadn’t been able to track her down, as much as he had embarrassed himself trying, calling her closest friends over and over again and haunting the School of Social Work outside his shift hours, hoping to catch her on her way in or out. But she never showed up and a few weeks later one of the social work students took pity on him and let him know she had transferred to another program.

After that, he couldn't study. He couldn't sleep. If not for Emilio, who was back then his fellow minimum-wage security guard and three years his junior, he would have gotten fired from his job and kicked out of the MBA program. But after the third time he'd shown up for their shift switch, hungover from the night before because he'd drunk himself into a stupor over Eva, Emilio had abandoned the front desk, taken him to his nearby dorm room, and thrown him in a cold shower. From that point on, he made sure Alexei ate and studied and didn't keep any liquor in his apartment until the worst of the heartbreak passed and he could move on.

But not forget. No, Alexei would never forget that condescending note she left on his refrigerator door. He eventually had it framed, and he kept it in the bottom drawer of his work desk in his New York offices. Whenever he felt his energy wane for the legitimate business world—which turned out to be in some ways even more cutthroat than his former crime world—he took the letter out and re-read it. That was all it took to feel his angry ambition spike again.

“I want Drummond Oil,” he told Emilio over the phone. “Set that in motion.”

A long silence came from Emilio's end. “Are you sure about that, man? You've come a long way, buddy. She's not worth going off the deep end again.”

“I know she's not,” Alexei said. “That's why it's the perfect time to get my revenge. Now make it happen.”

Emilio sighed, but didn't say anything else before hanging up. He now made more money than he could have ever dreamed of back in the day when he and Alexei had been unarmed security guards just trying to scrape by. Like most people in Alexei's life, he didn't poke the dragon if he didn't have to.

Alexei hung up, just as the driver pulled into the private field from which his jet would be taking off. Oh, yes, Eva might have run, but this time she definitely

wouldn't be able to hide.

Chapter Three

EVA ended up spending more to get on the last direct flight of the night from Pittsburgh to Dallas than she had on her entire Pittsburgh vacation package. And she'd also have to deal with the three-hour drive back to Drummond when she got in, but it was worth it if it meant she'd be back with Aaron tonight.

Guilt gnawed at her, making her desperate to see him, to remind herself how much she loved him and what a wonderful life they had built together.

An image of Alexei lifting her leg around his waist suddenly seared through her mind. Without warning, she felt her pussy moisten at just the thought of him bringing her to release with her arms pinned above her head like that.

She cursed herself and her treacherous body, but it had always been like that with Alexei from the very first kiss.

She could still remember being taken by surprise when she stopped by his security desk the night before Christmas break.

"Hey, Lexie," she'd said, tapping on his business book to get him to look up at her. She'd had to use this tactic often, because Alexei was almost always studying whenever she saw him. Unlike her, who only cracked open her books a couple of nights before a paper was due.

"I can see you're studying and I don't want to disturb you..." she started to say.

"You disturb me every night with the tap, tap, tap on my book while I am attempting to make study," he pointed out. "I think this is maybe hobby for you."

She continued on like he hadn't said anything. "...but I know you're going to be here all alone over the holidays, and I wanted to give you your Christmas present before I left."

"My Christmas present," he repeated, his usual scowl deepening even further.

"Yes," she answered. "I'm sick of seeing you sitting around here looking like an angry bear all the time. So this Christmas I'm going to give you a hug. It's more than obvious you need one."

He looked up at her from his sitting position, his hulking body completely eclipsing the tiny rolling chair he sat in. "You want to give me hug."

"Yes."

"No."

"Yes."

"No, we will not hug."

"Boy, I am Texas born and raised. We do not take 'no' for an answer," she informed him. "Now you can either get over here and let me give you this hug, or you can argue with me. But if I were you, I'd just give in. That way you can get back to your book."

"I am not boy." Alexei slammed his book shut and came around the desk to confront her.

"You are friendly," he said, pointing at her in a way that made his observation seem more like an accusation than a compliment. "You come here to say good night and

make, what is it called? Small talk every night because maybe you want to be friends. You are not like me. You have many friends. And I see you also talking and smiling to other guard, Emilio, too. Maybe you are girl who does not like when man not friendly to you. But I am a man, and I do not want to be your friend. No hug.”

For a moment she stared at him in shocked silence. “Okay,” she said, drawing out the word. “Well, I think this proves two things. One, you’re really rude in a way that goes way beyond all that stuff we learned about in my Cultural Sensitivity seminar and two, you really, really need a hug.”

Before he could offer any more protest she slipped her hands under his arms, which were clenched into fists at his sides, and wrapped her own arms around his wide torso. She laid her soft head against his massive chest and squeezed as hard as she could given their size difference and the fact that he was built like a stone statue. “Merry Christmas, Lexie—“

And that was when she felt his insanely large erection press into her stomach. She froze, her eyes popping wide.

“I told you, I do not want be friends,” he said above her, his voice quiet and furious.

For some reason, she still felt compelled to cling to him, if only to prove her point. “I still maintain that you really needed this hug,” she said, from the relative safety of his chest.

They stood there like this, her hugging him, him not hugging her back, neither of them saying anything, his erection filling the silence louder than a scream.

“You are adult woman but like kotenok, you do not listen. Like kitten, you do what you want and are surprised when your actions make trouble.”

She kept her face pressed to his chest, even though this position had become more than awkward at that point. “Am I in trouble?” she asked, her voice as shaky as her nerves.

“If you had listen when I say no, you would not have to know what you know now,” he pointed out.

“Listen more, yes. Less kitten, more listening.” Finally she mustered up the courage to draw away from him. “I’ll keep that in mind for the future, Lexie.”

She began to take back her arms, but he kept them pinned underneath his own and said in that stern way of his, “I do not think you have really learned this lesson. I must teach you.”

He lowered his face and kissed her hard and sure, cueing the all-consuming passion that would become the hallmark of their relationship. The kiss soon turned into groping and the groping turned into stumbling into a nearby supply closet where they consummated their fledgling attraction just five minutes after she accidentally found out that it existed. That had led to a less frantic session back at his place. And then Eva lost count of how many times Alexei initiated another session and how many times he sent her over the edge with his deft fingers, his tireless tongue, and his heavily muscled body that just kept going and going and going...

Page 6

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 10:09 am

She'd woken up late the next afternoon to a cell phone filled with angry messages from her father. Where was she? She was supposed to have arrived late the night before and he and her mother were worried sick. According to the last message, they were thinking about sending her perfect older brother, Steve, to Dallas to make sure she was all right.

She shook Alexei awake, and then playfully squirmed out of the way when he reached up to pull her back down on the mattress. "I've got to go, Lexie," she said. "I was supposed to drive home last night and my parents are mad as a house of cats."

Alexei regarded her through hooded eyes, heavy with sleep. "This is fine. When I see you next, we will be at your apartment. You will cook dinner for me and I will thank you for food all night long. We will sleep together and next morning we will fuck again in shower."

He then kissed her mouth, which had fallen open with shock and said, "Go to your family. But come home to me, kotenok."

The sharp ding of the captain turning on the seatbelt light jolted Eva out of this memory. They were beginning their descent into Dallas. With another spike of guilt, she performed a mental scrub, wiping away the memory, and instead concentrating on Aaron's handsome face. He was the one she loved, the most important person in her life, she told herself.

Four hours later she arrived home at the sprawling villa she and Aaron shared with her parents. No one knew she was coming home early, so no lights had been left on. It didn't matter, she had grown up in this place, and she easily picked her way

through the living room and up the stairs in the dark. She took off her heels at the top of the stairs and padded past her parents' room to the second door on the floor.

Though she'd tried to be as quiet as possible, Aaron must have heard her because he was sitting up in bed when she opened his door.

"Mama, is that you?" he asked, his little voice sleepy but strong in the darkness.

"Yes, it's me." She walked into the room and turned on the bedside lamp so she could see him and he could see her.

He spoke to her with half-closed eyes, just like his father used to when he was tired. It was even more eerie, because though Aaron inherited most of Eva's facial features, including her full lips, high cheekbones, and wide nose, his eyes plainly revealed who he really was, the son of Alexei Rustanov.

She hugged him to her with fierce love.

"Mama, I'm sleepy," he said, disengaging from her overly cloying hug after about thirty seconds.

She chuckled. She had probably only gotten that long of a hug because he was tired. Lord knew he didn't put up with too much affection from his mother when he was awake, especially if they were out in public. Like most boys his age, he spent a lot of energy trying to prove to the world he didn't need a mother, even if he did.

"Do you want a glass of water?" she asked, though he was already beginning to curl back up under his X-Men sheets.

"No, thank you," he said. "Night-night, Mama."

“Night-night,” she said.

She turned off the bedside light and left, but as she did, she looked back at her beloved child and reminded herself how hard she had worked to keep him a secret from Alexei, and of all the reasons she must continue to do so.

Chapter Four

Six months later.

EVA’S father called just as she was finishing up the paperwork from the Rodriguez’s home study. After years of trying for a third child, the two Drummond Oil employees were hoping to complete their family through adoption, which meant a qualified professional had to assure the Dallas-based adoption agency they’d chosen to work with that they were responsible people, with steady jobs, and the ability to take on another mouth at their dinner table.

In a big city like Dallas, this kind of thing would be handled by someone affiliated with either an adoption agency or a formal home study service. But in a town that only existed because it was where the Drummond Oil headquarters was located, Eva had to take on home studies along with her many other duties. These duties included handling all counseling for the local school district, following up on any domestic disturbance calls reported by the police, providing any child protective services needed, and handing out social security checks to the folks who preferred to pick them up at Drummond’s one-woman Social Service & Welfare office.

That day she was particularly rushed because she needed to get the Rodriguez’s paperwork in the mail by three o’clock to meet their adoption agency’s cut off date, or else she’d have to drive all the way to Dallas to hand deliver it. It was already two forty-five. Luckily the post office, like every other civil service in Drummond, was on Main Street, albeit at the opposite end as her building. If she walked really fast,

she could get there in under ten minutes.

She thought about not answering when the phone rang just as she was getting out of her chair to leave. But when she saw her father's extension pop up in the caller ID box, she knew she would have to. The mayor's office was only two doors down from hers. He knew she was in the building, and if she didn't pick up, he'd just make the small walk to talk to her in person, delaying her even further.

"Hey, Daddy," she said, picking up the phone. "I can't really talk right now. I'm handling some important paperwork."

"That can wait. I need to see you in my office." Cleveland St. James's voice rung through the phone line with austere authority.

Eva rolled her eyes, resenting how her father always made it seem like she should drop everything at her "little social work job" and come running whenever he called.

"It can't wait. It's adoption paperwork, and if I don't get it in the mail by three, it won't get to Dallas on time."

"Finish it up after we meet, then I'll have Berta overnight it for you."

"You're going to let me overnight it?" Now he really had Eva's attention. Her father was notoriously stingy about allowing anyone who worked for the town to overnight anything on Drummond's dime. "That's why all these small towns are going broke," he'd said the last time she had asked to overnight something, as if every small town fiscal crisis had less to do with businesses closing down or moving away and more to do with frivolous local employees.

"Is everything okay?" she asked him. She dropped her voice to a whisper. "Daddy, do you think you've had a stroke and just don't know it? I hear that can happen."

An irritated beat. “Eva Janelle St. James, get in my office. Now.”

Less than a minute later, Eva dropped into one of the brown, leather guest chairs in her father’s office. Just like the home they lived in, Cleveland’s office was large and stuffed to the gills with leather furniture, hunting trophies, and framed commendations from political, social, and community organizations.

He scanned her outfit of jeans and a neon-pink T-shirt with frank disapproval but didn’t say anything. They’d already had many discussions about her refusal to wear a suit or even business casual in her position as Drummond’s only social worker, until they had both agreed to let the issue lie. Eva liked to be comfortable and she wasn’t going to budge. Still that didn’t keep her father from wearing his blatant disapproval all over his face every time they met during the course of a work day.

“Are you sure you’re all right, Daddy? I mean what could be so important that you’d be willing to break out Drummond’s dusty FedEx account?”

Cleveland heaved a long-suffering sigh. “I keep on hoping one day you’ll grow up and realize not everything’s a joke, but it just doesn’t look like that’s going to happen any time soon. Thank goodness we had your brother first, or you would be too much of a trial to bear.”

She tried to keep the hurt his words caused her from showing. She didn’t know why his low opinion of her still bothered her so much. It had always been this way between them, him wondering out loud why she couldn’t be more like her brother, Steve. For a short time, she had actually managed to gain his approval when she decided to get her M.S. in Social Work in order to take over the Social Services & Welfare Office post from her mother, who had been doing the job for over thirty years. The summer before she started the master’s program, he had told anyone who would listen about his son who was in the Foreign Service program and his daughter who had decided to follow in her mother’s footsteps.

But that had been before their three-year estrangement and before the birth of his only illegitimate grandchild.

“I’m a social worker. I do realize everything’s not a joke,” she said. “But you’ve kind of got to have a sense of humor to do what I do.”

“Your mother always took her duties very seriously. None of this waiting until the last minute to get important forms in the mail, no asking if I had a stroke when I told her I needed to meet with her about something important.”

Page 7

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 10:09 am

Only respect for her father kept her from rolling her eyes. Yes, the horror that her parents, two of the most serious people on the planet, had given birth to one equally serious son and a big-mouthed, bright-color loving daughter, who had a son out of wedlock but still never knew when to stop joking. She wondered if she and her father couldn't just once have a meeting during which he didn't compare her to her super-organized and efficient saint of a mother.

“Daddy, is there something I can help you with? Because I’ve still got to get the social security checks ready for tomorrow.”

His lips thinned. “Yes, there is something you could help me with. Maybe you can help me understand why you’ve been messing around with Alexei Rustanov again?”

Eva broke into a cold sweat at just the mention of his name. “I haven’t been messing around with—“ She couldn’t even say his name out loud. “Can I ask where all this is coming from?”

“If you haven’t been messing around with him, why did his company just decide to buy Drummond Oil out of the blue?”

Her heart clenched. He wouldn’t. Not because of one kiss and five minutes of dry humping. But a certain dread was already starting to pool in her stomach, even as she said, “I’m sure that doesn’t have anything to do with me.”

He father lifted his thick eyebrows. “Really? Because when I tried to set up a meeting with his people in regards to the future of Drummond’s main business, and the source of seventy-percent of our town’s funding, I received an interesting call back from his

executive assistant. He said Rustanov himself would take the meeting, but only if it's with you."

Eva shook her head. "No, I can't. I can't meet with him."

Her father leaned forward, his face all business. "The taxes Drummond Oil and their employees pay are what funds both your salary and mine. They employ the vast majority of the adults who live here, and they're responsible for eighty-percent of all charitable donations. If Rustanov decides to suddenly withdraw his support or, heaven forbid, move the Drummond Oil headquarters somewhere else, this town will die."

Her throat had gone completely dry. Though she wanted more than anything to say she couldn't face Alexei again, she knew she would have to. Her father wasn't exaggerating. Drummond Oil really was the life-blood of the town, providing its sole industry. If Rustanov moved the Drummond Oil headquarters, the majority of her neighbors, many of whom she also counted as friends, would be out of a job. This included both Rodriguezes, who would have to put off their adoption quest until they could find another source of income.

Eva herself could always find a position as a social worker somewhere else, in fact she had been thinking about doing just that for a couple of years now that she had enough money in savings for her and Aaron to live comfortably until she found another job.

But Drummond Oil had always been a friends-and-family kind of business. Many of the people who worked there had inherited their jobs from their parents, just like she'd inherited hers from her mother. But unlike her, many of them hadn't even bothered to get a degree in order to take on the administrative work of running the offices of a company that hosted wells in several parts of the state. Drummond's own well had gone dry a couple of decades ago, but back then the company's namesake

family had decided to keep their headquarters in Drummond because it was central to all their other wells, and also because the family still had a home in the area. One of the reasons her father was such a local hero was because after the family sold Drummond Oil to a larger oil company, he had convinced that company to keep the headquarters in Drummond with a mix of tax breaks, business savvy, and one good-old boy, booze-filled weekend.

But now Alexei Rustanov owned Drummond Oil. And he wanted to meet with her.

“I’m no good at business meetings,” she said, her voice little more than a whisper.

“I know you aren’t,” he answered. “But in this case, it’s real simple. You’ve got to convince Rustanov to keep the Drummond Oil headquarters here. Tell him we’ll do whatever it takes, give him whatever incentives he wants to keep the business here. If you have to grovel at his feet, do it. Now is not the time to finally grow a sense of pride, little girl.”

Despite the circumstances, Eva found herself more irritated with her father than her manipulative ex-boyfriend. “It’s not about pride, it’s about my son. I can’t let him find out about Aaron.”

Her father sat up, his head tilting to the side in angry confusion. “What do you mean, find out? You said you told him and he didn’t want anything to do with Aaron. I thought that was why you left his name off the birth certificate and didn’t seek him out for child support.”

She winced. “It’s a little more like I figured he wouldn’t want anything to do with Aaron, so I kind of didn’t tell him.”

“You kind of didn’t tell him.” Her father’s posture had become rigid with anger. “So let me get this straight, little girl. First you moved in with this Russian boy against

my wishes. Then you got pregnant. Then you didn't even tell him he had a baby coming and it was his. Then you put yourself in his sights again. And now he's bought Drummond Oil, not even knowing you and him have a seven-year-old son?"

When her father summarized the story that way, it did sound really, really bad. "I know I've put Drummond in a really terrible position, Daddy. And I'm really sorry. But he cannot find out about Aaron."

"He sure as hell can't," her father agreed. "If he finds out you've been hiding a son from him, Lord knows what he'll do. I don't know what happened between you two that has him suddenly buying up Drummond Oil and wanting to meet with you, and to tell you the truth, I don't want to know, because my blood pressure is high enough as it is. But whatever you did, you need to get on that plane tomorrow, and go to New York to fix it."

"Tomorrow!" she said. "I can't just drop everything and drive all the way to Dallas to go to New York."

Her father gave her a small, tart smile. "Eva, I warned you against getting mixed up with this boy, and now look where it's gotten us. You can and will drop everything. And you will do whatever it takes to save our town, which we've both pledged to serve to the best of our abilities."

"Okay, Daddy, I'm just going to point out that you warned me to stay away from him because he was in your words, 'fresh off the boat,' 'couldn't even speak English,' and 'would never amount to anything.' I have no idea if he's officially got his citizenship or how his English is coming along, but you were definitely wrong on at least one of those accounts. He's made something of himself and now he's got you, me, and this whole town under his thumb."

To her surprise, Eva actually felt a bit of pride in Alexei welling up inside her. Who

would have thought the Russian security guard who could barely afford a rundown efficiency would own her hometown one day?

Her father glared at her. “This is all your fault, young lady. If you had kept your legs closed or at least chosen a black boy—” He broke off, obviously too angry to continue down that road. “Your mama and me didn’t raise you like that. ”

Once again, a volcano of regret erupted inside her. He was right, they hadn’t raised her like that and she had been a dutiful daughter up until she met Alexei, but he had awakened her until-then latent wild child. Funny Eva had morphed into crazy-in-love Eva and nothing her father said or did had gotten through to her. She had only been with Alexei for six months, but now her short affair was once again coming back to bite her in the butt. And this time it wouldn’t be just her father’s good name that would suffer. This time, everyone in Drummond might lose their jobs because of her.

“Fine, I’ll go,” she said, not wishing to argue with her father, who was at least half-right about the foolishness of her past actions. “I’ll do it for Drummond and I’ll do it for Aaron. If I don’t go, he might get nosy and start poking around for other things to manipulate me with.”

Perhaps feeling a modicum of remorse for sending his daughter into a known dragon’s den, her father relaxed his stiff posture and said, “You won’t have to drive to Dallas. He’s sending a private plane to the Drummond airfield to pick you up.”

Eva stood, feeling too guilty to look her father in the eye. “Just have Berta email me the details. I’ll be there. Now I’ve got a lot of work to do before I leave.”

She made a hasty exit then, but peeked over her shoulder at her father as she walked out the door. He looked like she felt. Grim and sad.

Chapter Five

EVA stayed at the office until one in the morning in order to get things where they could run without her for a day or two. She thanked her stars Aaron was currently staying with her brother, his wife, and their twin daughters all summer in Italy, where her brother was a Foreign Service officer.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 10:09 am

At first when her father had come up with the idea of her seven-year-old son spending the entire summer in a foreign country without her, she had balked. But he insisted spending time with a male role model under sixty would be better for Aaron than another summer in all-day camp. Plus, Aaron had wanted to visit his Uncle Steve and his cousins, and he was such a good kid, she found it too hard to deny him one the few big things he'd asked her for.

But now it felt like it had been fate's way of cutting her a break. She just hoped she could get this situation with Alexei mitigated before he returned in three weeks, further complicating an already complicated situation.

She arrived at the airfield, which was located about fifteen minutes outside Drummond with an extra large coffee in hand and wearing a pair of large white sunglass to protect her bleary eyes from the bright Texas sun.

She parked her car outside the small, corrugated metal building, which held a couple of benches for departing passengers to sit on. When she got out, she was surprised to see Berta's maroon Lincoln also parked outside the tiny building. And she was even more surprised when she walked in and found her father's longtime assistant and three other middle-aged black ladies sitting on the benches, waiting for her. Two of them worked in civil services like her and Berta, and one of them was a vice president at Drummond Oil.

"How ya'll doing?" she asked, the typical Texas greeting rolling off her tongue, despite the fact she was emotionally and physically exhausted and did not at all feel like being social during the short time she had before her flight was set to leave. Still, she was the mayor's daughter, and she had been trained to be unfailingly polite to the

town's citizens, no matter what. "Ya'll came to see me off? How sweet."

But Berta's eyes were glued to Eva's yellow T-shirt and red denim skirt paired with Croc flip-flops. "See, I told you we would need to do an intervention," she said to the other three women. "Well, come on then. We don't have much time."

And before Eva could protest, the four ladies set upon her, stripping her down to her bra and panties, and replacing her comfortable clothes with a slinky black dress that showcased her cleavage and just barely walked the line between sophisticated and out-and-out sexy.

They then pulled a cordless flat iron and manicure supplies out of nowhere and proceeded to straighten her hair, which she had been wearing in a large twistout, and paint her bare nails a vampy red. Last but not least, they chucked her beloved Croc flip-flops and forced her poor feet into a pair of stilettos.

"Really, stilettos?" she said.

Berta sucked her teeth. "Your father might have been fool enough to trust you to dress yourself, but I knew better."

"Berta, you have always excelled at complimenting yourself and insulting me at the same time," Eva said. "It's like a special talent."

Berta harrumphed. "I got two years before I can retire with a full pension. You best do whatever it takes to convince that man to keep the headquarters here in Drummond."

The vice president peered over her glasses at Eva. "Whatever it takes," she repeated in such a way that made it clear to Eva that these women were totally fine with her prostituting herself for their job security.

“Well, Berta, please use the same amount of effort you put into this makeover to finish that pile of work I left on your desk before I get back.” This was, at best, a hollow command. Though Berta was supposed to assist both her father and herself, she’d yet to do a lick of work for Eva and whenever Eva confronted her about it, she said something to the effect of, “When your mother was here, she didn’t need any extra assistance.”

This was another reason Eva was keen to leave Drummond after Aaron returned from Italy. Sometimes it felt like the town was so set in its own ways that it was going backwards as opposed to forward.

In response to her stated wish, Berta just harrumphed again.

And If Eva thought she was going to get away with bringing her clothes with her so she could change back into them on the plane, she was sorely mistaken. When she tried to reach for them, Berta held them above her head and said, “Get along, now, Miss Eva. You got a meeting to get to.”

And that was how Eva came to board Alexei’s private jet looking ten times more sexy than she had wanted to and grumbling about the audacity of old black women.

On the plane, she wrote a long offline email to Aaron, since she had no idea if she’d be back in Drummond in time to Skype with him at their usual hour before dinner, which was right before he went to bed. But while she was trying to compose a light letter filled with silly news from town, her thoughts kept drifting back to the man who had summoned her to New York, and her father’s hand in making sure she did exactly as he asked.

She could still remember the one time they’d all had dinner together those many years ago. Her father had come to town for the National Conference of Black Mayors convention, which was being held in Dallas, and he had made a side trip to to take his

daughter to dinner. Eva had known from the start he wouldn't approve of Alexei, who she'd been dating for three months at that point. But Alexei had insisted on joining them.

"I will not be dirty secret," he'd said, like she was asking him to help her hide a dead body as opposed to gently suggesting he not come by to see her that night. After their first fevered coming together, they'd spent most of their time at her much larger apartment even though it was further from campus than his efficiency. However, Alexei refused to lay low the one night her father would be staying over.

So she had taken the chance that the two of them might find some common ground and brought Alexei along to dinner. This was the decision she would mentally kick herself for over and over again for the next eight years. Their first and last meeting had been nothing short of disastrous.

Alexei had taken offense on her behalf whenever her father teased her about not being as smart or responsible as her older brother. "Eva is very smart," he said. "And she is very good with people. She will be excellent social worker."

"Her brother's even better with people," her father said. "He's in the Foreign Service program. He might even become an ambassador someday."

"I think Russians and Americans maybe agree, we need more good social workers, not more rich ambassadors and politicians."

At that point Eva had audibly groaned and said, "Can we just agree to disagree? Personally I am a fan of both my brother and myself and I know we're both looking forward to serving our communities in different ways." She patted her father's hand, which was now clenched around his dinner fork. "Just like you, Daddy."

But her father kept on glaring at Alexei like she hadn't even spoken. "Are you trying

to say you know my daughter better than I do?”

“No, I am saying you should be more proud papa. Eva very good, very smart, very kind, but you choose to, how do you say...” The angrier he got at her father, the thicker his accent got. “... put her down for not being same person as her brother. You should be happy to have such wonderful daughter instead.”

Eva opened her mouth to offer up a quip that would hopefully diffuse the situation, but it was too late. Her father threw down his napkin. “Eva, if you thought bringing around some Russian boy to insult me and my parenting to my face is a good way to gain my respect, then you were surely mistaken.”

“I am not boy,” Alexei said, his voice growing dangerous.

Eva ignored him and tried to bring the conversation out of the death spiral it had entered. “Daddy, it’s a cultural thing. He’s very blunt,” she said, trying not to feel guilty for failing to stick up for Alexei the way he’d stuck up for her.

“Well, then you obviously need to find a boy from another culture, because I’m not going to put up with you living on my dime while dating this fool. I’ll meet you in the car.”

With that he stood up and stormed out of the restaurant.

In the wake of his departure, Eva said. “Wow. That went so well, way better than I expected when I said it would be an awful idea for you to come to dinner with my father and me.”

Alexei narrowed his eyes. “This is joke, da?” He wasn’t great with sarcasm on his best English days.

“For sure da, that was a joke.” She sighed and tabled her own napkin. “And I was really looking forward to dessert, but I guess I should go after him.”

“You are leaving?”

“He’s my father, Alexei. He’s given me everything I’ve ever asked for and he’s currently paying all of my expenses. Yes, I’m going after him. I’ll call you later, okay?”

She’d dropped a pile of bills on the table for the expensive dinner, which she knew he wouldn’t be able to afford on his salary. Then she’d run after her father.

But she hadn’t called him later. Instead she’d shown up at his door with an overnight bag. “Do you love me?” she asked him before he could even greet her.

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 10:09 am

Alexei shook his head, scowling with confusion. “Why do you ask me this? And why do you have bag?”

“Because tonight my father gave me an ultimatum. He said either I break-up with you or he’ll cut me off entirely. And guess what?”

Alexei rarely smiled, but when he did it softened his entire face. “You choose me.”

She nodded with a chagrinned smile. “I chose you. But if it turns out you’re not in love with me like I’m in love with you, this is going to be really awkward and embarrassing, especially since I’m going to have to move in with you until I can figure out a new non-Daddy-endorsed living situation.”

This was meant to be a joke, but as with most things, Alexei took her seriously. “Of course I love you. You are my kotenok, my heart.” He took her overnight bag from her. “Come, come inside. I will show you. You will not look for new apartment. You save money and live with me. I can give you three drawers and half closet—”

He would have gone on, but Eva cut him off with a kiss that quickly turned passionate. And by the time Alexei lowered her on to his floor mattress, she was more than certain she’d made the exact right decision.

Worst decision she’d ever made, she declared silently to herself on Alexei’s luxurious aircraft eight years later. She closed her laptop with disgust, unable to concentrate on composing an email to her son—the one she was desperately afraid of Alexei finding out about. Instead, she turned her attention to the New York skyline as they descended into LaGuardia Airport. One of those buildings belonged to Alexei in its

entirety. Who knew what type of man he was now, and who knew what he'd demand of her, now that he had her and her entire hometown at his mercy.

Chapter Six

ALEXEI had just received a text from Emilio that the plane had landed at LaGuardia and Eva was on her way to their Midtown office building, when Emilio himself got on the line to say his uncle was calling from Russia and wanted to talk with him.

There were few rules from their crime family days that he still adhered to, but one of them was when an older family member calls, the younger family member is obligated to drop everything and pick up.

"Uncle," he said without preamble and in his native Russian. "What can I do for you?"

"Google Alerts just told me you have bought Drummond Oil. I would like to talk about this with you."

"There is nothing to talk about Uncle," he said, wishing Sergei had never gotten the bright idea to start receiving Google Alerts on his on nephew. His uncle wasn't that great at keeping up with the company's own business reports, but receiving Google Alerts every time Alexei's name came up in the news made it easier for him to poke his nose into both Alexei's personal and formal business. "It is a good investment and I like good investments."

"When our advisors said we should invest in oil over here, you said no, you didn't like it, and you chose to focus on other natural resources," his uncle said. "That is what you declared. Why then are we getting involved with oil now and with such a little company? Does this mean we will no longer be investing in Matsuda Steel and the Sinclair Industries deal is off the table? Will we be expanding into oil in Russia,

too? Because I have contacts from the old days who will be able to help us with this.”

Alexei closed his eyes in irritation. This was exactly why he’d refused to deal with oil in Russia. It could be very lucrative, yes, but his uncle would have insisted on doing business with the same people they’d done business with when they were a crime family. No matter how many millions of rubles had flooded into his bank account, because of Alexei’s decision seven years ago to decriminalize their family business, Sergei continued to argue for a return to the old ways.

But Alexei did realize he had no one but himself to blame for this call. Buying Drummond Oil had given his uncle just the excuse he needed to push his agenda again.

“No, the Matsuda deal is still on the table and I fully intend to remain mostly in metals and natural resources outside of oil. Do not concern yourself with this new purchase, Uncle. I will only hold on to the company for a little while before selling it again.”

“You bought a company only to resell it? Why?”

Alexei wasn’t about to tell him the true answer: revenge. Instead he said, “I have my reasons.”

“I will start looking into possible investments over here,” his uncle declared. “Maybe you will extend these reasons to the companies your old uncle would like you to look at as well. I was more than an enforcer, you know. I advised your father, and I kept this family going while you were having your American adventure.”

That’s what his uncle called working like a mule to get his MBA. For a moment, Alexei’s temper flared. He loved his uncle, but sometimes he suspected he resented the profitable direction in which Alexei had taken the company. If it were up to him,

they'd still be scrapping in the street like dogs.

But then again, who was he to judge his uncle for living in the past? He had just spent millions of dollars on a small oil company just to get revenge against a woman he should be beyond caring about. There was no reasonable way to explain that, and even he could see this landed on the wrong side of obsession. He comforted himself with the fact that it would be over soon. He'd have his revenge, and Eva would be sorry she ever crossed the "fresh off the boat" Russian who had given her his heart in full.

"Uncle, I must go. I have an important meeting."

"I will make that list and call you back," his uncle said. Then he hung up, not waiting for Alexei to agree or disagree.

* * * *

The elevator ride up to Alexei's offices felt like the longest one she had ever taken. Not just because his offices were situated at the very top of a very tall building, but also because she was standing beside Emilio. She had considered him a friend back when he'd been Alexei's counterpart at the School of Social Work's security desk. They'd been friendly acquaintances even before she started dating Alexei. In truth, she'd joke with her friends how career services must have really like the SSW, because they had gotten not one, but two hot security guards. Emilio, who was still tall, lean, and exceedingly handsome, had been much more friendly than Alexei back then, and he'd seemed genuinely happy for her and Alexei when they became a couple.

But eight years later, he had greeted her in the lobby with a cold, "I'll take you to Mr. Rustanov now." And that had been it.

She'd thought they'd spend the entire ride in uncomfortable silence, but halfway through, he said, "It's not right, you coming back into his life like this all of sudden."

Eva could appreciate his loyalty, but... "He's the one who made me come all the way to New York. Trust me, I was very happy staying out of his life in Texas."

"You're not dressed like you were dragged here." He cast his eyes toward her slinky dress.

"I was physically ambushed by four little old ladies who forced me into this get up. Have you ever been ambushed by old ladies? They're rough, then they guilt trip you if you try to fight back. Believe me, you cannot win."

Emilio now turned fully toward her. "What happened in Pittsburgh?"

She felt her face warm. "Nothing that warranted all of this. Trust me."

"I don't trust you," he said, his voice clipped. "I'm the one who had to put him back together again after you left. If it were up to me, I'd keep you on the other side of the planet from him. But it isn't."

The elevator dinged, saving her from having to answer. They stepped out into a large, all-glass suite. Every wall was floor-to-ceiling glass and she could already see Alexei in a well-tailored business suit standing with his hands clasped behind his back as he looked out the window. All the furniture in the outer and inner office was also made of glass, including the chairs, Emilio's desk in the outer office, and Alexei's much larger one in the inner office. Even the floor beneath their feet was outfitted in some kind of smoky glass tile.

The only thing not made out of glass were the two armed security guards outside of Alexei's office, and the effect wasn't helped much by the fact they were wearing

matching light grey suits and mirrored sunglasses.

“Is this an office or a super-villain’s lair?”

To her surprise, Emilio actually cracked a smile, which temporarily transformed him into the easy-going guy she remembered. “I tried to tell him it was too much. But you know how Russians are. They like too much. At least it’s elegant, yeah? You should see some of the other executive’s offices in Moscow. Tacky.”

Eva burst out laughing, remembering the complete wardrobe makeover she’d had to perform on Alexei after she opened his closet and found some of the busiest open-collared, polyester dress shirts known to man.

But the laughter died in her throat when Alexei turned from the window and looked straight at her. She had been joking earlier, but as she walked through the door one of the guards held open for her, it really did feel like she was entering the bad guy’s lair.

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 10:09 am

“Hello, Eva,” he said, when she walked in. “I see you and Emilio have become reacquainted.”

She didn’t realize until the door closed behind her that while she and Alexei had kissed and gotten as intimate as two people could with all their clothes still on, they hadn’t actually exchanged any words the last time they’d seen each other in Pittsburgh.

“You went and lost your accent?” she said, too surprised to not act surprised. She could hear his Russian background in the cadence of his speech, but other than that, his thick accent was gone, an almost monotone reflection of what it used to be. Alexei’s voice, she realized, was now clear and hard, like the glass in his office.

“I decided it would be best left behind if I truly wanted to navigate in business,” he said. His words were soft and civil, but his eyes were unblinking and hard as granite. “But I see you kept yours.”

“Yep.” She nodded. “I’m still Texas through and through. As a matter fact, do you mind if I take a seat? My feet aren’t built for anything with a bigger heel than cowboy boots and these stilettos are killing me.”

His lips thinned as if he was actually thinking of denying her a seat, but in the end, he extended a hand and said, “Yes, sit. We have much to discuss.”

She took a seat. “We sure do,” she said, tentatively sliding her bottom into one of the weird glass chairs. She was pleasantly surprised to find it quite sturdy and not nearly as fragile as it looked.

“Listen, I’m going to cut to chase here,” she said. “I’ve got a pretty good idea why you called me to your office. You’re angry because of how I left things eight years ago. And I’ve gotta say, you got me. Threatening my hometown was exactly the way to get an apology out of me. An apology you deserve big time. So I’m gonna say it now. I’m all kinds of sorry about what happened between us. If you want, I’ll get down on my knees and grovel. But please don’t take out your anger at me on the Drummond. There are good people living there, and they don’t deserve to go out like this because of something I did when I was very young.”

She emphasized those last five words, hoping they’d serve as a gentle reminder that perhaps things people do when they are young shouldn’t still be held against them eight years later.

He regarded her for a few long, measuring moments. He then finally sat down in the glass chair behind his own desk. “Your apology is very pretty, Eva, but the truth is it would be inconvenient for me to keep the headquarters in Drummond. Dallas is easier to fly into. The decision is already made. I just wanted to inform you of it to your face.”

More than anything, Eva wanted to simply accept this and move on. She wanted to say, “Okay, fine,” and get the hell out of Dodge. But as mad as she had been at Berta earlier, she also felt guilty, because her pension was riding on this negotiation, as well as the future well-being of all five-thousand residents of Drummond. The schools, all the civil service offices, everything would close and just about everyone would lose their jobs because of her.

She shook her head mournfully. “Please, I’m begging you to reconsider. The town’s going to die without the Drummond Oil headquarters. Is there any way I can talk you out of this?”

He regarded her with a lazy half-smirk. “I do not want to be talked out of it, Eva.”

She caught the emphasis he put on the word “talked” and her blood curdled, “What do you want then? I mean other than see me squirm in this hideously uncomfortable glass chair?”

His eyes raked down her body. “I see you still like your inappropriate jokes at inappropriate moments. This is a negotiation, Eva. Perhaps you should be serious and ask me what I want again. This time without the attitude.”

Barely resisting the urge to rile the vicious snake he’d become further by rolling her eyes at his command, she said in her best serious voice, “What do you want?”

He leaned forward. “I want you completely at my mercy for two weeks. I want to use you as a fuck toy, doing to you whatever I want, however I want it, for that time until I get tired of you and throw you away like you threw me away eight years ago. That’s what I want.”

Her mouth went as dry as a mile of Texas backcountry road. She couldn’t have made joke at that point if her life depended on it. But more upsetting than his request was her body’s response to it. She could feel herself moisten, at just the thought of being with Alexei again, even if it were in such a degrading way.

She closed her eyes and could hear her father’s voice ring in her ears. Do whatever it takes to fix this. She also thought of Aaron who would be safe from discovery if she just allowed Alexei to exact his revenge.

Aaron was what sealed it, really, because she could tell that even if she said no to his terms and let him kill Drummond, Alexei would come at her with something else. No, he wouldn’t be satisfied until he fulfilled his revenge fantasy.

“Just so we’re clear on this,” she said, her voice more than a little shaky, “If I agree to spend two weeks with you, then you’ll let the Drummond Oil headquarters stay in

Drummond for good? And you'll also leave the funding Drummond Oil has put in place for our town as is? No backsies?"

He regarded her with a satisfied gleam in his eyes. "Yes, I will allow Drummond Oil to stay in Drummond after I'm done with you. And you may keep the funding scheme."

She folded her arms and averted her eyes. "Fine," she mumbled.

"What's that?" he asked, cupping his ear. "I did not hear you."

"Fine," she said, clear as day, over-enunciating the word. "If completely degrading me will make you feel better about yourself, then I'll do what you want, if it means you'll leave me and my hometown alone."

His scowl deepened. "You will need to learn to be careful with your mouth before we meet again on Sunday. If you continue to act unpleasant when we are together next, I will consider you in violation of our agreement and I will send the order to close your precious headquarters."

"Wait, Sunday? I only have two days until I have to..." She couldn't say it. "...do what you want me to do? But I have a ton of paperwork. I can't just disappear from my job with only two days notice. Plus two weeks is a long time. I can't clear off my desk and pack in just two days."

"I am sure the good people of Drummond will be able to get along without you for two weeks." He gave her a smile that didn't nearly reach his eyes. "As for packing, bring nothing but yourself. I will provide your clothing. That way we can both be sure what you are wearing is to my liking."

The thought of someone else picking out her clothes for two whole weeks was

appalling on several different levels, but she didn't dare protest since every time she did, he just seemed to come back at her with an even more ludicrous demand. If she didn't shut up, he'd have her running around buck-naked for two weeks just for his amusement.

"Fine," she said. "May I go now?"

"No, not yet. Your hair..."

She touched her straightened locks. "You want me to at least bring a flat iron, so I can keep it like this?"

"No," he said. "I want it to be curly the next time I see you. I do not like it this way."

She started to tell him she didn't usually wear it down like this. She had straightened it for Layla's wedding just for fun and, of course, she'd been ambushed by little old black ladies before she got on the plane. But then she remembered who she was talking to and just went with another "Fine."

"And when was your last STD test?"

Her cheeks warmed. She wasn't about to tell him how low-action her life had been in the sex department since leaving him. Drummond was small and her job and motherhood took up a lot of her time. So even if there was a great guy dying to date an overworked single mother, she hadn't had time to find him. "My last physical was in May, and all my blood work came back clean. But the last time I saw you, you were keeping company with Ms. Threesome, so I'm thinking condoms are in order."

"I will get the necessary tests before our excursion, but I assure you I am clean as well."

“How about birth control? I’m on the pill, but I’d rather use condoms just to make sure.” She didn’t add that she’d been on birth control eight years ago, and apparently that hadn’t been enough to prevent her from getting pregnant with Aaron.

“There is no need to worry about this. I received a vasectomy a few years ago to prevent this from happening.”

Eva nearly choked on her own breath. “I always knew you were anti having kids. But I thought maybe one day you might change your mind.”

“I did not,” he said, his eyes going distant like they used to when there was a subject he’d rather not talk about. “The point is there will be nothing between us.”

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 10:09 am

He gave her a heated look. “The next time I see you, I will be clothed, but you will be completely naked, except for a bow in your hair, which will signify you are a gift, sent to this Russian, courtesy of your beloved town of Drummond. You will open your legs wide to me, and there will be nothing between us when I enter you. After that, I will fuck you and you will welcome every thrust until we both come with me buried deep of inside of you. “

He let his words sink in for a few seconds before saying, “Now you may go.”

She didn’t realize she’d been holding her breath until he dismissed her, and even then she didn’t move to leave right away. His words had made her so wet she was half-afraid she’d squish if she dared to stand up. Back when they’d been together, Alexei had often made it hard for her to cover her true feelings with jokes, and it looked like he was still in possession of this particular talent. For several moments, she just sat there feeling rattled to her core, both hot with lust and cold with dread.

But eventually, she managed to pull herself together and rise from her seat. On shaky legs, she picked her way to the door in the ridiculous stilettos. But just as she put her hand on the glass handle, he said, “Eva, one more thing...”

When she turned back to face him, his expression, which had been so heated just a moment ago, visibly cooled. “Say hello to your father for me.”

Chapter Seven

THE only good thing Eva could say about her trip to New York was it really didn’t take that long. Thanks to the convenience of Alexei’s on-call jet, she was back in

front of the computer in her den in time to Skype with Aaron in Italy.

His toddler twin girl cousins had been running him ragged all summer, and he looked tired and happy as he described his heroic efforts at keeping the twins out of the kitchen while Steve's wife, Maria, made pasta from scratch.

"It was really good, Mama. You think we can get Grandma to make it like that?"

"No," her mother called from the family room, shameless in her eavesdropping. "I'm not going to be fussing around with dough for hours when I can just throw the boxed kind in a pot and call it a day. That's good enough for this family."

"Sorry, sweetness." Eva tossed him an apologetic look through the computer.

"That's okay," Aaron said, even though he looked disappointed.

She felt terrible. This was yet another reason she had grown tired of living with her parents. At first it seemed like a great idea, since the house was so big, and she could use the money she saved in rent for Aaron's college fund and the vacation they took every year. But for Eva, who had learned to enjoy cooking before she moved back in, the culinary situation had grown untenable. Her mother didn't welcome anything more adventurous than Chinese takeout at their dinner table. Plus, she ruled the house kitchen with an iron fist, so Eva wouldn't be able to make fresh pasta herself even if they had the right tools.

She would move out, she decided with sudden conviction. After she was done jumping through Alexei's hoops, they would move somewhere and make a new start. And she'd make him fresh pasta or whatever his little heart desired at least once a week.

On the other side of the computer screen, Aaron yawned. "We're leaving to go to

Disneyland Paris tomorrow. Uncle Steve said I have to go to bed early.”

“That’s very practical of your Uncle Steve,” she said. “But before you go, I just wanted you to know I won’t be able to Skype with you when you get back. I’m going on vacation, and I’m not sure how much computer access I’ll have.”

Aaron sat up, his eyes narrowing in that way that made him look so much like his father. “You, Grandpa, and Grandma are going on vacation somewhere?” He sounded suspicious, as he should, since during the course of his young life, his grandfather had never taken a non-working vacation much less one with Eva in tow.

“Auntie Layla’s husband is really busy right now, so we decided to take a vacation to the Bahamas, just the two of us.” She hated to lie to him, but this was the most plausible excuse she could come up with to explain why she wouldn’t be available by computer for the next two weeks.

The suspicious squint disappeared and he nodded. “Okay, that’s good. I like Auntie Layla.”

“I know you do,” she said, laughing. Layla had been Aaron’s go-to babysitter for those first couple of years before her father had forgiven her enough to let her move back home. And after that, she and Aaron had taken trips to visit Layla in Dallas at least three times a year, before she moved to Pittsburgh.

She looked at Aaron’s sweet face now, trying to memorize every aspect of it, since she wouldn’t be able to see it for two more weeks. “I know you’ll be good for Uncle Steve and Aunt Maria, and I’ll try to text with you as much as I can.”

“Okay. Have fun. Love you, Mama.” One of the nicer side effects of their summer apart was Aaron had become much more affectionate. She supposed it was all well and good to say you didn’t need your mama, until you got to missing her.

“Love you, too, sweetness.”

And then he was gone, leaving Eva to feel torn between her son and the man who didn't even know he existed.

“I don't know why you look so sad,” her mother said, appearing in the doorway to the den. “Nearly brought this town to ruin, now you're going to up and take a vacation with your girlfriend like lah-dee-dah. “

Even though her mother, Truelle St. James, was thirty years older than Eva, someone might have mistaken them for sisters, if everyone in their small town didn't already know them as mother and daughter. They shared the same dark chocolate complexion and even had the same body type, though her mother did a lot more to keep her curves hidden, preferring to wear unassuming grey or black dresses to the bright colors Eva favored. Other than that, at first glance, anybody could tell they were related.

However, when they opened their mouths, you knew within fifteen minutes, despite their genetic bond and similar career paths, they were complete opposites. The only thing Truelle enjoyed more than running an organized and efficient house was telling others exactly how they should be living their lives. And she certainly would've given Eva a piece of her mind, if she knew who her daughter would really be spending the next two weeks with.

She had a feeling her father and Berta suspected the truth, but they were both sticking to the cover story. As one of the few non-widowed single mothers in town, her father was already embarrassed enough by her. No need to also let everyone know she would be doing “whatever it takes” for the next two weeks in order to keep the Drummond Oil headquarters in their little town.

Truelle came into the room and started reorganizing the desk, starting with

straightening the pile of files Eva had brought home with her from the office. “If you ask me, you should stay here to make sure this mess is truly cleaned up like you say it’s supposed to be now. But then again, you have never been the one to clean up your own mess, have you?” She gave the desk she’d just neatened up a pointed look.

And for a moment Eva was almost grateful Alexei had put her in this position, because it meant she’d finally get a break from her mother’s constant criticisms. When she moved back in five years ago, she’d hoped they’d be able to come to terms and mend the fences that had been broken during their estrangement. But over the course of the next half-decade, she’d come to accept her parents didn’t want to forgive her. They had decided a long time ago to stay mad at her for disobeying them and then having the nerve to get pregnant out of wedlock. And nothing she said or did would ever convince them she had changed from the irresponsible girl they’d pegged her as eight years ago.

“Okay, Mama,” she said. “Well, I’ve had a long day and I have a lot to do before I leave on Sunday, so I’m just going to go up to my room now.”

She felt like a teenager again over the next couple of days as she pointedly ignored her mother’s barbs and disapproving looks while also rushing to pack and get two weeks worth of work off her desk before she left. Despite her constant nagging, she actually managed to get everything done and was packed and ready to go by Sunday morning. The only thing was she had no idea where she was going.

Neither Alexei nor anyone associated with him had been in contact with her since she left New York. She supposed she could have looked up the number for his corporation and tried to get Emilio on the line, but then it didn’t really seem right that the onus of showing up for two-week sex slave duty should be on her. However, when she woke on Sunday morning with still no emails or voicemails about where she was supposed to be and when, she began to wonder if Alexei hadn’t been bluffing. Maybe he had never planned to let the Drummond Oil headquarters stay in

Texas. Maybe he had just wanted to see if she'd really agree to his proposal.

She shook her head in disgust with herself. How could she have been so naïve? He was a billionaire who dated modelesque women who were always up for threesomes. Why would he choose to spend his two-week vacation with her? Of course he had been messing with her, she decided.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 10:09 am

But just as she was about to start unpacking, a knock sounded on the front door. A few seconds later, she opened it to find Emilio on the wrap-around front porch.

“So, I guess this is actually happening then,” she said when she saw him. “I’d half convinced myself he was bluffing.”

“Yeah, if you knew Lex, you’d know once he says something’s happening, it’s happening.”

“So he sent you all the way out here to pick me up? Isn’t that a little below your pay grade?”

If Emilio felt the same way about the situation, he didn’t let it show on his face. “He only sends me on non-business related errands when he wants to make sure they get done to his specifications.”

She was about to ask what exactly Alexei had “specified” for this particular errand, but he beat her to the punch with, “You ready to go?”

“Sure, just let me get my suitcase.”

Emilio shook his head. “Special orders. Nothing bigger than a purse.”

Eva blinked. “Wait, he’s forbidden me to bring a suitcase of my own clothing?”

Emilio looked very uncomfortable now. “Yeah, he has. But if it makes you feel any better, everything you need will be provided for you when you reach your

destination.”

That in no way made her feel any better. “I don’t want everything provided for me. I want my own things. I can’t believe this.” But she stopped herself before she could go into full hysterics. It wasn’t Emilio’s fault his boss was a complete dick.

“Fine,” she said through gritted teeth. “Let me just get my purse then.”

Less than thirty minutes later, she and Emilio climbed aboard Alexei’s plane.

“You should sit there,” he said, indicating a white leather seat on the left side of the plane, which had a manila folder placed on it.

She picked up the folder and tried to hand it to him. “Is this yours?”

Emilio didn’t take it from her. “No, that’s definitely meant for you,” he said, shifting awkwardly before making a big deal of sitting in the seat across from her.

She opened the folder to find a single print-out indicating Alexei Rustanov had been tested for several sexually transmitted diseases, and the reports had all come back clean. Then it was her turn to cover her embarrassment by taking her seat.

Her cheeks were still burning by the time the plane took off. She really couldn’t have been more furious with herself for somehow managing to get re-involved with a man like Alexei Rustanov.

Chapter Eight

EVA had thrown her passport in her purse just in case, but she had expected Alexei’s plane to take her back to New York, where she’d figured he’d hole her up in a penthouse made entirely of glass while he did whatever he wanted to her for the next

two weeks. So she was surprised when the plane began to descend just an hour after take off.

She looked out the window and saw a coastal island, which she decided must be South Padre, since there weren't that many islands located only an hour's plane ride from Drummond. A few minutes later she found out her guess had been right when a grey-haired limo driver greeted Emilio and she at the bottom of the small plane's stairs.

"Welcome to South Padre Island, Miss St. James," the driver said before turning to Emilio and saying, "Welcome back, Mr. Alvarez."

So Alexei had decided their tryst should go down on Texas largest barrier island? South Padre was a known party destination, a place that attracted mostly college kids on spring break and families who didn't want to go as far as the Caribbean. She wondered why a billionaire with access to any number of glamorous locales would choose to spend his vacation there.

"Does Alexei spend a lot of time here?" she asked Emilio when they were settled in the back seat of the limo.

"No." Perhaps sensing she needed it, Emilio poured Eva two fingers of bourbon and handed it to her. "But he does own the resort you'll be staying at."

She blinked hard for the second time that day. "Say what now?"

Fifteen minutes later, she received her answer when she stepped out of the limo and saw The R resort. Even though it looked like it had undergone a rather expensive remodel, Eva recognized the location as the old Surfside Hotel, which was where she had been planning to spend Spring Break before her father cut her off. The weekend after that disastrous dinner, she'd not only moved in with Alexei but also called the

fellow SSW grad student who had coordinated their trip to South Padre to say she wouldn't be able to go.

She could still remember Alexei regarding her with mournful eyes when she got off the phone. "I wish to have money for you," he'd said. "Then I send you on this trip and maybe go with you, da? I am sorry I cannot do this. You deserve more."

She'd masked her disappointment about the trip, which she'd really been looking forward to, and said, "I'd much rather stay here with you for the break, anyway. And nobody really deserves a trip to stupid South Padre Island."

But he shook his head and insisted, "No, one day I will find a way to give this trip back to you. I promise."

And now he owned the hotel she was originally supposed to stay at.

She craned her neck upward to take in the entire structure. Man, when Alexei decided to show somebody, he really showed them.

Emilio escorted her up the elevator and past two large and burly guards, both sporting shaved heads, to the penthouse suite. The R, a luxury hotel that sat many stories above and far outshined the nearby competition, was owned in-full by the Rustanov Enterprises.

As it turned out, Eva had been right. Alexei had decided to hole her up in his penthouse. Only it was located at the top of this hotel as opposed to in New York. When Emilio showed her into the suite, she could barely believe her eyes. Unlike his office in New York, this space was warm and inviting, decorated in a sumptuous red and gold color scheme that made it feel more like a palace than a room in a hotel known for hosting well-heeled spring breakers. At least half of the penthouse was taken up by a living room, which featured a standard-sized pool, of all things,

complete with deck chairs and a small bar. There were also plate glass windows providing a 180-degree unobstructed view of the island. She went to the Texas-facing side of the suite and swore she could see all the way to Corpus Christi.

“Wow,” she said to Emilio as she jogged to take in the view on the other side of the large living room. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen a hotel room this nice in my whole life.”

“You say that and you have not even seen the bedroom yet,” a male voice said behind her.

She gasped and skidded to a stop before turning around to find Emilio had disappeared. And a very smug Alexei Rustanov had taken his place.

His eyes scanned over her. “You are already in violation of our agreement,” he said, frowning. “You are still clothed and I do not see a bow in your hair.”

Chapter Nine

ALEXEI still didn’t quite know what he was doing on South Padre Island. When he had invited Eva to his offices in New York, it had been with the full intention of telling her to her face that he would be moving the Drummond headquarters to Dallas. Revenge being a dish best served cold and all that. In his original plan, this meeting would have finally rid him of his obsession with her, and it would serve as a final testament to the fact that he had turned out better than she could have ever expected back when she dumped him with a note attached to his refrigerator door.

But then she had shown up in that sexy black dress. She obviously believed she still had some kind of sexual power over him and could talk him out of moving the Drummond Oil headquarters just by wielding it. And from the moment he saw her standing in the outer office, laughing with Emilio, he had hated her for this

belief—mostly because it was absolutely true.

Despite his original plan and his desire to be rid of her once and for all, he'd found himself inviting her back into his bed. Maybe it was because he had been so obsessed with his plan for revenge that he hadn't slept with Caroline, or anyone else for that matter, in six months. Or maybe it was because the entire time she'd been in his office, he'd had to fight the urge to spring across his desk and take her, not caring who saw. Or maybe it was simply because she had turned those mocking brown eyes on him and asked him what he wanted.

For whatever reason, he'd made this deal with her, despite the fact that it wasn't good for business and it definitely didn't bode well for his mental well-being, which had steadily eroded in the six months since he first saw Eva again at Nathan Sinclair's wedding. Because of the deal he'd made with her, he'd also have to keep the Drummond Oil headquarters opened. Which meant he had just spent millions of dollars for the privilege of paying her father's salary until he was able to sell the company off to the highest bidder.

He'd had to rearrange his entire calendar in order to get these two weeks off, not to mention clearing out the penthouse suite in the middle of the summer season. As he had flown to South Padre Island, he had cursed himself, asking himself what the hell he thought he was doing. He'd asked himself the same question again after he sent Emilio to Drummond to pick Eva up, and then several more times during the three hours he waited for her to arrive.

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 10:09 am

His only consolation had been the thought of what he would do to her as soon as she walked through the door. He'd rip her out of whatever sexy outfit she had chosen for the trip and then take her just as he'd described back in his office, so she'd know who had bought her and who was now fully in charge of her body. He'd developed a raging hard-on just thinking about fucking Eva again, of having power over her this time, of making her bend to his will.

When he heard her come in, he made his way out to the penthouse's main room and silently dismissed Emilio while Eva's back was turned. But then he'd been thrown off his game yet again by the look of pleasant surprise on her lovely face as she cooed over the luxurious trappings of the penthouse, the sort of which he'd long ago started taking for granted.

He was also taken aback by what she was wearing. She had chosen to make the trip in flip-flops, a bright, blue denim skirt, and a Kelly green UT Dallas T-shirt. That outfit, paired with the happy smile on her face and her hair, which she'd pulled into a large lopsided puff at the back of her head, made her look almost exactly like she had back at UTD. Exactly like the girl he'd fallen in love with.

With the same boundless energy he remembered, she jogged from one side of the room, then started toward the other, saying, "Wow, I don't think I've ever seen a hotel room this nice in my whole life."

A surge of personal satisfaction swept through him, that something he owned could make her respond like this. "You say that, and you have not even seen the bedroom yet," he joked from his position behind her, forgetting for a moment this woman was his enemy and he had brought her here fully intent on revenge.

But he remembered soon enough when she skidded to a stop and turned around to face him. The youthful light disappeared from her eyes and the smile died on her lips, as if his presence alone erased all the joy from the situation.

His own moment of good humor evaporated as well, and he once again cursed himself, this time for giving a damn what she thought in the first place. Falling back on his business instincts, he said the thing he knew would show her she held no sway over him and that he was in the power position in their little arrangement.

“You are already in violation of our agreement,” he said, his voice as cold and monotone as he could make it. “You are still clothed and I do not see a bow in your hair.”

Her gaze spiked with fury and he stepped forward more than ready to go to battle with her over this, but then she surprised him by saying, “As you wish.” She curtsied and batted her eyes prettily before asking without a trace of her Texas accent. “Where do you want me, sir?”

Before he could answer, she put a hand to her cheek and said, “Oh, my bad, you already said you wanted me spread out for you on the bed.”

She hurried past him and he found himself in the strange position of silently following behind her as she looked behind each of the doors, all the while prattling on in that simpering, sweet, accentless facsimile of her own voice. “Oh, no, that’s not a bedroom, that’s a conference room—nice touch. And that’s not the bedroom either. That’s a bathroom. I like the marble flooring. You’ve done so, so well for yourself, Mr. Rustanov. You’re so much better than me in every way.”

Finally she came to a door that led to the penthouse’s master bedroom. She smiled with false brightness and looked back at him. “Oh, here’s the bed. Wow, I think this room has more square footage than my entire two-bedroom apartment back in Dallas.

It's very reflective of your immense power and the oodles and oodles of cold, hard cash you now have. This country girl is just about bowled over."

She entered the master bedroom suite, and continued on with her monologue. "It feels like I'm sinking into this carpet, it's so soft and luxurious. And these area rugs—you must have paid a pretty penny to ship them in from the Orient. That's where fancy rugs, come from, right? The Orient? I wouldn't know. I'm so back-country. Ooh, is that a Jacuzzi in the corner? I bet you're going to bang me but good in there before these two weeks are through!"

He gritted his teeth, "Eva..."

She flopped a hand over her heart. "Oh goodness gracious. Where is my head?" She let her large, plastic, neon-yellow purse slide to the floor. "You don't want to hear me rattle on. You want me naked on the bed. I'm so sorry I'm still clothed, sir."

She yanked her green T-shirt off over her head and wiggled out of her skirt. She then stepped out of her flip-flops and made hasty work of removing her panties and bra. Now naked as the day she was born, Eva kicked everything she'd just shed under the bed. "My ugly clothes have no business in a venue like this. I'm just going to hide them under this bed. My purse, too. Oh, but wait..."

She pulled a small, red gift-wrap bow out of her purse before putting it under the bed with the rest of her things. "Can't forget the bow," she all but trilled.

Then she stuck the bow to her forehead and lay back on the bed with her legs spread eagle. "Let me know if this is wide enough for you, sir."

He stood there, feeling like a fool. "If you think acting like an idiot will keep me from making you uphold your end of the bargain, then you are mistaken."

“Hmm,” she said from her position on the bed. “I’m not sure how you want me to answer that, sir. I’m just trying to be whatever you want me to be. I want to make sure you get everything you paid for, so please let me know if I’m not doing a good enough job. Your satisfaction means everything.”

For a moment he had to physically restrain himself from going over to the bed and throttling her until she dropped this stupid act. But after a few moments of holding himself still, he came back to his senses—his business senses.

This was just a tactic on her part and he had plenty of experience with tactics.

“My satisfaction means everything to you?” he asked, walking over to the bed.

“Oh yes, sir,” she said with enthusiasm so false, it bordered on contempt. “I want nothing more than to please you. “

“If you want to please me, then shut up,” he said.

She immediately clamped her lips together and pantomimed a turn-key gesture. Even without talking, she made it clear she thought his request childish and that she still had the upper hand.

But not for long, he vowed to himself.

He’d gained quite a bit of experience with chatty Americans over the past few years and he knew how to deal with them. In Eva’s case, he did exactly what he would have done in any business negotiation. He stayed silent for five minutes without saying anything.

But unlike with his business counterparts, he used the moments of silence to openly observe her naked body. Her breasts were larger now, and she’d gained weight all

over. He found he liked this version of her body more. Most of the women he'd slept with since making the transition to business mogul all looked the same, long and lean with D-cup breasts provided by A-plus plastic surgeons, and hard bodies that served as a testament to the hours they put in at the gym. Eva's soft curves and pretty girl-next-door looks called to him and made him realize how long it had been since he'd slept with anyone who looked like a real woman.

It was a struggle to keep his gaze cool and removed when he wanted nothing more than to crawl between her legs and sink inside of her. His penis was hard to the point of being painful, but he forced himself to maintain control.

And it was a good thing he did, because when he risked a light stroke over one of those thighs that he soon planned to have wrapped around his waist, she surprised him by shivering and quickly averting her eyes. This let him know she wasn't quite as removed from the situation as her vapid act would have led him to believe.

Unable to resist one more touch, he ran his hands over her inner thighs and to his delight, she audibly caught her breath, her body tensing in a way that told him she was more than ready to receive him.

* * * *

Eva had thought she had taken at least a little control of the situation back from Alexei, but it only took one touch to show her whatever control she thought she had was fragile at best. The involuntary shiver released a corresponding wetness between her legs, and when he ran his large hands over her inner thighs she could feel her clit swell as she creamed even more.

But then he did the unexpected and stepped back from the bed. She refused to give him the satisfaction of watching him go, but out the corner of her eye, she could see him stop a few feet from the bed and slowly remove his jacket, before unzipping his

pants.

“I am confused, Eva,” he said, after several more moments of silence had passed.

He walked back over to the bed and crawled between her legs with the panther-like grace she remembered, his usual scowl deepened with contemplation. “You are acting like someone who is only here under duress, but let us see...”

She felt rather than saw him take himself out of his pants and settle his thick erection against her throbbing entryway. “When I put my dick right here, I can feel you are already very wet.”

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 10:09 am

She opened her mouth to say something, but he placed a finger over her lips. “No, Eva. You said this was about what I want. And I do not want you to say another word until I tell you to. You can answer my questions with a shake of the head if it is ‘no’ or a nod if it is ‘yes.’”

He moved against her, sending waves of pleasure through her womb all the way up her spine. “Are you or are you not creaming all over my dick right now?”

Somehow his words only made her cream harder. She squirmed underneath him.

“I will need a yes or no, Eva.”

She slowly shook her head from side to side, wishing like hell it were true.

“And when I do this...” He lifted up again, taking away the pressure of his erection. But only for a brief moment. Soon she felt another kind pressure at her entryway, one that parted the lips of her vagina. “I’m watching myself feed my dick into your pussy. Are you sure this isn’t turning you on? Even a little bit?”

Eva couldn’t help the moan that escaped from her lips or the way her pussy clenched around him, happily accepting every inch he was slowly putting into her. But somehow she managed to shake her head from side to side again, denying the obvious truth.

After what felt like eons, he was all the way in, and she couldn’t believe how good it felt to have his thickness filling her up again like no other man’s ever had.

He closed his eyes, too. “Eva...” he whispered. “I can feel you, so wet and tight around me. But I am not going to do this if you truly do not want me as you are claiming. If you do not want me this way, I will pull out and we will spend the next two weeks drinking Mai Tais by the pool. I will keep my end of the bargain even if we do not have sex. But if you want this, if you want me to fuck you as hard as I have been dreaming about fucking you again these last two days, then you must nod yes. Right now.”

She hesitated. He was giving her an out, she realized. If she shook her head no, she could still save Drummond without serving as Alexei’s sex slave for the next two weeks. Problem solved, except...

She didn’t want to spend the next two weeks chastely sipping tropical drinks by the pool with this man. She wanted him right now with an urgency that bordered on insanity.

Eva felt herself nodding, even before she realized she had made the decision to do so. Then she opened her legs wider, letting him sink in even further before wrapping them around his waist.

She gasped when he lifted her up to his chest, drew almost all the way out of her, then drove himself into her warm, wet center and lost all control. He grunted out her name with every thrust, “Eva... Eva.... Eva...”

He held her so close his chest rubbed against her sensitive nipples and the top of his shaft brushed against her clit with every stroke. She heard someone’s soft cries of pleasure in the distance, and soon realized they were hers. The sensations became so overwhelming she couldn’t do anything but hold on to him, keening helplessly against his chest as he entered her again and again until her entire world exploded.

She went rigid as the orgasm pulsed through her, coursing through her entire body

and seemingly into Alexei's, because he let out a rough groan, crushing her to his chest for one long moment, before she felt him spill inside of her, hot streams of semen coursing into her before her own orgasm finally let her out of its death grip.

She didn't know how long she sat there clinging to him with her legs wrapped around his waist. Minutes, maybe hours, went by with nothing but the sound of them both breathing hard. But then the eternity was interrupted by the sound of her stomach growling.

She had been too nervous to eat breakfast, so she hadn't had anything since dinner the night before. And her body, now completely sated with sex, had decided to alert her to its other needs. She looked up at him, face full of chagrin.

He lifted an eyebrow. "Yes or no," he said. "You would like something to eat."

She covered her eyes with one hand and gave a very embarrassed nod, yes.

Chapter Ten

THEY ate a quiet lunch by the pool, sitting in side-by-side deck chairs and wearing matching white cotton bathrobes. Alexei would have classified the silence as companionable if he hadn't commanded it. Also, he was fairly sure the idiot personality Eva had decided to adopt would come back in full force the moment he allowed her to do anything but nod or shake her head.

He surreptitiously watched her slide a piece of mango into her full mouth as she gazed off into the horizon beyond the pool, and he felt himself swell underneath the robe. But he didn't make a move toward her. His head was in too much of a spin from what had happened less than an hour ago in the master suite. It had been a huge risk to give her the option of opting out of sex with him for the next two weeks with a shake of her head. Even as he put the offer on the table, he had been thinking of ways

to renege if she took it.

But then she had nodded and unwittingly turned the tables on him. By admitting she wanted him too, she'd done more to validate her position of power, more than any act of defiance ever could. She had become his again. By choice. And that made him happier than he wanted to admit. So even though he'd ostensibly conquered her, he still didn't feel like he was fully in control.

"Are you done eating?" he asked.

She nodded.

"Come here then."

She got out of her deck chair and came to stand next to his. She didn't reach for him or even give him a questioning look, just waited for his next instruction, which for some reason annoyed him even more than when she was pretending to be an airhead.

He patted his lap, indicating for her to sit down.

She hesitated before beginning to lower herself down, butt first. But he shook his head.

"No, straddle me." He untied his robe and pulled it open to reveal his naked body underneath. "I want you facing me."

Her eyes went to his cock, which lay only semi-erect between his thighs. Again, she hesitated, but then did as he asked, arranging herself so her knees rested at either side of his legs, and her bottom sank toward the underside of his thighs. She placed her hands on the deck chair's arms, holding herself as stiff as possible and as far away from his member as she could get in her current position.

He reached out and untied her robe, revealing her heavy, dark breasts, which he palmed in both hands. “Your nipples are standing at attention,” he observed. “Are you cold?”

She bit her lip and looked away.

“Answer me, Eva.”

She shook her head, still refusing to meet his eyes.

“I see goose bumps on your skin, too. Are you sure you’re not cold?”

This time she shook her head quickly, as if trying to bring this particular topic of conversation to a firm close.

“I would like for you to come a little closer.”

Before she could agree or disagree, he unhanded her breasts and brought his knees up, which sent her tumbling into his chest and lodged his dick against her hot slit.

He then wrapped his arms around her waist and said, “Look at me, Eva.”

It took her so long to do as he said, it seemed she was physically dragging her eyes upwards to meet his gaze.

“I like the way your body responds to me—no, keep looking at me,” he commanded when she started to cast her eyes downward again in obvious embarrassment.

She did as he said, but the look on her face made it seem like holding his gaze was painful for her, considering their position.

“You can feel me right now, yes? How much I want you?”

Her breasts moved deliciously against his chest as her breathing sped up.

“That is another yes or no question,” he reminded her, holding her gaze, not letting her look away from him or the moment they were sharing.

She gave him one stiff nod.

“You said earlier this was all about what I want,” he said. “Well, I want you, not that vapid girl you were trying to punish me with. For the next two weeks, I want to be with you. The real you. Do you understand?”

They sat there staring at each other, and this time he refused to command her to answer. He saw several emotions flash through her eyes, defiance, calculation, and even fear, but eventually she nodded her head.

“Good,” he said. “Then you can talk again.”

“I liked you better with the accent,” she said almost before he had finished giving her permission to speak again. Her words were defiant, but he was happy to hear them delivered in her usual Texas-rich voice.

“That’s because when I had an accent, you had me wrapped around your finger. And now you don’t, and I have you at my mercy.”

Before she could answer, he kissed her as he had been longing to since first seeing her in the penthouse of a hotel he’d only bought because of her. And she kissed him back with such passion, he could tell they still set each other on fire even after all this time. He wondered, not for the first time, how she could have thrown what they had away just because her father didn’t approve and because he had been poor.

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 10:09 am

He'd hated her for so long for leaving him the way she did, not understanding how she could have taken his heart and tossed it back to him in shreds. But now he wondered if what they had hadn't been what he'd thought.

For him it had been an all-consuming love, but for her, maybe it had just been sex, a way to rebel before she got sick of playing poor with him.

His anger should have flared up again at that point. But as he kissed her in the deck chair, the whole world fell away. For the first time in years, he didn't feel the bitterness that had been his constant companion since she left him. Instead of revenge, it felt like a dream come true. Like someone had heard his prayers during the bad days when he was still begging God to return his Eva to him and had decided to grant them eight years later.

"I want you again," he said. "I want to be inside of you."

"Alexei," she answered, her voice as hot and raspy as his.

He sucked in a breath when she took him in her hand and guided him toward her. "I want you inside of me. I shouldn't. I wish to God I didn't, but I do."

She enveloped him in her steaming, hot wetness, taking him in with one desperate jerk of her hips. Then she let out a cry of such intense pleasure, he nearly came right then and there. As it was, he had to hold her hips still, not allowing her to move on top of him.

"Let me," she said squirming against him. "I thought you wanted me."

“I do,” he assured her between gritted teeth. “Too much. I need a moment or this is going to be over way too soon for both of us. Just give me a minute.” She moaned and let her head fall against his shoulder. Her aching need felt so tangible to him that he released her hips and started to move into her, his desire to give her what she wanted greater than his desire to stay inside of her for as long as possible.

And he was right. It was over much faster than he wanted it to be. They both came only a few minutes later, announcing their twin release against each other’s shoulder. It made him wonder if every time would be like this, fraught with frantic need, like they’d been starved of each other for far too long.

“I really need a shower now,” she said, laughing a little as she basked in her afterglow. They had cleaned up a little after the first time, but here they were again, sweaty and reeking of one another.

“I will show you to your room.”

Her face lit up. “I have my own room?”

“Yes,” he answered. “But it is only for storage. Your vacation wardrobe is in there and a few toiletries. I assumed you used the same hair products as back in grad school and I made Emilio a list.”

Her cute gasp of pleasant surprise made the entire effort worth it. “Look at you, even remembering my favorite hair products!” She clapped her hands together. “Show me, show me, please!”

So he showed her, and he had to fight hard not to get caught up in Eva’s reaction when she squealed upon finding a closet full of designer label, brightly-colored vacation wear. “And here I was thinking you were going to have me running around buck naked,” she said, pulling out a seventies retro-style yellow and orange tunic

dress.

He tilted his head to the side. “I had not considered that option. Perhaps I should have the clothing returned.”

She hugged the dress to her and made a mad dash for the bathroom, yelling, “No backsies!”

He laughed and returned to the master suite to take a shower of his own. A certain contentment stole over him as he let the shower spray wash away his last interlude with Eva. Being with her again like this felt more right than he cared to admit, but for once, he refused to obsess over his feelings regarding her or try to quell them with bitter thoughts.

By the time he came out of the bathroom, dressed in another robe, he’d decided to take Emilio’s advice, and try “going with the flow” instead of waging a power war as he’d originally intended.

But then the sound of a cell phone ringing in his suite interrupted his thoughts. The bouncy ringtone definitely wasn’t coming from his smart phone. And he followed the sound to beneath the bed, where he bent down and found Eva’s phone going off. She had retrieved her things earlier, but the phone must have fallen out of her purse. It stopped ringing, just as he reached out and grabbed it.

And he would have delivered it to Eva right away, except a box that said, “Missed call: Aaron” popped up on the display screen.

He frowned, and a memory came back to him unbidden: Eva making a big deal of putting his name into her cell phone while they were eating breakfast in her apartment. “How exactly do you spell your name?” she’d asked, eating the omelet she had made for them with one hand and keying in his information with the other.

He'd spelled his first name for her, but when he tried to spell his last name, she winked and said, "No need. I really like you. I don't need to put in a last name to remember who you are."

His heart turned to stone in his chest as he looked at the one name on the screen. And it felt like he was walking through a room with no sound as he made his way back to the living room and stood there, waiting, until she finally appeared, now wearing the tunic dress she'd been so excited about.

"Hey, you're not dressed yet," she said. "Does that mean we're not going out?"

He held up her phone. "Who is Aaron?"

Her eyes widened when she saw her phone in his hand. "Why do you have my phone?" She ran over to him and tried to snatch it from him, but he held it above his head, too far for her to reach.

"Give it back. Give it back right now. This isn't funny."

He didn't find anything funny about this situation either and his voice was much harder when he asked again, "Who is Aaron?"

Chapter Eleven

"WHO is Aaron?" he asked, confirming Eva's worst fears after she found him in the living room, his countenance changed from relaxed and sexy to stiff and angry.

A cold hand closed around Eva's heart and she scrambled to think how to answer his question in a plausible way. "Nobody," she said, trying to relax her own posture.

"Eva, I operate in a world filled with sharks and snakes. I deal with half-truths on a

daily basis. Do you really think I cannot tell when someone is lying to me? Who is Aaron?"

Her heart beat louder than thunder in her ears. She didn't know how to answer this or what to say, because he was right. He'd be able to see through whatever lie she told. The safest bet, she decided, was to say nothing at all, so she clamped her lips tight.

"Answer me," he growled, still holding the phone in the air.

"No." Her voice was barely a whisper.

"You have to do what I say if you want to save your town, so tell me who he is."

Eva glared at him. He thought he had her with that one, but what he didn't understand was the only thing she cared about more than Drummond was Aaron. And she'd protect him at any cost. "Fine, then. Close Drummond Oil. I'm not talking about him with you. Now give me back my phone."

His eyes narrowed. "You love this man that much?"

She didn't answer.

"You love this man that much, but you are here with me?"

She shook her head. "Not for much longer. May I have my phone, so I can leave?"

He studied her for a long time before lowering the phone and placing it in her palm. "You know, I do not need that. There are people I can call. I will have a dossier on this Aaron within forty-eight hours."

"No!" she cried. "You leave him alone, Alexei Rustanov. I was stupid enough to get

caught up in this with you, but he's innocent. Just like all those people in Drummond you keep threatening to put out of work because you're mad at me."

His only answer to this was "Does he know you're here with me?"

She gave him a wry smile. Finally something she could answer truthfully. "No."

"What would he do if he found out?"

Again, she told the truth. "I don't know."

"If you two are in love, why are you not married?" he asked.

She shook her head. "I told you, I'm not going to talk with you about him. Either you drop the subject and agree to leave him out of this, or we end this—whatever it is—right now."

She was leaning toward the latter, but then he said. "Why did you nod?"

"What?"

He folded his arms over his chest.

"If you are in love with him, why did you not take the out I gave you?" he asked. "Why did you enthusiastically have sex with me again by pool? Are you unhappy with him?"

She saw his questions for what they were. An opening. An opening she could work with. "Listen," she said, stepping closer to him. "I know what you want from me. You want me to be the person I used to be, the one who left you, so you can get your revenge. I can be her for you. Look..."

Page 16

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 10:09 am

She hurled the phone and it arced into the pool. “It’s gone. No more Aaron. For the next two weeks, I will be who you need me to be. You just have to agree to leave him alone and never, ever tell him this happened.”

* * * *

Hot fury swirled around with cold calculation inside Alexei’s brain. And soon a new plan was forming in his head, one that would allow him to have his Eva and destroy her current relationship, too.

“Fine,” he said, borrowing a page from her acquiescence script. “We will do this.”

She licked her lips, obviously unnerved by his quick agreement. “You—you still haven’t promised me you’ll leave Aaron alone. That means you won’t get a dossier on him, or try to hunt him down, or tell him what happened between us then or now. If you don’t promise me that, I’m going to have to leave.”

“If you leave, I will close the headquarters and I will tell your precious boyfriend about us anyway.”

“Sure you can kill Drummond and really fuck up my relationship with Aaron, but that won’t be enough for you. I’ll be really upset, but you still won’t have closure. Only I can give you that. I’m the only one who knows how to help you achieve it. Believe me when I say what happened between us will just continue to haunt you, unless you let me help you.”

Curiosity now bled into the mix of cold fury. “Okay,” he said after a few moments of

consideration. “I will not seek out Aaron in any way. And I won’t close the Drummond Oil headquarters. But if I am not completely satisfied at the end of these two weeks...”

He let the threat hang, but she responded with a huge, “Thank you!” She clasped her hands in front of her chest. “You will be satisfied. I promise.”

She closed the space between them and caught him completely off guard, pulling him down by the scruff of his neck. For the first time in eight years, she kissed him, rubbing her body against his and leaving no doubt she burned for him as hot as he burned for her.

Then she leaned back and said, “I’m going to tell you why I really dumped you.”

Chapter Twelve

“I’M going to tell you why I really dumped you,” Eva said.

When Alexei agreed to her deal, he’d been half-furious and half-bemused that she thought he could be so easily assuaged with her New Age-notion of closure. But when she said those words, a strange chill ran down his back.

She took a few steps back after speaking, as if she needed to put distance between them before telling him the truth.

“This whole thing with my father started before I met you. As long as I can remember, my brother has always been my parents’ favorite. And as long as I can remember, I’ve been trying to measure up. The night Daddy, you, and me went to dinner, it all came to a head. Daddy and me got into that stupid fight about you. He said, ‘either you dump him or I’m going to cut you off.’” Eva shook her head, caught up in the memory. “I was so sick of him. He acted like every decision I made,

everything I did outside of getting my social work degree, was wrong. So I decided to show him. I moved in with you. I thought that would make him see I wasn't some dumb little girl he could boss around because he bought me everything and was paying my rent. The truth is, I moved in with you to get back at him."

She hugged herself and rubbed her arms, as if to ward off some invisible chill. "And the stupid thing is, I didn't even like you that much. I mean yeah, you were good in bed. But you barely spoke English, and your apartment was so crappy. I tried to pretend like everything was okay, but then that heat wave hit, and it was like, 'What am I doing? My dad's not that bad.' So I left you. I tried to let you down easy—"

He stopped her right there, and unbelted his robe. "Drummond," he said.

She came out of her story with a confused look, her eyes traveling downward to his straining erection. "What?"

"That is the safe word. If I hurt you, say 'Drummond.'"

* * * *

That was all the warning Eva got before she found herself pushed face-first into the nearest wall with Alexei's naked weight crushing her from behind.

"What're you doing?" she asked.

The weight of his body pressing against hers let up, but only a little bit. He pulled the tunic dress up over her head and flung it aside, before undoing the back clasp of her bra and whipping it to the floor as well. He used his strong, hard body to re-pin her against the wall, manacled her wrists above her head with one hand and using the other to rub her mound in slow, hard, punishing circles. To her great embarrassment, Eva felt her pussy start to drip from his first touch.

“Go on, finish your story,” he said in her ear, employing his middle finger to rub her own juices over her clit. “You used me to get back at your father. It was all a game to you.”

“Yes,” she said, so turned on she could barely think straight enough to speak. “I mean, it was grad school. It was fun to pretend to be in love for a while, but then when that heat wave hit, things got too real. The sex was great, but I just wanted my own place back with air conditioning and a full kitchen. I was so sick of cooking on a hot plate—”

She cried out when he removed his hand from her pussy and rammed into her from behind with brutal force, filling her with his thickness, but not allowing her enough room to move as he started rocking into her, bent at the knees, so her body jerked up and her pussy and pebbled nipples rubbed against the smooth wall with every thrust.

Immediately it was too much, stuck between a wall and Alexei’s extremely hard place. Before she was ready, she felt herself begin to orgasm. “Please, stop,” she panted, “If you don’t, I’m going to...”

“You are going to come,” he said, still fucking her from behind. “You dumped me for not being rich enough, and now you will come on my cock, spreading your pussy juice all over my hotel wall. You are creaming so much, I will have to call someone in to clean the wallpaper before we rent it out to the next guest. That is how hard you are about to come.”

And he was right. She felt a gush of liquid issuing from her pussy before the orgasm took her over, temporarily blinding her so she could only see stars. She screamed. The pleasure was too intense. She didn’t think she could take any more without passing out.

But then he suddenly pulled out and turned her around to face him. He kissed her,

biting her lip hard enough to bring her out of her post-coital daze. “No, stay with me,” he said. “I want you to finish the story.”

* * * *

He was out of control. Somewhere in the back of his head, Alexei realized he was acting like a wild animal instead of the dispassionate businessman he had trained himself to become. But he couldn't stop himself, couldn't leave her alone, but also couldn't come no matter how much his balls strained for release, because he was so unbelievably out-of-control angry at the woman who had just admitted what he thought of as his one great love was nothing more than a rebellion that went too far.

“That last week,” he heard himself asking her. “I thought you were happy. It was hot, but you kept on finding excuses to have sex with me.”

She looked at him with eyes that held both embarrassment and pity. “Yeah, I got my transfer acceptance to Arlington and my student loan money came through. That meant I could transfer to finish up my degree at UTA, which was cheaper than UTD, and I'd have enough money to get my own apartment with a real stove and an air conditioning unit that worked.”

And before he knew it, he was in her again, rutting like an animal, taking her without regard or permission, lost in a haze of memory. He had been so confused, so desperate to get her back, and she had been all too glad to be rid of him.

She clung to him now, her legs wrapped around his waist, panting as she continued on with her confession. “I would have just broken up with you, but I could already tell that was going to be hard. I mean an American guy would have taken it on the chin, but you were way more into me than I was into you, and I didn't want there to be a scene. That's not how I was raised, but I could tell you were the kind of guy who wouldn't just let me quietly dump you.”

She was right. If she had tried to break-up with him in person, he would have begged for her to stay with him. He would have yelled, he would have desperately bargained with her to change her mind, might have even cried. He would have done whatever it took to keep her there, he had been so in love with her, and he'd believed what they had was real. Back then, it would have been hard to convince him otherwise.

He drilled into her hot wet tunnel, his balls tight and begging for release, but he couldn't. His entire body had gone rigid with the need to come, but he couldn't, even as Eva's eyes rolled away again. "Oh, I can't...please...you have to stop...or I'm going to come again!"

He didn't stop, couldn't stop. He drove himself into her with furious thrusts, until he felt her pussy clenching around his dick, uncontrollably milking it. She cried, "Don't! Don't! Please don't!" over and over again before coming a second time with a full body shudder.

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 10:09 am

His balls tingled as a second wave of her juices washed over his dick. He wanted, needed to join her. It felt like he was going insane, like he either needed to or risk a complete mental breakdown.

But his body had a mind of its own. He swung her away from the wall, still embedded inside of her, and settled her beneath him on the carpeted floor. And though he felt beyond weary at that point, he hooked her legs around his waist. “Tell me about the morning before you left. Tell me exactly what happened from your point of view,” he said, his voice rough with anger and sadness.

But she shook her head, visibly tired, her face and torso shimmering with sweat. “No more. I can’t take this anymore.” But she didn’t say the safe word. In fact, she started moving underneath him again. “Why can’t I stop? I dumped you, but I can’t stop myself from wanting you right now.”

“Tell me,” he said again.

He didn’t think it was possible to get any harder, but the way she moved underneath him, her dark aureolas puffy with desire and her face helpless with need, made him the equivalent of granite, and it was all he could do to keep talking. “That morning you sucked my dick and convinced me to do your fucking laundry even though you knew you would be leaving me. Did you even go to school that day?”

She shook her head, lost in a daze of pleasure as she gasped out “No, I—I just up and left as quickly as I could ... I was such a bitch ... I thought it was funny back then—thought everything was funny.” She moaned with both lust and regret. “I was so silly.”

He squeezed his eyes shut. And there it was, the whole story. He had wondered about it so many times over the years, but never thought he'd get the complete and unvarnished truth from her. And now he had gotten it while they fucked each other senseless.

"We've got to stop," she said. "I'm going to come again, if we keep on doing this. I can't take another orgasm."

He ignored her, pounded into her, punished her as best he could while desperately trying to gain his own release. "I hate you," he heard himself saying to her on a rough chant. "I hate you. I hate you. I hate you. I hate you."

"I know, Lexie," she said, her voice broke when she called him by his pet name and tears pooled in her eyes. "You have every right to hate me, baby. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. It was messed up what I did, and I couldn't be sorrier for hurting you."

Then she came a third time with a silent scream.

It was the apology that broke him, the sincerity in her voice and the way she ed for him right after. He heard himself emit a guttural groan, like a badly wounded animal, and suddenly he was coming so hard, harder than he had ever come in his life. He could feel himself spilling into her wet passage, filling her up with his angry seed as the tension that had been building in him for eight long years finally released in wave after wave of cum.

The release was so powerful he barely had time to crawl out of her before they both fell into a sated sleep, right there on the luxurious carpet

Chapter Thirteen

EVA woke up with a startled gasp. She'd had the strangest dream, filled with sexual

heat and a weird, dangerous anger. The truth was, it had turned on her on, but when she rolled over on the mattress she shared with her boyfriend, she found his side of the bed empty.

The sound of water running in the bathroom solved the mystery. He was taking a shower, a cold shower if the room, which was already sweltering hot, was any indication. Throwing off the cheap, white sheet, she sat up in front of the fan, ridiculously grateful for its pitiful breeze.

She closed her eyes. It was hard to resist the urge to lie back down, despite having gotten a full eight hours of sleep. A deep, achy fatigue tugged at her, insisting she needed even more. It must be the heat, she thought. In any case, she needed to shake it off. She was down to her last pair of underwear—really past her last pair, since she was wearing her bikini bottoms at the moment. But she had no idea where she was going to find the strength to rally and do a couple loads of laundry before school. That was one of the few things she missed about living at home. Her efficient mother had done her laundry every week, and even after she went away to college, she'd bring big bags home for her bi-weekly Drummond visit, rather than do it herself.

Suddenly she felt the skin on the back of her neck prickle, which was her body's reaction whenever Alexei was in the vicinity. So even though she hadn't heard him come out of the bathroom, she opened her eyes, certain he must be standing nearby.

Sure enough, her huge, Russian boyfriend stood there in a towel, watching her in a way that made her feel like a beauty queen, despite the fact that her hair was in sloppy braids and she was already covered in a layer of sweat.

"Hey," she said, making her smile extra bright so he wouldn't worry. Alexei felt guilty enough about the broken A.C. unit, there was no need to let him see the negative effect the heat had on her energy levels. "I didn't hear you come out of the bathroom. For such a big guy, you move like a cat."

“I will replace your female-sounding ‘cat’ with ‘panther’ and agree,” he said and moved to stand closer to the edge of the bed.

She grinned up at him. “Are all you Russians trained to move like panthers?”

He looked away, his bemusement replaced by a faraway look. She’d seen it often and knew from experience that he wouldn’t share what it was about. This made her wonder, not for the first time, if there was more to him than he’d told her.

When they had first begun dating, he’d provided her with a tragic but simple back-story. His mother had died in car accident when he was a young boy, and his father, a humble businessman, had died shortly after Alexei’s eighteenth birthday, leaving him just enough money to pursue a business education in the United States. “My father always wanted me to study in America, so I thought I should live this dream for him.”

According to Alexei, there hadn’t been quite enough money to pay for an MBA on top of four years of undergrad, which was why he’d been forced to take on a job at the School of Social Work and live in an efficiency apartment. He’d told her the story early in their relationship and had not elaborated on it since.

But when he got that faraway look, like something she said had triggered a memory he didn’t want to share, it made her nervous. She trusted Lexie and didn’t think he would ever lie to her, but she did wonder if maybe he had left something out. Something important. However, the times she tried to dig deeper into his past, he cut her off with short answers, followed by swift subject changes.

He also received a phone call from his uncle every couple of weeks or so, in which he’d do a lot of listening before answering with a stream of Russian before delivering a curt “do svidania” and hanging up. His only explanation: “My uncle want me come back to Russia. He worry about me so far away.”

Being a stubborn Texan, she'd kept trying to get more information about his past and his mysterious uncle, until finally he said, "Kotenok, you have two living parents, even if you are not speaking to them right now. I do not have this. It is...too hard to talk about my childhood times. Please stop asking."

After that gentle request, she'd felt like such an ass for not considering his feelings about being an orphan that she didn't dare broach the topic again.

"Lexie," she said now.

He blinked and came back to her.

"What were you thinking about?" she asked him.

"I am thinking you deserve more than this shit apartment," he said.

That was definitely not what he was thinking, but she played along. "Stop it," she said with an exaggerated roll of her eyes. "A few of my clients would consider this place a palace. At least you have heat in the winter."

Alexei threatened to go talk to the landlord, who was already scared enough of him, poor thing. And a new plan formed in Eva's head, one that would keep Lexie from terrorizing the landlord, and solve her laundry problem...

Less than two hours later, she found herself alone in the apartment with two piles of freshly-washed laundry, courtesy of her boyfriend. And despite the fact that she was living in an un-air-conditioned apartment in the middle of a heat wave, she felt like the luckiest girl in the world. Alexei wasn't her first boyfriend, and she was acquainted with enough older women to know young love rarely lasted. But she had high hopes the love she shared with Alexei would go the distance.

She had never dated someone who understood her so well, someone who noted all her quirks and was amused as opposed to irritated by them. Someone who found her sexy, even when she was sweating like a pig with her hair in two sloppy braids. Someone who made her feel beautiful even when she was on her period, or having a bad hair day, or wearing something that didn't match because she was down to her last outfit.

Unlike the other guys she had dated, he was honest to a fault, which made it easy to put all her trust in him. She knew he would never lie to her, never do anything to hurt her, and that he loved her as much as she loved him, if not more so. And she did love him, his largeness, his directness, even his seriousness—sometimes it felt like she had been put on this earth just to make him smile, which he did all the time now, but only with her.

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 10:09 am

The only problem she could see possibly disrupting their love was his lack of desire for children. To be fair, he had told her this toward the beginning of their relationship, one night when they met outside of the School of Management where he took classes. As they walked back to the parking lot, she'd made a glum joke about her ovaries shutting down because she and the social worker in charge of guiding her fieldwork had removed a twelve-year-old boy who had beat his six-year-old sister to the point of unconsciousness with a baseball bat for daring to scratch up one of his Xbox games from his home just a few hours earlier.

After forcing her to explain and re-explain the ovaries joke due to his lack of English vocabulary regarding women's fertility organs, he had said. "I must tell you, I do not wish for children."

"Really?" she said. "But you'd make a great daddy. Why not?"

"I have reasons. "

"You wanna share any of them with me?" she asked, taking his large hand in both of her smaller ones as they walked.

"My parents are dead. Both their dying very hard for me. When my mother die, I am only child, but I miss her very much. I do not want my child to suffer. Also I do not like the children. They are loud and maybe they are not thanking the parents for anything. I do not think I can be good father to somebody who is like this."

She had stroked his face and said, "A lot of women who get out of an abusive relationship have trouble dating again. They're all like, 'What if the same thing

happens and he turns out to be an abusive asshole?’ Or they think they maybe don’t like men anymore. Or they’re afraid they won’t be a good girlfriend after what they went through. And we tell them you can’t live your life according to what might happen. You gotta get back out there. Otherwise your ex wins.”

He gave her a sad smile and squeezed one of her hands. “This is very good advice, Eva, but maybe not for me.”

Then before she could put forward another argument for children, he kissed her and changed the subject to the elective courses he was considering taking the following fall.

After that conversation, Eva hadn’t brought the subject of kids up again. She wasn’t particularly pro having children herself, especially after a year in the social work program. She’d only been half-joking about that monstrous boy making her not want to have them. Besides, they were in their twenties and hadn’t even started their respective careers yet. She figured there would be plenty of time to try to change his mind.

Just then, the landline rang, interrupting her thoughts about the future of Alexei’s and her relationship.

“Eva, it’s Mr. Sanders,” Alexei’s landlord said when she picked up the phone. His voice sounded nervous and shaky. “Alexei stopped by this morning, and I was just calling back to let him know I found another repair man and he’ll be stopping by today.”

So even two loads of laundry and unexpected morning sex hadn’t stopped Alexei from harassing his landlord. Poor guy.

“Thanks, we really appreciate it,” she said, trying to make up for her boyfriend. “Do I

need to be here?"

"No, he'll come up with me and we'll knock on the door. So if you're not home, I can let him in."

Eva got off the phone, shaking her head. Alexei was a total teddy bear, but most people couldn't tell that just by looking at him. So simple requests from him tended to come off way more intimidating than they should have. She'd learned to just accept they were always going to get better service than normal couples, because he had a way of asking for things that made other folks feel like he might do them some kind of bodily harm if his demands weren't met.

As if to confirm her assessment of Alexei's influence, a knock sounded on the door. She glanced at the clock. The fix-it guy had arrived at twelve noon on the dot.

But when she opened the door, instead of a plumber and Alexei's landlord, there stood two men in business suits, one a tall, beefy, middle-aged man with salt and pepper hair, the other a much younger, skinny guy in glasses.

"Hi," she said carefully, wondering why two men in suits would be at their door. "Can I help you?"

"Eva St. James?" the younger man asked. He had a slight accent she couldn't place, but otherwise spoke in a business-like manner.

"Yes, that's me," she said. Then asked again. "Can I help you?"

"I am Michael," he said, "And this is Sergei Rustanov. Alexei Rustanov's uncle."

Her eyes widened. Like any good Texas girl, her first thought was if she'd known company was coming by, she would have cleaned up a little. "Oh, I'm sorry. Alexei

isn't here and the apartment is a mess.”

The uncle, who had a craggy face which looked like it had been sculpted from cement, moved past her and into the apartment. His size made it easy for him to barge in and Eva instinctively jumped out of the way to let him pass. Now she knew where Lexie got it from. She was forever chastising him about charging down the campus sidewalks like he owned them, forcing other people to move aside as opposed to sharing the sidewalk like a civilized human being.

“Really, sir, the apartment is in no state for guests,” she said to Sergei’s back.

“He does not speak English,” Michael said behind her. “That is why I am here. To translate. May I come in?”

Eva frowned. “So you’re here to talk to me, not Alexei?”

“Yes.”

“Um, okay, then, come on in. There’s not really any place to sit. We don’t have a couch or anything—“

Sergei took one look at the table, which was covered with her unfolded clothes and swept it clean with one swoop of his large arm before taking a seat as if he hadn’t just knocked all her clean clothes to the floor.

“Mr. Rustanov would like for us to talk at the table,” Michael said, indicating with a sweeping gesture of his hand that she, too, should sit.

Suddenly feeling like a guest in her own home, Eva took a seat in the chair across from Sergei. “We only have two chairs,” she said to Michael.

“That is quite all right,” he said. “I will stand.”

Without any further ado, Sergei held her gaze and said something in a stream of Russian.

“He wants to know what Alexei’s told you about his family,” Michael said.

“Not much,” Eva answered, her unease growing by the minute. “Just that his parents died and his father left him enough money to study over here.”

Michael translated and Sergei looked away, obviously irritated. He then said something else in Russian.

“Anything else?”

She shook her head. “Um, not much. Sometimes I hear him arguing with his uncle—“ She stopped herself and addressed Sergei directly as she’d had been taught to in her special “Talking to the Deaf” master class. “Talking to you on the phone in Russian. I’m just going to go on and assume you’re the uncle he’s talking to. You seem like the kind of guy who’d be totally down for a weekly TransAtlantic argument. By the way, did you have to dump my clothes on the floor? Those were freshly washed.”

Once again, Michael translated. She could tell when he got to the part about the clothes and the weekly arguments, because the uncle’s eyes narrowed to slits.

He said something to Michael, who said, “From now on I will speak in the first person as if I am Mr. Rustanov himself. He has much to say and would prefer that you not interrupt.”

“I’ll try,” Eva said. “But us Texas girls aren’t exactly known for our not-interrupting skills.”

This time Michael didn't translate, and he said in an aside to Eva, "I know you think you are being funny, but I am strongly advising you to do as he says."

Something in his tone alerted Eva that this wasn't just a strange situation, but a possibly dangerous one. Her mind scrambled, trying to figure out if she should stay there and listen or run for her life. But in the end, her curiosity won out. "Okay, I can be quiet," she said.

This Michael translated, and Sergei nodded before folding his large hands on the table in front of him and speaking in large chunks, stopping every five sentences or so to let Michael translate:

"You may be a nice girl. I don't know. I don't care. Russia is not like America. We are not so enthusiastic about the races mixing. If Alexei were to bring you home, it will not be good for the Rustanov family. People would ask us, what is this? I do not want Alexei with an American girl, especially not a black one."

Growing up in a mostly white Texas town, Eva had encountered her share of racism, but never anything quite this straightforward and blatant. She opened her mouth but Michael shook his head and tapped a warning finger against his lips twice. The protest died as something told her she should keep her mouth closed, even if Sergei was saying he didn't want Alexei and her to be together because of her nationality and even more so, the color of her skin. There was something about this man. He seemed to be everything people thought her Lexie was, almost casually dangerous to the point that she had no problem imagining him pulling out a gun and shooting her for being disrespectful.

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 10:09 am

“Alexei did you a disservice,” Michael continued, picking up as if they hadn’t had the silent exchange behind Sergei’s back. “He should have told you about me, about his family. The reason we argue every week is because Alexei is supposed to be the head of our family now that his father has died. He wastes his time with unnecessary schooling when he should be back in Russia taking his rightful place. Another reason we have been arguing is because he says he would like to stay on in America after he graduates. He says he would like to work for a regular business as an executive. He says instead of serving his family as he was raised to do, he now wishes to live a normal life. I will not let this happen.”

Despite how weirded out she was by this entire situation, Eva’s heart soared. She had been worried about how they were going to make it work after Alexei graduated next year and she was delighted to hear Alexei had already started making plans.

She had half a mind to disobey his edict to stay quiet and tell him Alexei was a grown man and he couldn’t stop him from going down his own path or being with her. But that was when Michael brought out a laptop and flipped it open. “He wants me to show you this.”

The screen lit up to a picture of a man in a dripping wet suit, skin bloated, eyes glassy with death. It was obvious his throat had been slit and from the looks of his chest, someone had put a bullet or two into him as well. Seeing one picture of a dead body was horrifying enough, but then Michael pushed a button and a whole slideshow of dead bodies started. There were pictures of men ranging in age from eighteen to sixty, all dead. Not all of them had been dumped in water, but they all had slit throats and chest wounds, and there were a few full body shots that also revealed blown out kneecaps. The slideshow went on for several minutes with at least fifty pictures

flashing across the screen until it finally, mercifully stopped on a picture of a young, blond businessman, his eyes still wide with horror, his neck slit with two distinct bullet wounds in his chest.

Sergei began speaking again with Michael translating. “Because you are keeping our dear Alexei from fulfilling his duties, the Rustanovs now consider you our enemy. This is what our family does to our enemies, what we’re known for. And these are only the most blatant things we do. Sometimes our enemies die quietly, in car accidents, or they have falls from windows, or maybe drink a cup of tea, only to find out it has been poisoned.”

Eva froze in abject fear. It was her habit to drink tea as opposed to coffee. Sergei said something else in Russian. Michael nodded and looked up at her. “Now he says you can speak.”

She shook her head. “This isn’t Alexei. I might not have known where he came from, but I know he would never do something like this.”

Michael translated and to her surprise, Sergei chuckled. He pointed to the picture of the blond businessman and said something in Russian, his eyes twinkling like a proud papa.

Michael translated, “This is Alexei’s handiwork. He hunted this man down and killed him. When he was only eighteen.”

“Eva,” Alexei said.

“No,” she said, shaking her head, not wanting to believe but seeing in his uncle’s eyes that it was true.

“Here is what you will do,” Michael said, translating for Sergei. “You will leave

Alexei. You will do it tonight before he gets home. You will leave him a note. Make it convincing or there will be severe repercussions.”

“Eva,” Alexei said again.

“No,” Eva said, “I can’t. I can’t.”

Michael leaned forward. “I am speaking as myself now. Everything Sergei has told you is true. If you lived in Russia, you’d know about the Rustanov Family. You do not want to cross this man. Even if you tell Alexei, he won’t be able to protect you from his uncle. Sergei is too powerful and he wants his nephew back in the fold. Don’t be a fool. Alexei may be fantasizing about leading a normal life with you, but he killed a man in this way when he was just eighteen. He obviously belongs with his family.”

Eva’s eyes went back to the picture of the dead man.

“Eva!” Hands grabbed her shoulders and shook her.

She came awake, for real this time, only to find Alexei Rustanov himself standing above her.

Chapter Fourteen

EVA shrieked and shot up in bed, scrambling to the other side to put distance between her and the man she’d just found out was a cold-blooded killer. But then she slowly realized....It had been a dream. She hadn’t just found out Alexei was the soon-to-be head of the Rustanov family. No, that had happened eight years ago.

She put her hand over her racing heart, willing it to calm down. Wow, she hadn’t had that dream in a while. It had paid her a weekly visit for the first few months after she

broke up with Alexei, and then it had kicked in daily after she gave birth to Aaron. For a while, she had been constantly looking over her shoulder, wondering if every unmarked car was following her, refusing to drink tea for fear Sergei Rustanov would figure out a way to poison her despite acquiescing to his demands, just because she existed, just because she had dared to get involved with his nephew and had then not taken the abortion option when she found out she was pregnant.

It had almost been a relief when her father called two years after Aaron's birth and said her mother was ready to retire and she could have the job if she wanted it. No, her parents hadn't exactly completely forgiven her, but at least she knew just about everyone in Drummond. It would be easier for Sergei Rustanov to track her there if he wanted to, but it would take an awful lot of work to kill or have her killed without anyone noticing. In a high-density city like Dallas, it would have been easy to pick her off and make it look like an accident. But in a small town like Drummond, you couldn't leave a glob of spit on the sidewalk without everyone knowing it was you who'd done it. And all strangers were duly noted, which would make it hard for even a Russian mafia boss to get rid of her without raising suspicions.

But Sergei hadn't found her. From what she could tell after having his people clean her stuff out of Alexei's apartment and deliver it to Layla's, he hadn't even bothered to keep tabs on her. Alexei returned to Russia and became the head of the Rustanov empire, just as his uncle had wanted. Years passed and she started to believe maybe everything would be okay. Then more years passed and she began to believe everything was okay.

And it had been, until she ran into Alexei at Layla's wedding. Who knew he'd still be so angry at her for dumping him the way she had? Who knew he'd still have the exact same effect on her, as if eight years and one son hadn't happened since the last time they seen each other?

Now he stood on the opposite side of the bed, already dressed in a linen suit with an

unreadable expression on his face. “You are scared of me now,” he said. It was a statement not a question.

“No, I just...” She scrambled to shore up her nerves and become the person she needed to be for the next two weeks in order to get Drummond, Aaron, and herself out of this mess. “I’m just not used to being shaken awake. I was surprised.”

“You were saying, ‘no, no,’ and you were crying. That is why I shook you.”

“Was I?” she asked, trying to keep her tone light. “I must have been having a nightmare.”

“But you do not remember it?”

She didn’t have to remember it, she’d lived it. “Not exactly,” she said.

“Did it have anything to do with last night?”

She finally got where this line of conversation was leading. “Oh, you think, because we—“ She broke off not quite knowing how to describe what they had done last night. “No, I told you. That was closure.”

She peeped up at him, hating that she actually cared about the answer to her next question. “Did it help? Do you feel better?”

He gave her a short nod. “How did you know to use that tactic with me?”

“You make it sound like we’re two business opponents. It wasn’t a tactic. Closure is what I do for a living.”

She settled back on her knees. “One of my first big cases after I moved back to

Drummond was writing up a Red Cross report for this one man whose deli had mysteriously burned down one night. This guy was a nightmare, up in my office every day, demanding I have the electrician double-check all the outlets to make sure they hadn't caused the fire. Then the next day he'd want me to go interview Mr. Peterson—he owns a small grocery store down the street from the deli—to see if maybe it was foul play, like I was one of those TV detectives or something. Then he'd be back in my office again, talking about how the landlord's wife looked at him funny in Bible Study, and now he thinks they might have done it in order to get the insurance payout. I interviewed everybody and checked and rechecked. And finally we got the report back. I called him to my office to tell him it was definitely faulty wiring. I thought he'd be upset it was such a little thing, but instead he starts crying. This guy hunts with my daddy, and he was sitting in my office, blubbering like a baby. And then he thanked me like I had saved his life or something. Believe it or not, I'm still on his Christmas card list. You see, the thing was, I thought he wanted somebody to blame for the fire, but all he really wanted was an explanation. That's all he needed to let what happened go. And that's kind of the main point of my job, giving people closure, even when they don't realize they need it."

He stared at her so long, she began to grow uncomfortable.

“What?” she asked.

He rounded the bed and came to sit on her side of it. “I was wrong about who you were as a girlfriend, but I was right about your career prospects. You are very good at what you do.”

Her face grew warm, and she found herself turning around to sit next to him on the bed. “Thank you. My daddy is technically my supervisor, so I’m not used to getting compliments about the work I do for the community. Usually he’s grouching about how I didn’t do that and why can’t I make it easier for him to do this and why can’t I do everything I do faster, cheaper, and better.”

“You do not like your job?” he asked.

“No, I like it. I just kind of wish I did it somewhere else, with someone else who didn’t continue to think I was a disgrace, no matter how much I do for Drummond.”

She realized her mistake before the last words were out her mouth.

“Why does he think you are a disgrace?” he asked, his eyes narrowing in the way they used to whenever he was ready to spring to her defense.

She waved it off and shrugged. “Small-town dads aren’t like the ones in New York. I wasn’t married and popping out babies by a certain age so he considers me a disgrace. I could find a cure for cancer and Daddy would still think I was less than,

because I'm not married with children."

"So this Aaron refuses to marry you."

Eva's mouth twisted. Of course, Alexei would be more concerned with his perceived competition in this story. "I told you we're not talking about him."

"Did he ask you to marry him and you refused, or has he simply not asked you to marry him? Perhaps you have not been dating long enough?"

"You promised."

"I promised not to search for him or tell him about us. Questions were not included in the deal. What would you say if he did ask you to marry him?"

"Fine, I'll change the subject. I'm hungry. Can we order some breakfast? Or better yet, go out and get some? As nice as this place is, I wouldn't mind seeing the rest of the hotel."

"No, we will stay here and continue our conversation," he said. "I am finding I like denying your requests."

Despite her plan to rise above Alexei's petulance, irritation flared up inside of her and unleashed her tongue. "So that's how it's going to be? We're going to continue to carp at each other for the next two weeks? Wonderful. While we're at it, can we also make each other miserable with petty questions and denials of reasonable requests, because I think that would really take this vacation to the next level for both of us."

He lifted his eyebrows. "I understand reverse psychology now, Eva. Also, sarcasm."

"Oh, goody," she answered, her voice dripping with it.

“As for the next level...” He took her left hand and placed it on his cock, which was thick and hard underneath the linen of his pants, “Do not pretend to not know what you do to me.”

She shook her head, even as her heart sped up in her chest and she suddenly became very aware that while he was fully dressed, she was sitting there stark naked. “That’s not me,” she informed him. “That’s your thirst for revenge. I’m just a warm body, a representation of your past, something else you need to conquer, like the American business market. Don’t pretend it’s me that’s got you all revved up.”

He gave her a strange look. “Is that really what you think?”

“That woman you were with at the party looked like a supermodel, and she’s into threesomes.”

He kept his hand covering hers on top of his dick. “This is the third time you have brought her up. For someone who does not want to talk about her love life, you seem very interested in mine.”

“I’m not,” she assured him, because she totally was.

He leaned over and ran his lips along her neckline, causing her uncovered breasts to swell with desire. “What would you like to know, Eva? Tell me.”

“I don’t want to know anything,” she answered, trying to ignore the skittering spikes of pleasure his kisses were sending through her nervous system. “I don’t care. I’m only here because of your revenge fantasy.”

“But you nodded when I asked if you wanted to be with me in a sexual way.”

“Yes, I nodded, but only because I didn’t believe you would really be okay with us

hanging out for two weeks without sex. It was a concession to end the stupid argument.”

“Do not lie to me, Eva. I forbid it from now on.”

It was a total lie, so she stayed quiet and held herself as stiff as a woman possibly could with a very sexy man kissing and licking on her neck. Eventually he stopped with an annoyed growl. “Fine,” he said. “Get showered and dressed. We will go out to lunch.”

“Lunch?” She glanced at the bedside clock and saw that, indeed, it was now past noon. Nauseous guilt assailed her when she realized she had taken more than twelve hours to return Aaron’s phone call.

“Yes, “ he removed her hand from his groin like it was a dead fish. “We will talk and not fuck and get to know each other.”

She was still reeling in confusion less than an hour later when she walked into the The R’s eponymous flagship restaurant with Alexei. The tables were set with white linens and crystal table service, but no one but the hostess and two waiters were there.

“Right this way,” the hostess said, showing them to a two-top that looked directly out to the beach where families, college students, couples, and businessmen were having fun in the sun. The hostess indicated two waiters in black and white uniforms standing just a few feet away. “Franklin and Don will be your servers today. Please let them know whenever you’re ready to order.”

She squinted at the menu, which featured a mix of salads, fish, steaks, and other gourmet entrees. “Where is everybody?”

“This restaurant is technically not open for lunch,” he answered, still studying his

menu. “It is only us.”

“Another awesome display of your power. Good job,” she said, tossing aside the menu.

He glanced up from his. “Why do your compliments always feel like insults?”

She lowered her voice. “Because everything you do seems designed to show me what a mistake it was to dump you. Listen, Alexei, I get it. I was wrong to dump you the way I did. And trust me, if I had known you would become a bajillionaire and then blackmail me into coming down here, I wouldn’t have done it.” She folded her arms, thinking back to the night she found out who he really was, what he was capable of, and whispered. “If I had known any of it, I wouldn’t have gotten involved with you in the first place.”

Now he put down his menu, but held up his hand when one of the waiters tried to approach the table. Behind him, the man took the silent command and immediately resumed his waiting position.

“So you regret our time together?” Alexei asked. There was not a trace of warmth in his cold, green stare.

“How do you want me to answer that? Like me now, or the old me?”

“Like you now.”

“Me now has worked really hard to become a better person,” she said carefully. “I made a lot of mistakes when I was younger, but I’ve spent the last eight years trying to help people, and to make up for those mistakes, but somehow it never seems to be enough. Me now wants to get these two weeks over with, and then maybe move away from Drummond, away from Texas, to some place where no one knows me or sits in

continuous judgment of me for stuff that happened a long time ago.”

“You want to run away again,” he all but sneered. “And you hate that I am keeping you here, that I will not let you be the irresponsible girl again.”

Now she really wanted to scream at him. She was responsible. At this point, she was the most responsible person she knew. What would he do, she wondered, if she just told him the truth? Told him his beloved uncle had threatened her. That she left because she had been commanded to. That afterwards, she had considered risking her life to be with him. She had picked up the phone so many times to call him and explain everything, but then all her stuff had been delivered to Layla’s front doorstep in neat boxes, all marked with the same label: “From: Sergei Rustanov To: Eva St. James.” It had been an effective message. Unlike Alexei, who still hadn’t been able to pin down her whereabouts, his uncle let her know he could find her anywhere, any place.

Three weeks after that, she’d realized she hadn’t gotten her period in all the weeks of worry, fear, and confusion following her leaving Alexei. The plus sign on the pregnancy test stick had been her final answer. She’d keep this baby, but if she wanted to protect it, she’d have to let go of its father.

But now she was once again sitting across the table from Alexei, being accused of things she couldn’t deny, the old feelings roiling around with new fears. No, she couldn’t tell him, she decided for what felt like the millionth time in the past few days. She had no idea what he’d do if she told him. And she couldn’t take that risk.

Page 21

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 10:09 am

Alexei thought he was impressing her with his hotels, his private jets, and his empty restaurant, but all he was doing with his displays of wealth and power was scaring her more.

“I have to go to bathroom. I’ll be right back,” she said. She didn’t wait for his permission, just threw down the napkin she’d had on her lap, and all but ran out of the restaurant.

“Ms. St. James,” the hostess said as she ran past her.

“I’m going to the bathroom,” Eva said over her shoulder.

“There’s a restroom inside the restaurant—“

Eva didn’t hear the rest. Instead she made a beeline for the gift shop across the lobby, where she found and bought a pay-as-you-go phone, which the clerk assured could be used to make international phone calls.

Five minutes later she was in a stall in the nearby women’s restroom, dialing Aaron’s number with trembling fingers.

“Hello?” he said, his voice groggy.

Tears sprang to her eyes, but she tried to keep her voice light when she said, “I’m sorry for waking you, sweetness. I just wanted to hear your voice. Did you have fun at Disneyland Paris?”

“Yeah,” he said. “We did the Star Tours ride and went down Space Mountain—it’s just like the one in California. And then Serafina started crying, but I gave her some of my gelato and she stopped.”

She could hear the pride in his voice and smiled. “Wow, you’re one amazing cousin.”

“Yeah, that’s what Aunt Maria says. She says I should come out next summer, too. Can I, Mama?”

“Maybe,” she said. “We’ll talk about it when you get home.”

“You can come, too, and you can see Disneyland Paris.”

They talked for a few minutes more about the differences between Disneyland in California, which they’d visited a year ago, and Europe’s version. Then they talked about what he had for dinner and the action movie he’d gone to see with Steve and how they’d gone to a park and kicked around a soccer ball earlier in the day. There was a lot of Uncle Steve this and Uncle Steve that, and she realized how much Aaron must have missed have a male figure in his life who wasn’t a cranky old man.

She wished, not for the first time, she could give Aaron the father he so obviously craved. One who wouldn’t use all the money at his disposal to take him away from her, not because he actually wanted children, but to punish her for not telling him he had a son.

“Mama, I’m sleepy. Can I go now?”

She glanced at the phone read out. Almost forty minutes had passed. She was surprised Alexei hadn’t sent someone in there to fish her out. “Okay, baby, I’ll try to call you again in a day or so.”

The world and her myriad problems had fallen away while talking with her son, but as soon as she hung up, they came crashing back down on her shoulders and it felt like she had feet made of lead as she walked out of the bathroom, forcing herself to go back to the restaurant and face Alexei.

But she didn't have to go far because Alexei was standing right outside the bathroom door in his well-tailored linen suit, looking exactly like what he was: one pissed off billionaire.

“What is it with you and standing outside of bathrooms?” she asked.

He did not laugh. “You were talking to him.”

Eva didn't have to ask who he was referring to. She clamped her mouth closed, once again preferring to tell him nothing rather than having to tell yet another lie. It had been hard enough to pull off the one she spun for him last night. And she suspected she wouldn't have gotten away with it, if he hadn't already been so inclined to believe the worst of her.

He clenched and unclenched his hands, as if restraining himself from doing her physical violence. When he reached for her, she actually took a step back, afraid.

But when he caught her by the arm, he didn't hurt her, he kissed her, his tongue sweeping into her mouth, his other hand snaking around the back of her neck as he all but devoured her mouth in a kiss that took not only her breath away, but also all of her troubled thoughts.

She welcomed this, welcomed him, threading her arms around his chest, kissing him back with all the frustrated passion and residual love she didn't want to feel.

Chapter Fifteen

ALEXEI had not intended for the day to fall apart as it did. In fact, when he had woken up next to Eva on the floor, his spirit had felt lighter than it had in years. Somehow, by finally confessing the ugly truth, Eva had unburdened him. He had actually felt a little grateful to her as he carried them both to his bed to sleep for a few more hours, until he woke up at five a.m. as was his habit.

She looked so peaceful, lying naked in his bed, that he'd caressed her face, feeling a strange longing to kiss her awake. But in a moment of tenderness, he decided to let her sleep. He worked out in the suite's gym, showered, got dressed, answered a few business emails, all while whistling a tune to an old folk song from his childhood.

When he called his publicist to arrange for a photographer to discretely track their movements when they came down for lunch, it hadn't felt so much like his final revenge, but one last thing to take care of so he could finally relax and enjoy the rest of his time with Eva.

The plan had been to wake her up, get her downstairs for a romantic lunch, which would be snapped by his photog, and then get the pictures published in a few Dallas newspapers. His publicist had agreed leaking photos of him at The R with a local beauty would be a great advertisement for the hotel. Though she had to be wondering why he cared, considering The R was just one of his holdings and while profitable, not so much so that he should take an active interest in its publicity. Of course, she had no way of knowing his sudden desire to get The R in the trades stemmed more from a personal thirst for revenge than good business sense.

Drummond was a small town. Someone would see the romantic vacation pictures and tell Eva's Aaron about them. This new plan allowed him to keep his promise to Eva but have his ultimate revenge, too.

However, the day turned sour when he went back into the master suite and found Eva crying out, "No," in her sleep. She woke from her nightmare with a start, and then

shrank from his touch, like she was repelled by him, letting him know exactly who her nightmare had been about. He had meant to start the day off fresh with her, but they ended up getting in yet another argument.

He had managed to get her downstairs to lunch as planned, but not without feeling a surprising spike of shame for what he was about to do. Yes, she had treated him horribly years ago, and he wasn't one to let an insult that big go unanswered. He had a reputation for not just vanquishing but crushing his enemies, and it wasn't unearned. While he no longer resorted to violence, he wasn't above using underhanded tactics if it would help him win a contract or get a bigger percentage in a deal or outrun his competition. The reason he had come so far so fast was because he put winning over everything, and this philosophy had served him well over the years.

But what he was about to do was suddenly making him feel less like winner, and more like a bully, no better than her father, who had obviously been using her one rebellion with Alexei to control her all these years.

When she listed her reasons for wanting to move away from Drummond, it sounded like the same reasons she'd like to get away from him. Then when she tried to tell him she'd changed, he'd called her an irresponsible girl, which basically sent her running from the table and made him feel like an even bigger jerk.

She had been right about him needing closure, and maybe she was right about herself, too. Maybe she had changed for the better, and he just didn't want to see it, like he hadn't wanted to see that her fun-loving nature was really fickle immaturity eight years ago.

After just a few uncharacteristic moments of indecision, Alexei went after her. He'd call the photog off, he decided, and they'd talk for real this time. He was sick of arguing with her, and the one thing she'd said about working hard to be a better person had him intrigued. He wondered if she had actually become the person he had

thought she was back in the day.

But when he'd reached the restaurant entrance, it had been just in time to see her exit the gift shop and scurry into the nearby women's restroom.

Curiosity had him walking into the small boutique.

"Mr. Rustanov, hello!" the older woman behind the cash register said when he entered. Though all of the hotel employees had been informed he was staying on the premises, the cashier was probably rightfully surprised he had deigned to step into one of the gift shops. "Can I help you find anything?"

"The woman who was just here. What did she buy?"

The cashier didn't hesitate with her answer, his status as the hotel's owner overriding any consumer confidentiality ethics she might have had. "A pay-as-you-go phone."

"I see."

And just like that, the bitterness he'd thought himself freed from that morning came back to hang like an acid storm cloud over his heart.

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He waited for her outside the restroom. And waited. And waited. At first he had only been annoyed. Obviously, they would need to set some ground rules for the next few days. No more lying, no more sneaking off to make calls to her boyfriend. But as the minutes ticked by, he grew angrier and angrier.

Who did she think she was? Keeping him, Alexei Rustanov, waiting while she talked to her boyfriend on the phone? By the time she emerged from the bathroom forty minutes later, he was quaking with fury.

“You were on the phone with him,” he said, his voice tight with accusation.

She didn’t answer, which was answer enough. While he had been considering ways to forgive her and get to know her better, she had been whispering sweet nothings to the man she really loved.

He kissed her, long and hard, giving the photog plenty of time to snap his fill of pictures. The fact that she kissed him back, matching him in passion, made him despise her all that much more. How could she talk to her boyfriend one moment and then turn around and kiss him as if she burned for him in the same way he burned for her?

He broke off the kiss with an angry “Let’s go.”

He took her by the hand, another romantic gesture meant for the photog, and guided her to the elevator. But once they were ensconced back in the penthouse, he all but flung her into the master bedroom.

“Strip.”

“Alexei...”

“Shut up. You’re back on yes-no punishment. Now strip.”

Setting her jaw, she kicked off her flip-flops and peeled off the simple, yellow sundress she had chosen from the closet of clothes he’d provided for her. Then she stepped out of her panties and jerked off her strapless bra.

If he hadn’t been so consumed with anger, he would have chosen that moment to tell her she had been very wrong earlier. His reaction to her wasn’t purely based in revenge. Her dark chocolate body, the breasts, the hips, the ass, the way she shifted from foot to foot, waiting for his next instruction—it called to him in a way no other woman’s body ever had.

“Lie down in the middle of the bed.”

She did as he said with stiff movements.

“Now close your eyes.”

The sight of her lying there naked and prone caused his cock to pulse in his underwear. He took himself out, at the same time he said, “Picture me. Not him. Not any man you might have been with before. Just me.”

He lightly stroked his cock a couple of times, giving her a chance to get the picture fully in her mind. “Now imagine me touching your breasts. Put your hands over your tits and imagine they are mine.”

With awkward hesitation, she laid her hands on her chest and rubbed her own breasts.

“As you know from experience, I would do a better job than this. Squeeze them, flick your nipples.”

She did and to his delight, he watched her two black cherry-colored nubs become hard under her ministrations.

“Do this until it becomes uncomfortable for you in other places. Do this until you become wet, and then stick two fingers into yourself. These are my fingers and I want you fuck them.”

He guessed she must have already been wet, because no sooner were the words out his mouth, did she insert two fingers into her own slit.

“Now you may talk, but only to say my name. Say it now.”

“Alexei...” Her hips bucked on the bed. And his hand began stroking himself with a mind of its own. If there had ever been a sight hotter than the one of Eva masturbating on his bed, Alexei had yet to see it.

“Yes, fuck my fingers, let them make your sweet pussy come and say my name again.”

“Alexei...” She opened wider with two more fingers, sliding them in and out of her tunnel, while her hips juttled back and forth.

Pre-cum appeared on Alexei’s dick and was quickly used as lubricant by his now-frantically stroking hand. He only stopped long enough to climb up on the bed and kneel beside her curvaceous, writhing body.

“Use your other hand to rub your clit and come for me. Let me see you come, Eva, keep saying my name as you do.”

His words sent her over the edge. “Alexei! Alexei! Alexei!” Her back arched, and all self-stroking stopped as she came with one last long, helpless cry of his name. “Alexei!”

“Open your eyes,” he said as soon as he was done.

She opened her eyes, which were still glazed over with the orgasm she’d just had, and without him having to make the command, she knocked his hand away and replaced it with her own before taking him into her mouth inch by inch, until her pretty lips met her hand at the base of his dick.

He used one hand to hold her head steady as it bobbed up and down on his cock and the other to lift the fingers that had just been inside of her to his lips. He loved the way she tasted, always had, and he greedily sucked her essence from her fingers until he released into her mouth.

She swallowed every last drop, creating extra suction on the bulb of his dick as she did so, and he found himself calling out her name as he finished coming in her mouth.

When she was done, he drew her up to her knees and kissed her again, needing to taste himself on her lips, to be reminded of who she was here with, whose name she had called out over and over again as she masturbated herself to orgasm.

They fell onto the bed kissing, her legs tangling with his, her hard nipples stroking his chest through the Egyptian cotton of his shirt. They kissed so long, that Alexei’s anger began to recede. They kissed so long, that he forgot why they’d gotten into this argument in the first place. They kissed so long, that time began to rewind. They were Alexei and Eva again, making out for hours on his mattress on a hot summer’s day, neither of them wanting to be the first to break the embrace.

He came to his senses before she did, dragging his lips away and saying, “I have an

idea.”

She looked up at him but said nothing. He then remembered he had instructed her not to speak. “You may speak freely again.”

“You have an idea?” she asked, her voice husky with sex and amusement.

“Let us not argue anymore,” he said. “No matter what. Let us both decide right now to not, how do you say, push the other’s buttons.”

She smiled. “I can try.”

“If we both try, we can accomplish this.”

She laughed and nuzzled his chest. “Oh, I love when you do the authoritative Russian thing. Okay, I’m on board to try not arguing with you. Though, be warned: half the time I don’t know I’m pushing your buttons.”

“I will let you know, and you will let me know. And if one of us lets the other know, the one pushing the buttons will stop.”

She nodded. “Okay, that sounds fair.”

She then laid her head down on his chest and they held each other in companionable silence. He stroked her hair, loving the feel of it against his chin and the smell of the coconut oil and aloe vera gel she used to keep her thick curls so defined.

“I have an idea, too,” she said.

Then she fell quiet.

“Yes, what is it?” he prodded.

“Why don’t we pretend it didn’t happen?”

It took him a few seconds to figure out what she meant. “Pretend the break-up did not happen?”

“The break-up, the last eight years, the Drummond Oil purchase. Let’s pretend it didn’t happen. I won’t sneak off in the middle of lunch to make calls. You won’t keep reminding me how bad I messed up when I left you. We’ll be like every other couple in this hotel, on vacation like normal people, one of whom happens to be following every sexual command of the other.”

He thought about this idea, and though one petty part of him knew pretending she didn’t have a boyfriend or any reason to feel guilty about the way she left him would make all of this much easier on her, he also realized it would make things easier for him as well. He liked the idea of being the people who had just spent the last thirty minutes kissing as opposed the ones who had spent the hour before that arguing.

“Yes, I like your idea. Let us do this. From now on we are Alexei and Eva, a normal couple on a normal vacation with much sex involved.”

She smiled against his chest. “Can I call you Lexie?”

“I never liked that name. You are pushing a button.”

“Okay, okay. But Lex feels so villainy.”

“You used to call me baby, too,” he said, keeping his voice light. “I will not mind if you use this term of endearment.”

She thought about it and said, “Okay, baby, can we go eat? Nothing fancy though. Let me tell you, I could murder a cheeseburger right now.”

“I believe we have cheeseburgers in this hotel,” he said, a smile lighting on his lips. “While we pride ourselves on being a five-star experience, we also cater to families with small children.”

“No, I’m sick of being cooped up in this hotel. Let’s go out. Let’s go find a cheeseburger and then let’s hit the beach. That ocean’s been calling me ever since we got here.”

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 10:09 am

She disentangled her body from his and disappeared through the door that connected their two bedrooms. “I just have to find a suit and some kind of wrap.”

He got out of the bed, standing up to zip his pants.

“Look in the top left drawer,” he called to her, once again getting caught up in her enthusiasm, even if it was for something as run-of-the-mill as a cheeseburger. He couldn’t remember the last time he had bothered with such a plain meal.

“No, you didn’t!” she screamed. Two minutes later came running back into the room, dressed in a yellow polka-dot bikini. “I can’t believe this still looks good on me! Though, thank the heavens you got it in a few different sizes. I’m definitely not as skinny as I was in grad school.”

“I like your body even more now,” he told her, his eyes clouding over with lust. “We will go find your cheeseburger, but when we get back to the room, I will take you with this bikini on. In the Jacuzzi or in the pool. I have not decided yet, but you will leave the suit on while I am inside of you. I will make you come twice, once with my hand and once with my cock. Then I will bring you to the bed, pull the bikini bottom aside like this....” He made a gesture of pulling the crotch of her bikini aside with two hooked fingers. “And I will make you come a third time with my tongue.”

The smile faded from her face and she adjusted her stance. “Alexei?”

“Yes?”

“If your goal is for me to stay constantly turned on for the rest of this vacation, then

it's working, baby."

He smiled again. Her candidness about sex used to be one of the things he loved about her. One of the many things he could admit he missed about her now.

"Come," he said, holding his hand out to her. "Let our real vacation begin."

Chapter Sixteen

OF ALL the deals they had struck, the last couple of ones turned out to be the easiest to stick to. Eva found it scarily easy to pretend she and Alexei were any other couple, as opposed to people engaged in a two-week affair compelled by blackmail. The first couple of days there were a few "you are pushing a button" moments on both their parts, but by the end of the first week, those had died off and they'd really started to simply enjoy each other.

It helped that they were running all over the island like twenty-somethings on Spring Break as opposed to an international businessman and a small town social worker. Neither of them were used to taking vacations like the ones offered by South Padre Island. Alexei had told her prior to this, he didn't "believe" in vacations. "You do not become a successful businessman by taking vacations." And the few vacations Eva had gone on since their break-up had involved Aaron and places more geared toward kids than adults.

But they'd both managed to keep up their side of the bargain, and she'd found being with Alexei in this way made it very easy to forget who she was in real life. Just like in grad school, he treated her like she was the sexiest woman on the planet. He listened to her stories and really seemed to respect what she did for a living even though it paid so much less than what he did. He'd even stopped shaving, and within a few days, he looked like a slightly older version of the bearded man she'd fallen in love with.

The days flew by and before she knew it, they only had forty-eight hours left before she was due back home.

Alexei seemed to realize their time together would soon be coming to a close, too. He didn't say anything, but kept them in the room more, making love to her in long, intense sessions that suggested he was attempting to get his fill of her before they parted ways.

She didn't mind, since she was also having trouble with the sun setting on their time in paradise. But no matter what scenario she ran in her head, there was no way to keep the relationship going that guaranteed her and Aaron's safety.

If she told Alexei about his uncle, who she had heard him talking to on the phone at least three times during their vacation, he might not believe her. If he did believe her, it might not be enough for him to want to come back to her. For all she knew, Ms. Threesome was primed and ready and waiting for him back in New York.

If she did tell him, and he did believe her, then there was still the chance he'd want nothing to do with Aaron. He'd had a vasectomy, for heaven's sake, which didn't exactly scream, "I want to be a dad." Even if he could tolerate Aaron, she couldn't see any scenario in which he didn't flip out because she'd kept his son's existence from him.

Emilio had visited the suite a few times to have him sign contracts and receive instructions about how to handle a few business problems that had come up. From what she could see, Alexei was in the habit of using whatever weapon he needed in order to win his business battles. And if it came down to a battle with her, she had no doubt he'd use Aaron to get back at her.

"Eva?"

Eva jerked out of her thoughts and came back to the present in which she and Alexei were lying on their stomachs, side by side, on a large beach towel facing the crashing surf just a few yards in front of them. “Did you say something?”

“Yes, I was saying I’d like to go to The R for dinner tonight.”

“That’s fine,” she said. “You’ve got to be sick of all the non-gourmet food I’ve been forcing on you.”

He ignored her quip and said, “I would like to know where you were just now.”

She shrugged and told a half-truth. “Just thinking about all the stuff I need to do when I get back to Drummond.”

He nodded. “I’ve been pleasantly surprised by how well the business runs without me. Emilio has run our office well in my stead. But perhaps this is not the case with your office.”

Eva shrugged. “Berta’s supposed to be my assistant, too, but she always puts the stuff I give her on the backburner. I’ve never come back from vacation and not had to do all the stuff I asked her to do when I was away.”

“You just saved the entire town of Drummond from ruin. She should be grateful.”

“Um, well, we told a cover story about me going on vacation with Layla, so she doesn’t exactly know what all I’m doing for Drummond. And in any case, my dad and her pretty much blame me for getting them into this position in the first place.”

He went quiet for a while, contemplating something with that deep scowl of his before he asked, “How long did you say your father’s been mayor?”

“Almost thirty years. One of my first memories was his inauguration.”

“And he still has not found another source of industry other than Drummond Oil? That is not good business. As far as I am concerned, it was your father who got your town into this position, not you. He is lucky it was me who bought Drummond Oil. If someone else had purchased it, they might not have been as...” He pulled her closer and pressed a lingering kiss into her shoulder. “...open to negotiation.”

Eva hadn't really thought about it that way before. A little bit of the guilt she'd been feeling about getting Drummond into this mess started to subside and a wave of contentment washed over her. She leaned in closer to him, loving the way the bristles of his new beard brushed against her shoulder. He smelled like suntan lotion and beach, the exact opposite of the way he smelled when they first arrived and he took her in a frenzy of anger and reproach.

This version of Alexei, she noted, was much more into PDA than the one she used to know. Back at UTD, it had always been her initiating any displays of affection outside of the confines of their bedroom. But on South Padre Island, he was constantly surprising her with kisses or pulling her closer and a few times, even sweeping her off her feet in the playful way of lovers way younger and more carefree than themselves.

She couldn't get over what a good time she was having with Alexei. In the months it had taken her to get over him, she had managed to convince herself that the love and companionship she thought they had shared had been a fluke. After their break-up, she'd done fieldwork hours at a Dallas shelter for domestic violence victims. How many women had she met who told her their boyfriends or husbands had also refused to talk about their past? Only for them to find out later that the secretive men had a criminal record, which they'd been hiding.

His lips moved to her neck, and he easily found its most erogenous spot, sending

tingling sensations all the way down to her toes with his kisses. And she once again wondered how he had done the things he'd done and still managed to sleep at night. She also wondered how she could know herself what he'd done, what he was, what he still might be for all she knew, and still hunger for him the way she did.

The worst part of this vacation had been constantly having to stay on guard against falling back in love with him. And really, she wasn't sure she was doing such a crack job of that.

"If you keep on kissing my neck like that, we're going to end up breaking some of Texas's indecency laws." Then, when he kept on kissing her neck anyway, she asked. "Aren't you supposed to be meeting with Emilio at five?"

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 10:09 am

He groaned and looked at his Rolex. “Yes, we should get back. ” He turned her face toward his to give her a few more soft kisses. “But trust we will finish this after dinner.”

* * * *

Eva was unusually quiet during the ride home, Alexei noted. Albeit, they spent most of the return trip on a Vespa—Eva had seen the scooter on their third day there and insisted on renting one. She’d expressed so much enthusiasm for tooling around on the back of it with him, Alexei had arranged to have one purchased and delivered to the hotel for their everyday use. The truth was, Alexei liked having Eva hugged up against his back everywhere they went together. She had a way of laying her face on his shoulder that made it feel like she was happy to be there with him as opposed to compelled.

She usually said one or two things while they were on the scooter even if it was just to point out a restaurant or activity they might enjoy the next day. Even though it had been Alexei who commanded they spend two weeks together, so far they’d gone kiteboarding, windsurfing, dolphin watching, night clubbing, and even driving along the beach in all-terrain buggies, all at Eva’s request. And to his surprise, Alexei had enjoyed everything. He only ever went to vacation destinations on business, and it had never occurred to him to bother with such touristy activities.

But Eva acted more like someone who had truly missed out on doing these type of things, and she seemed determined to vacation just as hard as some of the younger college students the island was known to attract. This made him wonder about Aaron. Did he never take her anywhere? Why would she be so dedicated to him if he

couldn't even provide her with something as simple as an in-state beach vacation?

It would have been different if Eva hadn't left him because he didn't have enough money. But seeing as she had, it made her attachment to this Aaron, who was apparently not rich and definitely not satisfying her sexual needs, all the more confusing.

He was once again hit with the urge to break his promise to Eva and get a full dossier on this man. But he tamped it down, knowing there would be no need. His publicist had more than come through on the publicity angle. She'd expanded upon his original idea by not only pitching an entire South Padre story to her Dallas media contacts, but keeping on the photog so he could covertly take pictures of Alexei and Eva all over the island. She'd manage to get the Dallas Times to run a special feature in their travel section on South Padre Island from the point of view of a Russian billionaire, vacationing there with his Texas-born lover. So Alexei didn't have to seek this Aaron out, because their relationship would be blown to pieces in less than seven days, when the Dallas Times piece ran, letting her boyfriend know exactly where she had been and who she had been with when she said she was in the Bahamas with Layla. In less than a week, this boyfriend would no longer be in Eva's picture.

Still, her sudden quiet disturbed him. Was she thinking about Aaron? Wishing she were on South Padre with him instead of her Russian ex? The thought of her having sex with another man after she left in two days caused his heart to beat faster with jealous anger.

"What would you like to do tomorrow?" he asked, just to get his own mind off the subject of her and Aaron.

She wrapped both her hands around his large one, an affectionate habit she'd picked back up over the last few days. It bothered him that it felt so natural and that he liked when she took his hand like this, as if they were still really together.

“I don’t know,” she said. “It’s our last full day, so maybe you should pick. I’ve been kind of monopolizing all our out-of-bed time with stuff I wanted to do.”

“I do not mind,” he said. “Your version of vacation is much better than my version of vacation.”

“Oh yeah? What do you do when you have a few days off?”

“I usually visit my family in Russia. My aunts overfeed me.” He thought about how there was usually some mess to clean up regarding his Uncle Sergei, who still liked to use violence to solve both his business and personal problems. Often bridges had to be mended and certain officials paid off to look the other way. But to Eva, he said, “And I pay my respects to my uncle, who is semi-retired now but still involved with a few of our divisions.”

Her grip on his hand tightened and he felt her stiffen against his arm. “Are you all right?”

She let go of his hand and shook her arms out. “Yeah, I sure am. But I think my arms might still be a little stiff from windsurfing. Who knew it would require so much upper-body strength?”

They arrived at the elevators, and Alexei resisted the temptation to take her hand back, chastising himself for even having such desires.

“Um, your semi-retired uncle in Russia....is this the same uncle you used to get in arguments with every week back when we were at UTD?” she asked.

“You have a good memory.” As they stepped into the elevator he settled his arm around her shoulders, and tried not to think too hard about the fact that he had only made it a few seconds before needing to touch her again. “Yes, this is the same uncle,

but we do not argue anymore. We are for the most part on the same page.”

“Oh, that’s nice,” she said. But again it felt like she had gone stiff beneath his arm.

Perhaps she could sense what he’d just said about his uncle and he being on the same page wasn’t fully true. He didn’t bother arguing with his uncle anymore, just let the older man do as he pleased and cleaned up the mess afterwards. Though, he couldn’t say he wasn’t annoyed by the fact that Sergei had called three times in the last two weeks to suggest Russian oil companies they might want to invest in. He’d humored him and given the names to Emilio to research, but as he suspected, all the companies were either owned or managed by ex-Russian criminals, who had not done nearly as much to clean up their act as Alexei had. After Eva left on Sunday, he’d have to call his uncle and make him understand once and for all that despite his Drummond Oil purchase, Rustanov Enterprises would not be getting involved in oil on the Russian end.

But right now, he was more concerned with the woman who was holding herself rigid underneath his arm.

“You are not okay,” he said, sensing it even if she would not admit it.

She gave him a smile he could tell was forced. “Okay, you got me. I’m a little cold, but I didn’t want to complain about it since I’ll be changing soon.”

No, that wasn’t it. He could tell she was lying to him, but he also had a feeling he didn’t want to know what was really bothering her—especially if it had anything to do with the boyfriend waiting for her at home.

She nuzzled into his chest and wrapped her arms around his waist, saying, “I’m just going to take advantage of some of this heat you’re kicking off if you don’t mind.”

“I do not mind,” he said. He didn’t mind at all. And that was the problem.

“Just got the beach photos from your guy and sent them on to the publicist,” Emilio said, when Alexei came down to meet with him in the suite he was occupying a few floors below his own. “She said that should be enough for the feature, so you don’t have to worry about showing off in public anymore.”

A twinge of sadness on Alexei’s part greeted that statement. As much as he hated to admit it, these past ten days with Eva had been the best he’d had since their break-up. He’d liked pretending to just go along with her outside plans in crowded places, when really he’d known she was making it easier for the photog to get pictures of them together. And though he’d never been a fan of PDA, he’d welcomed the excuse to kiss and hold Eva close for seemingly no reason.

“I will keep acting in this manner, just so she does not get suspicious.”

Emilio raised his eyebrows. “Oh, I doubt she’ll suspect you’ve been doing all this stuff in public with her, just to expose her to her boyfriend back home.”

Yet again, shame came creeping in. Though, he kept on telling himself that he was doing this to make sure he won the war with Eva, guilt had been dogging him for the last few days. The more she told him about Drummond and her life there, the shittier he felt about the fact that her reputation would probably going down in flames with her relationship, because of what he planned to do.

“You okay, man?” Emilio asked him. “You got quiet there all of a sudden. You sure you don’t want me to just look into this boyfriend of hers? It’d be way less convoluted than this plan, and maybe we could come up with something that would sit better with Eva.”

Alexei shoved his hands into the pockets of the linen suit he’d changed into for

dinner. “Why should I care what sits better with Eva? This is revenge.”

“Yeah, that’s what you keep on saying,” Emilio said. He made a big deal of straightening out the contracts he’d set out for Alexei to sign, “But usually true revenge doesn’t involve signing an oil company over to a girl and then breaking up her relationship.”

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 10:09 am

“My intention is to destroy her relationship, not her reputation. This will ensure that she’s not shunned by the town of Drummond.” He paraphrased what Eva had told him. “Small towns are not like big cities.”

“Again, revenge usually doesn’t entail protecting the reputation of the person you’re getting back at.”

Alexei ignored him and skimmed over a copy of the contract. “This looks like it is all in order. I will let her know tonight. You can bring the papers up tomorrow morning and we will sign them then.”

Emilio just shrugged, not saying anything.

And Alexei slammed the contract back on the table, more irritated by Emilio’s unspoken judgment than he cared to admit. “By giving her Drummond Oil she will always know it is I who holds all the power where she is concerned and I who chooses how to wield it. Also, it will make it so she does not see my ultimate revenge coming.”

“That’s very romantic,” Emilio said.

“I am not wishing to be romantic. This is about revenge.”

Emilio screwed his face up and looked at the ceiling. “Okay, Lex. I want to be straight with you about a couple of things, but I need you to promise not to fire me first.”

Intrigued, Alexei turned to face his assistant. “Fine, I will not fire you for whatever you say. But only over the course of this meeting.”

Emilio shrugged, apparently deciding to take that. “You can deny it as much as you want, but I haven’t seen you this happy in years. And she might have a boyfriend back home, but when I see the two of you together, I can tell you’re the one she’s in love with.”

A mutinous flare of hope erupted in Alexei’s heart, but he smothered it as fast as he could. “I told you. We are both only pretending.”

“Yeah, I’ve seen the way she looks at you, and I don’t think she’s pretending. I don’t think you are either. I think you’re in love with her and she I think she loves you back.”

Alexei wanted to deny it, but he couldn’t. “It would never work out,” he said, instead. “She has this boyfriend, and there is too much between us from the past.”

Emilio shook his head, like his boss was being dumb as opposed to perfectly reasonable. “Look, I wasn’t a big fan of how Eva dumped you either. But I liked her before that, and I thought she was a decent human being. From what I can tell, she’s grown up and she’s made a lot of good changes in her life. She helps others for a living, she’s funny, and not to overstep my bounds, but she’s really easy on the eyes. I know this isn’t in your book of business tactics, but maybe you could think about letting what she did go. She was young, you were young. If forgiving her means you guys can stay together, then maybe it’s time to let go of the revenge plan.”

Alexei’s heart warred with his business senses. He wasn’t the kind of man who just let things go. He hadn’t gotten to where he was by letting his enemies go unchecked. But he could not deny he wanted more from Eva. Not just more vacation time, but more time with her. Despite his constant self-remonstrations not to do so, he could

already see he was well on his way to falling ragingly, irrevocably, head over heels back in love with her. But...

“Even if I forgive her, how can I convince her to leave her current relationship for me?”

“Well, this is a pretty good start.” Emilio tapped on the contract. “Maybe just tell her about it tonight, and then just...I don’t know, be real with her, I guess.”

Alexei stroked his newly-grown beard, considering this advice, then he said, “You will continue to serve as my assistant for the next two weeks. During that time you will find your replacement.”

Emilio’s face fell. “You said you wouldn’t fire me for talking straight to you.”

“I am not firing you,” Alexei informed him. “I am promoting you. You are the first business associate other than my uncle who has given me his honest opinion in years. Also, if I end up green-lighting a Dallas off-shoot of Rustanov Enterprises in order to be closer to Eva, I will need to leave someone in charge of the New York offices.”

“Are you kidding me?” Emilio said, his mouth wide open.

“As you know, I do not kid.” But the sternness in his voice was betrayed by the smile on his face when he said, “Now, I must go convince Eva she should be with me.”

Chapter Seventeen

EVA liked The R’s flagship restaurant much more when it was dimly lit and filled with people. They were once again shown to the same table by the window, but this time the sun was setting, casting the beach beyond the window in a romantic orange light.

Also, this time, Alexei insisted on pulling out her chair himself, in yet another romantic gesture.

“Thanks,” she said as she sat down. “But you really don’t have to fuss over me.”

He sat across from her, and answered in his usual stern way. “I find I like fussing over you. Do not deny me the pleasure.”

She smiled. “Well, when you put it that way, I don’t want to be rude.”

They were interrupted by the waiter who told them the specials of the day before asking if they needed a few more minutes.

“Nah, I’m good with the best steak you have,” she answered, handing him back the menu.

“I will have the same,” Alexei said, handing him his menu as well.

After the waiter was gone, she took his hands in hers and leaned forward to whisper, “Um, why was I giving you such a hard time about bringing me back here, again? Because let me tell you, this sunset is gorgeous.”

“I have no idea,” he whispered back. “Maybe you should listen to me more often.”

Her eyes twinkled with amusement. “Last I checked, I’ve been listening to you plenty this vacation. My back’s still hurting from listening to you in the shower, on the living room floor, and on that dang deck chair this morning.”

“Then after dinner, you may listen to me in a bed. It is the least I can do.”

Her lips twitched with the effort to keep from laughing. “Thank you, kind sir. You’re

so good to me.”

But then the amused light faded from his eyes. “Eva, I could be good to you. Even better than now.”

“I’m not so sure about that,” she said. “But I’m looking forward to you proving me wrong before our vacation is over.”

He didn’t wink or even smile back. “I am transferring ownership of Drummond Oil over to you.”

Her heart thudded into her stomach. “What!?”

“I do not like the way you are treated in your small town. This will give you the leverage you need to demand respect without needing to run again.” He said this as if he were granting her a small favor as opposed to handing over ownership of a multi-million dollar company.

She blinked at him. “Are you pulling my leg?”

“I do not tell jokes ever, but this is the second time tonight I have had to tell someone I am not joking.”

Though she was curious about the first time, she stayed on topic. “I don’t know anything about running a corporation.”

“I will help you,” he answered. “I have been thinking of building western quarters of Rustanov Enterprises, and Dallas is as good a city as any other. Of course, I will also retain a large percentage of stock in Drummond Oil and sit on your board.”

She sat back in her seat, already shaking her head. “Which means we’d be in business

together permanently.” No, she couldn’t let that happen.

“Would that be so bad?” Something flashed in his eyes, something that looked a lot like hurt.

“This is so generous, but I don’t want to be in business with Rustanov Enterprises.”

His face hardened. “You mean you don’t want to be in business with me.”

She shook her head again. “It’s not a good idea for us to see each other after these two weeks.”

“Because of Aaron?”

“Because of Aaron, because I’m not cut out to run a business of this size even with you consulting, because we agreed this would only be for two weeks.”

His nostrils flared. “What spell has this man weaved over you?”

“Alexei...”

“That you would turn down this significant opportunity.”

“One I didn’t ask for,” she whispered fiercely, angry at him for putting her in this position.

“That you would run away with him rather than stand up to your father and more importantly for yourself.”

“I’m not running away—“

“That you would deny us—“

She couldn't take it anymore. “There is no us. We're just pretending, remember! We're not together.”

“I am sick of pretending,” he said. “I want you in my life beyond Sunday.”

Page 26

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 10:09 am

“Well, you can’t have me! I’m not some company you can just take over. I have a life and people I care about and you are pushing buttons so hard right now.”

In the furious silence that followed, the waiter arrived with their steaks. But perhaps sensing the tension at the table, he set their plates in front of them and made a hasty exit.

After the waiter left, Alexei picked up his fork and knife and said, “I am a man of my word. I will cease pushing your buttons now per our agreement.”

So she had won, but it sure didn’t feel like it when she picked up her own steak knife and fork. They proceeded to eat their dinner, neither of them offering words to fill the awful silence. And though she couldn’t say for sure that Alexei didn’t enjoy his steak, she knew hers tasted like rubber in her mouth.

Chapter Eighteen

THEY didn’t order dessert. Alexei had not been kidding when he said he didn’t want to pretend with her anymore and he had no desire to extend the awkwardness of their dinner. They rode back up to the room on opposite sides of the elevator, both of them keeping their eyes glued to the numbers lighting up on each floor until they finally hit the penthouse.

When they entered the suite, he said, “I have a business email to send. Meet me in the bedroom. I expect you to be naked when I arrive.”

He didn’t turn around to see her reaction to this order, but heard faint surprise in her

voice when she said, “Okay.”

After she left, he pulled out his smart phone and sent a text message to Emilio. “Cancel my morning business calls. And make sure I’m not disturbed for the next twenty-four hours.”

He hesitated before typing the next bit. He didn’t want to break his promise, but if he was going to kill the Dallas Times story as he planned to do the next morning, he’d need a Plan B for going to battle with a man who had so far proven to be staunch competition. Also, he was no longer in the habit of not getting what he wanted, and it felt like Eva was leaving him no choice with this Aaron business. In the end, he sent a second text message:

“Also, get me everything you can on her boyfriend. I only have a first name. Aaron.”

With those messages sent, he powered the phone off and headed back to bedroom.

He found Eva on the bed, naked as commanded, but with her knees curled up to her chest and her chin pressed into the valley in between them.

He started to shrug out of his suit jacket, but then on second thought.... “You will take my clothes off for me now,” he told her.

He enjoyed the sight of her unfurling herself from her miserable position and crawling toward where he stood at the edge of the bed before situating herself in a seated position. The bed was just high enough that he could stand easily in the V of her legs, which sent a spike of heat up the shaft of his penis when her naked stomach rubbed against it as she pushed the white jacket off his shoulders.

But then she unbuttoned his shirt, so quickly and efficiently, that he bit out, “I see you’ve done this before.”

She looked away from, the sensual light in her eyes fading. “Since you seem intent on making this a pushing buttons sort of night, let me just say I’m sure there are things both of us have done before. And I’m sure your Ms. Threesome knows her way around a button-down shirt herself.”

He smiled, liking her show of jealousy, because at least it proved she cared a little bit, also because he couldn’t imagine commanding Caroline to undress him. With her, there was no back and forth. It was more like a business transaction, in which one party used all the tricks in her bag to satisfy the other. Their dynamic was nothing like his and Eva’s.

“Let us start over,” he said. He wrapped her arms around his waist. “Hello.”

“Hi,” she answered, the sensual light coming back on when she looked up at him.

“I am sorry about dinner,” he said.

She let out a short laugh, laced with relief. “I’m sorry, I’m not really laughing. It’s just I’m not used to hearing you apologize.”

“No, I suppose I have never apologized to you for anything before.” With slow deliberate movements, he stepped away from her to divest of his pants and underwear. And he could not help but smirk a little when her eyes went straight to his very erect cock.

He gently pushed her shoulders, so she was lying on her back. “I am apologizing now.”

In a punctuation of this statement, he bent and dipped his head between her thighs, giving her one long lick from the bottom of her vagina and raking his tongue across her clit on his way to the top. He lapped at her juices, reveling in the way she tasted,

delving his tongue deep inside her and swirling it around. It felt like a triumph when she grasped him by the hair and arched her hips into his mouth.

“Baby,” he heard her whisper. “You are so forgiven.”

For a while there was only the sound of him licking up her liquid desire, which only caused her to release more of her wetness into his greedy mouth, until she began to buck forward with her . He placed his hands on her hips, holding her still, so he could continue administering the most intimate of kisses as she cried out with pleasure.

When she was done, he repositioned them on the bed, with him on top, bracing himself on his forearms above her. “Eva, put me inside of you.”

She reached down and wrapped her hand around his cock, guiding it into her slick passageway, opening her legs even further so he could sink in all the way to his balls.

“The way you let me all the way in makes me want to fuck you like this all night long,” he told her, before leaning down to take one of her hardened peaks into his mouth. He laved it at the same slow pace they were moving together on the bed. They both seemed to understand there was something different about tonight. Neither of them would rush, and they would take the time to feel and appreciate the sensations they were giving each other.

“The way you suck on my breasts makes me want to let you,” she told him.

He switched breasts and did the same to the other, before saying, “You like the way I handle you. I am glad.”

“Mmm, so good,” she said, like sex with him was a hedonistic form of the dessert they had just skipped.

He took a moment to admire her, feasting on her pretty face, on how sexy her dark body looked moving against his, before coming down to his elbows, which sent him into her even deeper.

She sucked in her breath and then moaned it out. “Oh, baby.”

He laid his forehead against hers, going even slower than before, just trying to make it last as long as possible. Forever if he could. “I’m not trying to take you over like a business,” he whispered against her ear, “I do not just want you. I need you in my life.”

“Alexei...” he heard her say, a sharp warning in her voice.

“You were young when you left, but what you said before is right. You have changed. I can see that now, and I love the person you have become.”

Now she began pushing at him, her hands shoving against his chest, “Alexei, no, don’t got there—“

“I am not giving you Drummond Oil because I want to own you but because I am in love with you. I love you, kotenok. I love you.”

“Drummond!” she said, gasping out the word. “Alexei, get off me. Drummond!”

It took a moment to realize she had just said the safe word he’d given her at the beginning of their two weeks. He immediately stopped moving above her, but she continued to shove at him.

“No, stop. Get all the way out. Let me go!”

She was almost hysterical now, yelling the words at him. And she continued to shove

at him even as he pulled out and gave her enough room to sit up in bed.

He reached out, the need to comfort her greater than his confusion, but she slapped his hands away and screamed, “Don’t touch me!” Then she just sat there trembling while she clutched at her heart.

It looked like she was on verge of a heart attack, which made Alexei desperate to ease her pain.

“What did I do?” he asked. “Whatever is, I am sorry and I will fix it. Just let me help you.”

This time when he reached for her, she let him enfold her rigid body in his arms, and eventually she stopped trembling and her breathing gentled.

“I am sorry I upset you,” he said when her body relaxed from what he could only assume had been some kind of panic attack.

“No, I’m sorry,” she said, her voice hoarse. “It’s just I don’t know what to do and it’s tearing me apart.”

He nodded. “I understand.”

“You don’t. You really don’t.”

“Yes, I do. I am not the beast you think I am. I understand it is hard for you, that all of this is hard for you. Protecting your town and trying not to feel guilty about Aaron. It is hard for you to accept my love.”

She pulled away from him, “I hate this version of you. You’re not like the Alexei I used to know. I could somewhat trust him. But you’ll do anything to win. Say

anything to win. And I hate it.”

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 10:09 am

That hit a little too close to home, and Alexei felt a frisson of remorse for having ordered Emilio to look into Aaron. “I assure you, I do love you. This is not about winning. This is about me wanting to be with you again.”

But she shook her head at him. “You say you love me now, but what happens if I do something that upsets you, or if heaven forbid, it doesn’t work out? You were ready to destroy my entire hometown because I dumped you eight years ago.”

“Love is like business, there is always a certain amount of risk involved.” He reached for her hand and threaded his fingers into hers. “But I can promise you this, if you are honest with me from now on and if you promise never to walk out on me the way you did before, I will never intentionally hurt you again.”

She was quiet for a long time after he said that, then she asked, “What about children?”

He froze. “Is that why you will not leave him? Because he can give you children?”

“You didn’t answer the question,” she said. “If children were in the equation, would you still be so in love with me? I mean, you got a vasectomy for a reason, right?”

This gave him a moment of pause. In his mind, the vasectomy had been the end of the story, serving the purpose of not having to worry about accidentally impregnating the women he shared a bed with. The truth was that the break-up with Eva had turned him off the idea of marriage all together, and he’d thought he’d turn out like his uncle—a lifelong bachelor who could always be found with a new woman on his arm from year to year. Getting the vasectomy had also quelled the argument once and for

all with his uncle who kept on insisting he should get married to a nice Russian girl and have a son to take over the family business. The thought of putting a son in the same position he'd be in had been enough to convince him to go through with the minor surgery.

But if this was all that stood between Eva and him, and if this was the one bargaining chip the other man had that he did not, then he was willing to bring it into the negotiations. "I will try to get it reversed, but there are no guarantees. We might have to look into other ways of starting a family."

"So you would be okay with kids?" she asked with obvious suspicion in her voice.

"If it is the only way to keep you by my side, yes," he answered.

And once again she started shaking her head. "I've seen what happens when guys who don't want kids have to deal with them. It's one of those things, you either want them or you don't."

"And Aaron wants them?"

"What Aaron wants shouldn't matter. Children aren't bargaining chips in negotiations. If you're only agreeing to the possibility of having a family with me, so you can win me, I can't accept that."

It worried him that she sorted out his business tactic so easily, and even went so far as to say the words he had thought to himself, like "bargaining chip" and "negotiation." Once again, he consulted his mental book of business tactics. Usually, when he found himself at this point in a business discussion, where the person on the other side of the table was bringing up legitimate reservations to something he was proposing, he'd simply bide his time, reset with a better argument, and come back to the table with it.

“The truth is, I do not know how I feel about children. I have not considered the possibility of them for a very long time.” Alexei was proud of himself for coming up with this answer, which would buy him the time he needed to work out the problem, maybe even get Emilio’s opinion on the matter.

He pulled her back into the circle of his arms. “Perhaps what we both need is more time to think about this. Do not say yes or no to any of my proposals right away. I only ask that you think about them.”

She peeped up at him. “Just think about them?”

“That is all.” He pressed a kiss to her delicious mouth, the one he couldn’t bear to think of another man claiming.

“How about Ms. Threesome?” she asked.

He captured her hand and laid it on his chest. “Ms. Threesome and I have not seen each other for anything more than dinner and formal events since Nathan and Layla’s wedding.”

Finally that beautiful smile of hers came back to her face. “Not that I have the right to ask.”

“I like that you asked. I have never seen you jealous before.”

The smile disappeared again. “I’m not jealous.”

And he leaned down to kiss her. “This is fine, if you would like to believe it. But just in case you are not being fully truthful, you should know I would rather be with you than in a million threesomes with a million Carolines.”

She didn't say anything to that, but she did swing her leg over his torso, positioning her mound directly over his softened dick and rubbing it against him, "Is this okay?"

His cock answered for him, swelling inside her wet folds and giving her something to really rub against. "Da," Another idea occurred to him. "Whatever you do is okay. For this time you will set the pace."

Her face lit up. "You, Alexei Rustanov, are giving little ol' me, Eva St. James, control."

He nodded and let his hands fall to his sides, even though his instinct was to drop them on either side of her hips in order to set the pace and keep them balanced in his half-supine position.

"Whatever I want?" she asked.

Desire for her fell over him like a warm blanket and he could feel his mind, which had been so sharp about trying to negotiate Eva away from her current relationship a few minutes ago, growing hazy with lust. "Da," he said again.

That was all it took for her to start to move on top of him, this time slowly running her pussy lips from the bottom of his dick all the way to the bulbous top. The sensation was unbelievable, and bolts of hardcore, Grade A ecstasy ripped through his pelvis. It was all he could do not to grab her hips and slam inside her.

Then she did it again.

His hands fisted the sheets. And he gave himself a sharp command to stay in control, to not release outside of her like a school boy.

But then she did it again. And this time it was the wettest, slowest stroke yet.

“Eva,” he said. “Eva, please. Please.”

And she smiled, widening her eyes with mock surprise. “How did you guess I wanted you to say my name and beg?”

She then leaned forward and stroked him with her pussy lips again, but this time when she got to the top of his dick, she worked its head inside her. She didn’t even have to guide him in, he was so hard and she was so ready for him. Soon enough, he was embedded all the way to the hilt, but at an angle that wouldn’t give her clit the attention it needed for her to come in this position.

As if picking up on his analysis, she began to ride him, then said. “Touch me.”

He didn’t have to ask what she meant. At least in bed, he knew her better than she knew herself. He rubbed the side of his thumb against her clit and enjoyed the show of her breasts bouncing as she moved on top of him.

She moaned and said, “Just like that, and speak Russian to me, baby. Like you used to.”

It was a relief to be able to tell her all the things in his heart in his native language. “I want to be with you” and “You are mine” and “I will never not want you” and “You make me happy” and last but not least, “I love you, Eva, I love you.”

Maybe she remembered the Russian words for love, because she flew apart soon after he said it. She then fell onto Alexei’s chest as he unloaded inside her, her pussy still milking his dick as she rubbed her face against his shoulder while he said, “Kotenok... kotenok... kotenok...” over and over.

Afterwards, they didn’t talk. He switched off the lights from the control panel near his side of the bed and settled in behind Eva, spooning her as had become his habit

over the course of their vacation, with one arm around her waist and the other providing her with a pillow for her head.

He luxuriated in being able to hold her close like this after having loved her physically. And he refused to think there was a scenario in which this affair would end with her going back to Aaron. They were too perfect together, and they were meant for each other. He'd figure out a way to keep her by his side.

Still, he couldn't help but note as he drifted off to sleep that she had yet to say she loved him back.

Chapter Nineteen

EVA woke up and disentangled herself from Alexei around three in the morning. Really, saying she woke up was stretching it, since she hadn't been able to do much more than lightly doze after the bomb Alexei dropped on her.

"I love you, kotenok."

Her traitorous heart all but sang the memory back to her as she climbed out of bed, even as yet another wave of dread flooded her stomach. She loved him, too, would like more than anything to tell him how she felt. But there were two things holding her back now.

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 10:09 am

One, his criminal past. His business seemed on the up and up now, but almost every article she'd ever read about him after his quick rise to business fame, mentioned his crime family roots, strongly implying if not outright stating they had much to do with his current level of success. She didn't want Aaron being raised by a crime family or being taught how to kill in the "Rustanov style," which, according to the internet, was a slit throat, two bullets to the chest, and one in each knee cap. Her stomach turned just thinking of Aaron doing anything like that. But so far, she'd seen nothing to indicate Alexei was still involved in any of the unsavory things the Rustanovs used to be known for.

She'd just have to ask him about it the next morning, she decided, and hope to the heavens he had fully left that life behind.

She wanted to believe in Alexei again, to no longer live in fear of him but to love him as fully as he claimed to love her. No, he obviously never intended to be a father, but she hoped he would become a good one with her guidance.

It helped that he had kept all of his promises to her so far, even the one about not seeking out Aaron. Maybe they really could make a go of it this time, she thought, as she dropped into a seat at in the conference room, which Alexei had mentioned was completely soundproof earlier in the trip. Ever since then, she'd been getting up in the middle of the night and calling their son from its insulated confines.

It was three a.m. in Texas but ten a.m. in Milan.

"Hi, Mama!" he said. "Guess what?"

“Chicken butt?”

“Mama, you’re silly,” he informed her, before saying, “No, Uncle Steve said we could do whatever I want since it’s my last weekend in Rome.”

“Wow. What are you going to do first?”

“Eat gelato!”

“It’s ten in the morning.”

“It’s my weekend, Mama,” he said with the grave censure of a righteous seven-year-old.

“Okay, okay, who am I to argue? Go on, have your gelato—you know you’re back to old-fashioned American ice cream when you get back to Texas.”

“That’s okay. I kind of miss regular ice cream. Can we order a pizza when I get back, too? It’s not the same over here. ”

“Sounds good. I’ll have some Ben & Jerry’s waiting for you in the freezer and we’ll order a pizza for everybody when you get back. We’ll show Maria and the girls how Texas does pizza.”

When Aaron came back, he’d be traveling with Steve and his entire family who would be staying with them in Texas for two weeks.

“Can my dad come, too?” he asked.

“Um... “ She was so taken aback by the question that she didn’t exactly know how to answer it. “What...?”

“I heard Uncle Steve talking to Grandpa. He said you weren’t with Auntie Layla, but with my dad. Is that true?”

“Why are you just now discussing this with me?” she asked. She had never lied to Aaron about Alexei. When he’d asked about his father, she’d said it was a long story and she’d tell him it in full when he was older.

“Uncle Steve told me not to tell you what I heard, because you’d be mad. But you told me not to keep secrets from you ever.”

He sounded as confused as any kid would be after receiving conflicting instructions from two of the adults he loved most.

“Honey,” she said. “You were right to bring it up. I don’t ever want you to keep secrets from me. Uncle Steve was wrong to say that to you. Never let anyone tell you that you can’t tell me something. We’ve talked about this.”

Like many social workers who had seen child abuse up close, Eva had a deep fear of her son not feeling safe enough to tell her anything.

“I know. But Uncle Steve is family.”

“Even if it’s family. Don’t ever let someone tell you to keep a secret from me. In fact, if they say that to you, come straight to me with it.”

“Okay, Mama.” Then after an appropriate few seconds: “Is my dad big like me?”

“You mean tall?” she asked.

“Yeah?”

“Yes, he is. And he’s also Russian.”

“What?” he said. “No way!”

“Trust me, I would’ve chosen another country if I was making it up.”

“But I don’t know any Russian.” Aaron sounded despondent. “What if he hates me?”

“He won’t. No one could hate you. And I can teach you hi and bye, but you won’t need them because he speaks perfect English.”

“So he’s smart?”

“Yeah, really smart.”

“Is he coming with you to pick us up?”

She thought about that and dismissed it. “No, I think it’s better if I pick you all up. I’ll answer any questions you still have and then we’ll see about you maybe meeting him later on. Okay?”

“Okay, I can’t wait.” He sounded even more excited than he had for gelato, and she was happy she’d soon be able to give him the gift of knowing his father. And she just hoped Alexei would come through after she talked to him, because Aaron really was a kind and amazing little boy. He’d obviously been yearning for a father for quite some time now, but he’d never made her feel she wasn’t enough for him.

“Have a good last weekend, sweetness. I love you so much.”

“Love you, too, Mama.”

She hung up, her decision pretty much made for her. Aaron already knew about Alexei, now it was time for her to bring Alexei up to speed. She'd do it first thing in the morning, she decided. And then hopefully they could figure out how to handle his uncle, before he found out they were back together.

The sound of the fax machine suddenly springing to life made her jump in her seat. And curiosity led her over to it as it started spitting out pages, not to snoop, she told herself, just to see. It was probably something boring and business-related that she wouldn't understand anyway.

But as she got closer, she could see it wasn't a business contract, but a copy of a story that had apparently been printed off the Dallas Times internet site. That gave her pause because what would Alexei want with a Dallas Times story?

The top page of the story printed, revealing the headline, "RUSSIAN BILLIONAIRE, ALEXEI RUSTANOV, WELCOMES YOU TO SOUTH PADRE ISLAND."

Then she saw the picture that accompanied the story. She snatched up the pages. No, make that a whole gallery of pictures featuring her and Alexei, enjoying romantic times all over the island. There was even one picture of him kissing her shoulder on the beach. Her eyes landed on the words, "the normally media-shy billionaire" and "in a relationship with Eva St. James, a small-town Texas social worker."

And that's when the document's cover page came through.

To: Emilio Alvarez

From: Gina Greer, PR Partners

Hi Emilio,

Just thought I'd send around a hard copy of the story for Mr. Rustanov's files. It ran a week earlier than it was supposed due to another story falling through, but I think he'll be happy. It turned out exactly as he specified.

Best,

Gina

It only took her a few confused moments to put it all together. The man who had just promised to always be honest with her had purposefully broadcasted their time together on the island, so everyone in Drummond, including the man he thought she was in love with, would know they were together.

He had lied to her. He hadn't changed. He was just as ruthless as she thought he was two weeks ago. And now it was just a matter of time before his psychopath uncle found out about the current incarnation of their relationship.

Chapter Twenty

ALEXEI knew something was wrong almost as soon as he woke up. It wasn't just that Eva wasn't there in bed with him, it was also that the suite felt different. Like something was missing. Or someone.

He recognized the feeling immediately. It was the same one he'd had when he came home to an empty apartment eight years ago.

"Tell me you did not run again," he said, getting out of bed and heading straight for Eva's bedroom.

All the clothes he'd had bought for her were still hanging in the open closet. And in typical Eva fashion, the clothes she had worn last night before getting dressed for

dinner were lying in a discarded pile on the floor. From what he'd seen, she'd only become slightly neater since the last time they'd lived together.

But the clothes that mattered, the ones she'd traveled in to get here, the ones that had still been sitting in a laundry bag on her dresser just a few days ago, were missing. The torn-into laundry bag the only evidence they'd ever been there.

Why had she run yet again?. Desperate anger and frustration gathered inside him like a storm cloud as he threw on a robe and headed out to the hallway. Was it because he had pressured her? Because he'd told her he loved her? Another more terrible thought occurred to him. Maybe this was her way of informing him she'd picked Aaron.

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 10:10 am

But then he saw the door to the conference room was open. He always met with Emilio in the younger man's suite, and Emilio only came up to the penthouse to drop off a few things he requested and even then, he'd only gone into the conference room to use the fax machine, so why was the door opened?

He saw the scattered papers from the doorway, and his heart fell into his stomach when he spotted the Dallas Times article. He'd been planning to tell Gina to kill the article this morning, but now it was too late. The damage had already been done, and who knew what Eva was thinking. Probably that everything he'd told her last night had been a lie and that he was exactly what she'd accused him of being—a man who would do anything to win.

Anguish at the thought of losing Eva over this tore through him. No, he had to fix this. She'd most likely gone back to Drummond. He'd follow her there and he'd do whatever he'd have to do to make her see he really did love her, and that he was ready to start over fresh with her. No more lies, no more manipulation, just the two of them again like the last eight years had never happened.

His smart phone, which he'd stuffed in the pocket of his robe, started vibrating. It was Emilio. "I was just about to call you," he said, after he pushed the Accept button. "I need for you to arrange for the plane to take me to Drummond. I want to be in the air within the hour."

"Um, I think you'll want to hear what I have to say first. The guy I hired to look into this Aaron fellow couldn't find any Aarons over the age of twenty-one in Drummond, so he looked for documents linking Eva to an Aaron, and he found quite a few, including a birth certificate and school records."

Alexei shook his head, his mind reeling under the onslaught of this new information. “So you are saying she and this Aaron have a school-aged child together?”

“No, I’m saying Aaron is her child. He was born about seven and a half years after Eva broke up with you, and my guy emailed me a picture of him, which I’m looking at right now. Of course, we’d have to get a DNA test, but if the eyes are any indication, this is your kid.”

Chapter Twenty-One

“MAMA, mama!” Aaron came running out of Steve’s five-story, yellow apartment building to meet her, with his Uncle Steve close behind. It seemed to Eva he must have grown at least a couple inches since the beginning of the summer, when she’d seen him last. If he kept going at this rate, he’d be up to her shoulder by his next birthday. That is, if he made it to his next birthday. She only hoped she could get them out of Italy before Alexei or his uncle managed to hunt them down.

She fell to her knees on the sidewalk to meet her son’s hug and he wrapped his long gangly arms around his neck. “Oh, sweetness, sweetness,” she said. “I missed you so much.”

“What are you doing here? I thought we were supposed to be flying back to Texas next weekend.”

“Yeah, that’s what I thought, too,” her brother said, appearing behind Aaron.

She threw her brother an apologetic look over Aaron’s shoulder. “Sorry, it was a last-minute decision to come to Italy. I would have called, but I only had time to look up your address in the airport before flying out here.”

Steve looked more than a little suspicious. “Well, you got here at the right time. We were just about to eat lunch. Aaron, please go inside and tell your aunt to put another plate on the table for your mother.”

“Okay, Uncle Steve.” Aaron quickly pulled out of the hug and ran back inside the apartment building to do Steven’s bidding, punching a code in at the door to gain entrance. Good, she thought, at least Steve’s building had some measure of security.

“Where’s your suitcase?” he asked when Aaron was out of earshot. “You didn’t leave it in the cab that dropped you off, did you?”

“No, I didn’t bring anything. Just myself. I was hoping Maria might loan me a few things to wear.”

Steven frowned. “You came all the way to Italy with nothing but the clothes on your back and a passport?”

“Yes,” Eva said. “Like I said. It was a last-minute decision.”

“Mmm-hmm, does Dad know about this last-minute trip?”

She gave him a tight smile. “Not yet.”

He shook his head. “Little sister, you seem to keep on finding new ways to keep him mad at you.”

“Yes, “ she snapped. “Because everything I do is designed to upset Daddy. Thank you for reminding me of that, once again, my perfect big brother.”

“I’m not trying to remind you of anything,” he snapped right back. “And don’t pull that routine with me. You’re the one who showed up here out of the blue,

unannounced.”

She laid a placating hand on his arm before he could go any further. “You’re right. I was out of line. It was a long flight, and I’m just really tired and turned around and freaked out.”

“What’s going on, Eva? First Dad tells me something about how Aaron’s dad is back in the picture and apparently threatening to ruin the town. And now suddenly you’re in Italy, talking about you how ‘just decided’ to take a trip.”

“I’ll explain everything later. Right now, I need to help Aaron get his bags packed and then we need you to get us some fake IDs.”

“Fake IDs? What?” Steve grasped her arm, serious alarm etched across his face. “Eva, you need to tell me what’s going on right now.”

“That is just what I was about to say,” came a voice from behind them.

Eva turned and clapped a hand over her mouth. Standing on her brother’s front lawn in a black business suit, over five thousand miles from South Padre Island, was her ex-boyfriend, and the father of her child.

“Where is my son, Eva?” he said, his body positively vibrating with barely contained rage. “Take me to him. Now.”

Chapter Twenty-Two

FRESH grenades of rage were still going off in Alexei’s chest by the time he got off his plane in Milan. How could Eva have done this to him? Left him because she was pregnant and didn’t want to be without her daddy’s money? And why had she let him believe Aaron was her boyfriend as opposed to telling him the truth?

It said something about how far he had come from his criminal roots that his first instinct hadn't been to call his uncle and have her disposed of, as any self-respecting Rustanov would have done just a decade ago if crossed in such a way. However, he did spend the thirty minutes it took to get from the airport to the address in Milan concocting increasingly vicious revenge scenarios. Taking sole custody of Aaron wouldn't be enough, he decided. He'd also make sure she never saw him again. He'd buy every judge from New York to Texas if that was what it took. Business ethics, be damned. He'd use every underhanded tactic he could to ensure she was robbed of Aaron the way she had robbed him of his son all these years.

The thirty minutes passed by fast in this manner, and before he knew it, the Bentley Emilio had secured to get him from the airport was coming to a stop in front of a mustard-yellow apartment building. He knew this must be the right place, even without looking at the address Emilio had given him, because Eva and her brother were outside the front door, so engrossed in conversation neither of them noticed the car pull up behind them.

"I will let myself out," he told the driver. "Stay here."

He exited the Bentley with grim determination pumping through his veins. When he returned to the car, it would be with his son in tow.

"I'll explain everything later. Right now, I need to help Aaron get his bags packed and then we need you to get us some fake IDs," he heard her say as he approached.

"Fake IDs? What?" A black man in glasses, and only a few inches taller than Eva, took her by the arm. This must be her brother, the Foreign Service officer. "Eva, you need to tell me what's going on right now."

"That is exactly what I was about to say," he said, interrupting their conversation.

When Eva gasped and turned around, he saw real fear in her eyes. Good, he thought. He wanted her scared. No, he didn't just want her scared, he wanted her to rue the day she'd decided to cross him for the rest of her life.

"Where is my son, Eva?" he said. "Take me to him. Now."

Despite her previous moment of uncloaked fear, she stood her ground, folding her arms across her chest. "No, not like this."

"You kept him from me for seven years and now you think you can just tell me 'no?'" he roared, approaching her.

"Now calm down." Her brother stepped in front of him and tried to stop his advance. "We don't want to cause a scene."

But Alexei shoved him aside and pointed at Eva. "You will take me to him. Now."

"No!" she said, her voice quivering with her own anger. "Leave us alone. You're a bully and a liar and you need to just go away now."

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 10:10 am

“You call me a liar? You lied to me for seven years. You kept my son from me for seven years!”

Now Steve approached them again. “Wait a minute, Eva. You said he didn’t want anything to do with Aaron and that’s why you refused to seek him out for child support.”

Eva had the nerve to throw her brother an annoyed look. “He didn’t want anything to do with Aaron. He didn’t even want children back then. He still doesn’t.”

“I said I didn’t want children,” Alexei said through gritted teeth. “That does not mean you can’t tell me I have one.”

Her brother came to stand beside him, shaking his head at Eva. “You can’t not tell a man he has a son!” Steve pursed his lips together in obvious disappointment. “And here I was thinking you had grown up, that you’d finally gotten some sense in your head—“

She cut her brother off with a vicious glare. “I swear to heaven, Steve, if you take his side in this, I will never talk to you again. You don’t know anything about me. Neither of you do. You don’t know why I did what I did or what I’m willing to do to protect my son.”

Alexei once again stepped in front of her brother. “I do not care why you did it, because trust me in this, Eva, when my lawyers are done, you will not have a son to protect. I will have full custody and I will never again let you see him.”

Eva swung at him, a surprisingly adept, open-fist punch that connected with his face at just the right angle to send him stumbling a few steps. “You can go to hell, Alexei Rustanov! I will never, ever let you anywhere near him.” Her voice sounded as vicious as she looked.

He recovered from the punch with a shake of his large head. And he was just about to tell her exactly who could go to hell and whose lawyers would send her straight there, when small fists began pummeling his mid-section.

“Leave my mama alone!”

Chapter Twenty-Three

EVA hadn’t been able to sleep on the plane rides from Dallas to London and then on to Milan, which meant she hadn’t slept in almost twenty-four hours. She also hadn’t eaten, and that had probably been a mistake, because by the time Alexei showed up, the only things keeping her on her feet were adrenaline and fear. Perhaps because of this, when he’d started throwing around threats and accusations like she had known he would back when she was actually considering telling him the truth, she had shot past trying to reason with him to screaming at him before straight-up punching him.

At first it felt good, to finally be able to literally hit back at him after keeping her real emotions under lock and key for weeks. But then Aaron came out of nowhere and started throwing wild punches of his own at Alexei, and the world suddenly went into slow motion. Luckily for Aaron, Alexei was so stunned by his son’s sudden appearance that he froze, not responding to his physical attack in any way that could get Aaron hurt.

“Aaron, no!” Eva pulled him away from Alexei and said. “Run back to the apartment. He can’t go in there. That’s the only place you’ll be safe.”

“No!” Aaron said with a stubborn shake of his head. “I can’t let him hurt you.”

“He’s not—“ Flustered, she got down to her knees in front of him on the narrow stone sidewalk. “He’s not going to hurt me.”

“Then why did you yell at him and punch him?” Aaron asked, still breathing hard. “You never yell. Or hit.”

“Aaron, remember when we talked about how if something dangerous happened, you’d have to listen to and do everything I said, no questions asked?” She bit back the tears in her eyes, not wanting to scare him any more than she already had. “This is one of those times. Now, please go back into the apartment building.”

Aaron’s response was to throw his arms around her neck. “No, mama. I’m not leaving you.”

He began to cry, which destroyed what was left of her frayed nerves and made her cry, too, because she couldn’t figure any way out of this. Even if she managed to get Aaron back into the building, she wasn’t sure she’d be able to keep him safe from Alexei or his uncle. However, she was sure if she didn’t run with Aaron, she’d have to give Alexei the full custody he wanted. If she didn’t, either he or his uncle would have her taken care of and give Aaron some bullshit story about how she’d met with a tragic accident.

So she cried into her son’s soft curls, because she didn’t know how to protect him or how to keep him with her. And she was so tired and just sick to death of being confused and scared all the time. It felt like she was having a nervous breakdown. And she couldn’t even begin to make herself stop crying, even for Aaron’s sake.

Suddenly, strong arms wrapped around them, and the next thing she knew, both she and Aaron were pulled as a unit into Alexei’s lap. “Stop crying,” he whispered in that

stern way of his. “Stop crying.”

God help her, his arms were like a blanket of comfort, and just like his embrace had quelled her panic attack in the hotel suite, she immediately began to calm down, sniffing like a baby against his shoulder, until she and Aaron both stopped.

As soon as they did, Steve came to stand above them, his mouth in a terse line. “Can we move this into the apartment now? All the neighbors are looking out their windows at us.”

* * * *

Alexei still wasn't quite sure what had happened. One minute he was determined to snatch Aaron away from his duplicitous witch of a mother, and the next moment he had them in his arms.

He'd seen Eva get angry. He'd seen her laugh uncontrollably. But he had never seen her cry before. Especially not like this, with huge sobs that just about ripped through his heart. He couldn't take it, couldn't stand to see both her and his son in pain, and the need to comfort them overwhelmed his desire to punish Eva.

Then somehow he'd ended up in the living room of Steven's apartment, sitting in a wing-backed leather chair, with a plate of homemade pasta in red sauce on his lap. Across from him, on a beige couch, sat Eva, who he couldn't help but notice was now sporting dark circles under her eyes and looking much more tired and withdrawn than the last time he saw her. He suppressed his immediate instinct to worry about her and wondered if he'd ever be able to reconcile all the opposing feelings she dredged up in him. Anger, pity, hate, love. She had him flipping back and forth seemingly every other minute. And at that moment, he wanted to both hurt and protect her.

“Here is your plate, Eva,” Maria told her sister-in-law. The small African-Italian

woman had a round moon face and a heavy accent, which matched her overall nurturing demeanor. But most telling about her personality was the fact that despite what happened outside, her first order of business had been to get them set up with plates of pasta, even after Steve had explained he and Eva wouldn't be joining them for lunch, because they "had to talk."

"Really, you didn't have to do this," Eva said.

"Yes, of course I must do this. You are very hungry after all the crying, no?" Apparently, she had been one of the people watching the entire scene unfold from their window. But unlike Steve, who had made his embarrassment clear, Maria patted Eva on the shoulder. "I am Italiana. I have seen much worse. Do not listen to Steve. He is the one always insisting on being embarrassed. We Italianos are happy to make a show."

Maria's words were kind but did not seem to any way alleviate Eva's own embarrassment. She changed the subject, leaning hard on her friendly Texas accent, when she said. "Well, I'm just going to apologize for all of that and say I'm happy to finally have a plate of this homemade pasta of yours. Aaron's been going on and on about it for weeks."

"If I had known he would be such big fan, I would have made it for him earlier in the summer. I am glad you are here with us to taste it."

At the mention of Aaron's name, Alexei's eyes drifted back to the gangly boy with the café au lait skin, who was still standing in the doorway. Even if Alexei hadn't been told of his existence before meeting him, he would have known this was his son. He had many of Eva's features, but the green eyes and the way he carried himself—it was like interacting with a bi-racial version of himself at seven-years old. Pride swelled in Alexei's chest, thinking about how the boy had come to his mother's defense, and refused to leave, even when she begged him to. That alone told him

everything he needed to know to love him.

“Are you my dad?” Aaron said, as if reading his mind.

Eva froze, but Alexei looked his son in the eye and said, “Yes.”

Aaron took a few steps toward him, stopping at the edge of the red and gold Tuscan area rug. “And you was mad because mama didn’t tell you about me?”

Alexei welcomed the hot rage that question rekindled. It reminded him why he was here and why he had no business feeling anything but disdain for Eva St. James. “Yes, that is exactly why I was mad.”

Page 31

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 10:10 am

“Maybe you wasn’t old enough to hear the story,” Aaron said, his voice thoughtful. “It’s a long one.”

To his consternation, he found himself having to fight the urge to laugh. “Oh, is it?”

Aaron nodded somberly. “That’s what Mama told me. How old are you?”

“Old enough to hear the story now, I believe.”

Maria chose this moment to walk over to Aaron and guide him toward the door by the shoulders. “We will let your parents talk now, si?”

But Aaron didn’t go without one last question, thrown over his shoulder, “You won’t hurt her, right?”

“No, I will not hurt her.” Not physically, at least, he thought to himself.

As soon as they were gone, he set aside his plate and said, “The only reason I am talking to you here, as opposed to in a room full of lawyers, is because I have just decided I do not want Aaron to grow up without a mother as I did.” He leaned forward in the chair. “I will have my lawyers draw up papers, which will grant me full custody and provide you with an apartment below my own. If you sign the papers, you will be allowed occasional access to him at my discretion. If you do not, then I will make sure you never see him again. This deal is only on the table for fifteen minutes, so you will need to decide now.”

Her response to this was to set her own plate down and quietly say, “Okay, you know

what, I'm through with you and your threats and your blackmail. Just go on ahead and kill me already."

"What?"

"Take out your gun or send over your hit-man or give me some poisoned tea or whatever ya'll do in your family when you want to get rid of somebody. It's obvious you only care about winning by stomping all over me so you can prove nobody can beat you. So I'm inviting you to either take your kill shot or stuff your custody agreement. I'm not going to play your business games anymore, and if you want to take my son away, you're going to have to do it over my dead body."

"I am not trying to win or prove anything," he said, his old Russian accent actually invading his speech, she was getting him so riled up again. And it was all he could do to keep his voice level, so the others wouldn't hear him in the dining room. "You are one who lied. You are one who left with my baby inside of you because I am not rich enough, and you are one who did not tell me about him, even when I asked you directly who he is."

"I didn't tell you because I knew you would react exactly this way," she whispered back at him. "I knew you wouldn't consider what was best for our son, only what was best for your ego. You think he's some pawn in this argument between you and me, but he's a little boy and he needs his mother! The fact that you're even talking about full custody tells me you still don't get that he's a human being, not some extension of Rustanov Enterprises."

He hated her at that moment. Hated her for keeping Aaron from him and hated her even more for being right about his ego coming before his son. It was true, he wanted Aaron in his life, and he wanted the boy to be happy, but he couldn't stand the thought of Eva not suffering for what she'd done.

“Why?” he asked, still keeping his voice low, but coming to his feet. “Why did you not tell me you were pregnant? I know I said I do not want children, but did you really think I would not have taken care of my responsibility? I would have dropped out of school and gotten a second job if that was what it took. I would have not turned away from you and my son. I thought you knew me better than that.”

She also stood, her movement stiff with anger. “I thought I knew you, too. But then I found out I didn’t know you at all.”

He shook his head, confused. “I do not understand your meaning.”

“My meaning is you keep asking me why I did this and why I didn’t do that, but you don’t want to hold yourself to the same standards.” She paused, as if shoring up the courage to say what she said next: “Why didn’t you tell me back then you were supposed to be the next head of a Russian crime family and that you killed a man and only came to America for college to lay low?”

He shook his head in confusion. “So you read my Wikipedia page and now you think you can hold that against me? It will not hold up in a court of law. No judge will grant you full custody because of allegations of what I am only rumored to have done.”

She shook her head right back at him. “No, Alexei, I did not find out about it on your Wikipedia page—though trust me, that was an interesting bit of reading in itself. I discovered all of this back in grad school before you became famous and that’s why I left you.”

Alexei’s eyes narrowed. He had purposefully kept the truth from her back then, but now she was claiming she had somehow found out. “No,” he said. “You are lying. You will do anything to get me to let you have Aaron to yourself. “

Her mouth fell open in offended shock. “Are you out your dingdang mind. As much as I love being a mother, doing it by myself has been hard. Really hard. Even with a kid as great as Aaron. You know, my parents didn’t just immediately take me back after what I pulled. I was on my own for two years. And if you had ever had to deal with back-to-back ear infections, explosive poop, and figuring out how to pay for full-time daycare, which you could barely afford on a social worker’s starting salary, you would never accuse me of trying to keep Aaron to myself. Believe me, there were a lot of nights I had to stay up until the early morning with him crying because he was sick, and I’d start crying, too, because I was so tired and I need someone to come in and relieve me. But I couldn’t have that, could I, because you were his father.”

Alexei pushed aside the guilt that sprang up when he thought of her crying while dealing with a sick baby all by herself. “You could have contacted me, even in Russia. You could have. Or better yet, you could have come to me as soon as your parents denied you. I would have forgiven you if I had known you were carrying my child.”

She looked at him, her face more angry and bitter than he had ever seen it. “No, I couldn’t have. You want to know how I found out about all your interesting pre-college experiences in Russia? Your uncle told me all about them when he came to your apartment and threatened to kill me and make it look like an accident if I didn’t break-up with you.”

Then she spat out, “When I found out you had decided to break the news about our time in South Padre behind my back, I wasn’t just running away from you, I was trying to run away from your uncle, too.”

Chapter Twenty-Four

EVA must have been more wrecked by her cross-Atlantic trip than she thought,

because at that moment she actually felt sorry for Alexei. He reacted as if she had physically hit him again when she dropped the bomb about his uncle.

For what had to be at least a minute, he said nothing, as if his brain had locked him in place while it attempted to process what she was telling him.

But then he took a step toward her and said, “You are saying my uncle came to our apartment and threatened to kill you if you did not leave me?”

“Yes,” she answered, realizing how unbelievable that must sound to him. “He said you were supposed to be the head of the family, not him, but you wanted to stay in America with me and he wanted you to come back. He also said a bunch of stuff about him not wanting you to marry a black girl, or even an American, but I’m pretty sure it was mostly because I was black.”

“He did not know about you. I kept this from him.” Alexei said. “I only told him I did not want to come back to Russia.”

“Well, apparently he figured it out somehow, because he was real clear about the fact that he would kill me if I didn’t leave that night. He even sent somebody over to clean out my stuff and had it delivered to Layla’s apartment, even though I hadn’t told anybody I was staying there.”

“So that is where you were hiding from me when I was trying to find you,” he said dully. “With Layla.”

“Yeah, I knew I had to go to someone you didn’t know I knew, and she’s still the only person I’ve ever met who would take in a girl she’d met once in a CPR seminar.” She lowered her eyes, suddenly nervous about making a full confession about what she did and how she did it eight years later. “Funny story, that’s actually how Aaron got his name. Her middle name is Erin, so I named him after her—“

“Eva,” he said, cutting off her ramble, his voice harsh with anger. “You are telling me you did not leave me that night because I was poor or because you were pregnant, but because my uncle threatened you. This is what you are telling me.”

“Yes, that’s what I’m telling you. I didn’t even find out I was pregnant until, like, a month later, and by then, I was way too scared of what your uncle might do to me to tell you.”

He blinked, his face becoming a cold mask, and when his eyes met hers, for the first time, she saw in them the other Alexei, the one she’d been told about. In that moment, he wasn’t the passionate, intelligent, caring, and sexy Russian she’d thought he was when they’d first started dating, but the cold-blooded killer his uncle had presented him as in their tiny little apartment.

“Stay here,” he said.

“What?”

“Stay here,” he repeated. He grabbed her by the wrist. “Look at me, if you try to run, I will hunt you down. So do not make me do that. You need to realize your original plan was a bad one, because there is nowhere on Earth you could hide from me.”

A chill ran down her back. It felt like she was talking to a stranger. No, that wasn't it. The truth was it felt like she was talking to his uncle again. She shrank from him. “Let go.”

He did, but not before saying the two words again, this time so viciously they cut through the air like a knife. “Stay here.”

Then he strode out of the room and apparently out of the apartment, because Maria appeared just a few moments later and said, “Why does he not eat the pasta?” Then her eyes went to Eva's still full plate. “And you do not eat either?”

She looked positively crushed by their seeming rejection of her food, but Eva was too confused to form a coherent answer. What had just happened? Over the past few weeks, Eva had spent an obscene amount of time running scenarios in which she told him the truth about what had happened the night she left him. She had imagined him yelling, she had imagined him accusing her of being a liar. She'd also imagined he'd hug her, apologize, and tell her everything was going to be okay in more hopeful moments.

But never in her wildest dreams had she imagined he would bark a command at her and then just walk out.

“I’m sorry,” she said to Maria, trying to pull herself together. “It was a long trip, and I’m just too tired to eat.”

“Oh, you poor thing. Let me show you to Aaron’s room. You will sleep there.”

She let Maria mother hen her toward the apartment’s third bedroom, which Aaron had been occupying all summer, but then she remembered, “Wait, I need to talk to Aaron, to explain to him...”

“No, no. You need to sleep. You can talk to Aaron when you get up.” Maria sat her on the side of the bed and pulled off her flip-flops.

As soon as she sat down on the bed, the jetlag and lack of food and rest kicked back in, all but erasing the adrenaline that had helped her get through her fight with Alexei. Maria’s twins were lucky to have such a nurturing and kind mother, Eva thought drowsily.

“Thank you,” Eva said, sleep pulling her down to the pillow, beckoning like a warm, insistent embrace she could no longer fight off. The waking world faded to black before Maria was even done tucking her in.

* * * *

The sun was setting when Eva woke up, painting the Italian sky outside her window a dark purple sinking into a bright orange horizon. If the sun was just now going down, she thought, then she’d gotten at least six hours of sleep—which was good, because she’d really needed it. She found a jersey dress, a new sports bra, a package of underwear, a towel, and a wash cloth on a wooden chair near the bed. She assumed

these items had been left there for her by her ever-thoughtful sister-in-law. And she couldn't help but feel a pin prick of jealousy for her brother, who had not only become a Foreign Service officer, but had also gotten the cream of the crop as far as life mates were concerned.

Still, by the time Eva emerged from the shower she felt completely restored. Done feeling sorry for herself and ready to fight Alexei's uncle and Alexei himself if she had to. She refused to let his last threat deter her from keeping her son safe.

Pulling her hair back into a large puff as she strode down the hallway toward the living room, she began to make plans. First, she'd need to convince Steve to get her and Aaron fake IDs, then she'd run to some place big like California, where a single black mother with a light-skinned child wouldn't stand out so much. Once there, she'd put together a new plan for what to do if they were found—

Her thoughts were interrupted by the sound of children giggling in the family room, accompanied by that of male laughter. And that was how she found Alexei, of all people, lying on the floor, pretending Aaron and Steve's two-year-old twins had him completely pinned and he couldn't get up.

But the game came to an abrupt end when Aaron saw her standing in the doorway. "Mama! Mama!"

The twins, who were already in their pajamas, abandoned their positions, sitting on Alexei's chest, and jumped up and down. "Auntie Eba! Auntie Eba!" they cheered, ridiculously cute in their matching pajamas and box braids.

Aaron came rushing over and threw his arms around her waist. "You're up!"

She rubbed his back, a little nonplussed by the enthusiasm of his greeting.

Her confusion must have shown on her face, because Alexei sat up and said, “You’ve been asleep for over twenty-four hours.”

“What?” She searched for and found a wall clock. “It’s only 9:30.”

“9:30 the night after you arrived. Aaron was worried about you, but Maria and I told him to let you sleep.”

As if on cue, Maria appeared behind her. “You are awake. Good, good, you can finally eat.”

The way Maria proceeded to fuss over her for the next half-hour would make one think the worst thing in the world that could ever happen to a person was to not have anything to eat for a whole twenty-four hours. And Maria would not be satisfied until Eva had eaten several mouthfuls of linguine and a slice of the fresh Italian bread she’d made. Steve was working late at the consulate and everyone else had already eaten dinner, so Maria fixed bowls of gelato for Aaron and Alexei who stayed on at the table, after she left to put the twins down.

Eva hadn’t realized how hungry she was until she took the first bite. After that, getting the pasta into her stomach became her main focus to the point that she wasn’t able to talk with her son and Alexei because her mouth stayed full. But as it turned out, she didn’t have to say a word. They kept up a steady stream of conversation topics that included Aaron’s soccer team, Aaron’s dead bug collection, and Aaron’s trips to both Disneyland Paris and Disneyland California.

Aaron couldn’t believe Alexei had never been to Disneyland and Alexei gravely promised to remedy the situation as soon as possible. “But maybe I will need someone to show me around. I hear Disneyland is very large.”

“Mama and me can show you,” Aaron told him, just as grave. “Maybe we could even

go to Disneyworld in Florida next time. But we're going to have to wait awhile for me to get enough money in my vacation fund."

Now Eva paused in her eating, waiting to see what Alexei would say. He could easily afford to whisk Aaron away to Disneyworld if he wanted to, whereas she'd have to focus doubly hard on replenishing their vacation fund after her unexpected trip to Italy and using a pay-as-you-go phone to make international calls for two weeks straight.

Alexei raised an eyebrow. "You have a vacation fund? Maybe you are very good with money, da?"

"Mama makes me put ten percent of my allowance in savings, ten percent in a college fund, and ten percent in a vacation fund, so I have money to spend when we go on vacation."

"That is very smart. How long do you think it will take you to save for Disneyworld?"

Aaron calculated in his head. "At least until Christmas."

Again she held her breath, waiting for him to supersede the rules she'd already set forth with Aaron, but Alexei just nodded. "Then we will go at your Christmas break."

"Do you think you can save up enough money by then, Mama?"

She had just finished her last bite of linguine. "We'll see. It might just be you and...your dad. Or we might have to..." She stopped again, realizing she still had no idea what the future held in store for them, and it wouldn't be a good idea to make Aaron any promises she wouldn't be able to keep later. "We'll see," she said again, and left it at that.

Alexei's face grew serious and he turned to Aaron. "It is time for your mother and me to talk. You will go now."

It took some effort for Eva not to laugh. That wasn't exactly the way you talked to a seven-year-old. But Aaron didn't seem to mind. "I'll go help Maria with the twins."

"Yes, good idea."

But before he left, Aaron hugged Alexei, throwing his skinny arms around his father's massive chest. Alexei dropped a kiss on top of his head and said, "You are a good boy."

"You won't leave without saying good-bye this time, right?"

Alexei looked Aaron in the eye, as somber as a priest. "I promise you, I will not."

That negotiated, Aaron hugged Eva, too, before jogging out the room. Like many boys his age, he tended to run everywhere, as if he had energy to spare.

"So I see you two are getting along," she said, when he was gone.

"He is easy to get along with," Alexei answered. A small smile lifted one corner of his mouth. "He told me his allowance is based on him doing the laundry for the both of you."

Page 33

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 10:10 am

Now Eva smiled, too. “You gotta start them early. I had him sorting by two and up to full loads by five. My mama talks about me like a big dog for making him do it.”

It was meant to be a joke, but Alexei’s face grew serious again. “She should not say this thing. He is already very responsible, someone who would make any father proud. He is the best of both of us. It is obvious you have been doing a very good job with him. ”

She put a hand to her chest. “Oh, my gosh, that’s the first time anyone’s ever told me that.”

“Everyone should be telling you that,” he said. “Including me.”

“So you’re not still mad at me about keeping him from you?”

Alexei eyes grew sad. “No, I can no longer be angry with you. You did exactly as I would have had the circumstances been mine. You were right to run, right to protect our baby over everything else. My uncle would have killed you and possibly Aaron, and back then I would not have been able to protect you. My uncle is what you might call a natural enforcer. He was trained from an early age to do this work, and the most important thing you ever did for yourself and Aaron is to take his threat seriously.”

And there they were, the words she didn’t know she needed to hear until he said them. Something cracked inside her chest. All this time, she’d thought it had been her job to give others, including Alexei, closure. She hadn’t realized how much she needed it for herself as well.

For the first time in the history of their relationship, she asked him an honest question, with full expectation of an honest answer. “This is why you didn’t want to have any children, isn’t it? Because you were scared you wouldn’t be able to protect them? Not just from your family’s enemies, but also from your uncle?”

Alexei nodded and steepled his hands on the table in front of him. “My mother did not die in a car accident. At least, her car accident was not accidental. A rival organization cut her brakes. My father was gunned down in broad daylight while meeting with a younger crime lord, someone he believed to be an ally. The man I killed was that younger man, the person who ordered the hit on my father. But after that I swore to myself I was done with that life. It had taken away the two people I loved the most, and I did not want to become the head of a crime family, even if it was what I had been groomed to do.

“At first my goal was to legitimize the Rustanov business, so we’d no longer have to war in the streets like common gang members. But then I met you, and I did not want a life filled with bodyguards and business for us. I wanted us to live a normal life without violence or empire building. And the reason I did not want us to have children was because I knew if we had a boy, my uncle would stop at nothing to involve him in the family business, even if he was bi-racial. This is the way of the Rustanovs.”

Alexei stared into his empty gelato bowl. “But now I can see these dreams I spun for us were the fantasies of a boy. My uncle would not have let me live my life as I saw fit, no matter what I saw for us. It is good you left me the way you did, because I would not have worked as hard to make Rustanov a legitimate enterprise if you had not. Because of you, I am the one who holds all the power now, not him.”

“So you’re no longer a criminal organization?” she asked.

“No,” he answered. “We have not been since I officially took over. I used my

American business education combined with my Russian criminal one to rebuild the Rustanov organization into a lawful business. I made timely investments. While my classmates ran after the next big thing in America, I looked to my Russia's untapped potential: metals, natural resources, media, and the like. I did the right things at the right time and it all paid off. Eventually, I was able to move into the American markets as well, which is why I chose to relocate to New York. Even though I had made my first millions in Russia, I was ready to leave it behind."

He pushed his gelato bowl away. "But you should know, *kotenok*, I have never taken a life lightly. The first time was to avenge my father." He finally looked up at her, his eyes full of sorrow and regret. "And the second time was to keep you and Aaron safe. My uncle will never come between us again."

It took a moment for Eva to understand his meaning, but then she got it. "Your uncle is dead?"

He nodded. "I left to send the order and make sure he hadn't already arranged a hit. It's lucky you came to Italy and told me about his involvement when you did, because he'd already had a man headed to Texas to...I won't say it. I do not want to think about what could have happened had you returned to Drummond or stayed on in South Padre as opposed to coming here."

"So when you left, it wasn't because you were angry?" she asked.

He shook his head. "Of course not. All these years, I had been telling myself to believe the words you wrote to me in that letter, to believe you had not loved me back then as I so loved you. I think much of my anger came from not just the thought of you leaving, but also not fully believing our relationship had meant nothing to you. After you left, I started having these dreams in which you came to me and told me it had all been a misunderstanding, that somehow you had not meant to leave me and you still loved me as I could not stop myself from loving you. Our two weeks on the

island was the first time in the last eight years that I have not had this dream.

Though she'd had good reasons for putting him through that pain, it broke her heart to hear about it. "I'm so sorry, baby."

He shook his head. "No, you have nothing to apologize for. I only tell you this, so you will understand how it is I believed you immediately. Knowing my uncle as I did, I'm sad to say your story made more sense than the fake one you gave me that night in the hotel or even the new one I had made up for myself on the plane ride over here. I threatened you because I was scared for you and also, because I needed to know where you were. Making the arrangements took a few hours, and I wanted to confirm my uncle was dead before returning here. It was the least I could do."

She should have been horrified that Alexei could arrange such a thing, have his own flesh and blood killed without a moment of hesitation. However, waves of pure relief flooded through her. She had been so scared for so long because of this man that she couldn't mourn him.

Still, she said, "But he was your uncle. And because of me you lost him."

He nodded toward her plate, which still had a few uneaten slices of bread on it. "Are you done eating?"

"Yes, but—"

He came around the table and hauled her into his arms. Then he kissed her hard and long before saying, "He was my uncle, *kotenok*, but you are my heart. If you will have me back, I will always do everything within my power to protect you and our son. I will love you until the day I die, and I will never let anyone come between us again. I just hope you can love me, too, after everything that has happened, after how I treated you in South Padre, and after exposing you even further to my uncle..."

She covered his lips with her hand before he could go any further. “Baby, I love you, too. And I tell you what, I’ll forgive you everything if you grant me one wish.”

“Anything, kotenok.”

“Can I pretty please start calling you Lexie again?”

“Anything but that.”

“Wait a minute, but I said ‘pretty please’ and you said ‘anything’—“

He silenced her protestations with another kiss, and this time he didn’t stop kissing her until they heard Aaron clear his throat.

They looked up to see their son standing in the doorway a smirk on his face. “This means we’re all going to Disneyworld, right?”

Epilogue

Two years later.

ONE hot summer evening in late August, Alexei shifted the stack of newspapers under his arm to unlock the front door of their home in Drummond. It was the same two-story villa both his son and his wife had spent the majority of their lives in, except for a few notable exceptions. He and Eva had stripped all of her father’s hunting trophies and animal heads off the walls and tossed his heavy leather furniture. In its place, they’d put in bright, colorful retro furniture from the fifties, sixties, and seventies. It wasn’t quite to Alexei’s taste, but it had worked out to an even exchange since Eva hadn’t been too excited about him not only buying the houses on either side of the theirs, but enclosing the newly made compound inside a wrought iron gate with stone pillars stationed every feet. He’d also put in a state-of-the-art alarm system and

a security booth, complete with full-time guards.

The life of a billionaire was filled with luxuries, but to be able to live anywhere without round-the-clock security wasn't one of them.

He was just glad Eva's parents no longer lived there, but in a sleepy retirement community near Dallas, which meant the house that had once been filled with judgment and recrimination, was now was filled with nothing but love and a considerable amount of brightly-hued furniture.

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Technically, the town owned the house, and it was only on loan to the sitting mayor as a job perk. But since Eva had managed to garner an unparalleled job approval rating during her short time as mayor, Alexei doubted they'd be moving anytime soon.

"Hey, Dad," Aaron said, when he came through the door. He was playing a videogame, something that involved logs, rivers, and a lot of jumping on the player's part, but he paused it as soon as his father came in.

As usual, pride and love filled his heart when he saw Aaron after a long day, and he once again thanked God for aligning the stars so he could have him in his life. It pained him to think if Eva's good friend and his business associate hadn't made their unlikely marriage, he and Eva might never have met again, and who knew if his son would have ever sought him out?

But instead of going down the path of what might have been, he forced himself to go back on dad duty, which he'd discovered he thoroughly enjoyed over the past two years. "Does your mother know you are playing video games on a weeknight?"

"Yeah, it's a reward for getting an A-plus on my math test today. And I only get to play for half an hour until the laundry's done, then I have to fold it and go to bed."

Alexei chuckled. Despite the fact that Eva was close on a deal that would bring a college to Drummond, he had the feeling Aaron would choose an out-of-town school if only to get out of laundry duty.

"Do you want me to help you fold?" Alexei asked. It had been one of the two days a

week he drove into Dallas to conduct business there, and he was a little tired from the long commute home, but he was also proud of Aaron for doing so well on his math test.

“Nah, I’ve got it. Is that the newspaper?”

“You have not read it yet?” Alexei handed him the paper, which had a picture of Eva on the front, smiling in her Dad’s old office, which had also received a rather colorful redecoration. The article’s headline read, “MAYOR IN BLUE JEANS.” Alexei had already read the glowing feature about one of the nation’s few, black, female mayors, who had managed to bring a collection of new business to her sleepy Texas town in a relatively short time, and he was surprised Aaron hadn’t.

“Yeah, I read it online but not in the newspaper. You know Mama. She got busy and forgot to tell Berta to pick one up, and by the time I reminded her, it was too late. They were all gone.”

Of course they were. How often would a piece on their small town be featured on the front page of the Dallas Times? He was sure the limited number of copies printed in Drummond were gone before lunch time. Though her father had been taken by surprise when Eva not only ran against him for mayor, but won in a landslide, it was now no secret how beloved the new mayor, who had turned around the town’s future prospects, was. It also helped that nothing ever happened in Drummond, and in less than two years, Eva had revealed the father of her son to be a Russian billionaire, married him, and run against her father for mayor. They probably would have voted for her for the soap opera alone.

“She was kind of bummed,” Aaron said. “You should go give her a copy now.”

“I will do this, and I will see you in the morning.” He pulled his son close and planted a kiss on his head. Though Aaron had recently declared himself too old for baths and getting tucked in at night with a bedtime story, he had yet to complain about the

many hugs and kisses he still received from both of his parents.

“Night, Dad.”

Alexei wondered if he would ever get used to the heart-stopping joy of having someone call him “dad.”

His extended family back in Russia still would not talk to him or even receive him in their homes, because of what he’d done. But, sacrificing the esteem of his aunts and cousins had been well worth it. And whenever he felt a tug of guilt about what he’d had to do to his uncle in order to protect his family, one look at Aaron alleviated it.

“Goodnight, Son,” he said, climbing up the stairs.

But he did not end up giving Eva the newspaper when he walked through their bedroom door.

Mostly because he found her there naked, except for a mini-skirt, her hair plaited into two long French braids, holding herself braced against their dresser drawer with her back curved so her behind stuck out in the most tantalizing of ways. This particular drawer was much more expensive than the flimsy plywood one they’d had back in grad school, but he recognized the scene immediately. And he knew without asking that she was wearing nothing underneath the denim that encased her still-delectable rear end.

“Hey, Lexie,” she said, grinning at him over her shoulder. “You know what, it was so hot today, and it occurred to me I never kept my end of that laundry bargain we made. Do you remember what you wanted?”

He set the newspapers aside on an armchair, already swelling inside his pants with desire for her. He stripped off his jacket and rolled up his sleeves before coming to stand behind her, close enough that she could feel his presence if not his touch. Yet.

“I believe I said I would touch you here...” He covered her left breast with one of his hands. “And here...” He unbuttoned her mini-skirt, his erection growing even harder, when he parted her pussy lips with his index and ring finger and rubbed her clit with the middle one.

She groaned, her head falling to her chest, just as it had those many years ago. “Lexie,” she moaned.

He rubbed three fingers against her clit just long enough to get her primed, before moving his fingers down to tunnel inside of her.

The position was wicked on his part—it was enough to get her excited, but because he was no longer working her clit, not quite enough to get her off. As a consequence, she worked herself on his fingers, making them slick with her desire, but still unable to get what she wanted from them.

He watched this play out, the sight of his wife squirming making him just as hard as if he’d been stroking his own length, as opposed to simply resting it against her back.

“Is there something you want?” he asked. “Something you’d like me to give you?”

“Lexie please,” she said. “Your fingers, they’re not enough. I need you inside of me.”

The sound of her begging nearly got her exactly what she wanted. He had done a complete one-eighty since South Padre and now hated to deny his Eva anything. But they had a scene to play out, and she wasn’t performing her part correctly.

“I like that you are begging, but you have not said the right name yet.”

“Lexie...” She grabbed his hand, and was now pumping it into her in a frenzy.

“No, that’s not the name I want to hear.”

“Alexei, oh hell, Alexei. Please, I want you. I want you insi—“

She didn't get any further than that, because he turned her around and lifted her onto the drawer in one swift move, and before she could finish asking for it, he was already inside of her. “Marry me,” he whispered.

“What?” she asked, barely coherent. “We're already married.”

He stopped moving and looked deep into her dark brown eyes. “Say you will marry me.”

For a moment, he thought she would laugh. Make a joke or not agree just to be ornery. But in the end, she simply smiled at him, the most beautiful smile in the world, and said. “Yes, baby, I'll marry you.”

And then he was pumping into her again, glorying in her, loving her, until the present blended into past and they were young again, celebrating her saying yes to his marriage proposal by making love on top of their cheap plywood dresser, until her breaths started coming out in short gasps. And they both shattered at the same time, their souls exploding into a thousand pieces and reforming in the present as two people who loved each other openly and honestly.

As they came down, breathing hard, Eva let out a shaky laugh and batted her eyes at him. “I hope that didn't come too late, Lexie.”

He laughed himself, hardly able to believe his luck, that this woman was now his wife, that she had given him the son he hadn't even known he needed, that she could still make him instantly hard again with just a bat of her pretty brown eyes.

“Kotenok, it is never too late. I think we have proven that.”

Then he started to move inside her again.