



# Hostage with Benefits

**Author:** *Petra Moore*

**Category:** Romance

**Description:** When struggling graphic designer Natalia Petrova gets kidnapped by a dangerous Russian enforcer over the shipment her deadbeat father stole, she is supposed to be afraid. But she isn't. Instead, she is bantering with her captor, getting cooking lessons from his housekeeper, and having the most mind-blowing sex of her life.

Mikhail Volkov has spent years building walls around his heart. He is cold, controlled, and untouchable. But this smart-mouthed American hostage who cracks jokes instead of cowering in fear is doing something impossible: she's making him feel things. When she looks at him like he's a man instead of a monster, his self-control shatters completely.

The shipment gets returned, but Mikhail can't let her go.

Now this ruthless enforcer who's never begged for anything in his life is about to beg for the one thing he can't live without: her love.

**Total Pages (Source):** 13

# Page 1

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I didn't ask to be kidnapped on a random Tuesday.

Tuesdays were objectively the worst day of the week. Monday at least had the decency to warn you it was going to be terrible. Tuesday pretended to be normal until it stabbed you in the back.

Or in my case, until a mountain of a man with a scar bisecting his left eyebrow threw me over his shoulder in a Trader Joe's parking lot while I was still clutching a bag of frozen dumplings.

"Put me down," I said, my voice flat because honestly, the energy required to sound properly terrified was beyond me after the day I'd had. My therapist would call this a trauma response, but I called it just a usual Tuesday.

The man said nothing, just deposited me in the back of a black SUV with windows tinted so dark they were probably illegal in this state.

Probably all states. But I guessed when you were the type of person who casually kidnapped women from grocery store parking lots, vehicle regulations weren't high on your priority list.

I should have been screaming, I realized. I should have been fighting. Instead, I was wondering if my dumplings would defrost before I could get them into a freezer. If I ever saw a freezer again.

The man slid into the driver's seat. He smelled like expensive cologne. It was... not unpleasant, which was a thought I immediately tried to evict from my brain.

“Natalia Petrova?” His accent was thick. His eyes, though, were cold. The kind of blue that made you think of hypothermia.

“That depends on who’s asking and whether they plan on returning me to my apartment before my dumplings defrost.”

His eyes narrowed at me.

“I am Mikhail Volkov.” He said this like I should recognize the name. “Your father has something that belongs to me.”

Of course. Of course this was about my father. Everything terrible in my life circled back to that man.

Mikhail studied me like I was a puzzle with missing pieces.

“You will be my guest until he returns what is mine.”

Guest . That was a fancy word for hostage. But sure, let’s go with that.

“Does your... hospitality include Wi-Fi? I have a deadline with a client tomorrow. I promise I won’t contact the cops.”

For a second, he looked genuinely confused. Like the idea that I might have a job, responsibilities, a life that didn’t revolve around being kidnapped was completely foreign.

“You are not afraid,” he stated. Not a question.

I shrugged. “I’m exhausted. Fear requires energy I don’t have right now.”

An hour later, the car turned onto a private road. I wondered if anyone had seen me being taken, if anyone besides my clients would notice I was gone.

“Most people cry when they are kidnapped,” he said.

“Most people don’t have four years of therapy and only an empty savings account to show for it.” I stared out the window. “Also, I’m still deciding if this is worse than the client call I was dreading.”

His knuckles tightened on the wheel. He wore a ring on his right hand, silver with some kind of crest. It was the kind of ring that would leave a mark if it connected with someone’s face.

The car slowed as we approached a gate that looked like it belonged at a military installation rather than at a private residence. Beyond it, a house rose up against the evening sky. Mansion was probably a more accurate term for this building.

“Welcome to my home,” Mikhail said as the gates parted.

“Charming,” I replied. “Very supervillain chic.”

I caught the briefest upturn of the corner of his mouth. It was just a twitch of his lip, like his face had momentarily forgotten its job was to be a marble statue.

He stopped the car, then opened the door for me and urged me to follow him.

Inside, the mansion was exactly what you’d expect from someone who casually kidnapped people on weekdays: minimal but expensive furniture, no personal photos, tacky golden ornaments everywhere. The kind of place that looked like a movie set and not a real home.

The man led me up a curved staircase, his hand not quite touching my elbow but close enough that I could feel the heat radiating from him. We stopped at a door at the end of a long hallway.

“You will stay here,” he said, pushing the door open.

The room was nicer than my apartment, which was a depressing realization. A large bed with crisp white linens. A sitting area near wide windows that probably had a view in daylight. A door that presumably led to a bathroom.

“The windows do not open,” he said. “The door will be locked from outside. If you need anything, there is an intercom by the bed.”

I nodded, still clutching my Trader Joe’s dumplings I hadn’t let go of all this time.

“My frozen stuff is going to melt,” I said, because it seemed like the only normal concern to voice in this extremely abnormal situation.

He stared at me for a beat, then held out his hand. “I will put it in the freezer.”

I hesitated, then passed him the bag. Our fingers brushed, and I noticed how warm his hands were despite his cold demeanor. He checked the contents, brow furrowing at the realization I’d really handed him a bag of frozen dumplings .

“This was going to be your dinner?” His tone made it sound like a personal offense.

“Yup,” I said. “Before the kidnapping course correction to my evening plans.”

He made a sound in the back of his throat. “I will send up proper food.”

“Thanks. Very considerate for a kidnapper.”

His eyes narrowed slightly. “You will call your father now.” He pulled a phone from his pocket. I assumed it was so that the call couldn’t be traced.

My stomach dropped. I hadn’t spoken to my father in eight months, and our last conversation had been an awkward “happy birthday” and that was it. If this guy wanted to threaten my father, I wasn’t the best way to do that, but I didn’t really have to teach a mafioso how to do his job, right? Right ?

“He won’t care,” I said quietly. “Whatever you’re hoping to accomplish by using me as leverage... it won’t work.”

Mikhail’s expression shifted subtly.

“We will see,” he said, dialing a number and holding the phone out to me.

The call connected after four rings. My father’s voice came through, speaking rapid Russian.

“Dad,” I said in English. “It’s Natalia.”

A pause. Then, “Natasha? Why are you calling from this number?”

I glanced at Mikhail, who was watching me with unnerving intensity. “I’ve been kidnapped by someone who says you stole from him.”

Another pause. Then a string of Russian curses.

“Put him on,” my father said finally.

I handed the phone to Mikhail, who took it without breaking eye contact with me. They spoke in Russian, fast, harsh words I couldn’t follow due to the speed. I caught

my name once or twice, but nothing else.

What I did understand was the way Mikhail's expression darkened, the way his knuckles whitened around the phone. Whatever my father was saying, it wasn't what Mikhail wanted to hear.

He ended the call and slipped the phone back into his pocket.

"Your father says he needs time to acquire what belongs to me," he said, voice carefully neutral.

"And what exactly did he take from you?" I asked.

"That is not your concern."

"It became my concern when you threw me over your shoulder in a parking lot."

A muscle ticked in his jaw. "You will stay here until the matter is resolved."

"And how long will that be?"

"As long as necessary." He moved toward the door. "Use the intercom if you need anything. Dinner will be sent up soon."

I sank onto the edge of the bed after he left.

The reality of my situation was finally starting to penetrate the shock.

I was being held hostage in a mansion by a man who looked like he could break me in half without even trying, all because my father, who wouldn't even notice if I disappeared off the face of the earth, had stolen something valuable.

My laptop was still in my car, parked at Trader Joe's. My client was expecting completed mockups by noon tomorrow.

I pulled out my phone from my pocket, but there was no signal. Of course.

Pressing the heels of my hands against my eyes, I allowed myself exactly thirty seconds of panic. Thirty seconds to feel the fear, the anger, and the complete absurdity of the situation.

Then I got up, went to the bathroom, and splashed cold water on my face. I dried off with a towel and stared at my reflection.

Okay , I told myself. Practical steps. First, don't get killed. Second, figure out what Dad stole. Third, don't miss my work deadline.

I walked back into the bedroom and pressed the intercom button.

"Yes?" Mikhail's voice came through immediately.

"I really need that Wi-Fi password," I said. "And preferably my laptop from my car."



## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 2:47 am*

There was noise outside my door and it was getting closer.

When the door opened, it wasn't Mikhail standing there but a woman old enough to be my grandmother. She had salt-and-pepper hair pulled into a tight bun and wore a simple black dress with an apron. Her face was a map of deep lines, none of which suggested a life spent smiling.

"Miss Petrova," she said, her accent even thicker than Mikhail's. "Dinner is served."

I blinked at her. "I thought food was being sent up."

She made a dismissive noise in the back of her throat. "Guests eat at table, not in bedrooms like prisoners."

"I am a hostage," I pointed out.

"Mr. Volkov says guest. I prepare dining room for guest."

Behind her, I could see a younger woman in a maid's uniform and a man in what looked like security attire hovering in the hallway. The security guy looked uncomfortable; he and I both knew this wasn't in the kidnapping playbook.

I considered refusing, but honestly, I was starving, and the idea of real food after the day I'd had was too tempting. Plus, there was something almost comical about being force-fed a proper dinner by an elderly Russian housekeeper who seemed to have opinions about hostage protocol.

“Fine,” I said, getting up from the bed. “But I still need that Wi-Fi password. I have work to do.”

The old woman clicked her tongue. “Work, work, work. First, you eat.”

She turned and walked away, clearly expecting me to follow. I did, because what else was I going to do? The security guy fell into step behind me.

The dining room was... a lot. A crystal chandelier, a dark wood table, and paintings on the walls in golden frames. Two places had been set at one end, with candles lit between them. It was like I had been kidnapped into a costume drama set.

“Sit,” the old woman said, pointing to one of the chairs.

I sat.

The younger woman poured water into my glass.

“You speak Russian?” she asked in accented English.

“A little,” I replied in Russian, the words coming out clumsy. “Not very well.”

Their eyes lit up like I’d just performed a miracle.

“She speaks!” the older woman said in Russian, turning to her colleague. “And she’s pretty too, in that American way. Thin, but we can fix that.”

“Good bones,” the younger woman agreed in Russian. “And smart; you can tell from her eyes.”

“Um, I can understand you,” I said in English. “I might be rusty when speaking, but I

understand you.”

They exchanged a look like I’d just passed some test I didn’t know I was taking.

“Good,” the older woman said, switching back to English. “I am Galina. This is Irina. That one—” she jerked her head toward the security guy “—is Dmitri. He does not talk much.”

“Nice to meet you all,” I said, because apparently my mother’s insistence on politeness had survived even kidnapping. “I’m Natalia.”

“We know,” Irina said while smiling, but her eyes were assessing me; I could tell. “Mr. Volkov told us.”

“Did he also tell you why I’m here?” I asked.

Another look between them.

“Yes. You are a guest,” Galina said firmly.

Before I could point out the absurdity of that statement, the door at the far end of the dining room opened, and Mikhail walked in. He stopped short when he saw the setup, his eyes narrowing.

“What is this?” he asked Galina in Russian.

“Dinner,” she replied calmly. “For you and the young lady.”

“I said to send food to her room.”

“It is not proper,” Galina said, unmoved by his glare. “You said she is a guest. Your

father would never?—”

“My father is not here,” he cut her off sharply, but his stance softened. “This is my home.”

Galina simply stared at him until, with a barely audible sigh, he moved to the chair opposite mine and sat down.

“Leave us,” he told the staff.

Galina and Irina exchanged another one of those looks before departing, Dmitri following silently behind them. But the door to what I assumed was the kitchen remained conspicuously ajar.

“Your staff seems... interesting,” I said.

Mikhail’s jaw tightened. “Galina has been with my family since before I was born. She believes this gives her certain... liberties.”

“Like setting up dinners for hostages?”

Something that might have been amusement flickered in his eyes. “She does not approve of my methods.”

“So she’s trying to, what, civilize the situation?”

“She is...” He paused, seeming to search for the right words. “She is old-fashioned.”

Irina appeared with two bowls of soup, setting them down in front of us before disappearing again.

“Borscht,” Irina had said. “Galina makes the best back home in Moscow. Enjoy. ”

I ate a spoonful. It was rich and earthy and better than anything I’d planned to microwave in my apartment.

“So your family brought your stuff from Russia?” I asked, because sitting in silence with my kidnapper seemed worse somehow.

“Some of them.” He took a sip of his water. “Galina refused to stay behind.”

“Doesn’t seem like she takes orders well.”

That same almost-amusement. “She believes she knows better than everyone else.”

“And does she?”

“Often, yes.”

We fell into silence as we ate. From the kitchen, I could hear low murmurs in Russian, clearly Galina and Irina discussing us. I caught fragments: “...good Russian girl,” “...speaks English with no accent,” “...might be good for him...”

Mikhail’s expression darkened. He’d heard it too.

“So,” I said, pushing my empty soup bowl aside. “About that Wi-Fi password.”

His eyes met mine. “You are being held hostage, and your concern is still internet access? Are you one of those people who can’t live without their phone?”

“No, but I have a work deadline tomorrow. A client is expecting mockups by noon.”

“And this matters to you? Now ?”

“Bills don’t stop coming because I’ve been kidnapped.”

Irina appeared to take our bowls and set down plates of what looked like beef stroganoff. As she leaned between us, she said quietly in Russian to Mikhail, “She is practical. This is good in a woman.”

Mikhail’s efforts not to roll his eyes were in vain.

After Irina left, he said, “Your father. You two are not close.”

It wasn’t a question, but I answered anyway. “No.”

“Yet he named you Natalia. A Russian name.”

“My mother was half-Russian. Hence the name, hence the rusty language skills. It’s not my father’s doing.”

“And your mother, she is...? ”

“Dead. Car accident when I was fourteen.”

“I am sorry,” he said right away.

I shrugged, an automatic response to that particular brand of empty sympathy I’d perfected over the years. “It was a long time ago.”

“And since then, it has been just you and your father?”

“No,” I said, keeping my voice flat. “Since then it’s been just me.”

He didn't ask for clarification, which was good because I didn't want to give it. Instead, he cut his meat and started eating.

"Your work," he said after a moment. "What is it that cannot wait?"

"I'm a freelance graphic designer. The client is a tech startup with more money than sense and a CEO who changes his mind every six hours. This project will pay my rent and then some."

"And if you miss this deadline?"

"They find someone else. I don't get paid. My rent doesn't get paid. I die on the streets. Circle of life."

His lips twitched. "This will be resolved soon."

"Define 'soon'."

"When your father returns what he took."

"Which is what, exactly?"

Mikhail's expression closed again. "That is not your concern, I told you."

"We've been over this. It became my concern when you threw me over your shoulder in a parking lot."

He set down his fork with deliberate care. "You seem remarkably unconcerned about your situation."

"Panic takes energy I don't have. And fear doesn't change circumstances; it just

makes them harder to think through.”

“Is that what your therapist taught you?”

I stilled. “Something like that.”

Dessert arrived. It was some kind of honey cake that, under normal circumstances, I would have appreciated. Now my stomach was too knotted to enjoy it.

“The Wi-Fi password,” I said again as Irina cleared our plates. “I need my laptop and the password.”

Mikhail’s eyes narrowed. “Your priorities are concerning.”

“My priorities are practical. Look, either this gets resolved quickly and I need to make my deadline, or it doesn’t and I’m stuck here long enough that I’ll need the money when you let me go. Either way, I need to work.”

“Perhaps you should be more concerned with your safety.”

“Are you planning to hurt me?”

He looked almost offended. “No.”

“Then my most pressing concern is work. Thus, I need that password. And my laptop, preferably.”

Galina came in with tea, setting down delicate cups in front of us.

“See, she works too much,” she said to Mikhail in Russian. “Like you. Maybe that is good. She understands.”



Mikhail stood abruptly. “ Enough .”

I stood too. “The password.”

“You are the most infuriating hostage I have ever encountered.”

“I’m the only hostage you’ve ever encountered who cares about paying her bills .”

He turned and stalked from the room. I followed, ignoring Galina’s knowing look.

“Mikhail,” I called after him in the hallway. “The password. My laptop. Come on .”

He spun around so quickly I nearly ran into him. Before I could step back, he moved forward, backing me up against the wall. His arm came up beside my head, caging me in.

“You think this is a game ?” His eyes peered into mine. “You think this is a situation where you can make demands ?”

He was close enough that I could feel the heat from his body and smell that expensive cologne again. My heart was hammering, but not entirely from fear.

My eyes dropped to his mouth without my brain’s permission. Full lips pressed into a hard line, the bottom one slightly fuller than the top. I had the sudden, insane thought of what they might feel like against mine, against my neck, against?—

He noticed. Of course he noticed. His eyes narrowed, and for a moment, the tension between us shifted into something else entirely.

Then he laughed, a short, bitter sound. “You really are as fucked up in the head as I am, aren’t you? Four years of therapy, you said, yeah? Must have been a scam.”

He pushed away from the wall and walked off, leaving me breathing hard, my skin burning where he'd been close to it.

I made my way back to the hostage room, equal parts furious and uncomfortably aroused. The door locked behind me, and I sank onto the bed.

What was wrong with me? Stockholm syndrome didn't set in this fast, did it? No, this was just... adrenaline. Basic biology confused by danger signals... right ?

I tried to distract myself by examining the room more carefully, looking for anything I might have missed. But my body was still humming with this unwanted awareness that I was horny , embarrassingly so. All this tension was coiling into a tight spiral...

After twenty minutes of restless pacing around the room, I gave up. I was alone, locked in, and overwhelmed by a day that had contained more bizarre emotional whiplash than the past year combined. If there was ever a time when self-care of this manner was justified, this was it.

I lay back on the bed, sliding a hand beneath the waistband of my jeans. I closed my eyes, trying to conjure up safe, generic fantasies (not blue eyes and full lips and strong hands that could lift me effortlessly and throw me over a shoulder).

I was just finding a rhythm with my fingers when the door opened without warning.

Mikhail stood in the doorway, my laptop bag in one hand (he had really gotten it?!). He took in the scene: me on the bed, hand down my pants, face flushed.

"Don't stop on my account," he said, as he stepped inside. He set the laptop down on the desk. "The password is on a sticky note inside. I'll leave you to... finish your business."

## Page 3

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I should have been mortified. I should have yanked my hand out of my pants and apologized or made some excuse. That's what a normal person would have done.

But something had short-circuited in my brain over the course of this endless Tuesday. Maybe it was the stress, the fear, or the absurdity of my situation. Maybe it was just that I'd finally reached the limit of how many fucks I could give in one day and had simply run out.

So instead of stopping, I held his gaze and moved my hand deliberately beneath the fabric. My whole body woke up, and goosebumps covered my skin all over.

His pupils dilated instantly, darkening those blue eyes. I heard the slight catch in his breath and saw the tightening of his jaw. He hadn't expected that.

For a long moment, he didn't move. Then, with deliberate slowness, he closed the door behind him, locked it from the inside, and turned to me fully.

He crossed the room in two steps, never breaking eye contact.

My heart hammered against my ribs, but I didn't stop and moved my fingers again. Some distant part of my brain was screaming that this was insane and dangerous, but my body wasn't listening anymore .

He looked down at me, his expression unreadable.

“This is a very bad idea.”

“I’ve been having a lot of those lately,” I said, my voice huskier than I’d intended.  
“Join the club.”

“I could hurt you.”

“You said you weren’t planning to.”

“This is different.” He sat on the edge of the bed but didn’t touch me. “There are many ways to hurt someone.”

I stilled my hand but didn’t remove it. “I’m a big girl. I can make my own bad decisions.”

“Is that what this is?”

“Isn’t it?”

His hand moved to my wrist, where it disappeared down my jeans. “If we do this, there are rules.”

“Of course there are,” I said, unable to keep the edge from my voice. “You seem like a man who likes rules.”

“You can say stop at any time. You can change your mind. You can?—”

“Are you going to keep talking, or are you going to fuck me?”

Something flashed in his eyes—irritation, amusement, desire, all tangled together. Then he leaned down and pressed his lips to mine, so gently it was barely a kiss at all.

I’d expected force and demand. This tenderness caught me off guard more than any

aggression could have. He kissed me like I was made of glass, like I might shatter if he pressed too hard.

When he pulled back, his expression had softened. He brushed a strand of hair from my face.

“Is this how you treat all your hostages?” I asked, because silence felt dangerous.

“Only the ones that get on my nerves.” His hand wrapped around my wrist and pulled my hand out of my jeans.

With his other hand, he cupped my face, thumb tracing my cheekbone.

And it was nice, objectively. He clearly knew what he was doing. But after the day I’d had of being kidnapped, confronting my useless father, having my life turned inside out, this careful treatment felt inadequate.

I reached up, took his hand from my face, and placed it firmly on my breast, pressing his fingers until he got the message and squeezed.

His eyebrows rose slightly. “Not as fragile as you look, are you?”

“Nope. Never have been.”

His expression shifted, and his grip tightened. I arched into it, encouraging him to continue. His other hand slid under my shirt, but he was still too cautious.

I rose and tugged at his belt. “Too many clothes.”

He helped me undress him, revealing scars scattered across tanned skin and muscles built for function rather than show. I ran my fingers over a puckered mark near his

shoulder that could only have been a bullet wound.

He undressed me with the same deliberate care that was starting to drive me insane, his eyes darkening further as each piece of clothing fell away.

When I was naked beneath him, he paused, looking down at me so intensely that under any other circumstance, I would have been self-conscious, but somehow right now, I wasn't.

His hands explored me slowly, mapping each curve and hollow with maddening thoroughness.

It felt good, of course it did, but I was wound too tight for this gentle exploration.

I needed release, catharsis, something to break the tension that had been building since he'd thrown me over his shoulder hours ago.

I guided his hand between my legs, showing him how I liked to be touched.

He was a quick learner, his fingers finding a rhythm that had me gasping, slipping in and out, making obscene wet sounds and flicking my clit with his thumb.

But each time I approached the edge, he'd slow down, draw back, keeping me suspended in pleasure without release.

"Please," I finally said, frustration making my voice rough.

"Please what, Natalia?" His accent thickened when he was aroused, rolling my name on his tongue just so.

"Harder," I said, then when he still held back: "Stop treating me like I'll break and

fuck me.”

He chuckled, the sound vibrating against my neck where his lips pressed into my skin a second later. “You Americans, always in such a hurry.”

“This American is going to lose her mind if you don’t—” I guided his other hand to my ass, making him grab it roughly. “Like that. God, just— fuck me like you hate me .”

He went still. For a moment, I thought I’d gone too far, crossed some invisible line. Then he pulled back to look at me, his expression suddenly intense in a very serious way.

“I don’t hate you,” he said quietly.

“It’s just an expression?—”

“But if that’s what my hostage needs,” he cut me off, his voice dropping to a register that made my pulse jump, “then that’s what she’ll get.”

The shift was immediate and electric. His fingers dug into my skin. His mouth found mine in a kiss that was all demand and hunger. He pinned my wrists above my head with one hand, the other gripping my hip hard enough to leave marks.

“Is this what you want?” he murmured into my ear. “To be taken like this?”

“Yes,” I gasped as his teeth grazed my neck.

He positioned himself between my thighs, the blunt pressure of his cock against me making me arch upward. “Say it again, you want it like this?”

“Yes.”

He pushed into me slowly, the stretch and fullness making me gasp. Once fully seated, he stilled, his breath coming hard against my neck.

“Move,” I urged, trying to shift my hips.

“Demanding, even now.” But he began to move, setting a pace that was still too controlled for my liking.

I wrapped my legs around him, pulling him deeper. “More.”

His rhythm faltered, before resuming. “So greedy,” he growled. “Demanding what you want.”

He groaned, his control slipping further. “What more do you need, Natalia?”

“Nothing,” I gasped as he hit a spot that made me see stars behind my eyes. “Just like this.”

His movements grew more forceful, less controlled. “You like being fucked by the man who kidnapped you?”

The words sent a shameful thrill through me. “Yes.”

“Fuck.” Next, he growled something in Russian that my brain couldn’t register, even though I knew the language. But his rhythm grew erratic, and I was close— so close —hovering on the edge.

“Look at me,” he demanded.



I opened my eyes, meeting his gaze. And just like that, I was hypnotized. I couldn't look away as pleasure built to an unbearable peak, a spiral coiling tightly in my core.

"Come for me, Natalia," he growled. "Let me feel what that's like."

The command, or maybe just the way he said my name, pushed me over the edge. Release crashed through me in wave after wave, my walls clenching around him as I cried out with a hoarse voice. I was never this vocal usually, but fuck if this wasn't unusual sex.

His rhythm stuttered, then his breathing grew harsher as his own orgasm followed, his cock throbbing, pumping me full of his cum.

He pressed his face into my neck, a string of Russian words I couldn't translate fast enough in my mind falling from his lips.

As our breathing slowed, he made no move to withdraw. Instead, one hand moved between us, his fingers finding where we were still joined.

"Stay still," he hummed against my ear. "Let your body drink every last drop of it."

The possessive tone in his voice sent an unexpected aftershock of pleasure through me. I should have found it weird, maybe even concerning. Instead, I felt my walls tightening around him again, my body responding to his command.

He made a sound of approval, his lips brushing my temple. "Good fucking girl. You're maddening."

The weight of him on top of me like this should've been uncomfortable, but somehow wasn't. Instead, I felt... present in my body in a way I hadn't been in a long time. Like he was an emotional support weighted blanket.

Finally, he shifted, withdrawing carefully and moving to lie beside me. I expected him to get up to leave. Instead, he pulled me against him, arranging us so my back was to his chest, his arm draped over my waist.

We lay in silence for a while, the reality of what we'd just done slowly seeping back in. I'd had sex with my kidnapper. Really good sex. The kind of sex that made you forget your own name for a few minutes. And now we were... cuddling?

He released me a minute later and got up, gathering his clothes from the floor. I watched him dress, noting the deliberate way he avoided looking at me now.

"Your laptop," he said eventually. "The password is on a sticky paper inside."

"Thanks," I said, my voice carefully neutral.

He paused at the door, his back to me. For a moment, I thought he might say something else, something to acknowledge what had just happened between us. Instead, he simply nodded and left, the door closing behind him and the lock clicking into place.

I lay there for a few minutes, processing. My body felt used in the best possible way. My mind, however, was a riot of conflicting thoughts.

Eventually, I got up, wrapped myself in a blanket, and retrieved the laptop from the bag. True to his word, the Wi-Fi password was on a sticky note inside.

I set up at the small desk, logged in, and opened the design files I needed to finish .

Work had always been my refuge; I buried myself in it when life got too complicated. Now, as I lost myself in color palettes and typography, I tried not to think about what I'd just done. About Mikhail's hands on my body, the sound of his voice in my ear,

the way he'd looked at me when?—

No. Work now. Existential crisis about sleeping with my kidnapper later.

I was deep in my flow state hours later when the door opened again. I'd expected it to be Galina, but it was Mikhail who entered, carrying a tray.

"You need to eat if you're gonna be working through the night," he said, setting it down beside my laptop.

"Thanks." I saved my work but didn't look up at him.

He didn't leave. Instead, he stood there, watching me work for a moment.

"Is it all good?" he asked, nodding at the screen.

"Sure." I wasn't sure if he was genuinely interested or just making awkward conversation.

"Your client will be satisfied?"

"My client is never satisfied. But he'll pay."

He made a sound that might have been amusement.

I finally looked up at him. He'd showered; his hair was still damp at the temples. He'd changed into a black t-shirt that emphasized the breadth of his shoulders and the size of his arms.

"Any word from my father?" I asked, because it seemed safer than commenting on how good he looked.

His expression darkened. “Yes. There is... a complication.”

“What kind of complication?”

“The kind that means you will be here longer than expected.”

Our eyes met, and something unspoken passed between us. What had happened between us had just become more complicated by an order of magnitude.

“I see,” I said. “Good thing you let me use the Wi-Fi, then.”

His lips twitched, almost a smile. “Yes. Good thing.”

He turned to leave .

I turned back to my laptop, but the design on the screen seemed less important somehow. I thought about the consequences of what we’d done. About the man who’d kidnapped me, then fucked me, and then brought me food.

Stockholm syndrome , my rational brain supplied. But it felt like something else, something more complicated than that.

I shook my head and focused on the screen. One problem at a time:

Finish the design.

Meet the deadline.

Figure out what my father had stolen.

Deal with the fact that I’d just had the best sex of my life with a Russian criminal...

later.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 2:47 am*

I woke up wondering if last night's orgasms had permanently altered my brain chemistry.

I stared at the ceiling, inventorying the soreness between my legs, the light bruising on my wrists, and the memory of Mikhail's weight pressing me into the mattress. What kind of person sleeps with their kidnapper?

This kind, apparently.

A knock at the door jolted me from my existential crisis. I yanked the sheet up to my chin.

"Who is it?" I called, my voice scratchy from sleep. And screaming. Definitely some light screaming was done last night.

Mikhail entered carrying a mug. He'd already dressed in another one of those criminally well-tailored suits. His hair was styled, and I had the absurd urge to run my fingers through it just to mess it up a little.

"Good morning," he said, setting the mug on the nightstand. The smell of coffee hit me, and my stomach growled in response.

"Morning." I sat up, keeping the sheet tucked around me. "Do kidnappers usually provide room service? Is this what that is?"

He exhaled sharply through his nose. "No. This isn't room service."

“What are you doing here, Mikhail?”

“I wanted to tell you that you are free to move around the house. The door will remain unlocked. You can lock it from the inside for privacy.”

“Upgrading my accommodations already? What did I do to deserve that?”

His gaze traveled deliberately down to where the sheet covered my body, then back up to my face. “I think you know.”

Heat bloomed across my skin. “So that’s how it works? Sex for hostage privileges?”

“No,” he said sharply. “That is not how it works. Do not suggest it again.”

The shift in his tone was jarring.

“Sorry,” I said, not entirely sure why I was apologizing. “I just meant?—”

“I know what you meant.” He moved toward the door. “Join me for breakfast in thirty minutes. That is not a request.”

After he left, I dragged myself out of bed and into the shower, letting hot water wash away the evidence of last night’s activities.

My mind kept replaying fragments—his hands pinning mine above my head, his mouth on my neck, the way he’d looked at me when I came, and my body responded with an embarrassing eagerness for a repeat performance.

Cold shower. Definitely needed a cold shower.

I dressed in yesterday’s clothes, grimacing at the wrinkles. My laptop sat on the desk,

reminding me of my deadline. I should be working, but the prospect of breakfast with Mikhail was far more interesting. I took a sip of the coffee and took a deep breath.

What was wrong with me?

The dining room was just as intimidating in the daylight. Mikhail sat at the head of the table, reading something on his phone. He looked up when I entered, his eyes tracking me as I approached.

He nodded, gesturing to the chair on his right. The table was set with food: pastries, fruit, eggs, and things I didn't recognize but smelled amazing.

"Did you sleep well?" he asked as I sat down.

"Is that a serious question?"

His lips twitched. "Fine, just eat."

I reached for a pastry. As I ate, I caught him watching me with that same intensity from last night; occasionally, he would do this thing where he added one more of the things I already had on my plate.

"I can feed myself, you know," I said after the third time.

"Clearly not. You are too thin."

"I maintain a perfectly healthy weight for someone surviving on my levels of income and anxiety."

He frowned. "Your job and the deadline are giving you anxiety now?"



“No, it’s fine now. I have time to finish everything.” I surprised myself with how easily I dismissed it.

“Good.” He looked pleased. “There are more important things for you to do than work right now.”

“Like what? Being a good hostage?”

“Like enjoying breakfast.” He reached for the coffee pot, refilling my cup. “And perhaps getting to know your host.”

“Is that what we’re calling it now? You’re hosting me?”

“Would you prefer I call it kidnapping?”

“I’d prefer it if you were honest, yeah.”

Something in his expression shifted. “Then I will be honest. I have business to attend to today. You are free to explore the house, but do not leave the building. The security system will alert me if you try.”

“What kind of business does a kidnapper have this early in the day?”

“The kind that ensures you remain my only hostage.” He stood, straightening his already perfect suit. “Make yourself at home, Natalia.”

The way he said my name, rolling the syllables with that accent, made my insides liquefy. I watched him leave, appreciating the view of a man in a wickedly well-tailored suit despite myself.

Make myself at home. In my kidnapper’s mansion. After sleeping with him. Sure.

Perfectly normal fucking Wednesday.

I found the kitchen by following the scent of freshly baked bread. Galina stood at a massive island counter, flour up to her elbows, muttering in Russian.

She looked up when I entered. “Ah, Miss Petrova. Good. You help.”

Before I could protest, she’d shoved an apron at me and positioned me beside her at the counter.

“I don’t really cook,” I started to say.

“Not cook. Bake different.” She demonstrated kneading the dough. “Like this. You try.”

I mimicked her movements, surprised when she nodded approval.

“You have good hands for this. Strong.” She looked at me, assessing. “But too thin. American girls don’t eat enough.”

“I eat plenty,” I protested.

“Today breakfast, yes. But before? No. I can tell.” She poked at my ribs through my shirt. “We fix this fast.”

For the next hour, she worked me like a sous chef, all while interrogating me about my life, my job, my apartment, my family.

Galina narrowed her eyes at me. “You think this is normal kidnapping? If normal, you be in basement, no nice bed.”

“I’m aware of the luxury hostage accommodations, thank you.”

“Not hostage. Guest .” Her tone suggested this distinction was important to her.

“Guests can leave whenever they want, Galina.”

She waved a flour-covered hand dismissively. “Details. Important thing is, Mr. Volkov likes you.”

“Because I’m useful leverage against my father. ”

Galina’s laugh was like a rusty gate. “Your father. Pah. That man worth nothing to Mr. Volkov now.”

I paused in my dough-shaping. “What do you mean?”

She realized she’d said too much and busied herself with the oven. “Nothing. Not my business to say.”

“Galina—”

“You will make good wife,” she said, abruptly changing the subject. “Strong. Not afraid. You learn cook now too.”

“Wife? I’ve been here less than two days!”

“Time means nothing.” She tapped her chest. “I see how Mr. Volkov looks at you. Not like business. Like hunger .”

My face heated. “That’s just... physical.”

“No, no. Mr. Volkov has many women for physical needs. Models, actresses. They bore him after one night.” She leaned closer, lowering her voice. “He watches you on security cameras. He can’t stop thinking about you.”

That should have creeped me out. Instead, something warm and dangerous churned in my stomach. “He’s making sure I don’t escape.”

“Tell yourself this if it makes you feel better.” She patted my cheek, leaving a smear of flour. “But I know. He needs a good Russian wife. Someone strong who won’t break. Pretty with good hips to make kids.”

“I’m not dating or wife material; I’m a hostage.”

“Hostage, girlfriend, wife, they are all labels.” She dismissed them with a wave. “I see how he looks at you . How you look at him .”

“I don’t look at him like anything,” I protested.

“Lie to Galina if you want. Don’t lie to yourself.” She opened the oven and gestured for me to slide in the tray of whatever we’d been making. “Now, we make soup. You chop vegetables.”

After escaping Galina’s culinary boot camp, I wandered the mansion. The place was massive. I found myself outside a heavy wooden door I assumed was Mikhail’s office, hesitating only briefly before trying the handle.

It opened. Either an oversight or a test by my kidnapper.

The files in his office were scattered, but it was easy to piece everything together. A shipment of drugs was missing, stolen by my father.

I was trying to decipher Mikhail's handwriting when I heard footsteps in the hallway.

I moved to the bookshelf, pretending to browse. Dmitri appeared in the doorway, his expression suspicious.

"Looking for something?" he asked, his accent thicker than Mikhail's.

"Just exploring. Mikhail said I could move around freely." I pulled a random book from the shelf. "I like to read."

Dmitri looked unconvinced but nodded. "Mr. Volkov will return soon."

"Great. Thanks for the update."

He lingered a moment longer, then left, but I knew my snooping time was over. I returned to my room, my mind racing with what I'd found. Whatever my father had stolen was drug-related, and it was big enough to warrant kidnapping me.

I was contemplating this mystery when Mikhail returned in the late afternoon. He opened my door without knocking, looking annoyingly perfect despite whatever "business" he'd been conducting.

"We're going out," he announced.

"Are we now?"

"You need clothes."

I looked down at my wrinkled outfit. "What's wrong with these?"

"Everything." He stepped closer, his presence filling the room. "Unless you plan to

wear the same clothes until this situation resolves.”

“And how long will that be?”

His expression hardened. “Longer than we initially expected.”

“So we’re going shopping?”

“No.” His voice was flat, but his eyes said something different. “ We are going to a store. You will get clothes. Then we return. This isn’t a shopping trip.”

“What if I don’t want to go?”

“Then you can continue wearing the same outfit and washing it in the sink each night.”

I sighed dramatically, suppressing a smile. “Fine. Then shopping it is.”

I tried not to think about how bizarre this was: shopping with my kidnapper.

“Get whatever you need,” Mikhail said, trailing behind me at the mall with thinly veiled discomfort. He clearly wasn’t a mall person.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 2:47 am*

I headed straight for the basics. I got a few plain t-shirts, a pair of jeans, a pair of sweatpants, leggings, and several pairs of underwear. As I sorted through my options, I felt Mikhail's eyes on me, tracking my every movement.

"You're not getting anything nice?" he asked as I sorted the stuff I wanted to try on and the ones I would get without trying on.

"These are nice."

He frowned. "I meant something..." he gestured vaguely, "not sweatpants."

"I don't need cocktail dresses. I'm a hostage."

His frown deepened, but he didn't argue. I headed for the changing rooms. Mikhail settled into a chair outside, looking comically out of place among the bored boyfriends and husbands.

I tried everything on quickly, but when I emerged with my selections, Mikhail had disappeared. I found him across the store, walking towards me with a white and blue flower-patterned sundress in his hands.

"What's that?" I asked.

"Something that isn't sweatpants." He handed me the bag. The blue color almost matched his eyes.

"I don't need?—"

“Try it on.”

It wasn't a request. I sighed and returned to the changing room, slipping into the dress. It fit perfectly... how did he even know what size to get? I barely knew what to pick out for myself.

When I stepped out, his expression changed to one of hunger as he took me in.

“Turn,” he said, voice low.

I turned, the dress swishing below my knees.

He moved behind me, his hands finding my shoulders. “The zipper is caught.”

His fingers worked the zipper, deliberately slow, his breath warm on my neck. We were hidden from the main walkway but still in public.

“Beautiful,” he murmured, but he wasn't looking at the dress. His eyes met mine in the mirror.

Something reckless stirred in me. Here we were, as if he hadn't kidnapped me, as if I hadn't spent the morning snooping through his office, as if last night hadn't happened.

I turned to face him. “I need to try to take it off. Help me with this?”

His eyes darkened further as I guided his hands to the bow at the back of the dress. Once loosened, I let it fall.

“Perhaps I should assist you in the changing room,” he whispered.



“Perhaps you should.”

We barely made it inside. He closed the curtain, and before I could realize what was going on, his mouth was on mine, hungry and demanding. I backed against the wall, pulling him with me, my hands already working at his belt.

“What are you doing?” he asked against my lips.

“Thanking you for the shopping trip and last night.” I sank to my knees, looking up at him. “Unless you want me to stop?”

His answer was to tangle his fingers in my hair, guiding me forward. I freed his cock, which was already hard and straining against his boxers. I took him in my mouth, savoring the way his breath hitched, the way his control slipped with each stroke of my tongue on the underside of his length .

For a man who’d kidnapped me, who’d upended my life without warning, making him lose this precious control felt like reclaiming some of my own power.

He tried to stay quiet; we were both painfully aware of the people outside, but when I took him deeper, I felt the tremor in his thighs and heard the whispered Russian curses above me.

“Natalia,” he groaned, the warning clear in his tone.

I didn’t stop. I wanted this; I wanted to make him come apart, wanted to know I could affect him as much as he affected me. I wanted to see how fast I could make this restrained man come.

He didn’t even last a minute of me taking him down my throat. He didn’t push in even once, just let me do my thing as he bit into his fist while his thighs trembled.

When he came, it was with a shudder and a gasp. The hot pulse of him down my throat made me press my own thighs together, suddenly aware of how wet my panties were.

I sat back on my heels, oddly satisfied with myself, licking my lips and then lapping up the still-leaking cum from his head.

He pulled me to my feet at once, his expression almost reverent as he tucked his cock away. “You continue to surprise me.”

“Good. I’d hate to be predictable.”

“If you want something, it’s yours; no need for this, but I’m not complaining.”

I shook my head. “I don’t want things.”

“What do you want, then?”

“I want you to return the favor tonight.”

His eyes darkened with promise. “I’ll have you chained to my bed, writhing with pleasure until you pass out, then.”

I blinked. “That’s a bit dramatic, don’t you think?”

“You haven’t seen what I can do with my mouth yet.” He straightened my dress. “I think I’m appropriately dramatic. And I’m getting the dress.”

The drive back was charged with anticipation. I sat beside Mikhail in the back of the SUV, a respectable distance between us. Dmitri drove, occasionally glancing at us in the rearview mirror .

Back at the mansion, Galina met us at the door, eyeing the bags with approval. “Good. Now you have proper clothes. Dinner in one hour.”

Mikhail nodded. “We’ll be there.”

“We?” I raised an eyebrow.

“Unless you prefer to eat alone?”

“No, it’s just... Is this gonna be a daily thing?”

“Yes.” He carried my bags upstairs, depositing them in my room. “One hour. Wear the dress.”

It was an order, not a request. Oddly, I didn’t mind.

After he left, I sorted through my new wardrobe, still bewildered by what had happened today.

My kidnapper had taken me shopping, let me blow him in a changing room, and now we were having a semi-formal dinner together.

This was beyond Stockholm syndrome; this was a whole new psychological disorder.

I changed into the blue dress anyway.

Dinner was an elaborate affair, complete with wine and candles. Galina had outdone herself, presenting course after course with obvious pride. She kept giving me knowing looks every time she served a course, as if we shared a secret. We didn’t.

Mikhail watched me eat with that same satisfaction from breakfast, occasionally

reaching across to refill my wine glass.

It was strange how easy and natural it felt, as if we were on a date, not hostage and mafioso playing house.

“Your father,” he said eventually. The shift in topic was jarring. “You truly have no relationship with him?”

I set down my fork. “None worth mentioning. The last time I heard from him was on my birthday eight months ago.”

“And yet, when I called him about you, he seemed concerned.”

“Concerned about what you’d do to me? I doubt that. I think he’s just concerned you know that he stole it and are coming for him.”

Mikhail studied me. “You are very perceptive.”

“I’ve had a lifetime of practice reading people who might hurt me.”

His eyes softened. “You know I would not hurt you, Natalia. I said so last night.”

I took a sip of wine, gathering courage. “What did he steal from you, Mikhail?”

His expression closed off. “That is not your concern.”

“We’ve been over this. It became my concern when you threw me over your shoulder in a parking lot.”

“It was a shipment. Valuable. That is all you need to know.”

“How valuable?”

“Very.”

“He hasn’t returned it yet?”

“Yes,” he replied way too fast.

“Would you like dessert?” Galina’s voice broke the moment as she entered with a tray.

“No. We’re finished here.”

The look he gave me made it clear dinner might be over, but the night was just beginning.

He led me not to my room but to his. It was a larger, darker version of mine with the same expensive minimalism. The massive bed dominated the space, with dark sheets on the bed instead of the white ones in my room.

“Last chance to change your mind,” he said, his voice rough with desire.

I answered by reaching for the zipper of my dress.

He stopped me, his hands replacing mine. “Let me.”

He pulled the zipper down slowly, his knuckles brushing my spine. When the dress pooled at my feet, he stepped back, his gaze traveling over my body with undisguised hunger.

“On the bed,” he ordered.

I complied and positioned myself in the center of his bed. He removed his tie, then methodically unbuttoned his shirt.

“Arms above your head.”

I raised my arms, watching as he removed his belt. Instead of discarding it, he approached the bed, the leather dangling from his fingers.

“Do you trust me, Natalia?”

The question hung between us.

“Enough for this,” I said finally.

He nodded, understanding the line I had drawn. With deliberate movements, he wrapped the belt around my wrists, binding them together above my head.

“Too tight?”

I tested the restraint. “No.”

“Good.” He finished undressing, his body all lean muscle and scars in the dim light. When he joined me on the bed, he didn’t immediately cover me with his body. Instead, he knelt between my legs, his hands skimming up my thighs.

“I made you a promise,” he said, hooking his fingers in the waistband of my underwear and drawing them down slowly. “About having you writhing until you pass out.”

“That seems medically concerning.”

His laugh was low and genuine. “Always with the humor, even now.”

“It’s how I cope with stress.”

“Am I stressing you?” His mouth pressed against my inner thigh, making me shiver.

“In the best possible way.”

His hands pushed my thighs wider, his grip firm enough to bruise. “Tell me if it’s too much.”

Before I could react, his mouth was there, hot and insistent. I gasped, arching into the contact. He held me open, his forearms creating bruising pressure on my inner thighs as he devoured my pussy with single-minded focus.

Every swipe of his tongue, every sucking kiss drove me higher. I strained against the belt as pleasure built to an almost unbearable peak.

When he slid two fingers inside me, curling them in perfect counterpoint to his tongue, I came with a cry that probably echoed through the entire mansion. But he didn’t stop. He worked me through that orgasm and immediately started building toward another, relentless in his attention to my clit.

“Mikhail,” I gasped, “I can’t?—”

“You can.” His breath ghosted my cunt. “Be a good girl for me and give me one more.”

He slowed his pace deliberately, bringing me to the edge and then backing off. His tongue traced lazy circles around my clit without quite touching it, his fingers pumping shallowly in and out of my cunt.

Each time I neared the peak, he would ease back, keeping me suspended in that exquisite space between pleasure and release.

“Please,” I begged, my hips bucking against his grip.

He looked up at me, his eyes dark with hunger. “Say you’re mine and I’ll let you cum.”

“I’m yours,” I gasped without hesitation. I was beyond caring about the implications. I needed this. “Please, Mikhail.”

He rewarded me by sucking my clit between his lips, his fingers finding that perfect spot.

The sensation was so intense it bordered on pain; my nerves were firing all at once.

His other arm pressed harder across my thigh as he held me open, refusing to let me escape the orgasm he was determined to wring from my body.

His tongue flattened against my clit, providing the perfect pressure as his fingers worked faster, deeper. I felt myself teetering on the edge, desperate for release but almost afraid of its intensity.

“Let go,” he commanded against my skin. “Come for me.”

The second orgasm hit so much harder than the first, leaving me trembling and incoherent. Still, he continued, adding a third finger, stretching me in preparation for what I hoped would come next.

By the time he finally moved up my body, I was a limp, quivering mess. He untied my wrists, rubbing the marks gently before positioning himself between my thighs.



“Look at me,” he commanded as he pushed his cock inside.

I forced my heavy eyelids open, meeting his gaze as he filled me completely. There was something in his eyes beyond lust, a kind reverence and vulnerability I didn’t expect.

He started moving with deliberate strokes, his thick cock hitting spots that sent aftershocks of pleasure through my oversensitized body. When I wrapped my legs around him, urging him deeper, his control began to slip.

“Natalia,” he groaned, his rhythm faltering. “You feel?—”

Whatever I felt like was lost as he captured my mouth in a bruising kiss. I tasted myself on his lips, the sheer obscenity of it making me clench around him.

He broke the kiss with a curse, his movements growing more erratic. I felt myself building toward a third impossible peak, my body responding to his as if we’d been made for exactly this.

“You’re going to come again,” he growled in my ear, reaching between us to circle my clit. “This cunt is mine, and I need her to milk me for all I’ve got.”

The command in his voice, the pleasure bordering on pain, the look in his eyes, the smell of his cologne drowning out every thought in my mind, all of it combined to push me over the edge once more.

I’d forgotten how to breathe. I came, gasping for air, my pussy clenching around his cock, and he followed right after, spilling his cum deep inside.

He collapsed beside me, pulling me against his chest. For a long while, we lay in silence, our breathing gradually slowing.

The skin between my thighs was sticky with a mixture of cum from both of us, but he wouldn't let me leave the bed.

His hand traced patterns on my back, occasionally pausing, then following up with a kiss.

As I was falling sleep, I heard him murmur something in Russian against my hair. I couldn't quite catch the words though.

My last coherent thought before sleep claimed me was that my therapist would have a field day with this. Why was I finding comfort in the arms of my kidnapper? But then again, therapy had never felt as good as three orgasms in a night.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 2:47 am*

I found Galina in the kitchen the following morning, already deep in breakfast preparations. She gave me a knowing look that made me wonder if the entire household had heard last night's activities.

“Good morning, Miss Petrova,” she said, wiping her hands on her apron. “You sleep well?”

“Fine,” I mumbled, heading straight for the coffee pot.

“Mr. Volkov has business today,” she informed me. “Important meeting about the shipment.”

My ears perked up at that. “The stolen shipment? That my father stole?”

Galina's expression turned guarded. “I told you I do not discuss business.”

“But you know about it.”

She shrugged, turning back to the stove. “I know everything in this house.”

“Including what's between me and Mikhail?” I couldn't help asking.

A smile spread across her face. “Especially that. Walls not so thick as Mr. Volkov thinks they are, you know.”

I groaned, burying my face in my hands. “Great. ”

“It is normal,” she said matter-of-factly. “Healthy young people with feelings, of course there is passion.”

“We don't have feelings,” I protested automatically.

Galina snorted. “Americans always need silly labels. Always need an explanation for the heart.”

“This isn't about my heart,” I insisted. “It's about being kidnapped and developing inappropriate feelings for my captor.”

“Not captor now.” She set a plate of eggs in front of me. “Partner.”

“We are not partners!”

“No? Then what? Still hostage? Hostages don't sleep in master bedroom, and don't make him smile after years of nothing.”

“That doesn't mean anything,” I said, but my voice lacked conviction.

“It means everything,” Galina countered. “Now eat. Growing woman needs strength.”

The way she said “growing” made me pause, fork halfway to my mouth. “Galina... did Mikhail say something to you? About, um, children?”

Her eyes lit up. “Babies? You can't be pregnant already?”

“No!” I said hurriedly. “Absolutely not. I was just... he mentioned something last night.”

She nodded. “Mr. Volkov always wanted family. His father push, push, push for heir,

but Mr. Volkov say must be right woman. Must be strong woman.” She gave me an appraising look. “You are strong woman.”

I had no idea how to respond to that. The idea that Mikhail had been waiting for the “right woman” to have children with, and had somehow decided after three days that I was that woman, was simultaneously flattering and terrifying.

“I’m not looking to have children right now,” I said carefully. “I have a career, debt, a life back home.”

“Career here,” Galina said dismissively. “Mr. Volkov owns many legitimate businesses too. Need good designer sometime.”

“That’s not?—“

“Debt gone. Mr. Volkov has money.”

“You’re not listening,” I said, setting down my fork. “I barely know him. He kidnapped me three days ago. This is insane.”

Galina’s expression softened. “Love is always little bit insane, no? My husband, he stole me from dance in village. I hate him for one week. Married forty-seven years before he died.” She patted my hand. “When you know, you know.”

“This isn’t love,” I insisted. “It’s... convenience. Proximity. Biology.”

She made a dismissive noise. “Keep telling yourself this. But I see his eyes when he looks at you. Not like other women. Like you are water in the desert.”

I didn’t know how to argue with that, so I focused on my breakfast instead. But Galina wasn’t done.

“His father called this morning,” she said casually. “Very interested in you.”

I nearly choked on my eggs. “What?”

“He asked questions. How long you here, what you do, if you strong enough for family business.”

“And what did Mikhail say?” I tried to keep my voice neutral.

“He said not father's business. He said you are his concern, no one else.”

For a second hope bloomed in my chest. I dismissed it immediately a moment later.

“Galina,” I said carefully, “what exactly did my father steal? I need to know.”

She busied herself with the dishes. “Not my place to say.”

This was insane. Mikhail couldn't seriously be considering something permanent after just three days... right?

The conversation shifted as Galina asked about my family. Before I could deflect, I found myself mentioning my mother's death when I was fourteen. I expected brief sympathy, not the crushing hug Galina wrapped me in.

“You need a mother,” she declared, pulling back to look me in the eye. “I am your mother now.”

The matter-of-fact way she said it, as if adopting a hostage was perfectly normal.

“I never can have children,” Galina continued. “You can be my daughter, I help you.”

I blinked rapidly, fighting the ridiculous urge to cry. “That’s... very kind of you. But it’s not how that works.”

“Who says? Now tell me what foods your mother made for you. I will cook them for you. Make you feel better.”

“Actually, my mom was a terrible cook,” I admitted.

Galina recoiled in horror. “This explains everything! No mother’s cooking, no husband. I fix both problems now.”

“I don’t think those things are related?—”

“Of course they are! A man wants a woman who knows how to cook good food. It’s biological.”

“I’m pretty sure Mikhail didn’t kidnap me for my cooking.”

After lunch, Irina came into the kitchen and offered to show me around parts of the house I hadn’t seen yet. Whether this was part of the matchmaking campaign Mikhail’s staff were all a part of or just boredom on her part, I wasn’t sure, but I welcomed the distraction.

The mansion was even larger than I’d realized, with wings and rooms that seemed to go on forever. We passed a library filled with books in both Russian and English, a music room with a grand piano, and what appeared to be a small home theater.

“Mr. Volkov loves films,” Irina explained as we peeked inside.

“Really? He doesn’t seem like the type.”

“Many things about him would surprise you.”

Then we ended up in a room filled with security monitors showing feeds from cameras throughout the property. I spotted the entrance gate, the perimeter fence, various hallways, and rooms, including my bedroom.

Heat rushed to my face as I realized the implications. “You mean everyone has been watching?—”

“No, no!” she assured me quickly. “Only Mr. Volkov has the password for recordings. No one watches here all the time. But...” She shrugged. “The walls are not so thick. The security team makes bets.”

“Bets on what?” I asked, though I was afraid I already knew.

“How many times he makes you—” She made a crude gesture.

I was contemplating the logistics of drowning myself in the nearest toilet when a commotion from the front of the house interrupted my mortification.

Irina and I exchanged glances before hurrying toward the entrance hall. Mikhail stood just inside the door, looking annoyed as Dmitri and another security guard hovered around him. Blood stained the left sleeve of his white shirt.

“It’s nothing,” Mikhail was saying as we approached. “A scratch.”

“You need a doctor,” Galina declared, appearing from the kitchen with a first aid kit the size of a small suitcase.

“I need everyone to stop fussing,” Mikhail snapped, though he winced when Dmitri accidentally brushed against his arm.



His gaze landed on me, taking in my concerned expression. For a moment, everyone else in the room seemed to fade away.

Then Galina stepped between us, breaking the moment. “Miss Petrova will help. Everyone else, out.”

“I will?” I asked.

“Boss will behave better for you,” she said with absolute certainty. “Men are always brave for pretty women.”

Before I could protest, the staff had dispersed, leaving me alone with Mikhail and the first aid kit.

“Need something, boss?” I asked, raising an eyebrow.

His jaw tightened. “Don’t call me boss.”

“Would you prefer ‘kidnapper’? ‘Captor’? ‘He who abducts women from Trader Joe’s’?”

“Two can play this game, kukolka.” He smiled a wicked grin at me, then glanced at his bloody sleeve. “Can you really help with this?”

I sighed, gesturing toward the stairs. “Yeah, let’s go.”

In his ensuite bathroom, I made him sit on the edge of the tub while I examined the wound. It was a clean cut, about three inches long on his upper arm, not too deep but still bleeding steadily .

“What happened?” I asked, dampening a cloth.

“Disagreement.”

“With what? A knife?”

“With someone holding a knife,” he clarified, as if that made it better.

I pressed the cloth against the cut, perhaps a bit harder than necessary. He hissed through his teeth.

“Careful!”

“Don’t be such a baby. I thought you were a strong Russian man.”

Our eyes met in the mirror, his narrowed in irritation, mine bright with amusement.

“I hate doctors,” he admitted suddenly. “Hospitals. Needles.”

I paused. “The fearsome Mikhail Volkov is afraid of needles?”

“Not afraid,” he corrected quickly. “I just... dislike them.”

“Uh-huh.” I grinned, resuming my work. “Will you need me to hold your hand when you get shots at the doctor?”

“I need you to stop talking and fix my arm.”

I cleaned the wound thoroughly, taking perhaps a bit too much pleasure in his discomfort, before applying antiseptic and butterfly bandages. “You should probably get stitches.”

“This is fine.”

“Your call, tough guy.” I started packing up the supplies. “But don’t blame me if it scars.”

“One more won’t make a difference.” He rolled his shoulder experimentally, testing the bandage.

“You should be careful with what you say around Galina and Irina. They’ve been running a full-scale matchmaking campaign all day. Apparently, you’re quite the catch: rich, respected, cultured.”

He stared at me, expression unreadable. “They should mind their own business.”

“That’s not really their style, now is it?”

“What did you tell them?”

“That it’s generally frowned upon to date your kidnapper. ”

He smiled for a second, looking at the ground, then he looked into my eyes again.

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The air between us thickened. I was acutely aware of how small the bathroom was, how close he was sitting, and how his eyes had darkened to that dangerous blue that meant he was thinking things that would make it seem like Galina's matchmaking efforts hadn't been in vain.

"This is a terrible idea," I said, even as I took a step closer.

"Most good things in life are, aren't they?" He stood to tower over me.

He led me back to the bedroom, his hand firm on my lower back. The touch was proprietary and possessive; it should've set off alarm bells but instead sent heat pooling low in my belly.

Once inside, he turned to me, his eyes traveling from my face down the length of my body. And the hunger in his gaze— oh boy.

"Take it all off," he murmured.

I stepped out of my jeans and panties at once and then unbuttoned my shirt slowly, hyperaware of his eyes tracking each movement.

When it fell open, I let it slide from my shoulders to puddle on the floor.

Standing naked before him, I felt powerful, if only because Mikhail's face lit up as he took the view in.

"Now you," I said.

A flicker of amusement crossed his face as he began to undress, wincing slightly when the movement pulled at his injured arm.

When he was naked, he sat on the edge of the bed and beckoned me forward. I approached, standing between his spread knees. His hands settled on my hips, thumbs stroking over my hipbones.

“You make me forget myself.” He brushed a kiss to my neck as he pulled me into him. “Make me forget why you’re here.”

“Why am I here, Mikhail?” I asked, my fingers threading through his hair.

His mouth found mine, and the kiss was surprisingly tender. His injured arm limited him, so I took control and straddled his hips. His cock lay hard against his stomach, and I took him in my hand, stroking slowly.

“Careful,” he warned, eyes half-lidded. “I’m injured, remember?”

“Poor baby,” I teased, positioning myself above him. “Should I kiss it better?”

“I can think of something better than a kiss.”

I sank down onto his cock, taking him inch by inch until he was fully seated. The stretch and fullness made me gasp.

“Fuck,” he breathed, his hands gripping my hips hard enough to bruise. His eyes met mine, startlingly vulnerable and icy blue. “It’s like you were made for me.”

My heart stuttered; whatever this was, it was too close for comfort.

So, instead, I started to roll my hips, setting a pace that would push away any trace of

coherent thought from both our minds.

His hands guided my hips, his mouth finding my breast, sucking and nipping at my nipples, sending electric shocks straight to my core.

“I should keep you like this,” he said into my skin. “Just for me. Always ready, always wet, always horny.”

The words sent a shiver through me, a dark thrill I didn’t want to examine too closely.

“Would you like that, kukolka ?” His thrust upward met my downward motion, hitting a spot that made me cry out. “To be kept in my bed? To be mine?”

“Yes,” I admitted, the word torn from me before I could think better of it.

His rhythm faltered, then resumed with new intensity. One hand slid from my hip to my lower abdomen, pressing lightly.

“I should keep you full of my cum, too,” he said, his accent thickening with arousal. “Until you’re pregnant with my child.”

The words should have been a bucket of cold water. Instead, they sent heat spiraling through me, tightening the coil of pleasure building at my core.

“You’d look beautiful,” he continued, watching my reactions closely. “Your belly round with my baby. Everyone would know you belong to me.”

“Mikhail—” I gasped, torn between shock and arousal.

He flipped us suddenly, ignoring his injury to pin me beneath him. The new angle let him drive deeper, each thrust more possessive than the last.

“If you’d let me, I’d keep you barefoot and pregnant,” he growled against my ear. “Fill you with my cum every night until that happens.”

His hand slid between us, fingers finding my clit with unerring accuracy. “Tell me you want it,” he demanded, his thrusts becoming more erratic. “Tell me you want it too.”

“I want it,” I heard myself say, caught in the heat of the moment.

The words pushed him over the edge. He came with a guttural groan. I clenched around his cock as I shattered around him, mind blank and body begging for more as he held me tightly against him.

But instead of collapsing beside me as he had before, he stayed perfectly still, his cock still hard inside me. When I shifted, he placed a hand on my hip.

“Don’t move,” he commanded. “Keep it all inside you.”

When he finally withdrew, he did so slowly.

His cum began to leak out, but before it could, he was there, gathering it with his fingers and pushing it back inside.

The possessiveness with which he ensured his cum remained deep in me sent another wave of pleasure through my body and made my walls clamp around his fingers.

“Perfect,” he murmured, his fingers still working, pushing it deeper. His eyes were fixed on what he was doing, a look of primal satisfaction on his face.

I should have been horrified. I should have pushed his hand away. Instead, I lay there, letting him claim me in this most primitive way, as a strange contentment washed

over me.

When he finally looked up, meeting my eyes, I saw that this went beyond lust or possession; it was dangerously close to tenderness and...

We didn't speak about what had just happened. He simply pulled me against him, his hand resting possessively on my stomach.

Eventually, we disentangled ourselves, cleaning up with the efficiency of people deliberately avoiding a deeper conversation. I showered, and by the time I emerged from his bathroom, wrapped in a towel, he had changed into fresh clothes and was sitting on the bed, staring at his phone.

"Everything okay?" I asked.

He looked up, his expression unreadable. "Fine. Just business."

We spent the rest of the evening in a strange, domestic bubble: dinner, then an old movie in his private theater, where I fell asleep against his shoulder halfway through. I was carried to his bedroom after that, with his arms strong and sure around me.

I woke the next morning to an empty space beside me where Mikhail had slept all night. Stretching, I contemplated the events of the previous day, particularly the unexpected turn his dirty talk had taken.

It was just dirty talk, I told myself firmly. People say crazy things during sex. The fact that I couldn't stop thinking about the possibility of actually carrying his child, was just hormones and Stockholm syndrome playing tricks on my mind. At least I hoped.

I slid out of bed, intending to find coffee and maybe some perspective, when I heard



Mikhail's voice from the office. He was speaking Russian, his tone clipped and professional. I shouldn't have listened. I definitely shouldn't have crept closer to the partially open door.

I caught fragments; there was something about a “shipment” and “delivery.” The conversation was about my father's stolen shipments being returned.

When he switched to English, I froze.

“Yes, today. The exchange is arranged for noon.” A pause. “No, she doesn't know.” Another pause. “That's not your concern. I'll handle it.”

He ended the call, and I barely had time to step back before the door opened fully.

Mikhail stood there, already dressed in what I was beginning to think of as his “business attire,” which consisted of a dark suit, a crisp shirt, and the serious look of a man who might get into a fistfight with a business partner.

“You're awake,” he said, seeming unsurprised to find me hovering outside his office.

“I was about to grab coffee. Will you have breakfast with me?” I asked, lying through my teeth.

His eyes narrowed slightly, and I knew he didn't believe me. “I have to go out. Business.”

“Is it my father's shipment? The one you kidnapped me over?”

“Natalia—“

“If you get what you want, does that mean I'm free to go?” The question came out

sharper than I'd intended, edged with a fear I didn't want to examine.

Something flickered across his face—regret? Resignation? “It's complicated.”

“Uncomplicate it.”

“I don't have time for this right now.” He moved past me. “Stay here. We'll talk when I get back.”

“What if I don't want to stay? What if I want to leave?”

He paused at the door, looking back at me with an expression I couldn't interpret. “Do you?”

The question hung between us, weighted with more than just the immediate context. Did I want to leave? To go back to my shoebox apartment, my demanding clients, my solitary life? The answer should have been an immediate yes . The fact that it wasn't terrified me.

“I want the truth,” I said instead.

“When I return.” He checked his watch again. “I have to go.”

After he left, I couldn't stop thinking. The shipment was being returned today. The entire reason for my kidnapping would be resolved. Which meant... what, exactly? That I'd be released? That I'd go back to my normal life like none of this had happened?

The thought sent a spike of panic through me that had no logical explanation. I should be relieved. I should be packing my things, eager to escape this bizarre captivity.

Instead, I went back to my original room, the one I'd been given and that was intended for me to be kept as a hostage, and sitting down on the the bed, staring at the door. Waiting, though I wasn't sure what for.

Funny how being released now was starting to feel like the worst possible outcome.

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I woke up on Friday still technically a hostage despite the fact that I was pretty sure the shipment my father stole had been returned.

Mikhail had been gone all day and only came back late at night, long after I'd fallen into restless sleep in my original room.

I'd woken briefly when he checked on me. He stood in the doorway for a long moment before quietly closing the door without saying a word.

No explanation.

No “Hey, got the shipment back, you're free to go.” No “Actually, I've decided to keep you indefinitely because the sex is good and Galina needs someone to fatten up.”

Nothing.

So here I was, Friday morning, brewing coffee in the kitchen and wondering what my status actually was. Hostage?

Guest?

Live-in booty call with Stockholm syndrome?

“Good morning, Miss Petrova.” Galina bustled into the kitchen, eyebrows rising when she saw me operating the coffee maker. “You are early.”

“Couldn't sleep.”

“Ah.” She nodded sagely. “Men. They make good sleep impossible.”

I snorted. “In this case, it was less the man and more the existential crisis.”

“Eggs-is-what?”

“Never mind.” I poured a cup of coffee, inhaling the steam. “Is Mikhail up yet?”

“Left already. Business.” She made the word sound like a personal affront. “Always business. I tell him, take day off, spend with pretty girl. He say no, must work.”

“Did he, um, mention anything about me? About what happens now?”

Galina paused in her breakfast preparations, giving me an assessing look. “Now? You stay, of course. Where else would you go?”

“Back to my apartment? My job? My life?”

She waved dismissively. “Psh. That not life. This is life.”

“Galina, you do understand I was kidnapped, right? That I'm here against my will?”

“Were kidnapped,” she tried to correct me. “Past tense. Now you are here because you want to be.”

I opened my mouth to argue, then closed it. Was she right? Did I actually want to be here? The fact that I had to think about it was concerning.

“Mr. Volkov say you stay,” she continued, cracking eggs into a bowl. “So you stay. Is

that simple.”

“Nothing about this is simple.”

She gave me a look that was both pitying and amused. “Love never simple, devochka .”

“Whoa, who said anything about love?” The word made my stomach flip in a way that had nothing to do with hunger. “This is Stockholm syndrome, at best.”

“Stockholm?” She frowned. “Is it in Sweden, yes? What does Sweden have to do with you and Mr. Volkov?”

“It's a psychological condition where hostages develop feelings for their captors. ”

She cackled, a startlingly bright sound from such a stern-looking woman. “Americans. Always need a fancy name for normal things.”

“There's nothing normal about this situation.”

“Man wants woman. Woman wants man. Normal.” She placed a plate in front of me. “Eat. You need strength.”

“For what?”

“For when he comes back, of course.” She winked, and I nearly choked on my coffee because of the insinuation.

After breakfast, I wandered the mansion, half-expecting to be stopped by security, but no one seemed concerned about my movements. I made my way to Mikhail's office. I tried the handle, but it was locked.

Of course it was locked. The man wasn't an idiot. But the fact that he needed to lock it now, when he hadn't before, suggested there was something inside he didn't want me to see.

But Mikhail had gotten back what my father stole, right? The reason for my kidnapping was resolved, and yet he hadn't said a word about releasing me. I was still here, caught in this bizarre limbo between hostage and... whatever we had become.

Why was he keeping me here? What possible reason could he have for maintaining this charade?

The most obvious answer made my chest tight: he was using me.

The sex was convenient, and as long as I didn't cause trouble, why not keep his captive plaything around? The thought made me sick.

But then I remembered the way he looked at me. The tenderness in his touch that didn't fit with his harsh exterior. The way he pushed his cum is deeper, as if trying to make his breeding fantasy a reality.

No, there was something more going on here. And I intended to find out what it was.

By Monday, I was ready to scream. Three days had passed since I'd discovered the truth, and still, Mikhail said nothing.

He came and went, always “business,” always distant when he returned. He slept in his room; I slept in mine. The intimacy we'd shared seemed to have evaporated, replaced by a strange, tense politeness.

He would ask if I needed anything, if I was comfortable, if I wanted books or movies or anything else to pass the time—like I was a guest at a particularly boring hotel, not

a woman he'd fucked senseless while talking about getting me pregnant.

And yet, I caught him watching me. When he thought I wouldn't notice, his eyes would follow me across the room, with a particular hunger in his gaze.

I tried to give him opportunities to explain. I asked pointed questions about how long I'd be staying, about what his plans were, about whether I should be thinking about my job and apartment.

He deflected every time, changing the subject or giving non-answers that left me more confused than before.

Galina and Irina were no help. They continued to treat me like I was already a permanent fixture in the household.

When I asked Galina directly if she knew why I was still being kept as a hostage despite the shipment being returned, she merely patted my cheek and said, "Some questions answer themselves if you listen to your heart instead of your head."

Thanks, but no thanks for that, Galina.

By Monday evening, I'd had enough. When Mikhail returned from whatever mysterious "business" had occupied his day, I was waiting in the foyer, arms crossed.

"We need to talk," I said, blocking his path to the stairs.

He looked tired, the kind of exhaustion that made even his perfect posture slump slightly. "Can it wait until tomorrow? I've had a long day."

"No, it can't wait. It's been waiting for days."



Something in my tone must have alerted him to my mood because he straightened up.  
“Very well. My office?”

“Fine.”

I followed him to his office, noting with bitter amusement that he didn't seem concerned about me seeing inside now. He unlocked the door and gestured for me to enter, then followed, closing it behind us .

“What did you want to discuss?” he asked, leaning against his desk rather than sitting behind it. A small concession to make this less formal, I supposed.

“The shipment,” I said bluntly. “My father returned it last week.”

If he was surprised that I knew this, he didn't show it. “Yes.”

“And yet, here I am. Still here. Still being kept hostage in this house.”

“You're not a hostage, Natalia. You can move freely?—“

“But I can't leave, can I?” I challenged. “So what am I, Mikhail? Not a hostage anymore, since you got the shipment back. Not a guest, since guests can leave when they choose. So what exactly is my status here?”

He was silent for a long moment, his expression unreadable. “It's complicated.”

“That's not an answer.”

“What do you want me to say?”

“The truth would be nice,” I snapped. “Why are you keeping me here when there's no

longer any reason to? Is it just the sex? Am I a convenient warm body to keep your bed from getting cold?"

His jaw tightened. "You know that's not true."

"Do I? Because from where I'm standing, it looks like you got what you wanted from my father and decided to keep me as a bonus prize."

"That's not what happened."

"Then tell me what did happen! Tell me why I'm still here when the shipment has been returned. Tell me why you've been avoiding me for days, why you check on me at night but won't talk to me, why you keep giving me these... these looks when you think I won't notice!"

He pushed away from the desk, agitation visible in every line of his body.

"You want the truth? The truth is I don't know what to do with you. The truth is this was supposed to be simple. Kidnap you, get the shipment back, let you go. But nothing about you has been simple from the moment I threw you over my shoulder in that parking lot."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means you weren't supposed to be like this! You were supposed to cry and beg and hate me. You were supposed to be afraid. Not—" He gestured helplessly. "Not making jokes about kidnappers providing room service. Not blowing me in changing rooms. Not looking at me like..."

"Like what?"

“Like I'm a man, not a monster.” His voice had dropped, the anger replaced by something that sounded dangerously close to vulnerability.

“That doesn't explain why you're keeping me here.”

He ran a hand through his hair, a rare gesture of frustration. “I'm not keeping you against your will. You can leave whenever you want.”

“Bullshit. You told me security would 'ensure' I stayed put.”

“That was before.”

“Before what? Before you got what you wanted from my father? Before you got what you wanted from me?”

His expression hardened. “Is that really what you think of me? That I used you?”

“What else am I supposed to think? You won't talk to me, you won't explain anything, you just... keep me here like some kind of pet!”

“I'm trying to give you space,” he raised his voice to match mine. “I'm trying to... to figure out what this is, what I want, what you want. But you make it impossible!”

“I make it impossible? I'm not the one keeping secrets! I'm not the one who fucks someone and then acts like nothing happened! I'm not the one who?—“

“I'm in love with you!” he shouted, the words echoing in the suddenly silent room.

I stared at him, certain I'd misheard. “What?”

“I'm in love with you,” he repeated, quieter now but no less intense. “And it's

terrifying.”

I shook my head, taking a step back. “No. No, that's not... you can't be. That's ridiculous.”

“Is it?” His laugh was harsh and humorless. “You think I planned this? You think I wanted to fall for the woman I kidnapped?”

“This is insane. We've known each other for less than a week.”

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“And yet, here we are.”

I needed to get away to think clearly. This was too much, too fast, too confusing.

I turned and fled the office, ignoring him as he called my name. I ran up the stairs, down the hall to my room (aka the hostage room), and slammed the door behind me, turning the lock with shaking hands.

I sank down the doorframe, heart pounding, mind racing. Love? How could he possibly love me? This was a trick, a manipulation, another way to keep me compliant. It had to be.

But I couldn't forget the look on his face when he'd said it. The raw honesty in his eyes, the way his voice had cracked slightly on the words.

A knock at the door made me jump.

“Natalia.” Mikhail's voice was low and urgent. “Open the door.”

“Go away.”

“We need to talk about this.”

“There's nothing to talk about.” To my horror, tears welled up in my eyes. “Just... leave me alone.”

“I can't do that.”

“Why not? You've been avoiding me for days!”

“Because I was afraid!” The admission seemed torn from him. “I was afraid of what I was feeling, of what it meant. I've never... this isn't... I don't know how to do this.”

A tear slipped down my cheek, followed by another. Goddammit. I swiped at them angrily, hating the weakness of it.

But that's all this was. Hormones and stress and the bizarre psychological fuckery of being kidnapped and then told your kidnapper loved you.

It wasn't because his words had touched something raw and wanting in my soul, something that had been hollow for so long I'd stopped noticing the ache... right?

“Please, Natalia.” His voice was softer now. “Open the door.”

“Why should I? ”

“Because I'm standing in the hallway making a fool of myself, and I'd rather not have the entire staff witness my humiliation.”

Despite everything, a strangled laugh escaped me. “Serves you right for lying to me.”

“Yes, it does.” The simple agreement surprised me. “I never expected... I never expected to find someone who looked at me and didn't flinch. Who challenged me. Who made me smile like you do.”

I pressed my head back against the door, torn between the urge to open it and the fear of what would happen if I did.

“I've been trying to find a way to ask you to stay,” he continued when I remained

silent. “Not as a hostage. Not as a... whatever you think this is. But maybe something more.”

A laugh-sob escaped me. “Stop it.”

“Stop what?”

“Stop... being like this. Stop making me feel things.”

“I wish I could,” he rasped. “Believe me, I’ve tried to stop feeling things for you. It would be so much simpler if I could.”

The tears were flowing freely now, and I hated myself for them. I hated that part of me wanted to believe him, wanted to throw open the door and fall into his arms like this was some fairy tale instead of a fucked-up hostage situation.

“I found you in that parking lot, and every moment since then, you’ve surprised me. Challenged me. Even made me laugh when I thought I’d forgotten how.”

I heard a soft thud against the door from the other side.

“I’m going crazy,” he continued, lower now, as if speaking to himself as much as to me.

“Thinking of ways to keep you here. Telling myself just one more day, just one more chance to make you smile.

You light up every dark corner of my life, kukolka.

With your sharp tongue and the way you roll your eyes when you think I’m being dramatic.

The way you looked in that blue dress, like something from a dream I didn't quite remember but now that I saw it, I just knew.”

Kukolka . Little doll. The endearment made something twist in my chest.

“You stole everything.” His voice cracked slightly. “My control. My thoughts. My heart. And I let you, because even theft feels like a gift when it comes from you.”

I heard a shaky inhale from the other side of the door. “I would let you go if that's what you truly wanted. Right now. I'd have Dmitri drive you home. But I had to try... I had to see if maybe, if I gave you enough time, you might feel even a fraction of what I feel for you.”

The rawness and vulnerability in his voice were so at odds with the controlled, dangerous man who had kidnapped me that I couldn't reconcile the two.

And yet, they were the same person. The man who could throw me over his shoulder without effort and the man who was now practically begging outside my door were one and the same.

I got up and reached for the lock before I'd consciously decided to do so. The click seemed unnaturally loud in the silence that had fallen.

I opened the door slowly, not sure what I expected to see.

Mikhail stood there, his usual perfect composure completely shattered. His hair was mussed, as if he'd been running his hands through it repeatedly. His eyes were red-rimmed, wet with tears he was fighting not to shed.

“Natalia,” he breathed, my name a prayer on his lips.



We stared at each other for a long moment, neither of us speaking. Then, as if drawn by an invisible force, we moved simultaneously. His arms went around me as mine went around him, holding on like we were both drowning and the other was the only lifeline in sight.

“I'm sorry,” he whispered into my hair. “I'm so sorry for how this started. For not telling you the truth. For being a coward.”

I pressed my face against his chest, inhaling his scent. “This is insane. You know that, right? This whole situation is completely insane.”

“Yes.” I felt him nod. “But does that mean it can't also be real?”

I pulled back to look up at him, searching his face for any sign of deception. All I found was naked vulnerability, hope and fear warring in his eyes.

“I don't know what's real anymore,” I admitted. “I don't know if what I feel is Stockholm syndrome or... or something else. But I do feel something. And it scares the hell out of me.”

A tentative smile tugged at his lips. “That makes two of us.”

“What happens now?” I asked, the question encompassing so much more than just the immediate future.

“Whatever you want,” he said. “If you want to leave, I won't stop you. If you want to stay...”

“I don't know what I want.”

He nodded, accepting my words. “Then stay until you do know. Just... stay. Please.”

It wasn't a solution. It wasn't even a plan. But as I looked up at this man who was my kidnapper, my lover, my something-I-couldn't-yet-name, I nodded.

“Okay,” I said softly. “I’ll stay for now.”

The relief that washed over his face... He pressed his forehead to mine, his eyes closing briefly.

“Thank you,” he murmured.

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I didn't think I'd find myself making a mental pros and cons list about our relationship while curled against his chest that night.

But here I was, doing exactly that.

Mikhail's breathing had evened out, but I knew he wasn't asleep yet. His hand traced lazy patterns on my back, and he smiled every time I got goosebumps from it.

After our confrontation, we'd ended up here in his bed. Not for sex this time; we were just cuddling, but it felt more intimate somehow. His lips pressed against my hair, my forehead, and my temple every so often.

So... the pros and cons list.

Pros:

Financial security.

No more hustling for freelance gigs that barely covered rent.

No more anxiety about medical bills or unexpected expenses.

A mansion instead of my shoebox apartment.

Galina's cooking.

Sleeping in obscenely high thread count sheets.

Orgasms, lots of them and good ones at that.

The way, for the first time since my mother died, I didn't feel completely alone.

A really good looking man to ogle whenever I pleased.

Cons:

He was a criminal. Whatever euphemistic “business” he conducted, it wasn't legal. I wasn't naïve enough to pretend otherwise.

This whole thing had started with a kidnapping. The foundation of whatever we had was built on coercion, no matter how blurry the lines had become since.

My father was involved somehow, which meant this tangled web included the man who had abandoned me repeatedly throughout my life.

I'd known Mikhail for a week. This was insane by any rational standard.

And yet.

And yet when he held me like this, when I felt his heartbeat steady beneath my ear, none of those cons seemed to matter as much as they should. They were abstract problems.

What felt real was the warmth of his body, the safety of his arms, and the way hollow in my soul seemed to be filling, slowly but surely, with each moment I spent with him.

“What are you thinking about?” he asked.

“I think my therapist is going to need therapy after I tell her about all this.”

His chest moved with silent laughter. “Perhaps I should cover her bills as well as yours.”

“Thoughtful kidnapper.”

“I prefer ' attentive fiancé,” he said, the words so casual it took a moment for them to register.

I lifted my head to look at him in the dim light. “I don't recall a proposal. Or saying yes.”

His lips curved. “Consider this advance notice that one is coming.”

“That's presumptuous. That I'll say yes, that is.”

“Is it?” His hand moved to cup my cheek, thumb tracing my lower lip. “Tell me you haven't been weighing the pros and cons of us together in that practical mind of yours.”

“Hey! Mind reading wasn't a part of the deal.”

“I don't need to read your mind.” His expression softened. “You're always analyzing, always so pragmatic. It's one of the things I love about you.”

Love . The word still made my stomach flip, still seemed impossible. But in the quiet darkness of his bedroom, with no one to witness my vulnerability, I could admit to myself that I wanted it to be true, even though I couldn't say it back just yet.

“Go to sleep, Natalia,” he said softly, pressing a kiss to my forehead. “We'll talk more

in the morning.”

I settled back against his chest, feeling the steady rise and fall of his breathing until I fell asleep.

I blinked awake the next morning to find Mikhail sitting on the bed, fully dressed, just watching me.

“Creepy,” I mumbled, my voice thick with sleep. “Watching people sleep is creepy.”

“Good morning to you too. Did you sleep well, kukolka ?”

I nodded.

“I had Galina prepare breakfast for us in the dining room,” he said. “Join me when you're ready. ”

After he left, I took my time showering and dressing. My reflection in the bathroom mirror looked different... less exhausted, my eyes were clearer. I still looked like me, but a version of me that had been getting enough sleep and regular meals, which I'd never met before.

Twenty minutes later, I found Mikhail in the dining room, seated at the head of the table with papers spread before him. He looked up when I entered, his face softening.

“There you are,” he said, gathering the papers and setting them aside. “Sit. Eat.”

The table was set up with the usual feast Galina prepared. I settled into what had become my usual chair and reached for a pastry.

“Where is everyone?” I asked, noticing the unusual quiet.

“I gave the staff the morning off.”

“All of them?”

“I wanted privacy for this conversation.”

I paused mid-bite. “That sounds ominous.”

“Not at all.” He took a sip of coffee, watching me over the rim of the mug. “I wanted to discuss your job.”

“My job?” Not what I'd expected. “What about it?”

“You've missed work for a week. I assume you're expecting to get back to it eventually?”

I hadn't thought much about my clients in the past few days, which was strange considering how central work had been to my life before. “I suppose I should call my clients, let them know I'm... indisposed.”

“Or you could quit freelancing.”

I raised an eyebrow. “And do what instead?”

“I could take care of you,” he said simply. “Completely.”

The offer hung between us. Independence had been something I'd been striving for so long, the thing I'd clung to when everything else fell apart. The idea of giving it up, of being dependent on someone else, made something in me recoil instinctively .

“I like working,” I said curtly.

“You could still work. Design whatever you want, for whoever you want. But only because you enjoy it, not because you need the money.” He paused, studying my face.

“You'd have the freedom to be selective. To take only projects that interest you. Maybe you can work for one of the more legitimate businesses my cousins run.”

Put that way, it sounded almost reasonable. Almost.

“Why are you offering this?”

Instead of answering directly, he reached into his pocket and withdrew a small box, placing it on the table between us. Without much ceremony, he slid it toward me.

I stared at it, my heart suddenly pounding. “Mikhail?—“

“This would make things simpler,” he said, his tone matter-of-fact despite the enormity of what he was suggesting. “We could elope tomorrow. Or whenever you want.”

I opened the box with fingers that weren't entirely steady. Inside was a ring. A platinum band with an emerald-cut diamond flanked by smaller stones. Not tacky, yet undeniably fucking expensive.

“This is crazy,” I said, not taking the ring out. “We've known each other less than two weeks.”

“Yes.” No denial and no attempt to soften the reality from him. “And yet, here we are.”

“Why the rush? Why not... date like normal people for a while?”



He leaned forward, his expression serious. “In my world, marriages are rarely about love. They're arrangements between families, political alliances to prevent bloodshed or secure partnerships. They are negotiated like business deals.”

“And this would be different?”

“This would be a choice. My choice. Your choice.” His eyes held mine. “But it would also give me peace of mind. In my world, only a wife is respected and protected. I want you to have access to that, or I’ll worry any time you’re not in front of me.”

The practicality of his approach was so perfectly calibrated to my nature that I almost laughed. He knew exactly how to frame this with logical arguments and practical benefits so I would have to consider it. Bastard.

“You want to marry me for my protection?” I asked.

“I want to marry you because I love you,” he said, those particular words still sending a shock through me. “The protection is a benefit, not the purpose.”

I looked down at the ring, still nestled in its box. “I don't need a proposal to stay.”

“I know.” His voice was soft. “This isn't about keeping you here. It's about keeping you safe. About making it clear to everyone in my world that this isn't something temporary. That you are mine, and I am yours.”

Mine . The possessiveness in that single word shouldn't have made warmth pool in my belly. But it did.

“What about my father?” I asked, the question that had been nagging at me.

“What about him?”

“He's involved in... whatever it is you do. Won't that complicate things?”

Mikhail's expression hardened slightly. “Your father's involvement in my business is over. He's been... encouraged to look elsewhere. He won't be a problem for either of us again.”

I should have been concerned about what that meant. Instead, I felt only relief that I wouldn't have to think of him again.

“So that's it? You decide you want to marry me, and I'm supposed to just say yes?”

“You're supposed to say whatever you want to say,” he countered. “That's the point. This is your choice. Say no if you want to say no.”

I looked at him, really looked at him. The man who had treated me with unexpected kindness. The man whose carefully constructed walls had crumbled when he thought I might leave.

“Yes,” I said before I could overthink it.

His eyes widened slightly, as if he hadn't expected me to agree so easily. “Yes?”

“Yes,” I repeated. “But I have conditions.”

A smile tugged at his lips. “Of course you do.”

“I keep working. Maybe not as much, but I don't want to lose that part of myself.”

He nodded. “Done.”

“And I want to know more about your business. Not everything; I'm not na?ve

enough to think that's possible. But enough that I'm not completely in the dark.”

He hesitated, then nodded again. “Within reason. But some things are safer for you not to know.”

He rose and came around the table, took the ring from the box then knelt beside my chair.

“Natalia Petrova,” he said, completely serious. “Will you marry me?”

I blinked in confusion. “I already said yes.”

“Humor me.” The smile playing at his lips softened.

“Yes, Mikhail Volkov. I will marry you, God help me.”

He slid the ring onto my finger, then pressed his lips to my knuckles just above it. The tenderness of it made my chest ache with love.

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“From hostage to fiancée in less than two weeks,” I said, trying to lighten the moment before I did something embarrassing like cry or say I love you back. “Is that some kind of record?”

“For me, certainly.” He glanced up, still kneeling, his hands warm around mine. “I’ve never kidnapped anyone who irritated me into falling in love before.” He rose, pulling me to my feet with him. His hands settled on my waist, drawing me closer. “Now, I believe this calls for a celebration.”

“What did you have in mind?” I asked, though the heat in his eyes made his intentions clear.

His answer was to devour me more than kiss me.

When we finally broke apart, I was breathless, my heart hammering against my ribs. His hands had slipped beneath my shirt, warm against my skin.

“Here?” I asked, glancing at the dining table. “What about?—“

“Everyone has the morning off. I made sure of it, remember?”

The thought of being fucked on the table where anyone might walk in despite his assurances, sent a thrill of arousal through me.

His hands moved to the buttons of my shirt, deftly undoing them. “Besides, you’ll need to practice being quiet if you’re going to be my wife. My business associates don’t need to hear what I can do to you behind closed doors.”

“Confident,” I remarked, but my breath hitched as his fingers brushed against my collarbone.

“Not just confidence. I have experience to back it up now.” He pushed my shirt from my shoulders, his gaze darkening as it traveled over my body. “I now know exactly what makes you scream, Natalia. And I intend to use that knowledge thoroughly.”

He backed me against the table, lifting me to sit on the edge. Dishes clattered as he pushed them aside, making space for me to lie down. His mouth found my neck, teeth grazing the sensitive spot just below my ear, making me gasp.

“Remember.” He nipped at my earlobe. “Be quiet.”

His hands made quick work of my remaining clothes, leaving me naked and exposed on the polished wood. He stayed fully dressed. But when he looked at me, what I saw in his eyes wasn't dominance but reverence.

“Beautiful,” he said softly, hands skimming up my thighs. “Mine.”

“Yours,” I agreed, the word still new and strange on my tongue.

He dropped to his knees between my legs, hands pushing my thighs apart. I was completely open to him, exposed and vulnerable. I bit my lip as his breath ghosted over my core.

Then his mouth was on me, hot and insistent. I clapped a hand over my mouth to stifle the moan that threatened to escape.

His tongue found my clit, circling it with just enough pressure to drive me wild but not enough to make me cum.

I tangled my other hand in his hair, tugging lightly. He hummed against me, the vibration sending shocks of pleasure through my body. His hands gripped my thighs, holding me open as he feasted on my pussy with single-minded focus.

It was exquisite torture, being forced to stay silent while he systematically dismantled my control. He slid two fingers in, curling them to hit that perfect spot while his tongue continued its relentless attention to my clit, I had to bite down on my palm to keep from crying out.

He knew exactly how to read my body, when to ease back, when to press harder, how to keep me hovering on the edge of release without quite letting me fall. By the time he finally, finally let me come, I was trembling, sweat-slicked, and desperate.

The orgasm crashed through me in waves, all the more intense for having been delayed. I bit down on my hand hard enough to leave marks as my body convulsed around his fingers and mouth.

He worked me through it gently, easing me down until I was boneless and spent. I lifted myself on my elbows, trying to get a look at him still between my legs.

“Good girl,” he murmured, pressing a kiss to my inner thigh. “So quiet and perfect for me.”

He rose, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand in a gesture that should have been crude but somehow wasn't. His eyes were dark with arousal, but he made no move to undress so he could take his own pleasure.

“What about you?” I asked, still breathless.

“Later,” he said, helping me sit up. “This was for you. A proper celebration requires time I don't currently have.”

“Business?”

“Unfortunately.” He gathered my clothes, handing them to me with unexpected tenderness. “I’ll be back for dinner. We can continue this then.”

As I dressed, I caught him watching me.

“What?” I asked, putting on my shirt with hands that weren’t quite steady still .

“I still can’t quite believe this is real,” he admitted. “That you’re real. That you said yes.”

I looked down at the ring on my finger, the diamond catching the light. It was heavier than I’d expected, reminding me that this wasn’t a dream or a delusion.

“It’s real,” I said softly. “For better or worse.”

“For better,” he insisted, stepping closer to brush a strand of hair behind my ear. “Only for the better.”

After he left for his mysterious “business,” I remained in the dining room, the reality of what I’d agreed to settling over me gradually.

I was engaged. To a man I’d known for less than two weeks. A man who had kidnapped me from a parking lot while I was holding frozen dumplings.

What the hell was I doing?

And yet, I couldn’t bring myself to regret it. I couldn’t imagine taking the ring off, telling him I’d changed my mind. Whatever this was, it felt more real than anything else in my life.

When Mikhail returned that evening, I was waiting in the foyer. When he saw me, his expression brightened with genuine happiness.

“Having second thoughts?” he asked, noticing my serious expression.

“No,” I said honestly.

He crossed to me in three long strides, gathering me against him as if he couldn't bear even today's brief separation.

“My Natalia,” he whispered against my hair. His arms tightened around me. “Thank you,” he said softly.

“For what?”

“For staying. For saying yes. For seeing me as more than what I am.”

I pulled back enough to look up at him, at this dangerous, complex man who had somehow become essential to me in the span of two weeks.

“I see you exactly as you are,” I corrected. “That's why I said yes.”

And as he bent to kiss me, I realized it was true. I saw him, both the darkness and the light, the danger and the tenderness. And as impossible as it seemed, I was choosing him, with my eyes wide open.



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I was married by an Elvis impersonator in Vegas on a Sunday. I was watching my new husband slip a wedding band next to the engagement ring he'd given me less than twenty-four hours earlier.

“By the power vested in me by the great state of Nevada,” the impersonator drawled, “I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss the bride.”

Mikhail's lips found mine with surprising tenderness, his hands cradling my face.

“I love you,” I whispered as we pulled apart. It was the first time I'd vocalized it, and fuck... I could see that it nearly brought my husband to tears.

“Mrs. Volkov,” his lips brushed mine.

“That's going to take some getting used to,” I replied, but found myself smiling despite my best efforts to maintain my cynicism.

Dmitri, who had appeared seemingly out of nowhere to serve as our witness, looked distinctly uncomfortable in the chapel. He handed Mikhail the paperwork to sign.

“Congratulations, boss,” he said stiffly. “Mrs. Volkov.”

“Thank you for the heartfelt sentiment, Dmitri,” I said dryly.

The corners of Mikhail's mouth twitched. “You're dismissed, Dmitri. Ensure we're not disturbed for the remainder of the evening.”

The implications of that order sent a rush of heat through me. Dmitri nodded once and disappeared, leaving us alone with the Elvis officiant, who was already preparing for his next ceremony.

“So,” I said as we exited the chapel into the neon-lit Vegas night. “That was... efficient.”

“I told you Vegas was going to be practical.” Mikhail guided me toward the waiting car, his hand possessive at the small of my back. “One-stop shopping.”

“I can't believe I just married you. I got engaged and then married in the span of twenty-four hours.”

He pulled me closer, his lips brushing my temple.

The suite Mikhail had arranged was obscenely luxurious, with views of the Strip stretching out below like a river of light. Champagne waited on ice, alongside a spread of food I was too keyed up to consider.

“Does Galina know we did this?” I asked, kicking off the heels I'd bought specifically for the occasion.

“She's already planning a proper reception,” Mikhail confirmed, loosening his tie. “She called me several colorful names in Russian when I told her our plans.”

“I bet she did.” I moved to the window, taking in the view. “Your family?”

His reflection in the glass darkened slightly. “They've been informed. We'll deal with them when necessary.”

“That sounds ominous.”

He came up behind me, arms encircling my waist, chin resting on top of my head.

“Nothing you need to worry about tonight.”

“You know, for a criminal mastermind, you're surprisingly evasive about your family.”

His chuckle vibrated against my back.

“Should I be concerned?” I asked more directly.

“No.” His arms tightened around me. “You're mine now. Legally and officially. No one will challenge that, not even my family.”

“I look forward to meeting them, then. ”

He turned me in his arms, expression suddenly serious. “Any regrets?”

I considered the question honestly. Three weeks ago, I'd been a burnt-out graphic designer with crushing student debt and an empty apartment. Now I was married to a Russian criminal who looked at me as if I hung the stars at night.

By any rational measure, I should be having a complete mental breakdown about all of this.

Instead, I was strangely... content. Certain in a way I hadn't been about anything in years.

“Only that we had to come all the way here,” I said finally.

His eyes darkened with memory. “We will return home tomorrow.”

“Home,” I repeated, testing the word. “Is that what the mansion is now going to be for me?”

“Yes, and home for me is now wherever you are, Natalia.” The simple sincerity made my heart ache.

“That was almost romantic, Mr. Volkov.”

“I have my moments, Mrs. Volkov.”

His hands made quick work of my wedding dress. It slid to the ground, leaving me in the lingerie I'd bought in a rush specially for tonight.

“Beautiful,” he murmured, eyes traveling over me with naked appreciation. “My wife.”

I reached for him, undoing the buttons of his shirt with unsteady fingers.

“Husband,” I replied, testing the word on my tongue. “That's also going to take some getting used to.”

“We have time.” He captured my hands, bringing them to his lips. “A lifetime.”

He guided me backward until my legs hit the bed. He urged me to sit, then kneeled before me. My breath caught as he hooked his fingers in the waistband of my panties, sliding them down my legs slowly.

“I’ve been thinking about this all day,” he said, his accent thicker with desire. “Having you as my wife. Making it official.”

His hands parted my thighs, thumbs stroking the sensitive skin of my inner legs. I

shivered under his touch, already embarrassingly wet just from this.

“Mikhail,” I breathed, reaching for him.

He caught my hands, pressing them back against the mattress. “Not yet. Tonight, we do this my way.”

“Your way?”

His smile was predatory. “Yes, I will take my time.” His thumb brushed against my core, a feather-light touch, making me whimper. “Until you say exactly what I want to hear.”

“And what’s that?” I asked, breathing hard already.

“You’ll know when you say it.” He lowered his head, pressing a kiss to my inner thigh. “Think of it as a game.”

Before I could respond, his mouth was on me, his tongue tracing through my folds. I arched against him, a moan escaping me at the sensation.

He knew my body already: where to lick, when to suck, exactly how much pressure would drive me wild without making me cum. It was exquisite torture, being brought to the precipice only to have him pull back just as release seemed imminent.

“Please,” I gasped after the third time he’d denied me, my hands fisted in the sheets.

He looked up at me, chin wet with my arousal. “Please what, Mrs. Volkov?”

“Let me come.”

His smile was wicked. “Not until I hear what I’m waiting for.”

“I don’t know what you want!”

“Yes, you do.” He pushed two fingers inside, curling them just so while his thumb circled my clit. “Think, Natalia. What did you tell me for the first time today?”

My mind raced, clouded with pleasure and frustration. What was he looking for? I’d called him husband. I’d agreed to marry him. I’d?—

Oh .

“I love you,” I whispered.

His fingers stilled. “What was that?”

“ I love you ,” I repeated, louder this time.

“That was it.” The simple admission was followed by renewed attention from his mouth. “Say it again.”

“ I love you .” The words fell from my lips as he finally, finally let me fall over the edge, my release crashing through me in waves as he held me steady.

Before I could recover, he was standing, shedding the rest of his clothes. He joined me on the bed, his body covering mine, his weight a delicious pressure that grounded me as aftershocks of pleasure still rippled through my system.

“I love you too,” he murmured against my lips. “More than I thought possible.”

When he pushed inside me, the feeling was almost overwhelming. This wasn’t the

rough, desperate sex that I usually craved. This was something else entirely.

“Remember our first time?” he said against my ear. “You asked me to fuck you like I hate you.”

“This is how I fuck you when I love you,” he continued, his pace steady and deep, his eyes never leaving mine.

The intensity in his gaze was almost too much. I tried to look away, but he caught my chin, holding me there.

“Look at me,” he demanded. “I want to see your eyes when you come for me again.”

His hand slipped between us, finding my clit. It was overwhelming, building me toward a second peak so fast.

“Mine,” he growled against my neck, his thrusts becoming less controlled as his own release approached. “Say it.”

“Yours,” I gasped. “Always yours.”

“And I’m yours. Only yours, Natalia.”

My second orgasm hit like a tidal wave, my body clenching around him, pulling him deeper. He followed immediately after, filling me with his cum as he pressed his forehead to mine, our breaths mingling in the space between us.

Afterward, as we lay tangled in the sheets, his hand settled possessively on my lower abdomen.

“Soon,” he murmured, half-asleep, his accent thicker still. “Soon you’ll be carrying

my child.”

I covered his hand with mine, surprising myself with how right the idea felt. “Is that a request or a prediction, Mr. Volkov?”

His lips pressed against my shoulder. “Both, Mrs. Volkov. Definitely both.”



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A year later I was concealing my baby bump beneath a designer gown worth more than my old apartment's rent.

“Stop fidgeting,” Mikhail murmured, his hand warm at the curve of my hip as we entered the ballroom of a fancy hotel. “You look perfect.”

“I look pregnant,” I whispered back, though at four months along, the evidence was still minimal enough to disguise with clever styling.

“Yes,” he agreed, his voice dropping to that register that still made my stomach flip. “And it's driving me insane knowing you're carrying my child.”

“Possessive much?”

His lips quirked in that almost-smile I'd grown to recognize as genuine amusement. “I told you I'll always be like that, kukolka . Always.”

The ballroom was a study in opulence, with crystal chandeliers, marble floors, and gold accents that stopped just short of being tacky.

The guests were similarly elegant, the women dripping with jewels, the men in impeccable suits that couldn't quite disguise the dangerous energy that hummed beneath their civilized appearance .

This was Mikhail's world, the upper echelon of organized crime, gathered to celebrate Mikhail's grandfather's seventieth birthday.

I'd met Mikhail's family exactly once, three months after our impromptu Vegas wedding.

The encounter had been cordial but cool, his mother clearly disapproving of both the hasty marriage and the American bride.

His father had been less so, studying me with piercing blue eyes so similar to Mikhail's that it was unsettling.

"Mikhail," a voice called, and we turned to find a barrel-chested man with salt-and-pepper hair approaching. "And the lovely Mrs. Volkov."

"Uncle Viktor," Mikhail greeted him. "You remember my wife, Natalia."

"How could I forget?" The older man kissed my cheeks in the European fashion. "The American who tamed our Mikhail. You're looking radiant tonight."

Mikhail tensed slightly beside me. We hadn't announced the pregnancy to his family yet. It was a deliberate choice on my part. I wanted to keep the news contained for as long as I could.

"Thank you," I said smoothly. "It's good to see you again."

As the evening progressed, I was separated from Mikhail and drawn into a circle of wives and girlfriends who eyed me with curiosity. I'd learned that everyone assumed I was a monolingual American, and I forgot to correct them.

"She doesn't look like much," one woman murmured in Russian to another, eyeing me over her champagne glass. "How did she manage to get Mikhail Volkov to marry her?"

"I heard she was his hostage," another whispered back.

I sipped my water, pretending not to understand. Let them underestimate me. It was a position I'd grown comfortable with.

“Mrs. Volkov,” a cold female voice interrupted in English. I turned to find Mikhail's mother, Elena, elegant as always in midnight blue. “A word, if you don't mind.”

The other women scattered like startled birds. I followed Elena to a quieter corner of the ballroom, bracing myself for a subtle interrogation about my suitability as Mikhail's wife.

Instead, she surprised me by saying, “You're pregnant.”

It wasn't a question.

I met her gaze steadily. “Yes.”

“How far along?”

“Four months.”

She nodded, as if confirming a suspicion. “And you haven't told the family.”

“Mikhail knows. That's what matters.”

“You've changed him,” she sighed. “He's keeping secrets from me.”

“I haven't tried to.”

“No, I don't imagine you have. That's probably why it worked.” She studied me with her scary penetrating eyes. “He smiles now. Did you know that? Before you, I hadn't seen my son smile in years.”

I didn't know how to respond to that, so I remained silent.

“The men,” she continued after a moment, “they carry darkness in them.

It's what makes them successful in this world.

But it's also a burden.” Her gaze drifted to where Mikhail stood across the room, deep in conversation with his grandfather.

“You've lightened his. For that, if nothing else, I suppose I should thank you.”

Before I could respond, she was gone, gliding back into the crowd with the practiced ease of a woman who had navigated these events for decades.

I found Mikhail again twenty minutes later, after extracting myself from a conversation with a particularly persistent wife of one of his associates.

“Having fun?” he asked, passing me a fresh glass of water.

“Immensely. I've been called a gold digger in three different conversations and had rumors about me discussed at length by women who think I don't understand them.”

His jaw tightened. “Who?”

“Doesn't matter.” I placed a hand on his arm. “I had an interesting conversation with your mother, though.”

“Should I be concerned?”

“She knows about my pregnancy. ” I finished the sentence in a whisper.

His eyebrows rose. “How?”

“Women's intuition? Or maybe because I'm drinking water at an open bar.”

He glanced down at my still relatively-flat stomach. “Are you ready to make it official, then?”

“Might as well. Your mom might beat us to it otherwise.”

A moment after his grandfather's speech provided the perfect opportunity. After the old man finished speaking, glasses were raised in a toast. Mikhail kept me at his side as various family members approached to pay their respects to the patriarch.

When our turn came, Mikhail guided me forward with a hand at the base of the. Base of my spine.

“Grandfather,” he said in Russian, “thank you for including us in your celebration.”

The old man nodded regally, then turned his attention to me. “Natalia,” he said, his accent thicker than Mikhail's. “You are well?”

“Very well, thank you,” I replied in Russian. “And blessed with good news.” I placed a hand deliberately on my stomach. “We're expecting a child in the spring.”

The silence that fell over our immediate vicinity was almost comical. Then the patriarch's weathered face split into a broad smile.

“This is the best present I could get,” he said, raising his glass again.

Just like that, I was no longer the questionable American bride in the eyes of his family; I was the mother of Mikhail's heir. My husband kept me close, his hand never leaving my waist, his eyes checking on me regularly with a protectiveness that still made my heart flutter with embarrassment.

It was past midnight when we finally made our way back to our room at the hotel. I kicked off my heels with a groan of relief, unzipping my gown and letting it pool at my feet.

“That went better than expected,” I said, stretching my arms overhead.

Mikhail's eyes darkened as they traced the curve of my body, lingering on the slight swell of my stomach. “You were magnificent.”

“I stood around and announced I'm pregnant. Hardly an achievement.”

“You navigated a room full of family and friends with grace and confidence.” He moved closer, hands settling on my hips. “You spoke Russian with my grandfather. You even impressed my mother, which I previously thought was impossible.”

“She told me I make you smile.”

Vulnerability was written across his face. “You do.”

“I've created a monster. You used to be so stoic and intimidating.”

“I'm still intimidating,” he protested, but his lips were curved in exactly the smile we were discussing.

“Terrifying,” I agreed, running my hands up his chest to loosen his tie. “The big bad Russian man who brings me tea when I'm nauseous and talks to my stomach in Russian as if the baby can already hear him.”

He caught my hands, bringing them to his lips. “I'm like that only for you, kukolka .”

Later, as we lay tangled together in bed, his hand settled on my stomach in what had become a nightly ritual.

“I keep thinking this can't be real,” he said into my hair. “That I'll wake up and you'll be gone. That none of this happened.”

“If this is a dream, we're having the same one.” I covered his hand with mine.

His hand moved in gentle circles over the small swell where our child grew. “Are you happy, Natalia? Truly?”

The question was earnest, vulnerable in a way only I got to see. I turned in his arms to face him, finding his eyes in the dim light.

“Yes,” I said simply. “Against all logic and reason, yes.”

“You know, our child is going to be spoiled rotten, yeah?” I murmured a few minutes later .

“Our child,” he repeated.

“Our son or daughter,” I murmured. “Fifty-fifty chance.”

“A daughter would be perfect. I'd be surrounded by the two most beautiful women in the world. What a blessing.”

As I drifted off, I couldn't help but reflect on the absurdity of my life's trajectory. One year ago, I'd been kidnapped from a Trader Joe's parking lot. Now I was pregnant and married to my kidnapper.

My therapist had eventually fired me as a client, claiming my “persistent romanticization of a clearly Stockholm syndrome situation” was beyond her professional capabilities. Galina cackled for five straight minutes when I told her.

But as I fell asleep in my husband's arms, pregnant with our child, I couldn't help but

be grateful for how everything turned out.

the end.