



# Innocent Bratva Hostage (Sharov Bratva #8)

**Author:** *Maree Fox*

**Category:** Urban

**Description:** He's ruthless. He's cold. And he's about to make me his bride.

Kidnapped by a Bratva boss, forced into a marriage I never asked for.

He's nearly twice my age, and the last thing I wanted was to belong to him.

But when I discover I'm pregnant with his child, everything changes.

Now I belong to him, body and soul.

His touch is both a curse and a fire I can't escape.

I hate him, yet I crave him.

I'm trapped in a dangerous game I never asked to play.

He's controlling, possessive, and relentless.

But as my belly grows, so does the tension between us.

With every passing day, I'm falling deeper into his web.

But I'm not sure if I can survive his world, or if I'll be consumed by it.

Can I escape the monster who claims me as his?

**Total Pages (Source):** 27

## Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:05 pm*

The music pounds through the walls of the VIP lounge, a bass-heavy rhythm that vibrates up through my feet. My tray wobbles in my grip as I weave through the crowd of well-dressed strangers. The lights are dim, the air thick with perfume and the kind of tension that only comes when too much money and power are crammed into one space.

I shouldn't be here. Not in this room, not in this dress, not serving overpriced cocktails to people who look like they could buy my whole life without missing a dollar. Bills don't pay themselves, and being a waitress at The Silver Vine is the best gig I've landed since moving to Chicago.

I drop off drinks at a table near the corner, offering my rehearsed smile as I slip away. My shift is almost over. One more round of the room and I'm done for the night. I can already feel the ache in my feet from standing for hours, but the thought of peeling off my heels and curling up with a blanket keeps me moving.

Then I see him.

He's seated at a booth toward the back, his shoulders broad and his posture impossibly composed, like he owns the whole place. Maybe he does. His dark hair is a little disheveled, a lock falling over his forehead, but it doesn't make him look less dangerous. It only adds to the air of someone who doesn't care to follow the rules. His suit is sharp, black as midnight, and tailored perfectly to his frame.

I try not to stare, but his presence is magnetic. He notices me immediately.

"Waitress," he calls, his voice low and smooth, with the faintest edge of an accent.

Russian, maybe. It's hard to tell over the noise, but there's an authority in his tone that makes my stomach tighten.

I force my legs to move, balancing my tray as I approach his table. "Can I get you something?"

His eyes lock on mine, pale blue and startling. They pierce through me like he knows every secret I've ever kept. I fight the urge to shift under his gaze.

"Vodka," he says, his lips curving into a smile that doesn't quite reach his eyes. "The good stuff. Two glasses."

I nod, swallowing the lump in my throat. "Coming right up."

As I turn to leave, I feel his eyes on me, a weight that follows me all the way to the bar. I don't know why my hands are shaking as I place the order, but I take a breath to steady myself. It's just another customer, I tell myself. A rich, arrogant customer who's probably used to getting whatever he wants.

When I return with the drinks, he gestures for me to sit.

"I'm working," I say, trying to keep my voice polite but firm.

He leans back, his smile growing faintly amused. "Take a break. One drink. I insist."

I hesitate. My manager's rule is clear: don't get too friendly with the VIPs. Something about the way he looks at me, like I'm the most interesting thing in the room, makes it hard to say no.

"Fine," I hear myself say, sliding into the booth across from him. "Just one."

The vodka burns as it goes down, smooth but potent. He watches me, his gaze never wavering, and it's unnerving how calm he is, like he's in complete control despite the alcohol.

"What's your name?" he asks, his fingers tracing the rim of his glass.

"Hannah," I reply, setting my drink down. "You are?"

"Makar," he says simply. There's no last name, no explanation. Just the name, heavy with a meaning I don't understand.

We talk, or at least he does. I find myself hanging on his words, his voice like a dark melody that wraps around me. He's charming in a way that feels effortless, and even though I know better, I can't help but be drawn in.

"Why are you working here, Hannah?" he asks after a while, his tone softer now.

I shrug, playing with the edge of my napkin. "College isn't cheap. Someone's got to pay the bills."

He hums, like he's considering this. "You don't belong here."

I laugh, the sound nervous in my own ears. "I'm pretty sure that's the nicest way anyone's ever told me I'm out of place."

His lips twitch, almost a smile. "It wasn't an insult."

Before I can respond, he leans forward, his hand brushing against mine. His touch is warm, his fingers calloused, and it sends a shiver up my arm. I tell myself it's the alcohol making my pulse race, but deep down, I know that's a lie.

“You’re different,” he murmurs, his voice so low it’s almost a growl. “I could tell the moment I saw you.”

I don’t know what to say, so I say nothing. The air between us feels charged, heavy with something I can’t quite name. When his hand moves to my wrist, his thumb brushing over my skin, I forget how to breathe.

“Makar—” I start, but his name feels strange on my tongue, too intimate.

He tilts his head, studying me like I’m a puzzle he’s trying to solve. “Come upstairs with me.”

The words hang in the air, a challenge and an invitation all at once.

I should say no. Every instinct I have screams at me to get up, to walk away, but I can’t. There’s something about him, something dark and magnetic, that makes it impossible to refuse.

I nod, and the flicker of satisfaction in his eyes makes my stomach flip.

Makar doesn’t say a word as he takes my hand and leads me out of the lounge. His grip is firm, commanding, yet not rough. It’s the kind of touch that tells me he’s used to people following his lead without question.

I can’t think of a single reason to be the exception.

The hallway is quiet, a stark contrast to the pounding music behind us. My heels click against the marble floor as we step into the elevator. He presses the button for the top floor, his movements deliberate.

My heart races, a steady thrum in my chest that grows louder as the floors tick by. I

glance at him from the corner of my eye. He hasn't let go of my hand, and I feel the heat of his palm against mine.

When the doors open, he doesn't wait. He strides out, pulling me gently but insistently down the corridor. I don't even notice the opulence around me—plush carpets, gold accents, the faint scent of something expensive in the air.

My focus is on him, on the tension in his shoulders, on the way his presence fills the space like a storm waiting to break.

The door to his suite clicks shut behind us, and suddenly the world feels impossibly small.

I stand frozen in the entryway as he shrugs off his jacket, draping it over a chair. He doesn't turn to look at me right away, and I take the moment to drink him in—the way his shirt clings to the muscles of his back, the sharp line of his jaw as he loosens his tie.

“Come here,” he says, his voice low and steady.

I take a hesitant step forward, my pulse hammering in my ears. He closes the distance between us in an instant, his hands finding my hips. His touch is firm, grounding, and I feel myself exhale a breath I didn't know I was holding.

“You think too much,” he murmurs, his lips brushing the shell of my ear. “I can see it in your eyes. Let it go.”

I open my mouth to respond, but he tilts my chin up with one finger, silencing me. His eyes meet mine, and the intensity there makes my knees feel weak.

“Tonight, you don't have to think,” he says. “I'll take care of everything.”

Before I can process his words, his lips are on mine. The kiss is nothing like I expect. It's not gentle, not tentative. It's consuming, a fire that spreads through me with every second. His hands slide up my sides, his thumbs brushing just beneath my ribs, and I feel like I might melt under his touch.

I grip his shoulders, my fingers curling into the fabric of his shirt as he deepens the kiss. His teeth graze my lower lip, a teasing nip that sends a spark of heat straight through me. I don't even realize I'm moaning until I feel his chest rumble with a low, approving growl.

Makar pulls back just enough to study my face, his fingers tracing the curve of my jaw. His thumb brushes over my cheek, and there's something almost tender in the gesture, though his expression remains unreadable.

"Do you trust me?" he asks, his voice softer now, but no less commanding.

I don't know why, but I nod.

"Good," he says, and the word is a promise.

He leads me to the bedroom, his hands never straying far from my body. When he eases the straps of my dress down my shoulders, I shiver, but not from the cold. His fingers trail over my skin, igniting every nerve as he takes his time undressing me.

"You're beautiful," he murmurs, almost to himself, as if the words weren't meant for me to hear.

I barely have a moment to process the compliment before his lips are on my neck, his hands guiding me back until the backs of my knees hit the edge of the bed. I sink down, and he follows, his weight pinning me beneath him.

He kisses me like it's the only thing keeping him alive, his hands exploring every inch of me. His touch is rough in places, soft in others, a perfect balance that leaves me breathless. For once, I don't feel the need to be in control. I let him take the lead, let him show me what it means to surrender.

He wastes little time in undressing, simply tugging down his pants. His cock springs free—thick, veiny, already leaking precum.

“Wait,” I say, “I’ve never—”

“Do you want this?”

I swallow. “Yes.”

“Then just enjoy it.”

When he slides past my slick folds, it's like nothing I've felt before. He's so warm, and thick, and I moan as my walls clench around his cock. He's so big it's like he could split me open.

Makar says nothing as he make love, but he makes me come with a low moan. My body is alight with fire as the orgasm washes over me like a tidal wave, and it leaves me a whimpering, breathless mess against the mattress,

When it's over, I'm left trembling, my body still humming with the aftershocks of his touch. Makar lies beside me, his arm draped lazily over his forehead as he stares at the ceiling.

I turn my head to look at him, my chest tightening at the sight. There's something vulnerable about him in this moment, something raw and unguarded. It feels like I'm seeing a side of him no one else has.



“Stay,” I whisper, the word slipping out before I can stop it.

His lips curve into a faint smile, but he doesn’t answer. Instead, he reaches out, brushing a strand of hair from my face. The gesture is so unexpected, so gentle, that it steals the breath from my lungs.

“You’ll be fine,” he says finally, his voice low and almost... affectionate?

I want to ask what he means, but the weight of exhaustion pulls me under. My eyelids grow heavy, and I let myself drift, the sound of his steady breathing lulling me to sleep.

Somewhere in the back of my mind, I know he won’t be here when I wake up.

For now, I let myself believe in the illusion of safety by his side.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:05 pm*

The faint hum of the city buzzes outside my office window, but it's nothing compared to the pounding in my skull. Paperwork is a necessary evil, though I hate every second of it. Contracts, accounting records, agreements with people I'd rather see buried six feet under—I sift through them all with growing irritation. My desk is a mess of leather-bound ledgers and sleek laptops, the dichotomy of old-world tradition and modern business.

Andrei's knock at the door interrupts my thoughts. Three sharp raps, precise and impatient.

"Come in," I say, not looking up.

Andrei steps inside, his boots heavy against the hardwood. His expression is as serious as always, the tight line of his mouth signaling that whatever he's about to say will test my already thin patience.

"You have a visitor," he says, his tone neutral.

I don't bother masking my irritation. My pen drops onto the desk with a sharp clatter, and I finally meet his gaze. "Why wasn't I informed of this visitor in advance?"

Andrei doesn't flinch, which is one of the reasons I keep him close. The man has a spine, unlike most. "She showed up unannounced."

"She?" That catches my attention. My eyes narrow, my interest piqued despite my annoyance.

Andrei nods. “A young woman. Says it’s urgent.”

My fingers drum against the desk as I lean back in my chair. A young woman, here, demanding my time? The curiosity is enough to temper my anger, if only slightly.

“Does she have a name?” I ask.

“She didn’t say,” Andrei replies. “Just that it’s important.”

For a moment, I consider telling him to send her away. It wouldn’t be the first time someone thought they could barge into my world demanding an audience. The fact that she had the gall to come here—alone, from the sound of it—is intriguing. Stupid, but intriguing.

“Fine,” I say, waving a hand. “Bring her in.”

Andrei nods once before disappearing through the door. I take a moment to compose myself, straightening the papers on my desk. My irritation simmers just below the surface, but I mask it well.

When the door opens again, I see her.

She steps inside hesitantly, her movements small and careful, as if she’s testing the air for danger. She’s young—early twenties, maybe—with auburn hair pulled back into a messy ponytail. Her clothes are plain but clean, though she’s clearly uncomfortable under my gaze.

I let the silence stretch as she stands there, shifting her weight from foot to foot.

“Sit,” I say finally, gesturing to the chair across from me.

She hesitates before perching on the edge of the seat, her hands clasped tightly in her lap. Her eyes flit around the room, taking in the dark wood paneling, the expensive artwork on the walls, the faint smell of cigar smoke that lingers in the air.

“Who are you?” I ask, leaning back in my chair.

“My name is Lily,” she says, her voice trembling slightly. “Thank you for seeing me, Mr. Sharov.”

I raise an eyebrow. It’s rare to hear my name spoken with such... trepidation. Most people fear me, yes, but they also respect me enough to keep their voices steady. This one is nervous, which makes me wonder why she came here at all.

“What is it you want, Lily?” I ask, keeping my tone measured.

She swallows, her fingers twisting in her lap. “It’s about the Ember House.”

That gets my attention. I own several establishments in the city, but the Ember House is one of my prized possessions—a high-end nightclub that doubles as a hub for more... discreet dealings.

“What about it?” I ask, my voice sharp enough to make her flinch.

“It’s the manager,” she says quickly, as if afraid I’ll cut her off. “His name is Kris. He’s been working there for about a year now.”

I nod, recalling the name. Kris was a recommendation from one of my associates, and he’s done a decent job keeping the club profitable. At least, as far as I’ve been told.

“What about him?” I ask, my patience thinning.

Lily hesitates, her gaze dropping to her lap. She's clearly weighing her words, trying to decide how much to say—or how to say it without pissing me off.

“He's... not who you think he is,” she says finally, her voice barely above a whisper.

My eyes narrow, and I lean forward, resting my elbows on the desk. “Explain.”

She looks up at me, and for the first time, I see the resolve beneath her nervous exterior. “He's stealing from you,” she says, her words more confident now. “He's using the club for things I don't think you'd approve of.”

A dangerous silence falls over the room. My mind races, but outwardly, I remain calm.

“You're making a serious accusation,” I say, my voice dangerously low. “Do you have proof?”

Lily nods, pulling a small flash drive from her pocket. “I started working at the Ember House six months ago,” she says. “I saw things—transactions that didn't add up, people coming in and out who weren't on any official lists. I started keeping track, taking notes, recording things when I could.”

She places the flash drive on the desk, her hand trembling as she slides it toward me.

I pick it up, turning it over in my fingers. “Why come to me?” I ask. “Why not go to the police?”

Lily's lips press into a thin line. “Because the police don't scare people like Kris,” she says. “You do.”

Her words hang echo in my mind, and for a moment, I say nothing. She's not wrong.

The police might make an arrest, but I'd make sure Kris disappeared. Permanently.

I lean back in my chair, studying her. She's brave, I'll give her that. Stupid, maybe, but brave.

Relief flashes across her face, but I don't let her relax too much.

"Lily," I add, my voice turning cold, "if you're lying, or if this is some kind of game...."

She shakes her head quickly. "I'm not lying. I swear."

"Then you'd better start talking," I say, my tone sharp.

Lily inhales shakily, her trembling hands clutching the hem of her jacket as if the words she's about to say might destroy her. Her lips part, but for a moment, nothing comes out. I lean back, watching her, my patience wearing thin.

"Kris," she finally begins, her voice small. "He... he met me at the club. I didn't think anything of it at first. He was charming, and he said all the right things."

I stay silent, letting her speak. The tension in the room is palpable, my anger simmering just beneath the surface.

"We... ended up at a hotel," she says, her cheeks flushing with shame. Her hands twist together in her lap, and I already know what's coming. "We had sex. I thought... I thought it was just a one-time thing."

She swallows hard, blinking back tears. "It wasn't. He recorded me without my consent. I didn't even know until he showed me the videos." Her voice cracks, and she pauses, taking a deep breath before continuing.

“He started threatening me. Said he’d leak the videos if I didn’t do what he wanted.” Her eyes dart to mine, searching for any sign of empathy, but I keep my expression neutral, my rage contained for now.

“What did he want?” I ask, though I already know the answer won’t sit well.

Lily’s hands shake harder, her knuckles white. “He wanted me to... to serve some of the guests at the club. Not just serve them drinks.” Her voice breaks, and she lets out a choked sob. “He said they’d pay him for it. If I didn’t do it, he’d ruin me. My life, my reputation—everything.”

She breaks down then, her shoulders shaking as she cries into her hands. “I don’t know if you would care,” she says between sobs, “but I didn’t know what else to do. I had to come to you. You own the club. I thought maybe....” Her voice trails off, hopelessness written all over her face.

The room feels colder as her words settle. My jaw tightens, and the rage I’ve been holding back begins to seep through the cracks. Kris. That worthless piece of shit has been using my club as a front for exploiting women. Women like Lily, who probably thought they were safe when they walked through the doors.

Using women? That’s beneath the Bratva. There’s no honor in it, no respect. It’s filth. It’s weakness. And Kris has brought that filth into my territory.

“Do you have proof?” I ask, my voice a low growl.

Lily nods, fumbling with her phone. She pulls up a folder, scrolling through images and videos before handing it to me. Her hand trembles so badly I have to steady it as I take the device.

What I see only fans the flames of my fury. The evidence is damning: messages from

Kris, screenshots of his threats, even a partial clip of one of the recordings he made of her. She wasn't lying. Not about any of it.

I slam the phone down on the desk, making her flinch. My fists clench as I fight the urge to unleash my anger on something—anything.

“You’ve done the right thing by coming to me,” I say, my voice rough but steady.

Lily sniffles, wiping at her eyes with the sleeve of her jacket. “What are you going to do?”

I look her directly in the eye, my expression cold and unyielding. “Kris will never contact you again. That’s my word.”

Her lower lip trembles, and fresh tears spill over. “Thank you,” she whispers, her voice thick with emotion.

I stand, my movements sharp and deliberate as I step around the desk. “Andrei,” I call, my voice carrying through the thick walls.

The door opens immediately, and Andrei steps in, his eyes scanning the room before settling on me.

“Take her home,” I order, my tone leaving no room for argument. “Make sure she’s safe. No one touches her.”

Andrei nods without hesitation, moving to Lily’s side. She looks up at him, then back at me, her gratitude evident even as fear lingers in her eyes.

“Go,” I tell her. “You’ll be fine now.”



She hesitates for a moment, as if she wants to say something else, but then she nods, letting Andrei guide her out of the office.

When the door closes behind them, the silence in the room is deafening. I let out a slow, controlled breath, my hands flexing at my sides.

Kris has made a mistake. A fatal one.

I walk to the window, staring out at the city below. The lights twinkle like stars, oblivious to the darkness lurking just beneath their surface. Kris thinks he can use my club, my name, to line his pockets with the pain and humiliation of women like Lily.

He'll regret that.

I reach for the phone on my desk, dialing a number I haven't called in months. It rings twice before a familiar voice answers.

"Makar," comes the gruff greeting.

"I need a cleanup," I say, my tone clipped. "Someone crossed a line. Badly."

There's a pause on the other end, then a low chuckle. "Name?"

"Kris," I say, the name tasting bitter in my mouth. "You'll find him at the Ember House. Make it quiet. Make it permanent."

The line goes dead, and I set the phone down, my chest still tight with fury. Kris has sullied my reputation, my rules, and the sanctity of my business.

By the end of the night, he'll pay the price.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:05 pm*

The bass from the club's speakers thrums through the air, vibrating beneath my feet as I maneuver through the crowded floor of the Ember House. It's a Friday night, and the place is packed, every corner buzzing with energy.

Drinks clink against tabletops, laughter and shouts rise above the music, and the faint haze of smoke mingles with the scent of expensive cologne.

I balance a tray of cocktails on one hand, weaving through the press of bodies in my short black skirt and white blouse. My feet ache in my heels, but I've gotten used to that. The tips are worth it.

I glance at the VIP section as I approach, the faces there shadowed under the low, warm light. It's the kind of place where people come to flaunt money and power, though I try not to think too much about who they are or what they do when they're not here.

When I set the drinks down on a polished table, a sharp memory hits me like a slap, and my breath hitches.

The VIP section. A month ago. Him.

My tray feels heavier as the image flashes through my mind: a man with piercing blue eyes, a suit that screamed power, and a voice that made my knees weak. He'd looked at me like I was the only thing in the room, his gaze stripping away every layer of my defenses.

I can still feel the heat of his hands on my skin, the commanding way he'd spoken,

the fire that burned through me when I let myself follow him upstairs.

It was reckless. Stupid. Yet, I haven't stopped thinking about him since.

I rack my brain, trying to remember his name, but it slips through my fingers like water. Mark? No. Makar? Maybe. I don't know, and it doesn't matter. He wasn't there when I woke up, and I haven't seen him since.

"Earth to Hannah!"

I blink, snapping out of my thoughts.

Julie's grinning face appears in front of me, her blonde ponytail bouncing as she waves a hand in front of my face. "Where'd you go just now? You looked like you were a million miles away."

"Sorry," I say, forcing a smile as I shift the tray under my arm. "I'm just... distracted."

Julie cocks an eyebrow, her bright blue eyes narrowing playfully. "Distracted, huh? Does it have anything to do with a guy?"

I feel my cheeks flush, and Julie's grin widens. She always knows how to get under my skin.

"I have no idea what you're talking about," I say, turning away to set down another drink.

"Oh, please," she says, following me like a puppy. "You think I don't notice when you get all moony-eyed? Who is he?"

I glance over my shoulder, lowering my voice. “Julie, you’re going to get me in trouble. Shouldn’t you be with your friends?”

She waves a dismissive hand. “They’re fine. I came over when I saw you. I mean, what are the odds? You never told me you work here!”

“It’s just a job,” I say simply, though her excitement is contagious. Julie has that kind of energy—the kind that makes you feel like everything is an adventure.

“Here I thought you were busy studying art all the time,” she teases. “You’re so mysterious, Hannah Fox. Working in a fancy club by night, going to classes by day... what’s next, secret spy missions?”

I laugh despite myself, shaking my head. “You watch too many movies.”

“Maybe,” she says, leaning against a nearby table. “Seriously, this place is incredible. You must see some crazy stuff here.”

“Crazy is one word for it,” I admit, thinking again about the man from that night.

Julie doesn’t notice my shift in mood. “Well, if you see anyone important, let me know. I’ll wave and pretend I’m one of the cool kids.”

“Noted.” I glance toward the manager’s office and sigh. “I have to get back to work. It was good seeing you, though.”

Julie pouts but nods. “Okay, fine. Text me later, okay? We need to catch up.”

“Deal.”

As Julie disappears back into the crowd, I take a moment to steady myself. She has

no idea what kind of people actually frequent this place, and it's better that way.

The buzz of my earpiece startles me, and my manager's voice crackles through. "Hannah, VIP table five. Now."

"On it," I reply, turning and heading toward the bar to pick up the next round.

The VIPs tonight seem more demanding than usual, and I can't shake the feeling that something is in the air. Still, I push through, keeping my smile in place as I serve table after table.

No matter how busy the night gets, I can't seem to shake the memory of those blue eyes, or the way he made me feel. Real. Alive. For one night, I'd let myself lose control.

The dim glow of the hallway lights flickers as I approach Kris's office, my pulse quickening with every step. I've never liked him. Something about the way he stares a second too long or the way his smiles feel slimy, like they're hiding something.

When I knock on the door, his voice calls out immediately. "Come in."

I push the door open to find him sitting behind his desk, a smirk already tugging at the corners of his mouth. The room smells faintly of smoke and cologne, and the air feels heavy, oppressive. Kris leans back in his chair, his blond hair slicked back, his shirt unbuttoned just enough to show a hint of gold chain.

"Hannah," he drawls, gesturing for me to step inside. "Close the door."

I hesitate but do as he says, the soft click of the door shutting making the room feel smaller.

“You wanted to see me?” I ask, keeping my tone professional.

He motions to the chair opposite his desk. “Sit.”

I lower myself into the seat, balancing the tray of empty glasses on my lap. Kris’s eyes sweep over me, and I resist the urge to squirm under his gaze.

“You’ve been doing a good job around here,” he begins, his tone casual. “The VIPs like you. That’s important.”

“Thank you,” I say, wary. Compliments from Kris always come with strings attached.

He leans forward, resting his elbows on the desk. “You know, you’ve been working here for a while now, but I never pegged you as the... adventurous type.”

I blink, unsure where this is going. “Excuse me?”

Kris’s smirk deepens. “I remember you leaving the club on the arm of a certain gentleman a while back.”

My stomach drops, and my grip on the tray tightens. Heat rushes to my cheeks as I realize what he’s talking about.

“Relax,” Kris says, holding up a hand like he’s doing me a favor. “It’s none of my business what you do in your free time. I’m just curious. Do you even know who you slept with?”

My mouth goes dry. I’d spent weeks trying not to think about that night, and now he’s dragging it back to the surface like it’s some kind of joke.

“No,” I admit, my voice quieter than I’d like. “I don’t.”

Kris chuckles, the sound grating. “Figures. Let me enlighten you, sweetheart. The man you spread your legs for is none other than Makar Sharov.”

The name hits me like a freight train. My head snaps up, and I stare at Kris, trying to make sense of the words.

“Makar Sharov?” I repeat, disbelief thick in my voice.

Kris nods, clearly enjoying my reaction. “The owner of this club, and a whole lot more, if you catch my drift.”

My mind reels. Makar. Of course. That’s why his presence had felt so commanding, so impossible to ignore. He wasn’t just some rich guy blowing through town. He owns the Ember House, and who knows what else.

Kris watches me with a smug expression, like he’s just dropped the world’s most shocking gossip.

“Didn’t take you for the type to go for someone like him,” he says, leaning back in his chair. “I guess everyone has their price.”

My jaw tightens, and I glare at him. “I didn’t—”

He cuts me off with a wave of his hand. “Hey, no judgment here. In fact....” His tone shifts, turning oily. “If you’re into that sort of thing, I could help you out. I’ve got some VIPs who’d pay good money for a pretty little thing like you.”

I stare at him, my stomach twisting in disgust. “What are you talking about?”

Kris shrugs, like he hasn’t just crossed every possible line. “I’m just saying, you’ve got options. One-night stands are fun, sure, but why not make a little extra while

you're at it?" He winks, the gesture making my skin crawl.

It takes me a moment to process what he's implying, but when it hits me, the tray slips from my hands, the glasses clattering onto the desk.

"You think I'm—?" I can't even finish the sentence.

Kris grins, unbothered by my reaction. "Hey, no need to get all worked up. It's just an idea. You'd be surprised how much some of these guys are willing to pay."

I push myself to my feet, my hands shaking with anger and humiliation. "I'm not interested," I snap, my voice louder than I intended.

He raises his hands in mock surrender, still smirking. "Suit yourself. If you change your mind, you know where to find me."

I don't bother responding. I storm out of his office, slamming the door behind me. My heart pounds in my chest as I make my way back to the bar, the lights and music suddenly too loud, too bright.

The nerve of him. The sheer audacity to look at me and assume that because I gave in to my desires one time, it meant I was willing to sell myself.

I feel dirty, exposed, like every step I take is being scrutinized. My face burns with embarrassment, but beneath it all, there's a simmering rage.

How dare he?

I've made mistakes, sure, but that doesn't give anyone the right to treat me like I'm nothing more than a commodity.



I take a shaky breath, gripping the edge of the bar to steady myself. My thoughts spiral, images of Makar's intense blue eyes flashing through my mind. If Kris was telling the truth, if that man was really Makar Sharov....

What the hell have I gotten myself into?

I force myself back onto the floor, tray in hand, trying to shove the encounter with Kris out of my head. Even so, his words stick, coiling around my thoughts like barbed wire.

Makar Sharov. The owner of this club.

The bass-heavy music is relentless, drowning out my racing thoughts as I approach a table near the VIP section. A man in a tailored suit raises his hand to flag me down, his date draped across his arm, her laughter sharp and shrill.

"Another round," he says, not bothering to look at me.

"Right away," I reply, my voice steady despite the turmoil brewing inside me.

As I turn toward the bar, one of the waitresses, Tina, sidles up to me, balancing her own tray. "You look like you've seen a ghost," she says with a grin.

"Just a long night," I reply, trying to sound casual.

She raises an eyebrow. "You've been in Kris's office, huh? He's the worst. You okay?"

"Yeah," I lie, plastering on a tight smile. "I'm fine."

I'm not. Every time I hear the name Makar Sharov in my head, my chest tightens.

What am I supposed to do now, knowing I've been working under his roof this whole time?

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:05 pm*

The Ember House glows like a dark jewel against the Chicago night, its sleek black-and-gold facade both inviting and foreboding. Inside, the bass-heavy music thrums through the building, muffling the conversations of those too drunk or too arrogant to care who might be listening.

I step out of the car, my shoes crunching against the gravel as Andrei and four of my men fall into step behind me. The sharp winter air nips at my face, but it doesn't cool the fire burning in my chest.

Kris has been running this club like it's his personal empire, and tonight, he's going to remember whose name is on the deed.

"Don't make a scene yet," I tell Andrei as we approach the bouncer.

Andrei smirks. "When have I ever made a scene?"

I glance at him, unimpressed. The bouncer stiffens as soon as he sees us, his shoulders squaring. He's a big guy, but even he knows better than to stand in my way.

"Mr. Sharov," he greets, his voice wavering just enough to betray his nerves.

I nod once, dismissively. "We're going in."

He steps aside without hesitation, and we enter the club.

Inside, the music pounds, the lights flash, and the air smells of money and

desperation. My men fan out slightly, their presence enough to turn heads as we move through the crowd.

Patrons glance our way, some curious, others uneasy. They don't know me by name, but they can feel the weight of who I am, what I am.

Andrei leans in as we near Kris's office. "What's the plan?"

I glance at him, my voice cold. "We start nice. Then we finish however he deserves."

Andrei nods, his hand brushing the grip of the gun tucked under his jacket.

We reach the office door, and I don't bother knocking. Andrei pushes it open, and I step inside first, my eyes immediately locking on Kris.

He's lounging behind his desk, a cigarette dangling from his lips, a glass of whiskey in hand. The man looks up, startled, but quickly masks it with a grin that's as fake as the gold chain around his neck.

"Boss!" he exclaims, spreading his arms like I'm an old friend dropping in for a drink. "Didn't know you were stopping by tonight."

I say nothing at first, taking in the room. The desk is cluttered with papers, and the faint smell of sweat clings to the air. Kris's tie is undone, his shirt unbuttoned far enough to reveal a hint of his flabby chest. He reeks of someone too comfortable, too confident.

"Kris," I say finally, my tone smooth. "How's business?"

Kris chuckles nervously, glancing at my men, who remain silent and still behind me. "Business is great. Couldn't be better. You know me, always keeping things running

smoothly for you.”

I nod, stepping further into the room. “That’s good to hear. I like when things run smoothly.”

Kris’s grin falters for a split second before he recovers. “Of course. This place is my priority. You can trust me on that.”

“Trust,” I repeat, letting the word hang in the air.

Kris shifts uncomfortably in his chair. “Uh, yeah. Trust. Absolutely.”

I motion to Andrei, who steps forward and quietly shuts the door. The click of the lock echoes through the room, and Kris’s smile disappears entirely.

“What’s this about, Boss?” he asks, his voice a little higher now.

I lean against the edge of his desk, my eyes boring into his. “Let’s stop pretending, Kris. You’ve been busy, haven’t you? Using my club to run your own side operation.”

Kris blinks rapidly, his hands raising in a defensive gesture. “Look, I don’t know what you’re talking about—”

Before he can finish, I grab the glass of whiskey from his desk and hurl it against the wall. It shatters with a deafening crash, amber liquid dripping down the plaster like blood.

“Don’t insult me by lying,” I growl, my voice low and dangerous.

Kris flinches, his eyes darting to the broken glass. “I swear, Boss, I didn’t mean—”

I slam my hand down on the desk, making him jump. “You’ve been using my club to exploit women. Blackmailing them, trapping them, selling them off to the highest bidder. Did you think I wouldn’t find out?”

Kris’s face turns ashen, and he stumbles over his words. “It’s not like that! I was just... it was just a few—”

I grab him by the collar, hauling him halfway out of his chair. “A few?” I hiss, my face inches from his. “You’ve turned my club into a brothel. You’ve brought shame to my name, my rules.”

“Please!” Kris sputters, his hands clawing at mine. “It was a mistake! I can fix it!”

I shove him back into the chair, and he lands with a grunt. His hands shake as he adjusts his collar, his chest heaving with panicked breaths.

“You don’t fix things, Kris,” I say, straightening. “This is beyond that.”

I glance at Andrei, who steps forward, pulling a steel baton from his jacket. He smacks it against his palm with a dull thud, and Kris’s eyes widen in terror.

“Wait,” Kris pleads, scrambling to his feet. “Boss, I can explain—”

“Sit down,” I snap, and the force in my voice sends him crashing back into the chair.

I nod to Andrei, who moves behind Kris and slams the baton into the back of his knee. Kris screams, clutching his leg as he crumples to the floor.

“You thought you could use my name, my club, to run your filthy little business?” I ask, crouching beside him. “Did you think I wouldn’t notice, or that I wouldn’t care?”

“Please,” Kris sobs, tears streaming down his face. “It won’t happen again. I’ll stop, I swear!”

I grab his jaw, forcing him to look at me. “You’re right about one thing, Kris. It won’t happen again. Because after tonight, you’re done.”

“Boss—”

I cut him off with a sharp punch to the face, his head snapping back with a sickening crack. Blood pours from his nose, staining his shirt as he groans in pain.

I rise to my feet, wiping my knuckles on a handkerchief Andrei hands me. “Take him,” I say to my men.

Two of them haul Kris to his feet, dragging him toward the door. He screams, his voice raw with desperation. “Please! I’ll do anything! Just give me a chance!”

The Ember House’s main floor thrums with life: pounding bass, flashing lights, audible even from the office.

None of it registers. My focus is on Kris as my men drag him through the hallway and into my own office across the hall.

“Please, Boss!” Kris sputters, his voice hoarse from crying out. Blood trickles from his broken nose, staining his shirt. His legs buckle as he’s hauled forward, his shoes scraping against the floor. “I swear, it was just a mistake! Just a misunderstanding!”

I follow at a steady pace, Andrei at my side. I don’t rush. This moment has been a long time coming.

We reach the secondary office, a small, windowless room used for more... delicate

matters. The bare concrete walls and single overhead bulb give it a grim, utilitarian feel. My men shove Kris inside, and he stumbles, nearly falling before catching himself on the edge of the metal desk.

“Sit,” Andrei growls, shoving him down into the lone chair.

Kris’s chest heaves as he looks around wildly, his hands raised in a pathetic gesture of surrender. “Boss, please. Whatever you think I did, I swear, I can explain—”

“Shut up,” I snap, my tone cold and final.

His mouth snaps shut, his face pale and clammy. I step forward, pulling the chair from behind the desk and turning it to face him. Slowly, deliberately, I sit down, elbows resting on my knees as I lean forward.

“You’ve disappointed me, Kris,” I begin, my voice quiet but razor-sharp. “And do you know what happens to people who disappoint me?”

He shakes his head violently, his lips trembling. “Boss, I swear, I didn’t mean—”

I raise a hand, silencing him. “You’ve turned my club into your personal cesspool. Exploiting women. Blackmailing them. Selling them off like cattle.” I let the words settle, watching as they sink in.

“It wasn’t like that!” Kris blurts, tears streaming down his face. “It was just... it was just a few side deals. Nothing serious. Nothing that could hurt the business!”

I tilt my head, studying him like a bug under a microscope. “Nothing serious?” I repeat, my voice eerily calm. “Using my name, my reputation, to traffic women isn’t serious?”



“It wasn’t trafficking!” he protests, his voice rising. “It was... it was business. They were willing—”

I’m on him in an instant, my fist slamming into his jaw. The force sends him toppling out of the chair, sprawling onto the floor.

“Don’t lie to me,” I snarl, standing over him. “Do you think I’m stupid, Kris?”

He scrambles backward, his hands raised in a futile attempt to protect himself. “I swear, Boss! It won’t happen again! Just give me one more chance!”

I crouch down, grabbing him by the collar and yanking him up to meet my gaze. “You’ve had your chance,” I hiss. “You spat on it.”

His breath comes in short, panicked gasps as he shakes his head. “Please... please....”

I let him go, and he collapses to the floor, sobbing. My men stand silent and unmoving by the door, their expressions grim.

I straighten, adjusting my jacket. “Tie him,” I order.

Andrei steps forward, pulling a length of rope from his jacket. Kris struggles weakly as his hands are bound behind his back, his cries muffled by the gag one of my men shoves into his mouth.

I walk back to the desk, sitting once more as I watch him writhe on the floor. For a moment, I say nothing, letting the tension build. His muffled sobs echo in the room, grating on my nerves.

“Kris,” I say finally, my tone flat. “Do you know the difference between power and

weakness?”

He doesn't respond, his bloodshot eyes darting toward me in fear.

“Power,” I continue, as if lecturing a child, “is earned. It's built on respect, on loyalty. Weakness? Weakness is what you've shown tonight. It's greed. Cowardice. Exploiting those who can't fight back.”

I rise to my feet, pulling my gun from its holster. The metallic scrape of the safety being clicked off sends a visible shudder through Kris's body.

“Boss, please,” he mumbles through the gag, his words slurred and desperate.

I step closer, the barrel of the gun now level with his head. His sobs grow louder, his body trembling violently.

“Do you want to know what disgusts me most about you?” I ask, my voice soft, almost contemplative. “It's not that you betrayed me. It's that you did it so... sloppily. No honor. No thought. Just mindless greed.”

Kris shakes his head, tears streaming down his face as he mumbles incoherent pleas.

I crouch down, bringing the gun closer. “You're not just a failure, Kris. You're a liability. I don't keep liabilities.”

I stand, my finger tightening on the trigger. Kris screams behind the gag, the sound muffled but deafening in the small room.

The gunshot echoes, sharp and final. Kris's body jerks once, then falls still, his blood pooling on the cold concrete floor.

I lower the gun, my expression unchanged. There's no satisfaction in this, no triumph. Just the cold, detached necessity of cleaning up a mess.

"Andrei," I say, turning to him. "Clean this up."

He nods, already moving to direct the others. I slide the gun back into its holster and head toward the door, my footsteps steady and deliberate.

The bass from the club filters faintly through the walls as I step back into the hallway, the noise jarring after the stark silence of the room.

Kris is gone, his mess dealt with, and my rules remain intact.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:05 pm*

The music pounds relentlessly, a deep bassline that rattles through my chest and leaves my ears ringing. Even as I weave through the crowded floor of the club, I can't escape it. It clings to me like the stench of spilled liquor and cheap cologne—a constant reminder of where I am and how much I hate it.

This job wasn't supposed to be permanent. When I started, I told myself it was just a means to an end, a way to save up and eventually get back to art school. I'd dropped out in my first year, not because I wasn't good enough but because life had a way of cutting your legs out from under you when you were just starting to run.

Rent, groceries, utilities—they all added up faster than I expected when I first moved to the city. Dreams of sketching under sunlight and exploring galleries gave way to twelve-hour shifts under the glare of strobe lights, dodging grabby hands and leering eyes.

“Hey, sweetheart,” a man slurs, reaching out as I pass by with a tray of empty glasses.

I step out of his reach, my smile frozen in place. “Enjoy your evening, sir.”

It's the same every night. Drunken customers who think the uniform gives them permission to paw at me like I'm part of the entertainment.

As I pass the bar, one of the bartenders, Carla, gives me a sympathetic look. “Almost done?” she asks, her voice barely audible over the music.

I nod, balancing the tray on my hip. “Ten more minutes,” I reply, glancing at the clock on the wall. “Not that I'm counting or anything.”

Carla snorts, wiping down the counter. “You and me both. Hang in there.”

I force a smile, but my grip on the tray tightens as I head toward the back. The farther I get from the noise of the main floor, the more my frustration simmers to the surface. It’s not just the rude customers or the deafening music. It’s everything.

The job, the people, the sheer grind of it all—it’s suffocating. Kris is the worst of them, though. The smug way he smiles when he talks to me, like he’s doing me a favor by keeping me employed.

Earlier tonight, he’d called me to his office, his tone dripping with faux concern as he said, “If you’re into that sort of thing, I could help you out. Some VIPs would pay good money for a pretty little thing like you.”

The words replay in my mind, each syllable scraping against my skin like sandpaper.

I don’t know what infuriates me more—the casual way he suggested I sell myself, or the way he clearly thought I’d consider it.

I push open the door to the staff room, depositing the tray on the counter before grabbing my bag. My shift is officially over, and most of the other waitresses have already left for the night. The muffled music filters in through the walls, quieter here but still a constant presence.

As I sling my bag over my shoulder, my eyes catch on the crumpled paycheck stub sticking out of the top. It’s a pitiful amount, barely enough to scrape by after I pay rent and buy groceries. Saving up for art school feels like trying to fill a swimming pool with an eyedropper.

Still, I can’t let it go. The thought of finally getting back to that world—to sketchbooks and canvases and endless possibilities—keeps me going. Even if it

means enduring nights like this one.

I swipe through the photos, my chest tightening as I scroll past pieces of my old work. There's the charcoal sketch of a mother cradling her child, the soft smudges giving it an ethereal quality. A vibrant watercolor of a mountain range at sunset comes next, followed by a minimalist ink drawing of a city skyline.

I pause on one in particular—a detailed oil painting of a girl standing at the edge of a forest, her face half-lit by golden light filtering through the trees. It had taken me weeks to finish, every brushstroke a labor of love.

I sold it for rent money during my second month in the city. It didn't fetch much—not even close to what it was worth—but at the time, I didn't have a choice.

My fingers hover over the screen, the memory of handing it over to the buyer still vivid. The way they smiled, excited to take it home, while I felt like I'd lost a part of myself.

I miss it. All of it.

Creating something with my own hands, watching a blank canvas transform into a reflection of my thoughts and emotions. It feels like a lifetime ago, like a dream I had no business chasing.

The sharp ding of the clock on the wall snaps me out of my thoughts, pulling me back to the present. I lock my phone and slide it into my pocket, straightening up with a sigh.

I take a deep breath, trying to steady myself, but the anger bubbling in my chest refuses to fade. The audacity of Kris's words gnaws at me, the memory of his smug grin igniting a fire I can't extinguish.

I know it's stupid. I know calling him out could cost me this job—the one thread of stability I have left. Leaving without saying something feels like letting him win, and I can't stomach the thought.

The hallway leading to Kris's office is quieter than the rest of the club, the fluorescent lights overhead casting a harsh, unflattering glow. The buzz of the bulbs fills the silence, and my footsteps echo faintly as I approach the door.

Each step feels heavier than the last, my anger warring with the nagging voice in the back of my mind telling me to walk away. My fists are clenched, my nails digging into my palms, and my pride won't let me back down.

A muffled sound seeps through the thick door. Crying. Begging. Kris's voice, though strained and almost unrecognizable.

“Please... please, Boss... I'll fix it... I swear!”

My breath catches, my fingers hovering over the knob. For a moment, I consider walking away, but something about his tone—a mix of terror and desperation—roots me in place. Slowly, I press my ear to the door.

Another voice cuts through, low and calm but laced with something sharp. “You've already had your chance, Kris. You wasted it.”

That voice.

My chest tightens as a memory floods back—whispered words against my skin, a deep timbre that sent shivers down my spine.

I push the door open just a crack, enough to see inside without drawing attention to myself.

Kris is on the floor, his face streaked with tears, blood trickling from his nose. His arms are bound behind him, and he's shaking so hard I can almost feel it from here.

Then there's him.

Makar.

He stands over Kris like a predator looming over its prey, his posture relaxed but radiating a quiet, lethal authority. He's dressed impeccably, his dark suit tailored to perfection, but it's his face that holds me captive. The sharp lines of his jaw, the piercing blue of his eyes—they're the same, yet different.

That night in the hotel, his gaze had been intense but full of fire, drawing me in, making me feel alive. Now, those same eyes are cold, unyielding. He's like a different person entirely.

A chill runs down my spine, my pulse quickening as I watch him crouch in front of Kris, his movements deliberate.

"Do you know the difference between power and weakness?," he asks, his voice so quiet it makes the hairs on my arms stand up

Kris doesn't reply, shivering and shaking like a wet dog.

Makar tilts his head, studying Kris like he's some kind of pathetic insect. "Power," he says coolly, "is earned. It's built on respect, on loyalty. Weakness? Weakness is what you've shown tonight. It's greed. Cowardice. Exploiting those who can't fight back."

I press my hand against the doorframe, the weight of his words pressing down on me. This is a side of him I didn't see that night, a side I couldn't have imagined.



“Boss, please,” Kris cries, his voice breaking.

Makar straightens, slipping a hand into his jacket pocket. When he pulls out a sleek black pistol, my stomach drops.

I barely hold back a gasp, my heart racing as he checks the weapon with casual precision.

“Do you want to know what disgusts me most about you?” Makar asks, his voice soft, almost contemplative. “It’s not that you betrayed me. It’s that you did it so... sloppily. No honor. No thought. Just mindless greed.”

I can’t look away, frozen in place as Kris sobs harder, his pleas turning into incoherent babbling.

“You’re not just a failure, Kris. You’re a liability. I don’t keep liabilities.”

Makar doesn’t flinch. His expression remains unreadable, detached. Slowly, he raises the gun, pointing it directly at Kris’s head.

The weight of the moment suffocates me, and I grip the doorframe tightly, my knuckles white.

And then—

**BANG!**

The sound is deafening, even through the partially open door. Kris’s body collapses, lifeless, blood pooling around him.

I slap a hand over my mouth, my heart pounding so hard it feels like it might burst.

My legs tremble, and for a moment, I think I might fall, but I force myself to stay still.

Makar lowers the gun, his movements calm and deliberate as he slides it back into his holster. His gaze sweeps over Kris's body, then shifts to Andrei, who stands by the wall, arms crossed.

"Clean this up," Makar says, his tone devoid of emotion.

Andrei nods, stepping forward to motion for the other men to begin their work.

Makar turns toward the door, and for a terrifying second, I think he's going to catch me. My breath catches, and I shrink back, my body pressed flat against the wall.

Then it happens.

A small, involuntary cry escapes my lips. It's barely a sound, but in the oppressive quiet that follows the gunshot, it feels deafening.

The footsteps stop.

A shiver of fear ripples down my spine as I hear Andrei's voice, sharp and alert. "Did you hear that?"

"Check the hallway," Makar orders, his tone calm but commanding.

Panic seizes me. I turn and run, my shoes thudding against the floor as I race toward the nearest door. My heart pounds in my ears, drowning out everything else.

"Someone's here," Andrei growls from behind me.

I don't look back. My hands fumble with the doorknob of a storage room, and I slip inside, closing the door as quietly as I can. The space is cramped, filled with shelves of cleaning supplies and crates of liquor. The air smells of bleach and damp cardboard.

I crouch behind a stack of boxes, pulling my phone from my pocket with trembling hands. My fingers fumble as I swipe to unlock it, the screen seeming impossibly bright in the dim room.

I press the emergency service and bring the phone to my ear, my breath coming in short, panicked gasps.

The operator picks up after a single ring. "Nine-one-one, what's your emergency?"

"I—" My voice cracks, and I force myself to speak louder. "There's a man. At the Ember House. He just—"

Before I can finish, something cold and hard presses against the back of my neck.

My body freezes, every nerve screaming in alarm. The phone slips from my hand, clattering to the floor.

"Big mistake," a low voice murmurs behind me, right before everything goes black.

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My head feels like it's full of cotton, muffling everything around me. A dull ache pulses at the back of my skull, and the sharp jostling of my body against something hard snaps me into a hazy awareness.

The smell of leather and gasoline hits my nose first. Then, the faint murmur of voices

filters through the fog clouding my senses.

“She’s out cold,” a deep voice says, gruff and low.

“Good,” another voice responds, sharper. “Keep her that way until we’re back.”

My heart lurches, the words cutting through my disorientation like a blade. Where am I? What’s happening?

The jostling continues, and I become vaguely aware that I’m being carried. My limbs feel heavy, sluggish, and uncooperative as I try to move. Panic claws at my throat as I force my eyes open. The world around me is dim, the only light coming from a distant streetlamp.

A man’s face looms above me—dark hair, sharp features, and cold eyes. His expression is unreadable, but the sight of him sends a fresh wave of fear surging through me.

“Got the girl,” he says into a phone pressed to his ear, his tone calm and detached.

The girl. Me.

I try to move, my hands twitching weakly at my sides. A faint groan escapes my lips, and the man’s eyes snap down to mine.

“She’s stirring,” he mutters, annoyance flashing across his face.

“Keep her under control,” the other voice snaps, now close enough to feel like it’s inside my pounding head.

Before I can fully comprehend the situation, I’m shoved unceremoniously into the

back of a car. My body hits the seat hard, and the force sends another jolt of pain through my head.

“Stop fighting,” the man growls, grabbing my arm to keep me still as I weakly thrash against him.

“Let me go,” I manage to croak, my voice barely above a whisper. My throat feels raw, like I haven’t spoken in hours.

He doesn’t respond, his grip tightening. The sharp edge of his gaze slices through me as he mutters something under his breath.

I try to fight again, my limbs trembling with effort. The leather beneath me feels suffocating, the small space of the car pressing in on all sides. My vision swims, but I catch a glimpse of the man’s face again, his lips moving as he speaks into the phone.

“She’s more trouble than I expected,” he says, his tone clipped.

My breaths come in shallow gasps, my mind spinning as I try to piece together what’s happening. Why is this happening? Who is this man?

The questions slip away as darkness closes in once more, pulling me under before I can find the answers.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:05 pm*

The basement is silent except for the faint hum of the overhead bulb that sways slightly, casting shifting shadows on the cold, gray walls. The smell of damp concrete fills the air, the floor beneath my boots hard and unforgiving. Hannah lies crumpled on the floor, her breathing shallow and uneven.

I lean against the far wall, arms crossed, watching her. She's small, pale against the stark grayness of the room. Her dark hair spills across the floor, and for a moment, I study her features—the faint tremble of her lips, the delicate curve of her neck.

There's something about her. Something that gnaws at the edges of my memory.

"Who are you?" I murmur, my voice low, though there's no one here to answer.

Her stillness is unnerving. She stirs faintly, a soft whimper escaping her lips, but her eyes remain shut. The sight is almost... pitiful. Almost.

The sound of boots on the stairs pulls my attention, and I glance toward the doorway as Andrei descends, his expression as stoic as ever. He holds a slim folder in one hand, flipping through its contents as he steps into the room.

"Boss," he says, snapping the folder shut. "Got what you asked for."

"Good," I reply, straightening. "What did you find?"

He glances down at her, his lip curling faintly before he meets my gaze again. "Her name's Hannah Fox. Twenty-one. Moved here from Montana about two years ago for school. She's studying art at one of the local universities. Works nights at the Ember

House to pay the bills.”

Art. The word feels oddly fitting. She looks like she belongs in a painting—soft features, striking in a way that’s difficult to define. I push the thought aside.

“No family?” I ask.

Andrei shakes his head. “None. Parents are dead, no siblings, no close relatives. She’s completely alone.” He smirks faintly. “Lucky for us. Makes cleanup easier if we need to.”

I shoot him a look, and his smirk fades.

I step closer to her, my boots scraping faintly against the floor. Her chest rises and falls with slow, shallow breaths. “She’s no one,” I say quietly, more to myself than to him.

“No one,” Andrei echoes, his tone matter-of-fact. “She still saw too much. She called the cops. You know what that means.”

I glance back at him. “I’ll decide what happens to her.”

He raises an eyebrow, but doesn’t argue. “Fair enough. But you know what I think.”

“Do I ever care what you think?” I reply, my tone dry.

Andrei chuckles, but there’s tension behind it. “No, but you pay me to say it anyway.”

I crouch beside her, resting one elbow on my knee. Up close, I can see the faint freckles on her nose, the dark lashes that cast shadows on her pale skin. Something

about her feels... familiar.

“Andrei,” I say without looking up. “Does she have a history with anyone in the club? Regulars, staff?”

“Not that I found,” he replies. “Kept her head down, mostly. Did her job. Quiet.”

Quiet. The word grates against the memory flickering at the edge of my mind. I remember something louder—laughter, a flash of fire in the dark. My jaw tightens.

“She doesn’t seem so quiet now,” I mutter, more to myself.

Andrei steps closer, his boots heavy against the concrete. “What do you mean?”

I stand, brushing off my jacket. “I’ve seen her before.”

“You’ve seen every waitress in that club at some point.”

“No,” I reply sharply, turning to face him. “I’ve seen her .”

Andrei frowns, his brow furrowing as he glances down at her. “Where?”

I don’t answer immediately, my gaze fixed on her still form. The memory is hazy, blurred by the haze of vodka and dim lights, but it’s there. The curve of her jaw, the softness of her lips—

That night.

The realization hits like a punch to the gut, and I take a step back, my expression hardening.



“What?” Andrei presses, noticing the change in my demeanor.

“I know her,” I say flatly.

He raises an eyebrow. “From where?”

“It doesn’t matter.” My voice is clipped, and the look I shoot him silences any further questions.

Andrei exhales sharply, his frustration evident. “What do you want to do with her?”

“She stays here,” I reply, my tone brooking no argument. “For now.”

He folds his arms, clearly dissatisfied. “She’s a liability, Boss. You know that. If you’re not going to deal with her now—”

“I said she stays,” I snap, my voice cold. “I’ll handle her when I’m ready.”

Andrei holds up his hands in mock surrender. “Your call.”

I glance back at her, my thoughts swirling. She’s a liability, yes. She saw too much, involved the cops, and now she’s lying unconscious in the basement of my home.

She’s also something else. A puzzle. A memory I’d rather forget, now staring me in the face.

“Andrei,” I say, keeping my eyes on the girl slumped on the cold floor. Her dark hair is tangled, her face pale and slack in unconsciousness. Even now, there’s a tension in her body, like she’s ready to spring back into life and fight. It’s intriguing. “Have someone bring her food and water. She’s not dying yet.”

Andrei leans against the doorframe, crossing his arms with a faint chuckle. “You’re too soft sometimes, Boss.”

The corner of my mouth twitches in amusement. “Soft?” I finally glance at him, raising an eyebrow. “This is curiosity, not kindness.”

He grins, shaking his head. “Curious about what, whether she’ll thank you for the scraps?”

“No,” I reply smoothly, turning back to her. She looks small here, crumpled and vulnerable, but there’s something deceptively tough in her, even now. “Whether she’ll fight or flee when she realizes the door isn’t locked.”

Andrei straightens, his smirk giving way to a more serious expression. “You’re leaving her door unlocked?”

I nod, slipping my hands into my pockets as I study her. “Yes. Put her in one of the upstairs bedrooms. Something decent..”

“You’re actually hoping she’ll try to escape, aren’t you?” His grin returns, sharper this time.

“It could be entertaining,” I say, letting a faint smirk curl my lips.

Andrei chuckles, shaking his head like I’ve told some kind of joke. “You’re something else, Boss. Should I have someone stationed nearby, just in case she bolts?”

“No.” My tone leaves no room for argument. “If she tries something, I’ll handle it myself.”

He looks like he wants to argue, but then shrugs, a trace of amusement still lingering in his eyes. “Fair enough.” He signals to the guards standing outside the door. “Let’s get her moved, then.”

The guards step inside, lifting the girl carefully as they carry her out of the basement. She doesn’t stir, her head lolling against her shoulder, and I follow at a steady pace, my footsteps echoing through the dim corridor.

As we reach the main hall, Andrei glances at me again, his tone lighter now. “You know this is risky, right? She’s got fire. She could cause trouble.”

“I’m counting on it,” I reply, the words laced with dry amusement.

He laughs, shaking his head as he walks off to oversee the preparations.

Once they’re out of sight, I take a moment to linger in the quiet hall, my thoughts focused on the girl. There’s something about her—something that doesn’t fit into the usual pattern of pawns and players in my world.

I make my way to my study, the familiar scent of leather and whiskey greeting me as I step inside. Closing the door behind me, I cross to the desk and pick up the phone, dialing a number I know by heart.

“Vera,” I say when the call connects.

“Mr. Sharov,” she answers, her voice steady and efficient, as always.

“I need you to keep an eye on our guest,” I tell her, leaning back in my chair. “She’ll be moved to one of the upstairs bedrooms shortly.”

There’s a pause on the other end before she replies. “The girl from earlier?”

“Yes,” I confirm. “She’ll be scared when she wakes up. Befriend her. Be kind. Answer her questions if she asks.”

Vera doesn’t question me, though I can hear the faint hesitation in her voice. “Understood, sir.”

“Let her think you’re there to help,” I continue, my tone measured. “In a way, you are. If she plans something—anything—you tell me immediately.”

“I’ll watch her closely,” she promises.

I nod, though she can’t see it. “Don’t press too hard. Let her come to you.”

“Of course,” Vera says.

There’s a pause, the sound of her breath steady on the other end of the line before she speaks again. “Mr. Sharov... of course, I’ll do what you’ve asked, but I want to say something.”

I raise an eyebrow, intrigued by her uncharacteristic boldness. “Go on.”

“I won’t have to fake kindness with her,” Vera says quietly. “She’s just a girl. Scared. Alone. I don’t know what she did to cross your path, but... I’ll help her because it’s the right thing to do.”

There’s no challenge in her tone, no defiance. Just honesty.

For a moment, I say nothing, my fingers tapping against the desk as I consider her words. Vera has always been dependable—loyal to the Sharovs, discreet, and skilled at reading situations. That insight of hers is why I trust her with tasks like this.

“That’s good,” I say finally, my voice calm. “Her fear might make her reckless. If she trusts you, it will be easier to keep her from doing something stupid.”

“I understand,” Vera replies. “Trust isn’t something you can command. It has to be earned.”

I let out a quiet chuckle. “You’re confident you can earn it?”

“I’m confident I can try,” she answers.

A grin pulls at my lips. Vera’s compassion is rare in my world, but I’ve seen how effective it can be. “Then do what you must. Just remember where your loyalty lies.”

“With you, Mr. Sharov,” she says firmly. “Always.”

“Good,” I say, leaning back in my chair. “That’s all for now.”

“Of course. I’ll check on her shortly.”

I hang up, my thoughts shifting back to the girl. Vera’s natural warmth might be exactly what’s needed. She’ll soften the edges, make the girl feel like she has an ally in this house. That’s fine—so long as Vera remembers that kindness is a tool, no different from fear or control.

The door creaks open, and Andrei steps in, his expression unreadable. “She’s been moved,” he says, leaning casually against the frame. “Upstairs. One of the bedrooms like you asked.”

“And?” I prompt.

“She hasn’t woken up yet,” he continues. “Still out cold. Vera’s keeping an eye on

her now.”

I nod, my focus narrowing. “Good. Let her rest for now.”

Andrei tilts his head, studying me with a sly grin. “You’re putting a lot of effort into this girl, Boss. What makes her so interesting?”

I glance at him, my smirk faint but sharp. “That’s what I intend to find out.”

Andrei chuckles, shaking his head as he pushes off the doorframe. “Well, I’ll leave you to your scheming.”

He leaves, the door clicking shut behind him, and I lean back in my chair.

The pieces are in place. Now, I wait to see how she moves.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:05 pm*

The first thing I notice when I wake is the softness beneath me. My eyes flutter open, my vision blurry as I take in the ornate ceiling above—a chandelier hanging in the center, its crystals catching the soft morning light.

This isn't my apartment.

I sit up abruptly, my heart racing. The room is luxurious, decorated in warm tones with heavy velvet curtains draped over tall windows. The bed I'm lying in is massive, its headboard carved with intricate designs.

Panic surges as the memories come rushing back. Kris. The basement. The gunshot that still echoes in my mind.

Him.

Makar Sharov.

The image of him standing over Kris's trembling body, calm and detached as he pulled the trigger, sends a shiver down my spine. I had heard about men like him, but seeing it—seeing him—was something else entirely.

I swing my legs over the edge of the bed, my bare feet touching the plush rug. My body feels heavy, sluggish, and my head pounds faintly. The last thing I remember is calling the police, the pressure at the back of my neck, and then—nothing.

Where am I now?

I move cautiously, glancing around the room. There's a wardrobe in the corner, a polished vanity table, and a door slightly ajar that leads to what I assume is an en suite bathroom. Everything looks expensive, pristine.

I need to get out of here.

The door creaks softly as I push it open, stepping into a long hallway lined with artwork and elegant sconces. The house—or mansion, judging by the opulence—is silent, but the quiet hum of distant activity makes my pulse quicken.

I follow the hallway, my bare feet making no sound against the hardwood floor. At the end of the corridor, a grand staircase spirals downward into what looks like a sprawling foyer.

I descend the stairs quickly, my heart pounding as I glance around for an exit. The massive front door looms ahead, but when I try the handle, it doesn't budge. Locked.

"Damn it," I mutter under my breath, glancing around desperately. My eyes catch on a telephone sitting on a small table by the wall.

Hope surges in my chest as I rush to it, lifting the receiver with trembling hands. My fingers quickly dial 911, and I press the phone to my ear, holding my breath.

"Nine-one-one, what's your emergency?" a calm voice answers.

Relief floods through me, and I speak quickly, the words tumbling out. "My name is Hannah Fox. I'm being held against my will. Makar Sharov—he killed a man in front of me. Kris Hunter. He shot him, and now he's kidnapped me. I don't know where I am."

There's a pause on the other end, and the operator's voice returns, clipped and



professional. “Where is Makar Sharov now?”

I glance around the empty foyer, my breath hitching. “I—I don’t know.”

The voice takes on a chilling edge. “Maybe he’s behind you.”

The receiver slips from my fingers, clattering against the table as realization slams into me. The line wasn’t connected to the police. It was a trap.

I turn slowly, my stomach knotting, and there he is.

Makar.

He stands at the base of the stairs, leaning casually against the banister, his lips curved into a grin. He’s dressed sharply as always, his dark suit tailored to perfection, the faint gleam of his watch catching the light.

“Calling for help?” he says smoothly, his voice carrying across the room. “How predictable.”

I back away instinctively, my palms pressing against the table. “You... you planned this.”

His grin deepens as he takes a step closer, his movements deliberate, unhurried. “Did you really think I’d leave an unsecured phone in reach of a guest like you?”

“I’m not your guest,” I snap, my voice trembling despite my best effort to sound strong. “I’m your prisoner.”

He tilts his head, amusement flickering in his piercing blue eyes. “Prisoner is such a dramatic word. Let’s call you... my responsibility.”

I grit my teeth, my fists clenching at my sides. “Let me go.”

He laughs softly, the sound low and unsettling. “You know I can’t do that, Hannah. Not after what you’ve seen.”

His words send a chill through me, and I take another step back, my legs hitting the edge of a nearby table. “You can’t keep me here forever.”

“No,” he agrees, closing the distance between us with a few long strides. “For now, you’ll stay exactly where I want you.”

My back presses against the wall as he stops in front of me, his presence overwhelming. The air between us feels charged, heavy, and I force myself to meet his gaze despite the instinct to look away.

His hand moves, and I flinch, but he only brushes a strand of hair from my face, his touch surprisingly gentle.

“You’re scared,” he murmurs, his voice soft but edged with something darker. “Good. Fear keeps people alive.”

“Fuck you,” I whisper, my voice barely audible.

He leans closer, his expression fading into something colder, more calculating. “Hate me all you want, little fox. Understand this: I could have killed you last night. I didn’t.”

“Why?” I demand, my voice cracking. “Why keep me alive?”

His eyes bore into mine, unreadable and intense. “I don’t make decisions lightly,” he says, his voice dropping to a near whisper. “You... you’re an interesting

complication.”

Before I can respond, his hand presses against the wall beside my head, caging me in. His other hand lifts to my chin, tilting my face upward so I can’t look away.

“You think you’re brave,” he says, his lips curving into a faint smirk again. “But bravery only lasts until the consequences catch up.”

The heat of his closeness makes my breath hitch, my heart racing despite the fear coursing through me.

“I’m not afraid of you,” I lie, the words trembling on my lips.

He chuckles, the sound low and dangerous. “Liar.”

For a moment, the world feels impossibly small, the only thing I can focus on is his gaze and the weight of his presence.

“You’ll stay here, Hannah,” he says finally, his tone leaving no room for argument. “If you behave, maybe I won’t have to teach you what happens to people who defy me.”

His words are calm, almost conversational, but they’re sharp enough to cut through the tension, leaving me raw and exposed.

I stare at him, my heart pounding in my chest. His presence is suffocating, his authority absolute. Beneath the fear simmering in my veins, anger stirs.

“What’s wrong with you?” I snap, my voice trembling with rage. “Do you think you can just keep me here like some kind of prisoner? You’re insane!”

His expression doesn't change, but his eyes darken, a flicker of something dangerous crossing his face.

"You killed a man," I continue, my words spilling out like poison. "You shot Kris in cold blood and didn't even flinch. Do you even feel anything, or are you just some kind of monster?"

The last word hangs in the air, and for a moment, silence stretches between us.

Then, in a blur of motion, Makar closes the distance between us, his hand slamming against the wall beside my head. I flinch, the sound reverberating through the room like a gunshot. His face is inches from mine now, his piercing blue eyes locked on to mine with a fury that steals my breath.

"Careful, little fox," he growls, his voice low and dangerous. "You don't want to know what happens when you push me too far."

My breath catches in my throat, but I refuse to look away. "You already pushed too far," I spit, the words defiant despite the fear coiling in my chest. "You killed someone. You kidnapped me. You don't get to lecture me about boundaries."

He leans closer, the heat of his anger radiating off him in waves. "You think you're innocent in all this?" he asks, his tone sharp enough to slice through steel. "You think you didn't make a choice the moment you stuck your nose where it didn't belong?"

"I didn't have a choice!" I snap back. "You think I wanted to see you murder someone? To get dragged into your twisted world?"

He tilts his head, a humorless smirk tugging at his lips. "No, I don't think you wanted any of this, but here you are, Hannah. Here's the reality: you had a chance to save yourself."

I blink, his words throwing me off-balance. “What are you talking about?”

“This,” he says, gesturing to the phone on the table. “This was a test. Your last chance to prove you were worth sparing. All you had to do was stay quiet. All you had to do was keep your head down and not snitch. You couldn’t help yourself, could you?”

My stomach drops, a chill washing over me. “I had to try.”

His smile fades, replaced by a cold, detached expression. “I gave you a choice,” he says evenly. “You failed. Miserably.”

I take a step back, my legs trembling. “You’re insane,” I whisper, my voice barely audible.

“Am I?” he asks, his voice dropping to a dangerous whisper. “Or am I just a man doing what’s necessary to survive in a world that doesn’t forgive mistakes?”

I shake my head, my anger rising again despite the fear gripping me. “You’re not surviving, Makar. You’re terrorizing people. You’re destroying lives without even thinking twice.”

He exhales sharply, his patience clearly wearing thin. “I don’t destroy lives for fun, Hannah. I do it because I have to. In my world, hesitation gets you killed. Trust me, the only reason you’re still breathing right now is because I’m debating whether you’re worth the effort.”

My throat tightens, and I shrink against the wall, my gaze darting toward the door.

“Don’t,” he says sharply, his voice snapping like a whip.

I freeze, his warning anchoring me in place. His hand moves to his pocket, and when he pulls out a sleek black pistol, my blood turns to ice.

My breath hitches, my heart hammering as he holds the gun casually at his side, his grip steady and sure.

“Do you know what the problem is with people like you?” he asks, his tone almost conversational again. “You think the world operates on fairness, on justice. You think if you scream loud enough, someone will come running to save you.”

I can’t look away from the gun, my pulse roaring in my ears.

“Here’s the truth, little fox,” he continues, taking a step closer. “No one’s coming. Not the police, not your friends, no one. The only person who decides whether you live or die right now is me.”

Tears prick at the corners of my eyes, but I blink them back, refusing to let him see me break. “Then just do it,” I whisper, my voice shaking. “If you’re going to kill me, just do it. Stop playing these games.”

For a moment, the room is silent, the tension thick enough to choke. His gaze locks on to mine, unreadable, and the weight of his presence presses down on me like a physical force.

Then, without a word, he raises the gun and presses it against my temple.

My breath catches, my entire body trembling as the cold metal bites into my skin. His face is so close now that I can see every detail—the sharp line of his jaw, the faint scar near his brow, the glint of something dark and dangerous in his eyes.

“Be very careful what you wish for, Hannah,” he murmurs, his voice soft but laced

with menace. “Because I don’t make empty threats.”

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:05 pm*

Hannah's breath trembles as I press the barrel of the gun to her temple. Her defiance is gone now, replaced with fear and something else—resignation, maybe. A shame. She's young, her life barely started, and yet here she is, standing at the edge of death because of her choices.

Her skin is warm beneath the cold steel of the gun as I trace it slowly along the side of her face. The faint line of her jaw, the smooth curve of her neck—I follow them absently, detached from what comes next.

"It's a pity," I murmur, my voice low and calm. "You had your whole life ahead of you. Now...."

I don't finish the sentence. There's no need. The gun lingers just beneath her chin, forcing her to look up at me. Her brown eyes are wide, tears threatening to spill, but she holds my gaze, her lips trembling.

"Makar," she whispers, her voice barely audible.

The sound of my name on her lips is startling. Not boss, not sir, but Makar . It cuts through the cold detachment I've built around myself, sharp and unexpected.

"What?" I say, my tone clipped.

She swallows hard, her hands trembling at her sides. "I'm pregnant."

The words hit me like a physical blow, and my grip on the gun falters slightly. I stare at her, my mind racing.



“Don’t lie to me,” I say, my voice dangerously low.

“I’m not lying,” she says quickly, her voice shaking. “I swear. I just found out, and—”

“How long?” I interrupt, the question slipping out before I can stop it.

She hesitates, her lips parting as she struggles to find the words. “A month,” she says finally, her voice barely above a whisper.

A month. The child barely exists at this point—a cluster of cells, not even a heartbeat. I grit my teeth, my jaw tightening as I try to process what she’s telling me.

I’m not going to kill an unborn child. Even I have limits.

Her breath catches, a flicker of hope crossing her face. “It’s your child,” she says, her voice firmer now.

I laugh, the sound harsh and humorless. “Is that so? How convenient for you to bring that up now.”

“I’m not making it up,” she insists, her voice rising. “It’s yours.”

“Prove it,” I say, narrowing my eyes at her.

She hesitates again, but only for a moment. “It happened a month ago,” she says. “At the Ember House. The night I went into the VIP room to serve drinks. You were drunk, but you weren’t so far gone that you didn’t know what you were doing.”

The memory stirs faintly at the edge of my mind—flashes of that night. The low light of the VIP lounge, the burn of vodka, the softness of someone’s skin beneath my

hands. I took her to my hotel room, I remember now.

I close my eyes briefly, the image growing clearer.

“You took my virginity,” she continues, her voice trembling but unrelenting. “Then you left. You didn’t even look back.”

I open my eyes, my gaze locking on to hers. Her face is pale, her chest rising and falling quickly, but her words carry weight, cutting through the haze of doubt.

“You remember,” she says softly, her voice barely audible.

I do. The realization settles over me like a heavy weight. That night, the blur of pleasure and heat—I hadn’t remembered her face until now, but the pieces fit.

I lower the gun slowly, my mind still racing.

“If this is a lie,” I say, my voice cold and sharp. “I won’t kill you. I’ll make you wish I had.”

She flinches, but she doesn’t look away.

“It’s not a lie,” she says, her voice steady now. “It’s the truth.”

I study her for a long moment, the silence between us heavy and suffocating. Her words hang in the air, impossible to ignore.

Pregnant. My child.

The gun feels heavier in my hand as I set it aside, my fingers flexing against the sudden tension in my chest. This changes everything, and yet, it changes nothing.

“Sit,” I order, my tone leaving no room for argument.

She hesitates but does as I say, lowering herself into the nearest chair.

“You’ve just made your situation more complicated,” I say flatly.

Her brows knit together in confusion, but she doesn’t speak, waiting for me to continue.

“Whether you’re telling the truth or not, you’ve made yourself a problem I can’t ignore,” I say. “Problems in my world don’t tend to last long.”

Her lips part, but whatever she was going to say dies on her tongue as I take a step closer, my gaze hard and unyielding.

“This isn’t over, Hannah,” I say, my voice dropping to a dangerous whisper. “Not by a long shot.”

The tension in the room is as thick as the silence that stretches between us. Hannah sits frozen in the chair, her hands gripping the armrests like they’re the only thing keeping her tethered to reality. Her face is pale, her lips pressed into a tight line, but her eyes—those wide, defiant brown eyes—meet mine without wavering.

It grates on me.

I pick up the gun from the table, spinning it idly in my hand before sliding it back into its holster. “Come,” I say, the command sharp and clipped.

She doesn’t move at first, her body stiff with hesitation.

“Hannah,” I say, my tone colder now, “if you’ve gotten this far without me shooting

you, don't push your luck."

Her chair scrapes against the floor as she stands, her movements slow and cautious. I turn on my heel, not bothering to see if she's following as I make my way out of the room. My boots echo against the marble floors of the hallway, her soft footsteps trailing behind me.

We ascend the stairs, the grandeur of the mansion swallowing her small frame. It feels almost absurd, seeing her here—someone so ordinary in a world that is anything but.

When we reach her room, I pull a key from my pocket, the metal glinting in the low light. I dangle it in front of her, the corners of my lips curving into a grin.

"This," I say, letting the key swing gently on its ring, "is the only thing keeping you from freedom. Or what you think freedom is."

Her eyes narrow, a flicker of annoyance breaking through the fear.

I step closer, leaning in just enough to make her uncomfortable. "You'll be locked in here for your own safety," I say, my voice low and deliberate. "But every night, you'll eat dinner with me. Tomorrow, you'll see a doctor, and I'll know if you're lying."

She flinches, the color draining from her face. "I'm not lying," she whispers.

"For your sake," I reply coldly, "I hope not."

I slide the key into the lock, turning it with a soft click before pushing the door open. The room is exactly as I left it—plush bedding, elegant furnishings, and an en suite. Luxurious, but in her eyes, I know it must feel like a gilded cage.

She steps inside hesitantly, glancing back at me like she expects me to pounce.

“You’ll stay here,” I say, my hand still resting on the doorknob. “Don’t try to leave again, Hannah. I’m not feeling charitable tonight.”

Her lips press into a thin line, but she doesn’t argue.

I let the silence linger for a moment longer before pulling the door closed. The lock clicks into place, and I slip the key back into my pocket, the weight of it a tangible reminder of the control I hold.

As I head back to my office, Andrei is already waiting for me, leaning against the doorframe with his usual air of casual menace.

“She settling in?” he asks, raising an eyebrow.

“She’ll be fine,” I reply, brushing past him into the room.

Andrei follows, his boots thudding against the floor as he shuts the door behind him. “Fine, huh? You sound confident.”

I pour myself a glass of vodka, the burn of it grounding me as I take a sip. “If she has any self-preservation, she won’t try to leave again.”

Andrei smirks faintly, crossing his arms. “If she doesn’t?”

I set the glass down with a quiet clink, fixing him with a cold stare. “Then she’ll learn the hard way that this isn’t a game.”

He nods, his expression turning serious. “The... other thing?”

“She’s seeing a doctor tomorrow,” I say flatly. “If she’s lying, I’ll deal with it. If she’s not...”

I don’t finish the sentence, the weight of it hanging between us.

Andrei studies me for a moment, then nods again. “Understood.”

He turns to leave, but pauses at the door, glancing back over his shoulder. “You sure about this, Boss? Letting her live, I mean. Feels... risky.”

“It is risky,” I admit, picking up the glass again. “It’s also calculated.”

Andrei says nothing, but his brows furrow.

“You’ve got something to say,” I remark, not bothering to look up from the glass of vodka in my hand.

Andrei shrugs, leaning against the wall. “You don’t usually let loose ends stick around. Especially ones this messy.”

I glance at him, my eyes narrowing. “You have a point, or are you just here to waste my time?”

His smirk is faint, but it’s there. “What happens if she’s telling the truth? About the kid?”

His question echoes in my mind, heavy and uncomfortable. I take a slow sip of vodka, letting the burn settle before I speak. “Then it complicates things.”

“Complicates?” Andrei repeats, raising an eyebrow. “That’s putting it mildly.”

I set the glass down with more force than necessary, the sound sharp in the quiet room. “What do you want me to say; that I’ve thought about having children, that I’ve imagined building some perfect little family? You know me better than that.”

Andrei chuckles, shaking his head. “No, Boss. I know you don’t even like kids.”

“I don’t,” I admit, leaning back in my chair. “They’re loud. Annoying. Fragile.”

“And yet....” Andrei trails off, his tone pointed.

“Yet this is different,” I finish for him, my voice quiet but firm.

He studies me for a moment, his gaze sharp. “Why, because it’s yours?”

I meet his eyes, unflinching. “Yes.”

The admission surprises me as much as it seems to surprise him. Andrei straightens slightly, crossing his arms. “You’ve never struck me as the paternal type.”

“I’m not,” I say, my voice clipped. “If she’s carrying my child, that changes things. I don’t leave what’s mine to chance.”

Andrei smirks faintly, his head tilting. “You sound almost... protective.”

I glare at him, and he holds up his hands in mock surrender. “Relax, Boss. I’m just saying. It’s not like you.”

“No,” I agree. “It’s not.”

The silence stretches for a moment before Andrei speaks again, his tone more serious this time. “If it’s true, what happens next?”

I exhale slowly, running a hand through my hair. The thought of a child—a part of me I never asked for, never wanted—sits heavy in my chest. It's not just about me anymore.

“If it's true,” I say finally, my voice firm, “then I'll do what needs to be done.”

Andrei nods, seeming satisfied with the answer. He turns to leave, pausing at the door.

“For what it's worth,” he says, glancing back at me, “I think she'll be fine. She's tougher than she looks.”

I don't respond, and a moment later, the door closes behind him.

Alone again, I pour another glass of vodka, the weight of the situation pressing down on me.

If she's telling the truth, nothing will ever be the same.



## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:05 pm*

The early morning air is brisk, biting against my skin as I'm led out of the mansion. Two of Makar's men flank me, their expressions unreadable but their presence unmistakably intimidating.

Andrei walks a few steps ahead, the quiet authority in his stride making it clear he's in charge.

The black SUV is parked in the circular driveway, its sleek exterior glinting faintly under the muted sunlight. One of the men opens the door, gesturing for me to get in.

"Let's go," Andrei says curtly, not bothering to glance back as he slides into the front passenger seat.

I hesitate, my feet rooted to the ground for just a moment too long.

"Move," the man nearest me says, his voice low and impatient.

Swallowing the lump in my throat, I climb into the back seat, the leather cool against my skin. The door shuts with a heavy thud, sealing me inside the confined space. The other man takes the seat beside me, his large frame making the already cramped area feel even smaller.

The ride begins in silence, the hum of the engine the only sound as we pull out of the driveway and onto the quiet street. My hands fidget in my lap, my nerves twisted into a knot that tightens with every passing second.

The journey feels endless, the city blurring past the tinted windows as we drive. I

glance at Andrei occasionally, hoping for some sign of humanity, some indication that this isn't as cold and calculated as it feels. But his face remains impassive, his focus fixed straight ahead.

After what feels like hours, the SUV pulls into a gated private clinic. The building is small but modern, its clean white facade gleaming under the daylight. The gates slide shut behind us with a metallic clang, the sound making me flinch.

"We're here," Andrei announces, turning slightly to look at me. His eyes are sharp, assessing, but he doesn't say anything more as he opens his door and steps out.

One of the men opens the door on my side, and I climb out hesitantly. The cold air wraps around me again as I follow Andrei toward the entrance, my heart pounding harder with every step.

The clinic's interior is pristine, the air sterile and faintly scented with antiseptic. A nurse greets Andrei with a respectful nod before leading us down a hallway.

"In here," she says, opening a door to a private examination room.

I step inside, my stomach twisting as I take in the clean, clinical space. The walls are pale blue, adorned with generic artwork meant to soothe, but it does nothing to calm my nerves.

The doctor enters a moment later, a tall man with graying hair and a sharp, professional demeanor. His eyes flick to Andrei, and he nods in recognition.

"Miss Fox," he says, addressing me directly. "I'm Dr. Ivanov. Please, take a seat."

I lower myself into the chair, my fingers gripping the armrests as the nurse prepares the necessary equipment.

Blood tests, urine samples, and a physical exam—it's thorough, invasive, and utterly humiliating with Andrei standing by the door, his arms crossed like a sentinel.

The tests blur together in my mind, each one dragging me closer to an answer I already know but can't bring myself to confront.

When it's over, I'm led back to the waiting area, the sterile smell of the clinic clinging to my clothes. Andrei remains silent, his gaze steady as I sit stiffly in one of the chairs, my hands clenched in my lap.

Dr. Ivanov reappears after what feels like an eternity, a sealed envelope in his hand. He glances at me, then at Andrei, his expression neutral.

"The results are here," he says simply, holding out the envelope.

I shake my head quickly, my voice trembling as I speak. "Don't—don't say it out loud."

Dr. Ivanov hesitates, then nods, setting the envelope on the table in front of me.

My heart races as I stare at it, the weight of its contents pressing down on me like a physical force. I already know what it says. I've known for weeks, ever since the first wave of nausea hit, but seeing it spelled out in black and white feels like a finality I'm not ready to face.

"You can open it whenever you're ready," Dr. Ivanov says gently.

I nod, but I don't move, my hands trembling in my lap.

Andrei steps forward, picking up the envelope with a raised eyebrow. "You're not going to look?"

“Not yet,” I whisper, my voice barely audible.

He stares at me for a moment, then shrugs. “Fine. She’ll look when she’s ready, but she already knows what it says.”

Dr. Ivanov nods and tucks the envelope into a folder, his professionalism unwavering. “Very well. If there’s anything else—”

“That’s all,” Andrei cuts him off. “We’re leaving.”

I rise to my feet shakily, following them back through the hallway and out to the waiting SUV, one of Makar’s men leaning against it, his expression unreadable. The air feels heavier now, every step dragging me closer to a reality I’m not ready to accept.

The envelope sits heavily in my hand, though I haven’t dared to open it yet. Every nerve in my body feels frayed, my mind racing with a single thought: I need to get out of here.

This is my chance. We’re outside. Public. Even though there are few people around, the clinic is still in the city. Someone will help me. They have to.

My pulse quickens as my eyes dart around, scanning the parking lot. A nurse steps outside for a cigarette break, a man in a crisp suit opens the trunk of a sleek black car, and a woman with a toddler heads toward the clinic’s entrance.

I can do this.

My heart pounds as I glance at Andrei, who has stopped near the SUV to exchange a few words with the man waiting there. His back is to me, his attention momentarily elsewhere.

Now.

I take a deep breath and run.

The sound of my heels against the pavement feels impossibly loud, and I grit my teeth, pushing myself faster. My legs burn, my chest tightens, but adrenaline propels me forward.

“Hey!” Andrei’s voice rings out behind me, sharp and furious.

I don’t look back. I can’t. My eyes lock on the clinic’s entrance, where the nurse glances up from her cigarette, startled.

“Help me!” I scream, the desperation in my voice raw and unfiltered. “Please, he’s kidnapping me!”

The nurse blinks, her expression shifting from confusion to something more guarded.

“Stop!” Andrei’s voice booms, closer now, and I hear the heavy thud of his boots against the pavement as he gives chase.

I make it to the clinic doors, my hand gripping the cool metal of the handle. Before I can yank it open, a hand clamps around my arm, yanking me backward with brutal force.

“No!” I scream, thrashing against the hold, my legs kicking wildly as Andrei drags me away from the entrance.

The nurse watches, her cigarette dangling from her lips. She doesn’t move, doesn’t make any effort to step in.

“Please!” I shout at her, my voice breaking. “Call the police! He’s—”

“Enough,” Andrei growls, his grip like iron as he hauls me toward the SUV.

My heart sinks as I glance around the parking lot. The suited man is leaning against his car now, arms crossed, watching with mild interest but no intent to intervene. The woman with the toddler gives me a fleeting glance before ushering her child inside, her expression carefully blank.

No one is going to help me.

The realization crashes down with horrifying clarity. The nurse, the suited man, the patients—all of them are connected to Makar. This isn’t just a clinic. It’s his territory.

“No one here cares about your screams, girl,” Andrei snaps, his voice harsh and laced with annoyance. “Save your breath.”

I twist against him, trying to pull free, but he tightens his grip, practically lifting me off the ground as he drags me the last few feet to the car.

“You’re going to regret this,” I hiss, my voice shaking with rage and fear.

“Doubt it,” he replies coldly.

The SUV door swings open, and Andrei doesn’t bother with gentleness. He shoves me inside, the force of it sending me sprawling across the leather seat.

I scramble upright, my hands pressing against the door, but it slams shut before I can even think about trying to escape again.

Andrei gets in after me, slamming his own door with enough force to make the car

shake. His jaw is clenched, his face dark with fury as he turns to face me.

“Are you insane?” he snaps, his voice low and dangerous. “Do you have any idea what you’ve just done?”

I glare at him, my chest heaving as I try to catch my breath. “I’m not going to let you keep me here,” I spit, the anger burning through my fear.

“Oh, shut up,” he retorts, leaning closer. “You’re lucky I don’t toss you in the trunk after that little stunt.”

“Do it, then,” I challenge, though my voice wavers. “See how far that gets you.”

Andrei exhales sharply, pinching the bridge of his nose like he’s trying to rein in his temper. “Listen to me, Hannah,” he says, his tone calmer but no less threatening. “This isn’t a game. You don’t get to just run away and pretend like nothing’s happened. You’ve already made yourself a problem. Don’t make it worse.”

“You don’t scare me,” I say, though the tremor in my voice betrays the lie.

Andrei chuckles darkly, shaking his head. “Then you’re even more foolish than I thought.”

The driver starts the engine, the low hum filling the silence as the SUV pulls out of the parking lot. I glance out the window, my stomach churning as the clinic fades into the distance.

My throat tightens, tears pricking at the corners of my eyes. This was my chance. My only chance. I failed.

Andrei sits back in his seat, his expression unreadable now. He doesn’t look at me

again, his attention fixed straight ahead.

The car ride back to the mansion is long and suffocating, the weight of my failure pressing down on me like a physical force.

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The SUV rolls to a stop in front of Makar's mansion, the imposing structure looming against the fading light. Andrei kills the engine, the low hum fading into silence that feels far heavier than it should.

He turns to me, his sharp gaze cutting through the dim interior. "Listen carefully," he says, his voice low and edged with warning. "Not a word about your little stunt back there. To anyone."

I cross my arms over my chest, glaring at him, but my pulse quickens. "Why? Afraid of what Makar will do to you?"

He doesn't flinch, but the faint tension in his jaw betrays him. "This isn't about me," he snaps, his tone clipped. "If he finds out, it won't just be my head on the block—it'll be yours too. Trust me, his patience with you is wearing thin."

I raise an eyebrow, trying to mask the fear gnawing at my insides. "What will he do if he finds out you almost let me escape?"

Andrei doesn't answer right away, his expression hardening. "That's not something I plan on finding out," he says coldly.

I lean back against the seat, exhaling sharply. "Relax. I won't tell him. It's not like I want to get myself hurt."



His eyes narrow slightly, as if assessing whether I'm bluffing. Finally, he nods once, brusquely, and opens his door.

"Come on," he orders, stepping out and waiting for me to follow.

I hesitate for a moment, my body heavy with exhaustion and defeat. There's no choice. I climb out of the SUV, the cold evening air brushing against my skin as Andrei motions me toward the house.

The mansion feels even more oppressive now, its grandeur dark and uninviting. Andrei walks ahead of me, his pace brisk and his demeanor sharp.

When we reach the door, he unlocks it quickly and pushes it open, gesturing for me to step inside. The warm interior does little to ease the chill in my bones as I cross the threshold.

Andrei follows, shutting the door behind him with a heavy thud. His expression is unreadable as he leads me down the hallway and into my room—the one with the locked door and the lack of freedom.

He steps aside, watching as I walk in, then leans against the doorframe. "Stay here," he says flatly. "Keep your mouth shut. I'll deal with Makar." My stomach twists at his words. "Let's hope those test results are what he wants to see," he adds, his tone almost mocking but tinged with unease.

Before I can respond, he steps back, the door closing with a soft click.

The lock turns, sealing me in once again.

I sit on the edge of the bed, the weight of the day pressing down on me. Whatever happens next, one thing is clear: I'm out of options. For now, all I can do is wait.

## Page 10

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:05 pm*

The soft glow of the desk lamp bathes the papers in front of me in warm light, the faint scent of leather and aged whiskey lingering in the air. My office is quiet, a rare and fleeting luxury in my world. The evening's events weigh on my mind, but I let the silence settle, savoring the calm before the inevitable storm of interruptions.

It doesn't take long.

A knock sounds at the door, sharp and deliberate.

"Enter," I call, my voice steady.

Andrei steps inside, his face carefully blank, though the tension in his shoulders betrays him. He shuts the door behind him, his movements precise but not rushed, and stands before my desk.

I glance up, leaning back in my chair. "Andrei," I say smoothly, a faint smirk tugging at the corners of my mouth. "How was the trip to the clinic?"

His expression hardens ever so slightly, and I chuckle, already knowing the answer. "I heard she tried to escape," I add, my tone light with amusement.

Andrei doesn't flinch, but I see the flicker of unease in his eyes. "She did," he admits reluctantly. "Didn't get far, though."

I lean forward, resting my elbows on the desk and steepling my fingers. "Tell me," I say, my smirk widening. "Did she run like a terrified rabbit, or did she put up a fight?"

“She screamed bloody murder,” Andrei replies, his voice clipped. “Tried to get the nurse to help her. Made a scene.”

“And?”

“No one moved,” he says simply, his tone edged with irritation.

I can’t help but laugh, the sound low and genuine. “She has spirit,” I say, shaking my head. “I like that.”

Andrei blinks, clearly caught off guard by my reaction.

“Relax,” I say, waving a hand dismissively. “Neither of you will be punished. Not this time.”

Andrei’s shoulders ease slightly, but his jaw tightens. “She’s reckless,” he says, his tone matter-of-fact. “Dangerous. If she keeps this up—”

“She won’t,” I interrupt, my voice firm. “She’s learning. Slowly, perhaps, but she’ll get there.”

He looks skeptical but doesn’t argue.

I reach for the glass of whiskey on my desk, swirling the amber liquid before taking a sip. “Let her have her spirit, Andrei,” I say, my tone almost conversational. “It makes things more interesting.”

Andrei’s lips press into a thin line, but he nods. “As long as it doesn’t get out of hand.”

“It won’t,” I reply, setting the glass down with a soft clink. “I have no intention of

letting her get away, Andrei. She'll learn her place. Eventually."

He hesitates, then nods again before stepping back toward the door. "Let's hope you're right, Boss," he says quietly.

"Something else?" I ask, my tone sharp enough to cut through his hesitation.

He turns back to face me, pulling a folder from the inside of his jacket. He holds it out without a word.

I raise an eyebrow, my curiosity piqued, and take the folder from him. The weight of it feels heavier than it should, the meaning behind it already clear before I open it.

"These are the results," Andrei says, his voice steady but lacking its usual edge.

I flip the folder open, scanning the neatly printed words and numbers on the page. It doesn't take long to find what I'm looking for—confirmation written in cold, clinical language.

One month pregnant.

I close the folder slowly, the movement deliberate, and set it down on the desk in front of me. The words linger in my mind, louder than any thought, louder even than the distant hum of my office.

It's mine.

Andrei clears his throat, breaking the silence. "What now?" he asks, his voice hesitant.

What now? The question echoes in my mind, heavy with implications.

I lean back in my chair, my gaze drifting toward the shadows pooling in the corners of the room. A child. My child. The thought feels foreign, like a language I can't quite grasp.

I've built my life around control—every move calculated, every risk mitigated. And now, this. A life I didn't ask for, one I never planned for, growing because of one reckless night.

Hannah.

Her name surfaces alongside the memory of her face—those defiant eyes, the sharpness in her voice when she called me a monster. She's young, spirited, and reckless. She doesn't belong in my world, and yet... she's here, tied to me in a way that neither of us can escape.

Andrei shifts uncomfortably, clearly waiting for a response.

"Boss," he presses, his tone cautious. "What do you want to do?"

I exhale slowly, leaning forward to rest my elbows on the desk. My fingers tap against the wood as I weigh the options in my mind, each one more unpleasant than the last.

"We'll marry," I say finally, my voice cutting through the tension like a blade.

Andrei blinks, clearly caught off guard. "Marry?"

"Yes," I reply, my tone firm. "I won't have my child born a bastard."

The word settles, heavy with finality.

Andrei recovers quickly, his brow furrowing. “You’re serious.”

“Of course I’m serious,” I snap, irritation flaring at his doubt. “This isn’t a decision I make lightly, but it’s the only option. The child will have my name, my protection. That much is non-negotiable.”

He hesitates, his expression unreadable. “Hannah?”

I tilt my head slightly, my gaze narrowing. “What about her?”

“Will she agree to this?”

I laugh softly, the sound devoid of humor. “She doesn’t have to. She’ll do what’s necessary. For her own survival.”

Andrei nods slowly, but I can see the flicker of doubt in his eyes.

“You think this is a mistake,” I say, my tone challenging.

“I think it’s... unexpected,” he replies carefully. “If it’s what you’ve decided, I’ll make the arrangements.”

“Good,” I say, leaning back once more. “The sooner, the better.”

He nods again, turning to leave, but pauses at the door. “Boss... a wife and a child. That’s a lot of vulnerability.”

I meet his gaze, my expression cold. “Don’t mistake my decision for weakness, Andrei. Vulnerability is only a problem if it’s left unguarded. I don’t intend to leave anything unguarded.”

He holds my gaze for a moment longer before nodding and leaving the room, the door clicking softly behind him.

Alone, I reach for the glass of whiskey on my desk, staring into the amber liquid as if it holds answers I can't find.

A wife. A child.

It's not the life I wanted, but it's the life I'll gladly take.

My fingers tighten around the glass as my thoughts drift. She's defiant, frustratingly so, but there's something intoxicating about it. Even now, with her pregnant, she still challenges me at every turn. And the thought of her swelling with my child, of her belonging to me in every way that matters—it stirs something dark and undeniable in me.

My jaw tightens as I lean back in my chair, the glass held loosely in one hand. Control has always been the cornerstone of my existence. Everything I have, I've taken. Everything I want, I keep. Hannah is no exception.

The image of her flashes in my mind, her body soft and yielding under my hands. The curve of her belly, the life we created together growing inside her—it consumes me. The need to claim her, to remind her who she belongs to, burns low and steady in my chest.

A knock at the door shatters the thought like glass hitting the floor.

"Come in," I say, my tone sharp as I set the whiskey down.

Vera steps inside, her hands folded neatly in front of her. Her composure is impeccable, as always, but there's a flicker of something in her

expression—hesitation, maybe.

“I need to talk to you about Hannah,” Vera begins, her voice measured. “She’s scared.”

I arch an eyebrow, leaning forward. “Good. Fear keeps her in line.”

“No,” Vera says firmly, her gaze meeting mine without a trace of hesitation. “It’s not good.”

Her words hit like a slap, unexpected and unwelcome. I stand, my chair scraping against the floor as I cross the room. “Watch your tone, Vera,” I warn, my voice low and edged with steel.

She doesn’t flinch. Vera’s one of the few people who’s never been afraid of me, and it’s both a blessing and a curse.

“With respect, Mr. Sharov,” she says, her tone steady, “fear will only push her further away. She’ll never be happy here if all she feels is terror. A woman who isn’t happy won’t raise a happy child.”

My jaw tightens as her words settle over me like a weight. “Her happiness isn’t my concern,” I say flatly. “She’s here because I chose for her to be here. That’s all that matters.”

Vera shakes her head, her gaze unwavering. “You might think that now. What happens when that child looks at you with the same fear you see in her, is that the kind of family you want?”

Anger rises in me like a tide, swift and unrelenting. “Enough,” I snap, my voice cutting through the room. “You’re overstepping.”



“I’m doing my job,” Vera counters, her tone calm but firm. “I’ve been with this family long enough to know what works and what doesn’t. You want her to stay, to raise your child without resentment? Then you need to earn more than just her obedience.”

Her words, bold and challenging, surprise me.

I take a step closer, the space between us shrinking. “You speak out of turn, Vera.”

“You know I’m right,” she replies evenly, her expression unyielding.

For a long moment, the room is silent, the tension thick enough to cut with a knife. My hands clench into fists at my sides, the urge to dismiss her battling with the truth in her words.

Finally, I exhale sharply, turning away from her. “Leave,” I say coldly, my tone brooking no argument.

Vera nods, stepping back toward the door. “I’ll continue to watch over her,” she says before leaving. “Think about what I’ve said, Mr. Sharov. For her sake, and yours.”

The door clicks shut behind her, and I’m left alone with the echo of her words.

I return to my desk, but the whiskey no longer holds any appeal. My mind churns, replaying Vera’s warning and the unsettling truth behind it.

Hannah’s fear doesn’t bother me—it’s expected, even necessary. The image Vera painted, of my child looking at me with the same wide-eyed terror, gnaws at me in a way I can’t shake.

I lean back in my chair, staring at the ceiling as my thoughts spiral. Hannah is mine,

in every sense of the word.

Vera's right about one thing—if I want her to stay willingly, if I want her to raise this child without resentment festering between us, then fear alone won't be enough.

The realization sits uncomfortably in my chest, heavy and unfamiliar. For years, I've ruled with power and control, taking what I want without apology. With her, things feel different.

Her defiance, her fire—it draws me in, even as it frustrates me. And the thought of losing her, of watching her retreat into herself, makes my grip on control feel precarious.

I drag a hand down my face, a low growl escaping my throat.

Vera's words echo again, refusing to be silenced. A woman who isn't happy won't raise a happy child.

## Page 11

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:05 pm*

The knock on the door is loud and sharp, pulling me out of a restless sleep. My body stiffens as I sit up, my heart already racing. The past twenty-four hours have been a blur of fear, anger, and exhaustion, and now, dread twists in my stomach.

The door opens before I can respond, and Andrei steps inside, his expression as stoic as ever.

“Get up,” he says flatly. “Makar wants to see you.”

My throat tightens, and I glance at the locked window before swinging my legs off the bed. Running is pointless; I learned that the hard way.

“Fine,” I mutter, my voice hoarse.

Andrei waits silently as I pull on the sweater draped over the chair, the fabric offering little comfort against the chill that has settled deep in my bones. He leads me down the long hallways of the mansion, every step echoing ominously.

When we reach Makar’s office, Andrei opens the door and motions for me to enter. My stomach churns as I step inside, the sight of Makar behind the massive desk filling me with equal parts anger and unease.

He looks up from a document, his piercing blue eyes locking with mine. He sets the paper down deliberately, his movements calm, controlled.

“Sit,” he says, gesturing to the chair in front of him.

“I’ll stand,” I reply, my voice sharper than I intend.

His eyebrow arches slightly, but he doesn’t argue. Instead, he leans back in his chair, his fingers steepled as he studies me.

“Do you know why you’re here?” he asks, his tone cool and detached.

“I can’t imagine it’s for a friendly chat,” I snap.

A faint smirk tugs at his lips. “You’re right. This isn’t a chat. It’s a decision. One that’s already been made.”

My pulse quickens, my hands curling into fists at my sides. “What decision?”

“You and I,” he begins, his tone deliberate, “are getting married.”

The words hit me like a slap, and for a moment, I’m too stunned to respond.

“What?” I finally choke out, my voice rising. “You can’t be serious.”

“Oh, I’m very serious,” he says, leaning forward slightly. “This isn’t up for debate.”

“Debate?” I exclaim, my anger flaring. “You can’t force me into this! This is insane!”

His eyes narrow, the faint amusement vanishing from his expression. “You’re carrying my child,” he says coldly. “That makes you my responsibility. In my world, my child doesn’t grow up a bastard.”

“That’s not your choice to make!” I shout, my voice shaking.

“It is,” he counters, his tone unyielding. “It’s final.”

I glare at him, my breath coming in short, angry bursts. “I won’t do it. You can’t make me.”

Makar rises from his chair slowly, his imposing frame casting a shadow over me as he steps around the desk.

“I can make you,” he says quietly, his voice like steel. “I will. Let me make something clear, Hannah. If you don’t comply, your situation will only get worse.”

“What does that even mean?” I snap, though my voice trembles.

“It means you’ll lose whatever small freedoms I’m willing to give you,” he says, his gaze piercing. “Right now, you have the chance to move about the mansion, to have a life outside of these walls—within limits. Defy me, and those privileges disappear. Completely.”

“You’re treating me like a prisoner,” I say, my voice breaking.

“No,” he replies, his tone softening just a fraction. “I’m treating you like someone who doesn’t understand the stakes.”

I stare at him, the weight of his words pressing down on me like a physical force.

“This isn’t a negotiation, Hannah,” he continues, his voice firm but calm. “This is reality. You will marry me. You will be protected, provided for, and watched. That’s non-negotiable.”

I swallow hard, my nails digging into my palms as I fight the urge to scream. “What about my life, what I want?”

“What you want doesn’t matter anymore,” he says bluntly. “Not now.”

The words cut deep, and I turn away, blinking back tears. “I hate you,” I whisper.

He steps closer, his voice low. “I can’t make you like me, and I don’t care to. Understand this: you’re mine now. You and the child.”

I don’t respond, my chest tight with anger and despair.

“Go back to your room,” he orders, his tone final. “Think it over. Don’t mistake this for a choice, Hannah. There is no choice.”

Andrei appears in the doorway as if on cue, his expression impassive. He doesn’t say a word as he leads me out of the office, the door closing behind us with a soft but definitive click.

The silence between Andrei and me is suffocating as he escorts me back to my room. His footsteps are steady, unhurried, while mine falter, my mind spinning with the weight of what just happened in Makar’s office.

Married. To him.

The very idea is absurd, horrifying, and I can’t stop the wave of helpless anger that rises in my chest. My pace slows, and Andrei glances back, his expression impassive.

“Keep moving,” he says, his voice sharp and devoid of sympathy.

I stop in the middle of the hallway, my arms crossing over my chest. “Why are you doing this?” I demand, my voice shaking but louder now.

Andrei sighs, pinching the bridge of his nose like I’m an inconvenience. “It’s not my call,” he replies coolly.

“That’s not what I’m asking,” I snap. “You work for him, fine, but you’re still a person. Do you really not care about what he’s doing?”

His eyes harden, his lips pressing into a thin line. “No,” he says flatly. “I don’t care.”

The bluntness of his response takes the air from my lungs.

“You’re serious,” I whisper, disbelief coloring my tone. “You don’t care that he’s forcing me into this, that I have no choice?”

Andrei shrugs, his posture relaxed but his gaze cold. “Why would I care? Makar’s my boss. My loyalty is to him, not you. Whatever happens to you is none of my concern.”

“You’re a monster, just like him,” I say, the words slipping out before I can stop them.

His smirk is faint, humorless. “Think what you want, girl. It doesn’t change anything. This is how it is.”

The words hit me like a physical blow, leaving me reeling as we continue toward my room. When we reach the door, Andrei opens it and steps aside, motioning for me to enter.

“Get some rest,” he says, his tone edged with mockery. “You’ll need it.”

“For what?” I ask bitterly, though I already know the answer.

“The wedding,” he replies, his smirk deepening. “Tomorrow.”

The door closes behind me, the lock clicking into place with finality. I sink onto the

edge of the bed, my head in my hands as the weight of everything crashes down on me.

I'm trapped. Completely, utterly trapped.

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The next morning, I wake to the sound of footsteps and low voices outside the door. It swings open, and two women enter, their faces unfamiliar but professional.

"Miss Fox," one of them says, her tone brisk. "We're here to prepare you for the ceremony."

"What?" I blink at her, still groggy.

"For the wedding," she clarifies, as though it's the most obvious thing in the world.

"I'm not getting married," I say firmly, though my voice lacks conviction.

The second woman exchanges a glance with the first before stepping forward. "You are," she says, her voice gentler but no less certain. "It's already been decided."

I stand, backing away from them as panic grips me. "I don't want this. You can't just—"

"We're only here to help," the first woman interrupts, her tone neutral. "This will go much smoother if you cooperate."

I stare at them, my breath coming in short gasps. The walls of the room feel like they're closing in, the reality of my situation pressing down on me with unbearable weight.



They guide me—no, force me—into the adjoining bathroom, where an array of toiletries and luxurious bath products are laid out. The room smells of lavender and citrus, scents that would normally feel soothing but now make my stomach churn.

I don't fight as they draw a bath, the warm water swirling with fragrant oils. My limbs feel heavy, my mind numb as they help me undress and lower me into the tub.

The women work efficiently, washing and scrubbing as though I'm some kind of doll to be polished and prepared. I let them, my body limp and unresponsive, my thoughts a haze of anger and dread.

When they're done, they wrap me in a thick towel and lead me back into the bedroom. A white dress is laid out on the bed, simple but elegant, the fabric shimmering faintly in the light.

"I won't wear it," I say weakly, though even I don't believe the words.

The first woman doesn't respond, her hands already working to dry my hair. The second begins preparing the dress, smoothing out wrinkles and adjusting the delicate lace detailing.

As they dress me, my reflection in the mirror catches my eye. I barely recognize the girl staring back. Her face is pale, her eyes hollow, but her hair gleams, and the dress fits like it was made for her.

For me.

Tears well in my eyes, and I blink them back furiously. I refuse to let them see me cry.

The women work swiftly, their hands moving with practiced precision as they tailor

the dress to fit me perfectly. I stand stiffly in the center of the room, arms outstretched slightly, while they pin and stitch, adjusting the fabric against my skin.

The dress is undeniably beautiful, but it's nothing like what I would have chosen for myself. The material is a soft, luxurious satin in a creamy shade of white, fitted to skim my curves before flaring out slightly at the hips.

The neckline is daring, plunging just enough to hint at sensuality without crossing into overt territory, while the lace sleeves cling delicately to my arms, ending just below the wrists.

It's elegant. Classy. Sultry.

It's everything I'm not.

The woman kneeling at my feet, adjusting the hem, hums softly as she works. "This fabric is exquisite," she says, glancing up with a smile. "Mr. Sharov has excellent taste."

I say nothing, my jaw clenched as I focus on the far wall, trying to ignore the weight of the dress and the situation.

The other woman, working on the back of the gown, chimes in. "It's rare these days to see a proper wedding," she says, her tone light and conversational. "Such an occasion to celebrate. You must be so excited."

The words hit like a punch to the gut. My hands curl into fists at my sides, the anger and helplessness bubbling beneath the surface threatening to spill over.

"She looks nervous," the woman at my feet adds, misinterpreting my silence. "Don't worry, dear. It's natural to feel jittery before the big day."

My lips part, a biting retort on the tip of my tongue, but I snap my mouth shut, knowing it's useless. These women don't understand. They think this is normal. That this is my choice.

The absurdity of it stings worse than the sharp prick of a pin that grazes my side.

"Sorry!" the seamstress says quickly, her face flushed with embarrassment. "Just a slip. I'll be more careful."

I force a tight smile, the motion making my face ache. "It's fine," I manage, my voice barely above a whisper.

The minutes drag on, each one more excruciating than the last, until finally, the women step back to admire their work.

"There," the first one says, clapping her hands together with satisfaction. "You look stunning."

I glance at my reflection in the full-length mirror, and the girl staring back looks nothing like me. The dress fits perfectly, hugging and flowing in all the right places, the delicate lace shimmering faintly in the light.

Her eyes—my eyes—are hollow, her expression tight and unyielding.

"She's perfect," the other woman agrees, gathering her tools.

They begin packing up their things, chatting softly between themselves as they leave the room. Neither of them notices the tears threatening to spill down my cheeks.

A moment later, the door opens again, and the housemaid steps inside, her hands folded neatly in front of her. She's older, her face kind but lined with the weight of

years, her eyes soft as they take me in.

“Oh, child,” she says, her voice gentle.

The dam breaks, and I cover my face with my hands as the tears spill over. I feel her approach, the soft rustle of her skirt, and then her hands are on my shoulders, guiding me to sit on the edge of the bed.

She kneels in front of me, her hands resting lightly on mine. “Let it out,” she murmurs. “You’ve been holding it in too long.”

Her words undo me, and the sobs come, wracking my body as I cry into my hands.

“I can’t do this,” I manage between gasps. “I don’t want this.”

Vera squeezes my hands gently, her voice steady. “I know, dear. I know.”

Her understanding feels like a lifeline, and I cling to it, my tears slowly subsiding. She retrieves a handkerchief from her pocket and presses it into my hands, her movements careful and deliberate.

I wipe at my face, my hands trembling. “Why is this happening to me?”

Vera hesitates, her expression tinged with sadness. “Mr. Sharov is... not a man who changes his mind easily. He does what he believes is necessary.”

“It’s not necessary,” I say bitterly, clutching the handkerchief in my lap. “It’s cruel.”

Vera doesn’t argue, but her silence speaks volumes.

She stands, smoothing her skirt before turning to the vanity and retrieving a glass of

water. She hands it to me, her eyes kind. “Drink, child. You need your strength.”

I take the glass reluctantly, sipping the cool water as Vera moves to adjust the hem of the dress where it pools around my feet. Her presence is calming, a stark contrast to the chaos swirling in my mind.

“You’re stronger than you think,” she says softly, her voice laced with quiet conviction. “You’ll get through this.”

I want to believe her, but the weight of the dress, the weight of everything, feels like too much to bear.

She squeezes my hand one last time before stepping back, her gaze warm but steady. “I’ll be back to help you when it’s time,” she says. “For now, rest.”

Rest. The word feels like an impossibility, but I nod anyway, watching as Vera leaves the room.

Alone again, I stare at my reflection in the mirror, the tears drying on my cheeks.

The girl in the dress is trapped. No one is coming to save her.

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I turn away from the mirror, unable to meet the eyes of the woman staring back at me. Sinking onto the chaise lounge near the window, I let out a slow breath, my fingers curling into the fabric of the skirt. The soft material is cool beneath my touch, a stark contrast to the heat building in my chest.

How did it come to this? A few months ago, I was living my life, working a job I hated but surviving. Now I’m here, in this gilded room, about to marry a man I barely

know and who sees me as nothing more than an obligation.

The thought makes my throat tighten, and I press my palms against my thighs, trying to steady my breathing.

A knock at the door pulls me from my spiraling thoughts. Before I can answer, Vera steps inside, her expression calm and composed.

“The makeup artist is here,” she says gently, her voice soothing in the stillness of the room.

I glance up at her, my stomach twisting. “Do I have to?”

Vera’s gaze softens, and she steps closer, folding her hands in front of her. “You’d better do as Mr. Sharov says,” she replies, her tone kind but firm. “It’s easier that way.”

I laugh bitterly, shaking my head. “Easier for who? Him?”

“For you,” Vera says softly, meeting my eyes. “Fighting him will only make things harder.”

Her words settle heavily on my shoulders, but I nod, rising reluctantly from the chaise lounge. The dress drags against the floor as I follow her to the adjoining room, where the makeup artist waits.

The artist greets me with a professional smile, gesturing for me to sit in the chair in front of a wide vanity. The surface is cluttered with brushes, powders, and palettes, each neatly arranged as if for a performance.

I lower myself into the chair, stiff and unyielding, as the artist begins to work. She

doesn't ask me what I want or how I'd like to look. Instead, she moves with quick, confident strokes, as though she already knows.

"This will suit you perfectly," she says, her tone upbeat as she blends dark, smoky shadows onto my eyelids.

"Will it?" I ask, glancing at her through the mirror.

She smiles, clearly not hearing the bitterness in my voice. "It's exactly what Mr. Sharov requested."

My stomach churns. "He requested it?"

She nods, dabbing concealer beneath my eyes. "Oh yes. He wanted something dramatic, elegant. Smoky eyes, a neutral lip—nothing too bright."

I press my lips together, swallowing down the sharp retort rising in my throat. Of course, he made the decision for me. He's made all the decisions since this nightmare began.

The brush strokes against my skin feel heavier now, each movement a reminder of how little control I have. When the artist reaches for a pale nude lipstick, I can't help but speak up.

"Do you have anything brighter? Maybe a red or a pink?"

She hesitates, glancing at me in the mirror. "This is what Mr. Sharov specified," she says carefully, her hands resuming their work.

I sigh, sinking further into the chair as she finishes. When she steps back, I barely recognize the woman staring back at me.

The smoky eyeshadow is dark and intense, giving my face a cold, almost harsh look. The neutral lipstick washes me out, stripping away any warmth or personality. It's striking, sure, but it doesn't feel like me.

"What do you think?" the artist asks, tilting her head as she studies me.

I hesitate, the words tangling in my throat. What do I think? That I look like someone else entirely? That this image feels more like a mask than a reflection?

"It's fine," I say finally, my voice flat.

The artist doesn't press further. She offers a polite smile, packing up her tools with practiced efficiency.

Vera steps into the room as the artist leaves, her gaze sweeping over me. For a moment, she says nothing, her expression unreadable.

"You look lovely," she says eventually, though her tone lacks the usual enthusiasm of a genuine compliment.

"Do I?" I ask, my voice tinged with sarcasm. "I look like someone else."

Vera hesitates, moving to stand beside me. "I know this isn't easy," she says gently. "But sometimes, doing what's expected makes things... simpler."

I turn to face her, my jaw tightening. "Simpler for him, maybe. Not for me."

Her face softens, and she places a hand on my shoulder, her touch light but steady. "I can't pretend to know what you're feeling," she says. "But I can tell you this—strength comes in many forms. Sometimes, it's in standing your ground. Other times, it's in choosing when to bend."



Her words settle into my thoughts, and I glance back at my reflection. The woman staring back at me is polished and flawless, but she feels like a stranger.

“Do you really think this will get easier?” I ask quietly.

Vera’s hand drops to her side, and she takes a step back. “That depends on you,” she says softly. “And on him.”

The answer isn’t comforting, but it’s honest. I nod, rising slowly from the chair. The dress swishes around me as I move, its weight grounding me in this surreal reality.

“Thank you,” I say, though I’m not sure what I’m thanking her for.

Vera offers a faint smile, her gaze kind. “You’re welcome, dear.”

Vera lingers by the door, her hand resting lightly on the frame. She doesn’t leave, her sharp gaze flicking back to me with an almost maternal concern.

“You’re angry,” she says quietly.

I scoff, shaking my head as I turn back to the mirror. “Of course I’m angry. Wouldn’t you be?”

Vera steps closer again, her soft-soled shoes barely making a sound against the carpet. “I would,” she admits. “Anger, if left alone, tends to burn out the wrong things.”

I narrow my eyes at her reflection. “What am I supposed to do with it, then? Swallow it down? Smile and nod and let him pull all the strings?”

“Not exactly,” she says, her voice calm but resolute. “You can let it drive you, but

only if you steer it in the right direction.”

I laugh bitterly, turning to face her fully. “And where exactly is the ‘right direction’ in all of this? I’m being forced into a marriage I never wanted. What direction could possibly lead to anything better?”

Vera meets my gaze, unflinching. “Forward,” she says simply. “Through this. You think Mr. Sharov controls everything, but the truth is, there are ways to bend even the most unyielding people.”

Her words catch me off guard, my anger faltering just enough for curiosity to slip in. “What do you mean?”

“I mean that people like him respect strength,” she says, her expression softening. “They don’t understand it at first when it comes in a form they don’t expect, but they learn to recognize it. If you hold on to what makes you who you are—your dignity, your fire—he’ll see it.”

I cross my arms, skeptical. “You think he’ll care? That he’ll change?”

“People don’t change easily,” Vera concedes. “They adapt when they’re faced with something they don’t want to lose.”

Her words linger, heavy with implications I don’t fully understand.

I sigh, glancing back at the mirror. The woman staring back at me still looks like a stranger, but there’s a flicker of something else in her eyes now—a spark, faint but undeniable.

“What if I can’t?” I ask softly, my voice barely above a whisper. “What if I lose myself before I can figure it out?”

“You won’t,” Vera says firmly, stepping closer to rest a hand on my arm. “You’re stronger than you think, Hannah. I’ll remind you, every step of the way, if I have to.”

Her sincerity hits me harder than I expect, and for the first time all day, I feel a sliver of hope breaking through the weight of everything.

“Thank you,” I murmur, my voice unsteady.

Vera nods, her grip on my arm reassuring. “Now,” she says with a faint smile, “let’s make sure you’re ready. You’ve got a fight ahead of you, dear, and you’ll need all the strength you can muster.”

## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:05 pm*

The room is an echo of opulence, every corner gilded with wealth and tradition. High chandeliers cast a golden glow over the gathered audience, their murmurs fading into silence as the ceremonial proceedings begin. This is a private affair, meant for my inner circle and select allies. It isn't a celebration—it's a transaction.

A necessary binding.

I stand at the front, unmoving, my posture straight and composed. The silk of my tie feels suffocating, but I don't adjust it. Instead, I let the weight of the moment settle on my shoulders, reminding myself why this has to happen.

It's for the child. For the Sharov name. For order.

The ornate double doors at the end of the aisle creak open, and all heads turn, including mine.

Hannah stands in the doorway, a vision of defiance wrapped in satin and lace. The dress is a work of art, clinging to her figure in a way that's both modest and striking. The sleeves of delicate lace hug her arms, and the fabric flows around her like liquid light. Her dark hair frames her face, drawing attention to her wide, unyielding eyes.

She hesitates, her hand clutching a bouquet of pale roses that trembles slightly. But even with that flicker of uncertainty, there's strength in her stance. Her chin is lifted, her jaw set, her defiance written in every line of her body.

The sight of her stirs something unexpected in me. I've seen her angry, fearful, defiant—but this? This quiet resilience? It's more captivating than I'm willing to

admit.

I remind myself why I'm here. Why she's here.

She begins her slow walk down the aisle, her movements graceful despite the tension radiating from her. Each step brings her closer, and I can feel the weight of every pair of eyes in the room on us. I meet her gaze briefly, and she holds it for a fraction of a second before looking away, her lips pressing into a thin line.

Good.

When she reaches the front, I extend my hand, waiting. She pauses, her hesitation obvious, before she reluctantly places her hand in mine. Her fingers are cold, her grip stiff, but I guide her to stand beside me, facing the officiant.

The priest clears his throat, his voice deep and steady as he begins the ceremony. "We are gathered here today to witness the union of Hannah Fox and Makar Sharov, bound together by the vows they will now exchange."

I glance at her out of the corner of my eye. Her face is pale but composed, her lips tight with a bitterness she doesn't bother to hide.

"Marriage," the priest continues, "is a sacred commitment. A promise to protect, honor, and cherish one another. Hannah, do you take Makar to be your lawful husband, to have and to hold, in sickness and in health, for better or worse, for as long as you both shall live?"

Her body stiffens beside me, and for a moment, I think she won't speak.

Her voice, when it comes, is low but steady. "I do," she says, the words clipped and devoid of emotion.

Her defiance is palpable, but she gets through it. I see the tightness in her throat as she forces the words out, her eyes narrowing as she stares straight ahead.

The priest nods and turns to me. “Makar, do you take Hannah to be your lawful wife, to have and to hold, in sickness and in health, for better or worse, for as long as you both shall live?”

“I do,” I say, my tone firm, certain.

The vows continue, the words mechanical and rehearsed, their meaning irrelevant to either of us. When it’s time to exchange rings, I slide the band onto her finger, the cool metal gleaming against her pale skin. She hesitates before placing my ring on my finger, her touch fleeting, her gaze distant.

The priest folds his hands, his expression solemn. “By the power vested in me, I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss the bride.”

The words linger, heavy and suffocating.

I turn to her, her jaw tightening as I lean in. The kiss isn’t romantic—it’s an obligation. My lips brush against her cheek briefly, the barest gesture of compliance. It’s cold, perfunctory, and when I step back, her gaze is icy.

The room erupts into polite applause, the sound measured and restrained. It’s done.

I extend my arm to her, and after a moment’s hesitation, she takes it. Her grip is light, almost nonexistent, but I lead her back down the aisle, the applause fading into a low hum of murmured conversation.

As we step into the adjacent hall, the silence between us feels louder than any applause could.

“Congratulations,” Andrei says, approaching with a sly grin.

I nod curtly, my grip on Hannah’s arm tightening slightly. “Handle the reception,” I order, my tone clipped. “Keep it brief.”

Andrei inclines his head, his gaze flicking briefly to Hannah before he steps away.

She pulls her arm from mine the moment he’s gone, putting space between us.

“It’s done,” I say quietly, watching her carefully.

“Don’t talk to me,” she snaps, her voice trembling with barely contained anger.

I raise an eyebrow, my lips curving into a faint, humorless smirk. “You went through with it,” I point out.

Her eyes blaze with fury as she steps closer, her voice low and sharp. “Yeah, I don’t want to know what you’d have done if I said no.”

“True.”

Her jaw clenches, her hands curling into fists at her sides. “You’re a monster,” she says, her voice trembling but resolute.

I lean in slightly, lowering my voice. “This is your reality now. Whether you like it or not, my child is yours to bear.”

Her breath catches, her fury giving way to something else—something vulnerable and raw. But she doesn’t cry. She just stares at me, her eyes filled with a defiance I know will burn long after this moment.

“Enjoy the reception,” I say coolly, straightening. “You’re the guest of honor, after all.”

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The reception is exactly what I planned—efficient, restrained, and purposeful. It’s held in the grand hall of my mansion, a room designed to impress without excess.

Crystal chandeliers cast a steady glow over polished marble floors, their light reflecting off the sleek black suits and glittering jewelry of the attendees. The air is thick with the scent of cigars, champagne, and unspoken alliances.

This isn’t a celebration. It’s a declaration.

I stand at the center of it all, Hannah at my side. Her hand rests lightly on my arm, though it’s clear from the stiffness in her posture that she’s doing it out of necessity, not choice. She’s trying to look composed, but I see through her—the tightness of her jaw, the subtle tension in her shoulders. She’s angry.

Resentful.

A man without spirit wouldn’t have caught my attention, and a woman without it wouldn’t survive in my world.

“Congratulations, Boss.”

Andrei is the first to approach, his smirk faint but unmistakable as he offers a handshake. I accept it, my grip firm.

“Thank you,” I say, my tone even.



His gaze shifts briefly to Hannah. “To you, Mrs. Sharov.”

She bristles at the title, though she hides it well.

“Thank you,” she replies stiffly, her voice clipped.

Andrei chuckles, clearly amused, before stepping aside to make way for the others.

One by one, they approach—lieutenants, trusted allies, key players in the Bratva. Their words of congratulations are polite, measured, and calculated. Each handshake is a reminder of the power shift this union represents.

Hannah endures it all with a quiet defiance that doesn’t escape me. She hates every second of this, but she’s smart enough not to show it too openly.

The room hums with low conversation, glasses clinking softly as my men make their obligatory toasts.

“To the Sharovs,” someone says, raising a glass. The rest follow, the words echoing through the hall.

Hannah doesn’t respond, her lips pressing into a thin line. I allow her silence.

When the last guest finally steps away, leaving us momentarily alone, I turn to her.

“This is your place now,” I tell her, my voice low and deliberate. “By my side. Under my name.”

Her eyes narrow as she glares up at me. “You don’t own me,” she hisses, her voice sharp and defiant.

I lean in slightly, lowering my voice so only she can hear. “I do,” I reply coldly, letting the weight of my words settle. “Completely. The sooner you accept that, the easier this will be for both of us.”

She exhales sharply, her anger radiating off her in waves.

“You belong to me now, Hannah,” I continue, my tone softening slightly but still firm. “Your loyalty, your obedience—they aren’t optional. They’re expected.”

“You won’t crush me,” she spits, her voice trembling.

I smirk faintly, unfazed by her insult. “Perhaps,” I say, my tone quiet but steady. “Everything you do, is because I allow it. Remember that.”

Her glare intensifies, but she doesn’t respond.

The rest of the reception proceeds like clockwork. My men offer more toasts, their words polished but predictable. I nod in acknowledgment, accepting their congratulations with the same calm detachment I’ve carried throughout the evening.

Hannah remains at my side, silent and rigid, a doll dressed in lace and satin. She smiles only when absolutely necessary, her resentment simmering just beneath the surface.

When the final guest departs, the grand hall falls into an uneasy silence.

I glance at her, noting the exhaustion etched into her features. “It’s time,” I say simply, offering my arm.

“For what?” she asks bitterly, though I can see the answer already dawning in her eyes.

I don't reply, my gaze steady as I wait. After a moment's hesitation, she takes my arm, her grip light and reluctant.

Her defiance is clear in every step as I lead her out of the hall. The sound of her heels clicking against the marble floor echoes through the empty space, a rhythmic reminder of her presence—and her resistance.

She's mine now. Completely.

The hall is finally emptying as the last few guests murmur their goodbyes and file out, leaving behind only silence and the faint clink of glasses being cleared away by staff. Andrei lingers near the doorway, his smirk firmly in place as he watches me.

"Well, Boss," he says, stepping closer. "Quite the event. Everything went off without a hitch."

I nod, my gaze steady. "Efficient, as it should be."

He chuckles, casting a glance toward Hannah, who remains stiff and silent at my side. "Now for the best part of the evening. Enjoy your wedding night."

Hannah's entire body tenses beside me, her hand tightening briefly on my arm before she lets it fall away.

I don't react immediately, though I can feel her unease like a physical weight between us. My eyes flick to Andrei, who raises an eyebrow before winking, clearly enjoying himself.

"Leave," I say, my tone calm but edged with finality.

Andrei raises his hands in mock surrender. "Of course. My work here is done."

Congratulations again, Boss.” He steps back, smirking one last time as he disappears into the shadows of the hallway.

The tension between Hannah and me is palpable, her posture rigid as she stares straight ahead.

“You don’t need to look so alarmed,” I say quietly, my voice low but steady.

Her head snaps toward me, her brown eyes blazing. “Don’t I?” she demands, her tone sharp.

I grin faintly, leaning closer. “You’ll enjoy yourself tonight, Hannah,” I say, my voice dropping into something softer, almost coaxing. “I don’t force what should be freely given.”

Her eyes narrow, suspicion warring with the faintest flicker of relief. “What if I don’t want to?”

My grin widens just slightly. “Then you’ll simply sleep. No one will touch you without your consent.”

She studies me for a long moment, her lips pressing into a thin line. “I don’t trust you,” she says finally.

“You don’t have to,” I reply smoothly, turning and extending my arm again. “I don’t lie.”

After a moment’s hesitation, she takes it, her grip hesitant and light.

The night is far from over, but this is a start. A small step toward understanding.

## Page 13

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:05 pm*

The grand bedroom looms ahead as one of Makar's men opens the heavy double doors. My steps falter at the threshold, my gaze sweeping over the opulent space inside.

It's massive, the vaulted ceiling stretching high above, the walls adorned with dark wood paneling and understated gold accents. A fire crackles in the hearth, casting flickering shadows across the plush furniture and the massive bed draped in satin sheets.

It's beautiful, and suffocating.

I step inside slowly, the weight of the situation settling heavily on my shoulders. This isn't just a room—it's a cage. One I'll be sharing with him.

Makar follows, his presence behind me as steady and unrelenting as the sound of his boots against the polished floor. The doors close with a soft thud, sealing us inside.

I take a deep breath, my hands curling into fists at my sides as I try to center myself. "So this is it," I say, my voice tight.

"Yes," he replies simply.

I turn to face him, and my breath catches at the way his piercing blue eyes are already fixed on me. His gaze is intense, unreadable, and it lingers for a moment too long. I glance away, the tension in the room thick enough to choke on.

"You'll be staying here," he continues, his tone calm, almost casual. "With me."

“Indefinitely,” I mutter, the word like a bitter pill on my tongue.

He inclines his head slightly. “You’ll be safe here.”

I laugh humorlessly, shaking my head. “Safe? Yeah, okay.”

His expression hardens, the faintest flicker of irritation crossing his features. “This is what it means to be my wife, Hannah.”

“I didn’t choose this,” I snap, my voice rising. “You forced me into this. Into you.”

His jaw tightens, and he takes a step closer. “You think I had a choice?” he asks sharply. “This wasn’t about you, or me. This is about the child. About honor.”

“That doesn’t make it right,” I fire back, my chest heaving as my anger rises. “You don’t get to control me, no matter what name I carry now.”

“You’re my wife,” he growls, stepping closer again, his height and presence overshadowing me.

“I hate you for it,” I spit, though my voice trembles.

The tension snaps like a taut string. His hands move before I can react, gripping my arms firmly but not painfully as he pulls me closer.

“Careful,” he says lowly, his voice laced with warning. “I can tolerate many things, but not disrespect in my own home.”

I glare up at him, refusing to be cowed despite the way his presence invades every inch of my space. “Then maybe you shouldn’t have married someone you didn’t respect either,” I shoot back, the words tumbling out before I can think them through.

His eyes darken, the line of his jaw tightening, and for a moment, I think he'll step away. But instead, he moves closer, his grip shifting to my waist, firm but unyielding.

"Disrespect," he murmurs, his tone quieter now but no less intense. "You think I don't see you, Hannah? That I don't know exactly what you are?"

The heat in his gaze sends a shiver down my spine, but I lift my chin defiantly. "What am I, then?"

His lips curve into the faintest smirk, but there's no humor in it. "You're fire," he says, his voice low, dangerous. "Reckless. Defiant. Exactly what I need."

The air between us shifts, charged with something electric and undeniable. I should push him away, fight against the way his words sink under my skin, but I can't.

"You don't know anything about me," I say, though the words come out weaker than I intend.

His hand moves, brushing a strand of hair from my face, the touch unexpectedly gentle. "Don't I?" he murmurs, his gaze locking on to mine.

The tension crackles like a live wire, and before I can second-guess it, he leans in, his lips capturing mine in a kiss that's nothing like the cold obligation of the ceremony. It's fierce, demanding, and all-consuming, his hands tightening on my waist as he pulls me flush against him.

I freeze for a moment, torn between resistance and the way my body betrays me, heat pooling low in my stomach as I return the kiss, gasping against his lips.

Our frustrations, our anger, it all boils over into something raw and consuming. His hand moves to the small of my back, his grip possessive but not rough as he deepens

the kiss. My fingers curl into the fabric of his suit jacket, the closeness suffocating and intoxicating all at once.

When we finally break apart, my breath comes in short, ragged gasps, my heart hammering against my rib cage. His forehead rests lightly against mine, his own breathing uneven.

His breath is hot against my lips, and before I can say anything—before I can catch my breath—his mouth is on mine again. This kiss is rougher, more commanding, like he's laying claim to every part of me I've tried to keep hidden. His hands slide up my back, firm and possessive, pulling me closer until there's no space between us, no room to breathe.

I want to tell him no, to push him away, but the words don't come. Instead, a traitorous heat pools in my stomach, spreading through me like fire. My body betrays me, responding to him despite the chaos swirling in my mind.

His hands move to my veil, fingers deftly unpinning it and tossing it aside. My hair tumbles down, and his hands immediately dive into the strands, tilting my head back as his lips trail down the line of my jaw, searing every inch of skin they touch.

I should stop this. I should push him away, scream at him, something. Instead, my hands clutch at the fabric of his suit jacket, holding on to him as though he's the only solid thing in the room.

I can feel something hard prod against my thigh, and a shiver of arousal runs through me. His cock twitches, and my mouth goes dry.

“Makar,” I whisper, my voice trembling, though I don't know if it's from anger or something far more dangerous.



He pulls back slightly, his blue eyes burning as they meet mine. “Say it again,” he commands, his voice low and rough.

I swallow hard, my breathing uneven. “Makar,” I repeat, and the way his name leaves my lips feels like surrender.

A faint smile curves his lips before he captures my mouth again, his kiss more demanding this time. He doesn’t ask; he takes, and I let him.

His hands move to the delicate buttons of my wedding dress, unfastening them with a precision that makes my heart race. The fabric loosens, and I feel the cool air against my skin as he slides the dress down my shoulders.

“Lift your arms,” he murmurs, his voice a deep rumble that sends a shiver down my spine.

I do as he says, the gown slipping further until it pools at my feet. He steps back for a moment, his gaze raking over me with an intensity that leaves me breathless.

“You’re beautiful,” he says, the words so quiet I almost don’t hear them.

I don’t know how to respond. My hands move to cover myself instinctively, but he catches my wrists, gently pulling them away.

“Don’t hide from me,” he says firmly, his eyes locking with mine. “Not tonight.”

I nod faintly, my chest rising and falling with shallow breaths as he guides me backward toward the bed.

The backs of my knees hit the edge, and I stumble slightly, landing on the mattress. He follows, his movements deliberate as he climbs over me, his weight pressing me

into the soft surface. His knees bracket my hips, his hands planting firmly on either side of my head, caging me in.

The sheer power of him, the dominance in his posture, sends a thrill through me that I don't want to acknowledge. His gaze holds mine, and for a moment, the world narrows to just the two of us, the tension between us crackling like a live wire.

"Do you trust me?" he asks, his voice softer now, though still laced with authority.

"No," I admit, the word trembling on my lips.

He smirks faintly, leaning down until his lips brush against my ear. "Do you want this?" he murmurs.

"Yes."

He shimmies out of his suit pants—and then he's looming over me, his cock parting my wet folds. He's thick and long, filling me effortlessly as he begins to thrust. It's enough to leave me gasping, back arching as a moan leaves my lips.

Makar stretches me so wide without even having to try. He's everything I remember, and more.

His touch is everywhere—my waist, my hips, skimming over my pert nipples—each movement igniting sparks beneath my skin. He leans down, his lips trailing down my neck and over my collarbone, his stubble scraping against my sensitive skin. He takes one breast between his teeth, and it has me reeling.

I arch into him, my breath coming in shallow gasps as I let go of the resistance I've been holding on to so tightly. For the first time in days, I stop thinking, stop fighting, and just feel.

The sensation of his teeth, his fingers, against my bare skin sends a shiver through me, and I clutch at his shoulders, grounding myself against the overwhelming rush of sensation.

He ruts into me, ruthless, fast, leaving my hips aching from being stretched so wide. I can feel every inch of him inside me, the pressure building until I can't seem to feel anything else.

"Makar," I whisper again, the sound a plea I don't fully understand.

He pulls back slightly, his gaze burning as it locks on to mine. "Tell me to slow down," he says, his voice rough but steady.

I shake my head, my lips parting but no words coming.

For a fleeting moment, there's no resentment, no anger, no fear. Just the fire between us, burning too hot from the wedding, the baby, or the impossible situation I'm in. There's only this, only him, only the way he touches me like I'm something precious and fragile and entirely his.

He takes his time, pace slowing as I suck in deep, steadying breaths. My walls clench around his cock as he fondles my breasts, and I reach my peak.

I come with a cry, hands gripping at his arms, at anything I can reach, as the orgasm consumes me. I've never come so hard in my life, eyes scrunched shut as I try to muffle my gasps.

It's overwhelming, consuming, and I give myself over to it completely, letting him guide me through a storm I couldn't possibly have anticipated.

When it's over, we're both breathless, tangled together on the bed. His weight pins

me down for a moment longer, grounding me, before he pulls out and rolls to the side, his arm still wrapped around me.

He reaches out, his fingers brushing against my cheek before tucking a strand of hair behind my ear. The gesture is so unexpectedly gentle that my chest tightens, an unfamiliar ache blooming there.

“There will be a lot more of this,” he says softly, his voice roughened from exertion, “if you want it.”

I don’t answer, the words stuck in my throat, but I nod faintly, the tension in my body easing as his fingers linger against my skin.

I close my eyes as sleep begins to pull me under, my thoughts swirling with images of him, of the fire in his gaze, of the baby growing inside me.

For the first time, I wonder—not with dread, but with cautious curiosity—what the future might hold.

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:06 pm*

The first light of dawn filters through the heavy drapes, casting a faint golden glow over the room. I stir, blinking against the soft light as the events of the night come rushing back. My gaze shifts to the woman beside me, and for a moment, I simply watch her.

Hannah lies curled against the pillows, her dark hair spread out like a shadow against the pale sheets. Her face is relaxed in sleep, the usual tension gone, replaced by something softer, almost vulnerable.

It's a sight I didn't expect to find so... captivating.

The thought unsettles me. I didn't bring her into my life for this, for emotions or distractions. She's here because of the child, because of the Bratva's honor. Yet, as I watch her chest rise and fall with slow, steady breaths, a foreign urge stirs within me.

An urge to protect her.

I scoff softly, brushing the thought away. She doesn't need my protection; she needs my control. This marriage is a transaction, nothing more. Allowing myself to feel otherwise would be a mistake—one I can't afford.

Hannah shifts slightly, her brows furrowing as she stirs awake. Her lashes flutter open, and when her gaze meets mine, a deep blush spreads across her cheeks.

Her arms immediately move to pull the sheets up over herself, and the corner of my mouth lifts into a sly grin. "Good morning, Mrs. Sharov," I say, my tone laced with amusement.

She groans softly, burying her face in the pillow for a moment before peeking back at me, her blush deepening. “You’re insufferable,” she mutters.

I chuckle, leaning back against the headboard. “Yet, here you are, in my bed.”

Her glare is halfhearted, the embarrassment still coloring her expression. She shifts again, clutching the sheet tightly as if it’s a shield.

“You don’t have to look so embarrassed,” I add, my grin widening. “You seemed to enjoy yourself last night.”

She throws me a withering glare, but I catch the flicker of heat in her eyes before she looks away.

Pushing myself upright, I swing my legs over the edge of the bed and stand, reaching for my discarded shirt. “Get dressed,” I tell her, my tone shifting back to the controlled, authoritative edge she’s become accustomed to.

“For what?” she asks warily, her gaze following me as I button up my shirt.

“For the discussion we’re about to have,” I reply, turning to face her. “Now.”

She huffs, reluctantly sliding out of bed, the sheet clinging to her as she gathers her clothes and disappears into the adjoining bathroom. When she emerges a few minutes later, fully dressed but still flushed, I’m seated in one of the armchairs near the window, waiting.

“Sit,” I command, gesturing to the chair across from me.

Her brows knit together, but she complies, folding her arms over her chest as she sits.

“I’m laying down some rules,” I say, my tone leaving no room for argument.

“Rules?” she echoes, her voice laced with skepticism.

“Yes. From this moment forward, you’ll abide by them, without question.” I lean forward, resting my elbows on my knees. “First, you’re not to leave this mansion unless escorted by me or my men. Your safety is paramount, and I won’t have you wandering into situations you can’t handle.”

Her lips part, but I cut her off before she can argue.

“Second, you will have no contact with anyone outside this house unless I approve it. No calls, no letters, nothing. You’re my wife now, and your allegiance lies here, with me.”

Her eyes narrow, and I see the defiance flicker back to life. “You can’t just cut me off from the world,” she snaps.

“I can,” I reply coldly. “I will.”

She shifts in her seat, frustration radiating off her. “What else?”

“You will follow Bratva protocol at all times,” I continue. “That means respect for my men, adherence to my commands, and no interference in matters that don’t concern you.”

“If I don’t?” she asks, her voice sharp but trembling slightly.

I meet her gaze, letting the silence stretch for a moment before speaking. “Disobedience will result in consequences, Hannah. Severe consequences.”

Her defiance falters briefly, a flicker of fear passing over her features. She lifts her chin, refusing to look away.

“You really are a monster,” she whispers, her voice barely audible.

I lean back, watching her carefully. “Perhaps,” I say evenly. “I’m the monster keeping you alive. Remember that.”

She doesn’t respond, her hands clenching in her lap as she stares at the floor.

This is her reality now, and whether she likes it or not, she’ll adapt. I’ll make sure of it.

Hannah stands abruptly, her hands braced against the arms of the chair as she pushes herself up. Her defiance lingers in the way she holds her chin high, but there’s something else beneath it—something I can’t quite name but find myself wanting to uncover.

“I’m hungry,” she says simply, her voice sharper than it needs to be.

I lean back in my chair, my gaze sweeping over her. The faint flush on her cheeks from our earlier exchange hasn’t faded, and her dark hair is still slightly tousled from the bed.

There’s a certain charm to her disheveled appearance—innocent yet undeniably alluring. She looks like she belongs here, standing in the soft morning light, even if she doesn’t realize it yet.

“Hannah,” I say smoothly, rising to my feet in one fluid motion.

She turns slightly, her eyes narrowing as she watches me approach. “What?”



“You forgot something,” I murmur, my hand reaching out to catch hers as she tries to step away.

Her brows knit together in confusion, and before she can respond, I pull her closer, my free hand tilting her chin up. My lips capture hers in a kiss that’s far from gentle, my grip firm enough to keep her in place but not enough to hurt.

She stiffens for a moment, her hands pressing against my chest as if to push me away. But then she melts, her fingers curling into the fabric of my shirt as her lips move against mine.

Good girl.

When I finally pull back, her breath is ragged, her lips slightly swollen. She stares at me, her wide brown eyes flickering with a mixture of emotions—confusion, frustration, and something she’s trying desperately to suppress.

“You didn’t pull away,” I say, my voice low and laced with satisfaction.

Her blush deepens, and she quickly steps back, tugging her hand free from mine. “I didn’t because...,” she starts, searching for an excuse but coming up empty. Her gaze drops to the floor. “Because I’m starving, and I’m not thinking properly,” she finishes weakly.

I chuckle softly, the sound deep in my chest. “Then let’s get you fed.”

The dining room is quiet, the expansive table stretching between us. I sit at the head, my usual spot, while Hannah is to my left. The sunlight streaming through the windows highlights her features—the curve of her cheek, the slight furrow in her brow as she toys with her fork.

Breakfast is laid out before us, a spread of fresh fruits, pastries, and eggs prepared to perfection. She eats slowly, her movements deliberate, and the silence between us feels heavier than it should.

I sip my coffee, watching her with a mix of amusement and curiosity. She's guarded, her eyes flicking toward me occasionally as if she's waiting for me to speak first.

When I finally do, it's with purpose. "You'll need something to occupy your time," I say, my tone calm but firm.

She looks up, her fork pausing midway to her mouth. "What do you mean?"

"You can't work," I continue, setting my coffee cup down. "It's not safe, and I can't keep tabs on you if you're out of the house."

Her lips press into a thin line, and I can see the spark of resistance flare in her eyes. "So, what, I'm just supposed to sit around all day doing nothing?"

"You'll find something to do," I reply smoothly. "A hobby. Something you can manage within the confines of the house."

She scoffs, leaning back in her chair. "Oh, sure. I'll take up knitting or embroidery like some nineteenth-century housewife."

I smirk, raising an eyebrow. "If that's what you'd like, I'll have the supplies brought in."

Her glare sharpens, and for a moment, I think she's about to throw something at me. Instead, she exhales sharply, shaking her head. "This sucks."

"Maybe, but I'm right," I counter, leaning forward slightly. "This isn't negotiable,

Hannah. Your safety comes first, whether you like it or not.”

Her jaw tightens, but she doesn’t argue further. She pushes her plate away slightly, her appetite clearly diminished. “I’ll think of something,” she mutters, her tone clipped.

“You will,” I say, my voice softer now. “Whatever you choose, I’ll ensure you have what you need to do it well.”

Her gaze flicks to mine, and for a brief moment, I see something shift in her expression. It’s not acceptance, but maybe a small step toward understanding.

The silence stretches again, and this time, it feels less suffocating.

The quiet stretches between us, broken only by the faint clink of silverware against fine china. I watch Hannah as she takes small bites of the food in front of her—a plate of delicately scrambled eggs, fresh berries glistening with dew, and a buttery croissant that practically melts in the mouth.

Her movements are deliberate, almost hesitant, like she’s picking at the food more out of obligation than enjoyment.

“You’re not eating much,” I comment, leaning back in my chair and sipping my coffee.

She glances up briefly, her brow furrowing. “I’m not really used to... this.”

I raise an eyebrow, gesturing toward the spread between us. “You mean breakfast?”

“This kind of breakfast,” she clarifies, setting her fork down. “Fancy. Over the top. I’ve never had food like this.”

I study her for a moment, the corners of my lips tugging into a faint smirk. “What do you usually eat, then?”

“Cereal,” she says, almost defiantly. “Sometimes French toast if I had time before class. Nothing like this.”

I chuckle softly, setting my cup down. “Toast and cereal?”

“Yes,” she replies, her voice clipped. “Not everyone has a personal chef to whip up a gourmet meal every morning.”

“You don’t need a chef,” I say, leaning forward slightly. “Tell me what you want, and I’ll make it for you.”

That catches her off guard. Her eyes widen, and she stares at me as if I’ve just suggested something absurd. “You’d cook for me?”

“I would,” I say simply, my tone leaving no room for doubt.

She looks skeptical, leaning back in her chair. “Why?”

“I want you to be happy,” I say, the words slipping out before I can stop them.

Her expression hardens, and she looks away, her fingers tracing the edge of her plate. “I won’t be,” she says quietly, her voice laced with a bitterness that cuts deeper than I expect.

I frown, the sharpness of her words catching me off guard. “You can’t know that,” I reply, my voice firm but not unkind. “Things can change.”

Her gaze snaps back to mine, her eyes flashing. “You think I’ll just magically be

okay with this?"

"I think," I say evenly, "that you're stronger than you give yourself credit for. In time, you'll see that this life doesn't have to be as miserable as you're determined to make it."

She stares at me for a long moment, her jaw tightening before she looks away again. "You don't get it," she mutters.

"No," I agree. "I'm willing to try."

Her fork clinks against her plate as she sets it down, the tension in her shoulders palpable.

For now, I let the silence return, but I don't miss the way her hands tremble faintly as she folds them in her lap.

She's still fighting me.

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:06 pm*

The mansion is eerily quiet in the early hours of the morning, the kind of silence that presses against your ears and makes every footstep sound like a thunderclap. I wander its endless halls, trying to make sense of my new reality, though the weight of it feels like a chain dragging behind me.

It's not just the size of the mansion—it's the way it feels alive with its own rules, its own secrets. The windows stretch almost floor-to-ceiling in some corridors, offering a view of the sprawling grounds. The lawn is perfectly manicured, bordered by rows of flowers and tall iron gates in the distance.

Even with all this space, I feel trapped.

I move aimlessly, trailing my fingers along the smooth banisters of the grand staircase and stopping occasionally to peer into rooms that are equal parts luxurious and uninviting. Every polished surface and ornate detail screams wealth, but it does nothing to ease the restlessness knotting in my chest.

My thoughts spin endlessly: about the child I'm carrying, the marriage I never wanted, and the man I can't seem to understand. Makar is cold, calculating, a force I've yet to grasp fully. He doesn't let me in, and I'm not sure I want to get in.

Eventually, my wandering leads me to the kitchen. It's surprisingly warm and inviting compared to the rest of the house. Copper pots hang from hooks, the scent of freshly baked bread lingers in the air, and the morning light filters through small, lace-edged curtains above the sink.

A woman stands near the counter, wiping her hands on a towel. She's in her late

fifties, with soft, kind eyes and her gray-streaked hair pinned into a neat bun. She looks up when I step inside, her expression shifting into a small, polite smile.

“Hello, Mrs Sharov,” she says, her voice gentle but carrying a quiet authority.

I flinch slightly at the name, but manage a nod. “Hannah,” I correct softly.

“Of course,” she says, inclining her head. “Whatever you prefer.”

We stand there for a moment in awkward silence, and I realize how out of place I must look—lost in my own house.

“Would you like some tea?” Vera offers, her tone casual but kind.

I hesitate, but the warmth in her voice chips away at my defenses. “Sure,” I say finally.

Vera moves with practiced ease, pulling a kettle from the stove and filling it with water. As it heats, she sets a delicate china cup and saucer in front of me, along with a small dish of sugar and cream.

I sit at the kitchen table, my fingers tracing the edge of the saucer as she pours the steaming water over a tea bag and sets it down in front of me.

“Thank you,” I murmur, taking a tentative sip.

For a moment, we sit in companionable silence, the sound of the kettle cooling filling the room.

“You’ve been exploring the house,” Vera says after a while, her tone more observation than question.

“Yes,” I admit, glancing out the window. “It’s... overwhelming.”

“It takes time to adjust,” Vera replies gently. “I’ve been here for over thirty years, and even now, it surprises me.”

I blink, setting my cup down. “Thirty years? That’s... a long time.”

She nods, her expression softening with nostalgia. “It is. I’ve seen a lot of people come and go. But the house... it has its own way of holding on to things. Memories, I suppose.”

I pause, unsure if I want to delve further. Something about Vera’s calm presence feels grounding, and before I can stop myself, the words tumble out. “Does it get easier? Living here?”

Her eyes meet mine, and for a moment, her smile falters. “That depends on you,” she says honestly. “This place can feel like a fortress. It can also be a home, if you let it.”

I snort softly, shaking my head. “A home,” I echo, the word foreign and hollow on my tongue. “I’m not sure I even know what that means anymore.”

Vera studies me for a moment, her hands folding neatly in front of her. “A home isn’t about walls or wealth, Hannah. It’s about finding a way to make peace with where you are.”

Her words settle over me, heavy and unwelcome. “Peace,” I say bitterly. “That’s not exactly in the cards for me right now.”

“You say that now, but things won’t always feel so hopeless,” Vera replies, her voice steady.



I look at her, a lump forming in my throat. It's been so long since someone spoke to me like this—with kindness, without an ulterior motive.

“Do you... like it here?” I ask hesitantly.

Vera tilts her head thoughtfully. “It has its challenges,” she admits. “But I've made my place here. I've learned to focus on the good. I've learned that even in the hardest circumstances, there's always something worth holding on to.”

Her gaze lingers on me meaningfully, and I realize she's offering something more than words—an unspoken understanding, a lifeline in the overwhelming sea of my own thoughts.

Vera settles into the chair opposite me, her hands clasped neatly on the table. She's quiet for a moment, her gaze drifting around the kitchen as if gathering her thoughts. The air feels warmer here, less suffocating than the rest of the mansion.

“This house,” she begins softly, “has always been a strange place to live. It's beautiful, isn't it? Grand and imposing, but... cold, in a way.”

I nod slowly, unsure of how to respond.

“It wasn't always like this,” Vera continues. “When Makar was young, this place was alive. His parents hosted dinners, there were celebrations, and the staff—well, we weren't just workers. We were a family, of sorts.”

I glance at her, intrigued despite myself. “What happened?”

Her smile falters, and a shadow crosses her face. “Time happened. Loss happened. The world outside these walls grew harsher, and the family had to adapt. Makar's father... he was a good man, but strict. He believed in discipline, in responsibility. He

passed that on to his sons.”

I lean forward slightly, resting my elbows on the table. “Makar had a brother?”

“Anatoly,” Vera says, her voice softening with a tinge of sorrow. “Younger by a few years. The two of them were inseparable as boys. Makar was always the responsible one, taking care of his brother, making sure he stayed out of trouble. It was almost as if he thought it was his duty.”

I try to imagine Makar as a child, running through the halls of this enormous house, laughing and carefree. It doesn’t fit with the cold, controlled man I’ve come to know.

“Even then,” Vera continues, “he was serious. He always felt the weight of the family’s expectations. But there was a lightness to him too. He was... kind. Protective. When Anatoly died....” She trails off, shaking her head. “It changed him. Hardened him.”

Her words are heavy with meaning. I think of the man who had kissed me with such intensity last night, who had laid down rules with an iron will this morning. I can’t reconcile that man with the boy Vera describes.

“Do you think...?” I hesitate, unsure if I want the answer. “Do you think there’s still a part of him that’s like that? Kind.”

Vera’s smile returns, faint but knowing. “I do,” she says. “It’s buried deep, but it’s there. I’ve seen glimpses of it. You might too, if you look hard enough.”

I snort softly, shaking my head. “I doubt that.”

“Give it time,” Vera says simply.

Her words stir something in me, but I push it aside. “What about you?” I ask, eager to shift the focus away from Makar. “How did you end up here?”

“I’ve been here since I was very young,” Vera replies, a touch of pride in her voice. “I came when I was just a girl, working under the housekeeper before me. I’ve seen this house through many seasons, many changes.”

I nod, her story comforting in its simplicity. She’s steady, a quiet anchor in a place that feels like it’s constantly shifting beneath my feet.

Without thinking, I say, “I used to have something like that. A sense of stability, I mean.”

Vera tilts her head, encouraging me to continue.

“My mom,” I say quietly, my gaze dropping to my hands. “She used to make this dessert—cinnamon rolls with cherries on top. I’d come home from school, and she’d have them ready. They weren’t fancy or anything, but... they made everything feel normal. Safe.”

My voice falters, and I feel the sting of tears behind my eyes. I blink quickly, trying to push them back, ashamed of the vulnerability slipping through.

Vera reaches across the table, her hand resting gently over mine. Her touch is warm, grounding. “That sounds lovely,” she says softly. “Food has a way of bringing back memories, doesn’t it? It’s not just about the taste—it’s the feeling, the comfort it brings.”

I nod, swallowing hard. “I haven’t had them since she passed.”

Vera squeezes my hand lightly, then pulls back, giving me a sympathetic smile.

“Maybe one day, we can make them together.”

Her words catch me off guard, and I glance up at her, surprised by the kindness in her offer. “I’d like that,” I admit, the words barely above a whisper.

The sound of approaching footsteps breaks the moment. I stiffen automatically, the warmth of the kitchen replaced by a chill as Makar steps into the room.

His gaze sweeps over me, sharp and assessing. He’s still in his suit from earlier, the dark fabric immaculate despite the long day.

“Adjusting?” he asks, his tone laced with a smirk.

I bristle, crossing my arms over my chest. “I’m surviving,” I reply flatly.

His smirk deepens, and his eyes linger on me for a moment longer than necessary. There’s something in his gaze— an attention that unsettles me, makes me feel both exposed and curious all at once.

“Good,” he says finally, his tone dismissive. “I’m glad to see you making friends.”

I glare at him, but he doesn’t give me the satisfaction of reacting. He turns to Vera, nodding in acknowledgment. “I’ll need dinner prepared in the study this evening.”

“Of course, Mr. Sharov,” Vera replies smoothly.

Makar’s attention shifts back to me briefly, his expression unreadable. “Try not to make trouble,” he says, his voice low and almost amused. Then, just as quickly as he entered, he’s gone, his presence leaving a heavy silence in its wake.

I exhale slowly, tension bleeding out of my shoulders.

“He’s not so bad,” Vera says lightly, her tone teasing.

I snort softly, shaking my head. “He’s the worst.”

She chuckles, gathering the tea cups from the table. “You’d be surprised how much people can change, Hannah. Even him.”

I don’t answer, but her words linger as I stare out the window, my thoughts drifting between the past and an uncertain future.

I glance toward the doorway where Makar disappeared moments ago, my chest tightening with conflicting emotions. Can someone like him really change? Could the ruthless man who holds my freedom hostage—the man who controls my every move—be capable of something softer?

I want to scoff at the thought, to push it away as ridiculous, but the memory of his touch last night, the fire in his gaze, stops me. There was something else there, wasn’t there? Something more.

“You’re thinking too hard,” Vera says gently, breaking through my spiraling thoughts.

I blink, startled, and look at her.

She smiles knowingly. “Take things one day at a time. You don’t have to figure it all out now.”

I nod faintly, though the uncertainty still gnaws at me.

As Vera places a reassuring hand on my shoulder before turning back to her work, I let out a slow breath. One day at a time. It’s all I can manage for now.

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*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:06 pm*

The drive home feels longer than usual, the rhythmic hum of the engine doing little to quiet my thoughts. Work had been the usual chaos—negotiations, threats, deals to finalize—but through it all, my mind kept circling back to her.

Hannah.

This marriage was never meant to mean anything. It was a necessity, a solution to a problem I didn't ask for but refused to ignore. Yet, every day since we exchanged vows, I've felt... different.

I think of her too often, more than I care to admit. Her sharp tongue, the fire in her eyes, the way she softens when she thinks no one's watching. She's stubborn, infuriating, and utterly captivating.

I want to see her face the moment I walk through the door. I want her in my bed every night, tangled in my sheets, her body pressed against mine.

The thought irritates me, makes me grip the steering wheel tighter. She's not supposed to affect me like this.

When I pull into the driveway, something feels off. The mansion looms as it always does, its grand facade untouched, but the tension in the air is palpable.

One of my men jogs up to meet me as I step out of the car, his face drawn with urgency.

"Sir," he says, his voice low. "We've got an intruder in the house."

The words hit like a blow, my body immediately tensing. “Where?”

“The west wing,” he answers. “Second-floor study. We’re containing the area.”

I don’t wait for more. Shoving past him, I make my way inside, my boots pounding against the polished floors as I head toward the commotion. Adrenaline courses through me, sharpening my focus.

When I reach the study, two more guards stand by the door, their weapons drawn. One looks at me, his expression cautious. “Sir, we—”

I don’t let him finish. I push the door open with enough force to send it slamming against the wall, the noise reverberating through the room.

The intruder is there, lurking in the shadows, his figure partially obscured by the dim light. In his hand, the glint of steel—a knife, raised and ready.

The air is thick with tension, every muscle in my body coiled like a spring as I step further into the room. The man’s eyes meet mine, dark and wild, a predator cornered but still dangerous. He doesn’t speak, doesn’t flinch, his knife steady in his grip.

I take another step, my gun raised, my aim trained on his center mass. “You’ve made a mistake,” I say, my voice cold and steady.

He doesn’t answer. Instead, he lunges.

The movement is quick, but not quick enough. I sidestep, pivoting sharply as his blade slices through the air inches from my side. My elbow drives into his ribs with force, the impact sending him stumbling back.

The knife gleams again as he recovers, his stance shifting as he prepares to attack

once more. He's trained, I realize. Not a desperate thief, but someone sent here with a purpose.

My jaw tightens.

"You came into the wrong house," I growl, my voice low and venomous.

He snarls, charging again, and this time I meet him head-on. My hand grabs his wrist, twisting sharply until the knife clatters to the floor. His other hand comes up, a fist aiming for my jaw, but I block it with ease, my grip tightening on his arm until I hear the pop of a dislocated shoulder.

He cries out, his voice raw, but I don't stop. My knee drives into his stomach, doubling him over, and I follow it with a brutal strike to the back of his head.

He goes down, hitting the floor hard, but he's still moving, his hands scrambling for the knife.

Not a chance.

I kick it across the room, the blade skidding out of reach, and grab him by the collar, hauling him to his knees. Blood drips from a cut on his temple, his breath coming in ragged gasps, but his defiance remains.

"Who sent you?" I demand, my voice sharp and unrelenting.

He spits at my feet, his lips curling into a bloody sneer. "You think you're untouchable, Sharov?" he snarls.

My fist collides with his jaw before he can say another word, the impact snapping his head back.



“You’ll tell me who sent you,” I say, my tone deathly calm.

“I’d rather die,” he spits, his voice defiant even through the pain.

“So be it.”

I release him, letting him crumple to the floor, and reach for my gun. The weight of it in my hand is familiar, comforting, as I take aim once more.

“Wait!” a voice cries out, and my focus shifts instantly.

Hannah.

She’s in the corner, pale and trembling, her wide eyes locked on the scene before her. A kitchen knife is clutched tightly in her hands, her knuckles white from the force of her grip.

“Stay there,” I bark, my tone sharper than I intend.

The intruder takes advantage of my momentary distraction, lunging for me with surprising speed. I pivot, narrowly avoiding his grasp, and fire.

The shot echoes through the room, the bullet finding its mark with precision. The man collapses, his body hitting the floor with a sickening thud, and the knife he’d been reaching for spins out of reach.

Silence falls, thick and suffocating, broken only by the sound of my heavy breathing.

I turn immediately, my gaze locking on Hannah. She’s frozen in place, her chest rising and falling rapidly, her eyes fixed on the lifeless body sprawled on the floor.

“Hannah,” I say, my voice softer now as I take a cautious step toward her.

She doesn’t respond, her grip on the knife tightening.

“Hannah,” I repeat, crouching down in front of her. “It’s over.”

Her gaze finally shifts to mine, her eyes glassy with shock. “He... he was going to kill me,” she whispers, her voice trembling.

“He didn’t,” I reply firmly. “Because I stopped him.”

Her breathing is shallow, her knuckles still white around the handle of the knife. I reach out slowly, careful not to startle her.

“Give me the knife,” I say gently. “You don’t need it anymore.”

For a moment, she doesn’t move, her grip unyielding. Then, slowly, her fingers loosen, and the blade slips from her hands to clatter against the floor.

“Are you hurt?” I ask, scanning her for any signs of injury.

She shakes her head, but the fear in her eyes doesn’t fade.

I exhale quietly, relief washing over me despite the lingering tension in my chest. Someone dared to come into my home, to threaten her.

My wife.

The thought sends a surge of fury through me, and I glance back at the fallen intruder, my jaw clenching. This was a warning, a message meant to unsettle me. But they made a mistake targeting her.

They'll learn what happens when someone tries to harm what's mine.

"Hannah," I say, my voice softer as I turn back to her.

Her gaze is locked on the body again, her shoulders trembling. I reach out, brushing a strand of hair from her face. The touch seems to ground her, her wide eyes flicking back to mine.

"You're safe now," I tell her, the words carrying more weight than I expect. "I promise."

Hannah blinks, her wide, terrified gaze shifting from the lifeless body on the floor to me. Her breathing is uneven, her lips parted as though she wants to say something but can't quite form the words.

I crouch lower, my eyes locked on hers.

Her eyes flicker to the blade as though she's only just remembered she's holding it. Her grip loosens slightly, but she hesitates. For a moment, I think she'll cling to it like a lifeline. Then her fingers slowly unfurl, letting the knife slip free.

I take it gently, setting it aside on the floor. Her hands fall limply into her lap, the tension bleeding out of her like air escaping a punctured balloon.

"Hey," I say again, quieter this time, my voice carrying a steadiness I hope she feels.

She doesn't respond, her body frozen, her breathing still shallow. Her gaze drops to her hands, trembling against her thighs.

Seeing her like this—a woman so full of fire now reduced to this trembling, vulnerable state—stirs something deep in me.

Something I don't recognize.

Something I don't want to recognize.

Without thinking, I reach out, my hand resting on her shoulder. Her body flinches slightly at the contact, but she doesn't pull away.

"You're safe now," I say, the words quiet but resolute. "It's over."

She doesn't answer, but her eyes lift slowly to meet mine. There's fear there, yes, but also confusion.

I squeeze her shoulder lightly, grounding her, letting her feel my steady presence. For a moment, I consider pulling her closer, holding her until that fear subsides. I imagine wrapping my arms around her, letting her feel something more than the cold, detached protection I've offered so far.

I hold back.

Instead, my hand lingers on her shoulder, firm but impersonal, before I let it fall.

"We need to get you out of here," I say, straightening to my full height. My tone is more commanding now, an anchor for both of us. "Come on."

She stares at me for a beat longer, her brows furrowing slightly. Then she nods, her movements stiff and mechanical as she stands. I guide her toward the doorway, keeping my body close to hers, shielding her from the grisly scene behind us.

As we step into the hallway, the tension in her frame remains, her steps hesitant and unsure.

“You didn’t have to kill him,” she says suddenly, her voice breaking the silence.

My jaw tightens, but I don’t stop walking. “Yes, I did,” I reply, my tone firm. “He was a threat.”

“To me,” she whispers, her voice trembling.

“To both of us,” I correct, glancing down at her. “This wasn’t random, Hannah. That man wasn’t here by accident.”

Her lips press into a thin line, and she doesn’t argue.

When we reach the sitting room, I guide her to the couch, motioning for her to sit. She does, her movements slow and reluctant.

I stand before her, my arms crossed, scanning her for any signs of injury. I step closer, crouching in front of her again.

“Hannah, listen to me,” I say, my voice low but firm. “I know this is overwhelming, but you’re safe now. I won’t let anything happen to you.”

Her eyes lift to mine, and for a moment, there’s something raw and unguarded in her expression. “Why do you care?” she whispers.

The question catches me off guard, but I don’t let it show. “Because you’re my wife,” I answer simply. “Because you’re carrying my child.”

She flinches slightly at the reminder, her hand brushing against her stomach almost instinctively.

“This is what it means to be with me, Hannah,” I continue, my tone softening

slightly. “I protect what’s mine. Always.”

Her lips part, as though she wants to respond, but no words come. Instead, she nods faintly, her shoulders sagging as the adrenaline begins to fade.

I rise to my feet, glancing toward the hallway where the body still lies. My men will deal with it—clean up the mess, remove the evidence. But the lingering threat... that’s something I’ll handle myself.

For now, though, my focus is on her.

“You should rest,” I say, my voice gentler now. “We’ll talk more tomorrow.”

She hesitates, her gaze flicking to mine, then nods again.

As I turn to leave, she calls out softly, “Makar.”

I pause, glancing back over my shoulder.

“Thank you,” she says, her voice barely above a whisper.

The gratitude in her eyes is tentative, uncertain, but it stirs something in me nonetheless.

I nod once, saying nothing as I walk away.

The threat is gone, but the war is far from over. More than ever, I’m certain of one thing: I’ll destroy anyone who dares to come near her again.

## Page 17

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:06 pm*

The sitting room feels impossibly still, the heavy silence broken only by the faint ticking of a nearby clock. I sit on the couch, my knees drawn to my chest, staring blankly at the empty fireplace. My mind replays the nightmarish events of the attack in an endless loop—the glint of the knife, the intruder’s feral eyes, the sound of Makar’s gunshot ringing out.

My chest tightens, and I wrap my arms around my legs, trying to ward off the lingering fear that clings to me like a second skin.

Along with the fear is something else.

Makar.

The way he moved—ruthless, precise, unrelenting—when the intruder lunged at him. The way his voice cut through my panic, steady and firm, grounding me when I felt like I might shatter.

He protected me.

The thought unsettles me. He’s supposed to be the enemy in this twisted arrangement, the man who controls my every move. And yet, in those terrifying moments, his presence was a strange comfort, a shield against the chaos.

The door opens, and I stiffen, my heart leaping before I see him. Makar steps inside, his dark suit still immaculate despite the events of the evening. His gaze sweeps the room before settling on me.

For a moment, neither of us speaks. Then he crosses the room, his movements deliberate, his expression serious but softening slightly as he meets my eyes.

“The attacker,” he begins, his voice steady but laced with an edge, “was connected to Kris. I guess he wanted revenge for what happened.”

The mention of Kris sends a shiver through me, but I say nothing, waiting for him to continue.

“I’ll make sure this doesn’t happen again,” he says, his tone darkening with unspoken promise. “You’re safe here.”

The words settle over me like a blanket, heavy but comforting in their finality. I feel a spark of relief—unexpected and unwelcome—though I try to hide it.

His gaze lingers on me, sharp and assessing, before it shifts slightly, and his brow furrows. “You haven’t eaten in days,” he says, his tone firm but with a hint of something softer. Concern?

I blink, startled by the sudden shift in topic. “I’ve been...,” I falter, unsure of how to finish the sentence.

“Neglecting yourself,” he finishes for me, his voice carrying a note of disapproval. His gaze flickers briefly to my stomach, then back to my face. “That’s not good for you. Or the baby.”

The unexpected gentleness in his voice throws me off-balance. I stare at him, unsure of how to respond.

“Come downstairs for lunch,” he says, his tone leaving no room for argument. “You need it.”



He turns toward the door but stops after a few steps, glancing back over his shoulder. His gaze meets mine, steady and expectant, waiting.

I hesitate, my body rooted to the couch as the conflicting emotions swirl inside me—fear, resentment, confusion, and something dangerously close to gratitude.

Finally, I nod, unfolding myself from the couch and standing. My legs feel unsteady, but I force them to carry me forward.

Makar waits by the door, his expression unreadable as he watches me approach. When I reach him, he turns and leads the way out of the room, his presence both commanding and strangely reassuring.

For a moment, I stay rooted where I am, my chest tight with the weight of everything unspoken between us. Then, forcing myself to move, I follow him out of the room, the soft thud of my footsteps trailing behind his steady stride.

He leads me through the hall, his broad shoulders cutting an imposing silhouette against the dim lighting. When we reach the main staircase, he pauses briefly, his gaze flicking back toward me.

“Don’t take too long,” he says, his tone calm but firm, before turning and heading toward the dining room.

The sound of his footsteps fades as I watch him go, his presence leaving a strange void in its wake.

I turn and head for my room, grateful for the small reprieve. Despite our marriage, Makar has made no move to force me into his space, and for that, I’m thankful. The room I’ve been given is still mine, my small sanctuary in a house that feels more like a gilded cage than a home.

Once inside, I close the door and lean against it for a moment, letting out a slow, measured breath. My reflection stares back at me from the ornate mirror across the room, my features pale and my hair slightly disheveled.

Get it together, Hannah.

I walk to the vanity, dragging a brush through my hair in an effort to tame it. My hands tremble slightly, but I focus on the small, mundane task, letting it center me.

After smoothing down the fabric of my dress, I step back, taking in my appearance. I don't know why I bother—why I care what I look like when I'm about to face the man who controls every aspect of my life—but the thought nags at me all the same.

My gaze lowers to my stomach, my hand moving instinctively to rest there. It's still flat, no sign yet of the life growing inside me, but the thought alone is enough to make my chest tighten.

Shaking off the wave of emotion, I turn away and head for the door, my steps steady despite the nervous energy swirling in my chest.

The walk downstairs feels longer than it should, each step echoing in the vast, silent house. When I reach the dining room, my eyes are immediately drawn to him.

Makar sits at the head of the long table, his posture straight, his piercing gaze already fixed on me as I step inside.

For a moment, the weight of his presence threatens to swallow me whole. I square my shoulders and step forward, determined not to let him see the cracks beneath the surface.

The dining room is bathed in the warm glow of the chandelier, the soft light reflecting

off the polished wood of the long table. My footsteps are light as I enter, but they still feel loud against the silence that fills the room.

Makar is already seated at the head of the table, his posture as composed and commanding as ever. His sharp blue eyes find mine the moment I step inside, and I fight the urge to fidget under his unwavering gaze.

As I approach, my attention shifts to the place setting in front of me. My breath catches, my heart stumbling in my chest as my eyes land on the dessert waiting for me—a cherry-topped cinnamon roll, the glaze still gleaming and the smell achingly familiar.

It's just like the ones my mom used to make back in Montana.

For a moment, I forget where I am. The sight of the dessert pulls me back to those afternoons after school, the scent of cinnamon and cherries filling the kitchen as my mom set a plate down in front of me, her smile warm and constant. The memory is so vivid it feels like I could reach out and touch it.

I blink, my throat tightening, and glance at Makar. His expression is as unreadable as ever, but there's a flicker of something in his gaze—something that deepens when he notices my surprise.

“Vera mentioned you missed these,” he says, his tone almost casual, as though he hasn't just turned my world on its head.

The words are simple, but they hit me harder than I expect. He's trying to act like it's nothing, but I know better. This isn't just a gesture; it's... thoughtful.

Emotion wells up in my chest, threatening to spill over. Before I can second-guess myself, I step closer to him, my hands reaching out.

I press my face against his chest, clutching the crisp fabric of his shirt as a shaky breath escapes me.

It's brief—just a moment of closeness, my body trembling slightly as I let the wave of gratitude wash over me.

Makar doesn't move, and for a second, I wonder if he'll push me away. But he doesn't. His body is rigid, his breath steady, and though I can't see his face, I sense his surprise.

When I finally pull back, I avoid his gaze, my cheeks burning with embarrassment. "Thank you," I whisper, my voice barely audible.

He doesn't respond right away, but when I glance up, he gives me a small, almost imperceptible nod. It's not much, but it's enough.

"Sit," he says, his voice calm but with that ever-present hint of command. He gestures toward the chair across from him.

For once, I don't argue.

I sit quietly, the cinnamon roll in front of me untouched as I try to compose myself. The warmth of Makar's presence across the table feels heavier than usual, like it's wrapping around me, holding me in place.

"You're not eating," he says, his voice cutting through the silence.

I glance up at him, his expression unreadable. "I was just... remembering," I say softly.

He leans back in his chair, his gaze steady. "Your mother?"

The question surprises me, but I nod. “She used to make these all the time. After school, on weekends... they were her way of making everything feel normal.”

Makar’s eyes flicker with something—curiosity, perhaps—but he says nothing, letting me continue.

“She passed away when I was fourteen,” I add, my voice trembling slightly. “And after that, nothing felt... right anymore.”

The silence between us deepens, but it’s not uncomfortable. It feels heavy with understanding, a shared weight that neither of us speaks aloud.

“She must have been a good mother,” Makar says finally, his tone quieter than I’ve ever heard it.

“She was,” I say, a small, wistful smile tugging at my lips. “She would’ve hated this.”

“This?” he echoes, one brow arching slightly.

“This... arrangement. The baby. Everything.”

Makar doesn’t respond immediately, his gaze dropping to the table. “She would have wanted you safe,” he says after a moment, his voice firm.

I meet his eyes, and for once, I don’t feel the usual cold detachment. There’s something softer there, something I can’t quite name.

I pick up the fork beside my plate and cut into the cinnamon roll, the aroma of cinnamon and cherries hitting me like a wave. The first bite melts on my tongue, and for a moment, the world feels a little less chaotic.

Makar watches me, his gaze steady. “Better?” he asks.

I nod, swallowing. “Better.”

The faintest smirk touches his lips, and I realize it’s not the usual smugness I’ve come to expect from him. It feels... genuine.

“You’re full of surprises,” I say quietly, setting my fork down.

His smirk widens slightly. “Don’t sound so disappointed.”

I roll my eyes, a small laugh escaping me despite myself. “You’d complain too if you were in my position.”

“I don’t complain,” he replies smoothly, leaning back in his chair. “I adapt.”

I shake my head, another laugh bubbling up. For the first time in what feels like forever, the tension in my chest eases.

As we finish the meal, the silence between us isn’t the heavy, oppressive quiet I’ve grown used to. It feels lighter, easier, like something has shifted between us.

When I glance up at Makar, I catch him watching me, his blue eyes thoughtful.

“You’ve changed,” I say softly, the words slipping out before I can stop them.

His brow lifts slightly. “Have I?”

“Yes,” I say, meeting his gaze. “I don’t know if I like it.”

He chuckles softly, the sound low and rich. “I don’t need you to like it. I just need

you to eat.”

I roll my eyes, but the faint smile on my lips lingers as I take another bite.

## Page 18

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:06 pm*

The mansion is quiet as I step through the front doors, the click of my shoes on the polished marble floors the only sound. The event looms over the evening, a formal gathering of Bratva allies and high-ranking members—a display of unity and power, and my attendance is mandatory.

This time, I've decided Hannah will accompany me.

I sent a dress earlier, one carefully selected to suit the occasion and the woman she's becoming in this house. As much as I told myself this was a practical decision—a way to establish her presence alongside mine in this life—I can't ignore the faint sense of anticipation curling in my chest.

I glance at my watch, irritation simmering. We're already running late.

"Is she ready yet?" I mutter to one of the house staff hovering nearby.

"She should be down any moment, sir," the woman replies nervously before disappearing down the hall.

I pace near the foot of the staircase, the sharp edges of my impatience tempered by a flicker of curiosity. When Hannah finally appears at the top of the stairs, everything—time, sound, even my breathing—seems to halt.

She's breathtaking.

The dress is deep emerald green, the silk clinging to her in all the right places, the neckline just low enough to be daring without crossing into vulgarity. Her dark hair is



swept back into elegant waves that bares her neck and shoulders, and she moves with a grace I hadn't expected.

It's not just the dress or the way it accentuates her; it's the way she carries herself. There's still a hint of defiance in the set of her jaw, but it's softened by something else—poise, confidence, strength.

For a moment, I forget the event entirely, caught up in the way she's transformed from the fiery, untamed girl I married to this captivating woman walking toward me.

She pauses at the bottom of the stairs, her gaze meeting mine, and something in her eyes flickers—uncertainty, perhaps, or a challenge.

“Well?” she asks, her voice light but tinged with nervousness. “Do I pass the test?”

I clear my throat, forcing my features back into their usual mask of composure. “You'll do,” I say, my tone deliberately nonchalant, though my voice is rougher than I intended.

Her lips twitch, almost forming a smile, and she steps closer, adjusting one of the thin straps of the dress. “You're welcome, by the way.”

“For what?”

“For looking better than you expected,” she says, her tone teasing.

I don't answer, my gaze lingering on her a moment too long before I offer her my arm. “We're late.”

She hesitates briefly before slipping her hand into the crook of my arm, her touch light but steady. Together, we step out into the waiting car.

The event is a parade of power and wealth, the room filled with Bratva men in tailored suits, their wives and mistresses adorned in jewels and gowns that could rival royalty. Crystal chandeliers cast a warm glow over the polished floors, and the low hum of conversation is punctuated by bursts of laughter and the clink of champagne glasses.

Hannah moves beside me, her posture straight, her expression composed. If she's nervous, she hides it well. I glance at her out of the corner of my eye, noting how the green of her dress seems to deepen the warmth in her brown eyes.

She catches me looking and raises an eyebrow. "You're staring," she says quietly.

I smirk faintly, leaning closer so only she can hear. "You're the one drawing all the attention."

She blushes faintly but doesn't respond, her gaze shifting to the room around us.

She's right—people are staring. Men glance her way with thinly veiled appreciation, their eyes lingering a moment too long, and women study her with expressions ranging from curiosity to quiet judgment.

The sight stirs something in me—a sharp, unwelcome surge of jealousy.

I tell myself it's nothing. She's my wife, and it's natural to feel protective of what's mine. But the intensity of it unsettles me, the way my jaw tightens every time another man's gaze drifts in her direction.

"Is this normal?" she asks suddenly, her voice cutting through my thoughts.

I glance at her, frowning. "What?"

“The way everyone keeps looking at me,” she says, her tone carefully neutral, though I catch the faint edge of discomfort.

I take a slow breath, forcing my irritation under control. “They’re looking because they’ve never seen you before,” I say, my voice calm but firm. “They’re curious. It will pass.”

Her lips press into a thin line, and she nods, though she doesn’t look convinced.

Throughout the evening, I find my focus splintering. The event continues as planned—introductions, brief conversations, a toast or two—but my attention keeps drifting back to her. I watch the way she holds herself, the quiet strength in her movements, and the way her gaze sharpens when she catches someone staring too long.

She’s a force, even when she doesn’t realize it.

At one point, I notice a man—it’s my cousin, Mikhail—lingering nearby, his gaze fixed on her as she sips her drink. My hands clench into fists at my sides, the instinct to act immediate and overwhelming.

Hannah glances up, catching my eye. She tilts her head slightly, her lips curving into the faintest smirk, as if she knows exactly what I’m thinking.

“Relax,” she says softly, her voice carrying a note of amusement. “I can handle it.”

I grit my teeth but nod, forcing myself to step back, to let her manage this in her own way.

Still, the possessiveness lingers, coiling in my chest like a snake.

She's mine. No amount of defiance or independence will change that.

By the time the event winds down, I'm more on edge than I was when it began. As we head back to the car, I glance at her again, catching the faint flush on her cheeks, the way her lips curve into something close to a smile.

"You handled yourself well tonight," I say grudgingly as we slide into the back seat.

"Thanks," she replies, her tone light but carrying a hint of satisfaction. "I think I'm getting the hang of this."

I smirk, leaning back against the seat. "Don't get too comfortable. This isn't a game."

Her eyes meet mine, a spark of fire still burning in them. "Neither am I," she says quietly.

The car ride home is unbearable.

The tension between us hums like a live wire, crackling and sparking with every glance, every shift of her body in the seat beside me. Hannah sits with her back straight, her hands folded neatly in her lap, but I can see the way her fingers twitch against the fabric of her dress. She's as affected by this as I am, no matter how much she tries to hide it.

Yet, I can't bring myself to speak.

The night had been a trial of restraint, of biting back the urge to claim what's mine every time another man dared to look at her for too long. My control had been tested in a hundred different ways, and I'd barely held on. Now, with her so close, her scent wrapping around me like a drug, my patience is hanging by a thread.

Her earlier words echo in my mind, sharp and unrelenting.

Neither am I.

She's a challenge—a fire I can't extinguish, no matter how hard I try. Maybe I don't want to.

By the time the car pulls into the driveway, my resolve is in tatters. I step out, my movements stiff and deliberate as I wait for her to follow. She does, her heels clicking softly against the stone as we make our way inside.

The door closes behind us with a soft thud, the sound reverberating through the empty foyer. I should walk away, put distance between us before I do something I can't take back.

I can't.

"Hannah," I say, my voice low and rough, the single word carrying the weight of everything I'm feeling.

She turns to face me, her brows drawing together in confusion. "What?"

That spark of fire in her gaze—defiant, unyielding—shatters the last of my restraint.

I step forward, closing the space between us in an instant. My hands find her waist, gripping her firmly as I pull her against me. Her breath catches, her eyes widening in surprise, but she doesn't pull away.

"I can't," I murmur, my voice a strained growl as I pin her gently against the wall, caging her in with my body. "Not anymore."

She swallows hard, her hands coming up to press against my chest. “Makar—”

Whatever she was about to say is lost as my lips crash down on hers. The kiss is rough, desperate, an outlet for the storm raging inside me. She stiffens for a heartbeat, and then she melts, her fingers curling into the fabric of my shirt as she kisses me back with just as much intensity.

My hands roam over her waist, pulling her closer, needing her closer. Her soft curves press against me, and I groan, my restraint slipping further as I lose myself in the feel of her.

Her lips part beneath mine, and I deepen the kiss, my tongue sweeping into her mouth in a way that’s both demanding and possessive. She tastes like sparkling cider and something sweeter, something uniquely hers, and it drives me to the brink of madness.

I break away briefly, my forehead resting against hers as I try to catch my breath.

“This,” I say, my voice low and hoarse, “is what you do to me.”

She looks up at me, her eyes wide and dark with desire, her breathing as ragged as mine. “Makar...,” she whispers, her voice trembling.

I don’t let her finish. My lips are on hers again, my hands sliding up her sides to trace the delicate line of her neck. She shivers under my touch, and the sound she makes—a soft, breathy sigh—nearly undoes me.

I press closer, my body pinning hers against the wall, the heat between us growing unbearable. Her fingers trail up my chest, tangling in my hair, and I can feel the hesitation bleeding out of her, replaced by something raw and electric.

My hands move lower, finding the slit in her dress and slipping beneath the fabric to rest on the bare skin of her thigh. Her breath hitches, and I pause, my lips hovering just above hers.

“Tell me to stop,” I murmur, my voice a strained growl. “If you don’t want this, tell me now.”

She doesn’t answer right away, her gaze searching mine. Then, slowly, she shakes her head, her lips parting in a whisper. “Don’t stop.”

The words are my undoing.

I lift her effortlessly, her legs wrapping around my waist as I carry her toward the nearest surface—a sleek marble console table. Her dress rides up as I set her down, my hands splaying across her thighs, and I groan at the feel of her skin beneath my fingers.

She pulls me closer, her lips finding mine again, and this time, there’s no hesitation.

Her fingers curl into my hair as I fuck her, tugging just enough to send a shiver down my spine. The way she responds—fierce and unrestrained—stokes the fire burning inside me, and I know there’s no going back.

My cock twitches as her walls clench; her pussy is so soaked already, and her thighs tremble beautifully. She’s so delicate beneath me, so completely at my mercy.

“That’s a good girl, Hannah,” I murmur against her lips, my voice a low growl as I thrust harder. Harder .

Her name tastes different now, weighted with emotions I don’t want to name. Love? It’s a dangerous word, one I’ve spent my life avoiding.

I pull back just enough to look at her, my chest heaving as I take her in. Her lips are swollen, her cheeks flushed, and her wide brown eyes hold a mix of desire and vulnerability that punches me in the gut.

“You’re mine,” I say, my voice rough but unwavering. “Do you understand that?”

She swallows hard, her gaze locking on mine. “Yes,” she whispers, her voice trembling but sure.

My hand moves to her face, my thumb brushing over her cheek. The touch is gentle, a contrast to the hunger still roaring inside me. “I’m yours,” I add, the words spilling out before I can stop them.

With one last thrust, I spill inside of her. She cries out my name, her pussy tightening; it’s euphoric, my head spinning with the force of the orgasm that washes over me.

My legs shake as I pull out, dripping come across the inside of her thighs. She whimpers, and I smirk as I duck down to ghost a kiss across her lips.

“Rest,” I whisper against her skin, and she does.



*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:06 pm*

The weeks blur into one another in the vast, gilded halls of the mansion, but something is changing. Not just in the way my body moves slower now, my hand instinctively cradling the gentle swell of my belly as I walk, but in the way my thoughts linger—on him.

Makar.

I can't stop thinking about him.

It's infuriating, this pull he has over me. He's everything I should hate: controlling, cold, ruthless. Yet, against all reason, I find myself drawn to him. His voice, his touch, even his rare moments of gentleness... they haunt me, creeping into my mind when I least expect it.

At night, I replay the moments when his guard slips, the way his hands cradle me as though I might break, the way his eyes darken with something deeper when he looks at me. It leaves me aching, restless, craving something I can't name but know only he can give.

That terrifies me.

I don't want to feel this way. I don't want to want him.

My hand rests on my stomach as I wander the mansion aimlessly, trying to escape my own thoughts. The baby moves faintly, a reminder of the new life growing inside me, and I smile despite myself.

It's in this distracted state that I stumble upon a room I haven't noticed before. The door is slightly ajar, and curiosity pulls me forward.

Pushing it open, I step inside and immediately feel like I've entered a different world. The space is smaller than most of the rooms in the house, cozier, the walls lined with shelves filled with books and a few carefully arranged objects.

A collection of photographs catches my eye, drawing me closer.

I lean in, studying the images. There's one of Makar, younger but unmistakable, standing in front of what looks like the same mansion, though it's brighter, livelier in the picture. He's wearing a crisp button-down shirt, his expression serious even as a boy, though there's a faint hint of mischief in his eyes.

I chuckle softly, my fingers brushing over the edge of the frame. He looks... cute. It's strange to think of him as anything other than the stoic, commanding man he is now, but this picture tells a different story.

Beside him is another boy, younger, grinning wide and full of life. His arm is slung around Makar's shoulders, and the resemblance is clear—the same messy dark hair, strong nose and full lips. They're brothers.

Anatoly.

I've heard the name mentioned in hushed tones around the house, though never from Makar himself. The boy's smile is infectious, his energy practically leaping off the photograph. It makes my heart ache, imagining the bond they must have shared, and the pain of losing it.

Will our child smile like that? Will they have Makar's piercing blue eyes or my brown ones?

The thought startles me, and I step back, my hand instinctively moving to my belly. I close my eyes, trying to picture what our baby will look like, who they'll take after.

The idea of seeing Makar's features mirrored in our child stirs something deep inside me—a warmth I don't know how to explain.

I shake my head, pushing the thought away. I'm not supposed to feel this way. I'm supposed to hate him, not wonder if his smile will be the one our child inherits.

I can't stop myself.

The sound of footsteps in the hallway pulls me from my thoughts, and I glance toward the door, half expecting Makar to appear. The idea of him finding me here, surrounded by pieces of his past, makes my heart race, though I'm not sure why.

The footsteps fade away, leaving the hallway quiet once more. I let out a slow breath, the tension in my chest easing as I lean against the doorframe. My thoughts are still tangled in the image of Makar as a boy, the serious set of his face, and the bright grin of the younger boy beside him.

A soft voice pulls me from my reverie. "You found Anatoly's room."

I turn to see Vera standing a few feet away, her kind eyes watching me carefully. She approaches slowly, her hands clasped in front of her, her expression a mix of nostalgia and sadness.

"His room?" I ask, glancing back toward the photographs.

Vera nods, stepping closer to peer inside the room. "That's what we used to call this place. It was Anatoly's favorite spot in the house. He loved to read and collect things—little trinkets he found interesting. Makar kept it the way it was after...." She

trails off, her gaze dropping to the floor.

“After what?” I ask gently, though I already have an idea.

“After Anatoly was killed,” Vera says softly, her voice heavy with emotion. “He was so young. Too young.”

My stomach twists at her words, my hand instinctively moving to my belly. “What happened?”

Vera hesitates, her fingers brushing over the edge of the doorframe. “A rival faction,” she finally says. “They wanted to send a message. Anatoly was innocent, but that didn’t matter to them.”

The weight of her words settles over me like a blanket, suffocating and unbearable. I glance back at the photograph, at the boy who’d been so full of life, and my heart aches.

“It changed Makar,” Vera continues, her voice quieter now. “He was never the same after that. He’d always been serious, responsible, but after Anatoly... he became cold. Ruthless. It was his way of protecting himself—and everyone else.”

I swallow hard, my thoughts racing. This is why he is the way he is. The rules, the control, the need to shield himself from anything and anyone that might hurt him. It’s not just about power; it’s about survival.

“He doesn’t talk about him,” I murmur, my voice barely above a whisper.

Vera shakes her head. “No. It’s too painful for him. Everything he does, everything he’s built—it’s because of Anatoly. To make sure nothing like that happens again.”

Her words resonate, and for the first time, I see Makar in a different light. He's not just a man hardened by power and violence; he's a man shaped by loss, by grief so deep it turned him into the cold, impenetrable figure he is today.

My hand lingers on my stomach as I glance back at the photograph. Will our child bring him some of the joy he lost? Will they help him find the part of himself he's buried so deeply?

I take a deep breath, pushing the thoughts aside as a faint discomfort ripples through my lower abdomen. It's subtle, more an ache than a pain, but enough to make me pause.

Vera notices immediately. "Are you all right?" she asks, concern etching her features.

"I'm fine," I say quickly, though my hand instinctively presses against my belly. "It's just... a little discomfort. Probably nothing."

"Still," Vera says firmly, stepping closer, "you should rest. The baby's growing quickly now. You need to take care of yourself."

I nod, though the ache lingers, a faint reminder of how much has changed. I glance at Vera, her presence comforting, and offer a small smile. "Thank you, Vera. For telling me about Anatoly, and for everything else you do."

Her expression softens, and she places a gentle hand on my arm. "It's my pleasure, dear. You're part of this family now."

Her words make me chuckle softly, and I nod again before turning to leave the room. As I walk back to my own space, the discomfort fades, but my thoughts remain tangled in everything I've learned.

As I step away from the door to Anatoly's room, Vera falls into step beside me, her quiet presence comforting in the otherwise silent hallway. The mansion feels too large at times, too cold and intimidating, but Vera has a way of softening its edges.

She glances at me, her brow furrowing slightly. "You're sure you're all right?"

I nod, though my hand instinctively moves to rest on my stomach again. "I think so. It was just a little discomfort."

"Even small things matter," she says gently. "This is your first, isn't it?"

I smile faintly. "It is. I feel like I have no idea what I'm doing."

She chuckles, the sound warm and motherly. "No one does at first. The first child teaches you as much as you teach them."

Her words are kind, but they carry a weight I can't ignore. "You have children?" I ask, glancing at her as we walk.

Her face lights up, and there's a spark of pride in her eyes. "Two. A boy and a girl. They're practically adults now—late teens. They're my world."

I can't help but smile at the way her tone softens when she talks about them. "Are they like you?"

"Oh, heavens, no," she says with a laugh. "My daughter, Alina, is fiercely independent. She's got a fire in her that reminds me of you, actually. Always questioning, always challenging."

I raise an eyebrow at that. "Is that your polite way of saying I'm difficult?"

She grins. “Not at all. It’s a good thing to have fire. Life isn’t always kind, and it helps to be strong. Alina reminds me of that every day.”

“Your son?”

“Markus,” she says, her voice softening further. “He’s quieter. Thoughtful. He doesn’t speak much, but when he does, it’s always worth listening to.”

I can hear the love in her voice, the unshakable bond she has with her children, and it tugs at something inside me. I glance down at my own growing belly, wondering if I’ll ever feel that same connection.

“They sound wonderful,” I say honestly.

“They are,” Vera agrees. “They’ve taught me so much. Parenting isn’t just about guiding them—it’s about learning from them too. You’ll see. This little one of yours will change you in ways you can’t imagine.”

Her words settle over me, heavy but comforting, and I find myself asking, “Did you always want children?”

“I did,” she says with a nod. “Still, I was terrified too. I wondered if I’d be enough for them, if I’d make the right choices. Do you know what? I still wonder that sometimes. Love has a way of carrying you through.”

Love. The word lingers in my mind, bringing with it a wave of uncertainty.

As we reach the door to my room, Vera stops, turning to face me fully. “You’ll be a good mother, Hannah,” she says, her tone full of quiet conviction.

I blink, caught off guard by the certainty in her voice. “You don’t know that,” I say

softly.

“Oh, but I do,” she replies, a gentle smile curving her lips. “I’ve seen the way you care, the way you think about this child already. That’s the most important part.”

I swallow hard, emotion welling up in my throat. “Thank you,” I whisper.

She reaches out, placing a hand on my arm. “You’re not alone, dear. Remember that. And if you ever need advice—or just someone to talk to—I’m here.”

Her kindness is overwhelming, and for a moment, I don’t know what to say. All I can do is nod, my chest tightening with gratitude.

As Vera steps away, leaving me at the door to my room, I feel a little less lost. Her words echo in my mind as I step inside, closing the door behind me.

I sit on the edge of the bed, my hand resting on my stomach, and let out a slow breath.



*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:06 pm*

The meeting room hums with tension, the voices of Bratva leaders exchanging updates and strategies blending into the background. I sit at the head of the table, listening, though my focus drifts more than it should. Normally, these meetings command my full attention—discussing territory disputes, securing alliances, stamping out threats.

Not today.

Today, my thoughts are elsewhere. On her.

Hannah.

I grip the edge of the table, my knuckles whitening as her face flickers into my mind. The way her brown eyes darken when she's frustrated. The way her lips curve into a faint smile when she thinks no one's looking. The way her hand instinctively rests on her growing belly, as though shielding the life we created together.

She's beautiful.

It's maddening. I've built my life on control, on making calculated decisions without emotion clouding my judgment. Even so, she's unraveling that. Bit by bit, she's pulling me into her world, making me question things I've never dared to before.

The meeting drags on, but I feel disconnected, restless. When it finally concludes, the others begin gathering their papers, exchanging low murmurs. I rise from my chair, ready to retreat to my office for a moment to clear my head.

My phone buzzes in my pocket, the vibration sharp against my leg. I pull it out, frowning as I see Vera's name on the screen.

"Vera," I answer curtly. "What is it?"

Her voice is calm but tinged with concern. "Sir, I wanted to inform you about Hannah. She mentioned having some unusual pain earlier today. It happened again this evening, and she seemed... unsettled."

The words hit me like a blow, and I freeze, my hand tightening around the phone.

"What kind of pain?" I demand, my voice sharp.

"She didn't specify," Vera replies. "It seemed enough to worry her, so we called an ambulance. I thought you should know."

I don't respond, my mind already racing. Without a word, I end the call, slipping the phone back into my pocket as I turn toward the door.

"Makar?" one of the men at the table calls after me, his tone laced with confusion.

I don't bother explaining. My steps are quick, purposeful, my thoughts consumed by a single goal: getting to her.

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The hospital looms ahead, its sterile facade a stark contrast to the chaos swirling inside me. I park haphazardly, not caring about protocol or rules as I stride toward the entrance.

The receptionist barely has time to glance up before I demand Hannah's room

number. My tone leaves no room for argument, and within moments, I'm moving through the halls, my pulse pounding in my ears.

When I find her, my steps falter.

She's sitting on the examination table, her hands folded tightly in her lap. Her head is bowed slightly, dark hair falling around her face. She looks up when she hears me, and the tears glistening in her eyes hit me like a punch to the gut.

"Makar," she says, her voice trembling.

I'm by her side in an instant, lowering myself into the chair next to her. My hand moves to her arm instinctively, my grip firm but gentle. "What happened?" I ask, my voice low but steady, though the fear simmering beneath the surface threatens to break through.

The doctor clears his throat, stepping forward with a clipboard in hand. He's middle-aged, his expression serious but professional.

"Mr. Sharov," he begins, nodding briefly. "We've been monitoring your wife's condition. She's experiencing symptoms consistent with preeclampsia."

My brow furrows. "What does that mean?"

The doctor's gaze shifts between us, his tone measured. "Preeclampsia is a condition that can develop during pregnancy. It's marked by high blood pressure and other complications, which can be dangerous for both the mother and the baby if not managed carefully."

Dangerous . The word echoes in my mind, a cold knot tightening in my chest.

“What kind of complications?” I ask, my voice sharp.

“Hannah’s blood pressure is elevated, which is our primary concern. Left untreated, it can lead to serious issues, including damage to the organs or premature delivery. However,” he continues, his tone softening, “we’ve caught it early. With proper monitoring and medication, we can manage it.”

Hannah shifts beside me, her hands clenching tightly in her lap. I glance at her, noting the tension in her shoulders, the way her lower lip trembles despite her efforts to remain composed.

“What happens now?” I ask, my gaze locked on the doctor.

“We’ll prescribe medication to help control her blood pressure,” he explains. “Regular check-ups will be essential, and we’ll be keeping a close eye on the baby’s development.”

I nod, my mind already calculating the next steps. “She’ll have everything she needs,” I say firmly. “You’ll make sure of that.”

The doctor nods, sensing the finality in my tone. “Of course, Mr. Sharov. I’ll have the prescriptions ready shortly.”

As he steps away, I turn my attention back to Hannah. She’s staring down at her hands, her breath uneven.

“Hannah,” I say softly, leaning closer.

She doesn’t look up immediately, but when she does, the vulnerability in her eyes threatens to undo me.

“I’m scared,” she admits, her voice barely above a whisper.

My hand moves to hers, covering it completely. “You don’t have to be,” I say, my voice steady. “I’ll handle this. I’ll handle everything.”

Her eyes search mine, and for a moment, the tension between us fades, replaced by something deeper. Trust, maybe. Or the beginnings of it.

“Okay,” she whispers, her voice trembling but resolute.

Hannah’s fingers tremble faintly beneath mine as she glances toward the doctor, who’s speaking with a nurse just outside the door. She pulls in a shaky breath, her shoulders stiff, before turning her gaze back to me.

“They’re keeping me here for a few days,” she says softly, her voice tinged with exhaustion.

The words hit me like a slap. My jaw tightens, and a sharp sense of unease ripples through me. I don’t like it—not one bit.

“For what?” I ask, my voice clipped.

“Observation, I guess,” she explains. “Make sure the medication is working and that the baby is okay.”

Her focus shifts momentarily to her stomach, her hand brushing over the slight curve there. She doesn’t have to say it outright for me to understand what she’s feeling. She’s willing to endure anything if it means keeping the baby safe.

It grates at me, the selflessness she doesn’t even try to hide. “And you’re fine with this?” I ask, my tone sharper than I intend.

“As long as the baby’s okay,” she replies, her voice firm.

Something dark and unrelenting stirs in my chest, a frustration I can’t shake. “What about you?” I demand, my voice lowering as I lean closer.

She flinches slightly, her gaze flickering away. “I’m fine,” she says, but the tension in her voice betrays her.

I exhale sharply, running a hand through my hair. The idea of her here, out of my sight, where I can’t protect her—it’s unbearable. I’ve spent my life building control, ensuring that nothing and no one slips through the cracks. And now? Now I’m being asked to trust that someone else will keep her and the baby safe.

Damn it.

“You’re not fine, Hannah,” I say, my voice hardening. “Don’t act like you don’t matter. You’re just as important as that child.”

Her eyes snap back to mine, and for a moment, there’s fire in them. “I’m doing this for the baby,” she says through clenched teeth. “That’s all that matters.”

Her stubbornness should infuriate me, and maybe it does, but it also... captivates me. The sheer force of her will, her determination, her selflessness—it’s maddening and magnetic all at once.

Before she can respond, I close the space between us, capturing her lips with mine. The kiss is fierce, hungry, a collision of emotions neither of us is willing to admit aloud.

Her breath hitches, her fingers curling into the front of my shirt as she pulls me closer. I feel the warmth of her body pressed against mine, the faint curve of her

stomach reminding me of everything that's changed—and everything that's tying her to me.

She sighs against my mouth, and I deepen the kiss, my hand slipping behind her neck to hold her in place. The taste of her is intoxicating, a mix of defiance and vulnerability that I can't resist.

When I finally pull back, her lips are swollen, her cheeks flushed, and her eyes dark with something that matches the hunger I feel.

"Makar," she whispers, her voice trembling.

I press my forehead against hers, trying to rein in the chaos she stirs in me. "You're mine, Hannah," I murmur, my voice rough. "You and the baby. And I won't let anything happen to either of you."

Her breath catches, and for a moment, I see something shift in her expression—something softer, unguarded. Before she can respond, the door creaks open, breaking the moment.

Andrei steps inside, his expression neutral but his timing deliberate. "She needs to rest," he says, his tone calm but firm.

I glare at him briefly, but I know he's right. Still, it takes everything in me to step away, to release her hand and rise to my feet.

"I'll be back," I tell her, my voice softening slightly as I meet her gaze.

She nods, her lips pressing into a thin line as she watches me.

As I move toward the door, Andrei falls into step beside me, his usual stoic demeanor

firmly in place.

“You seemed... concerned,” he says after a moment, his tone carefully measured.

I glance at him, my expression hardening. “Of course I’m concerned,” I snap. “She’s carrying my child.”

Andrei smirks faintly but doesn’t comment further.

As we leave the hospital, the cold night air hits me like a slap, but it does little to cool the fire still burning inside me.

Andrei walks alongside me as we step out into the crisp night air, the distant hum of traffic filling the silence. I take a deep breath, trying to tamp down the lingering frustration gnawing at me.

“You’re on edge,” Andrei says, his tone calm but probing.

I shoot him a sharp look. “Wouldn’t you be?”

He shrugs, his hands sliding into his pockets. “Maybe. It’s not like you to let it show. This”—he gestures toward the hospital behind us—“it’s different for you.”

I don’t respond immediately, my jaw tightening as I reach the car. Andrei leans casually against the passenger door, waiting.

“Say whatever it is you’re dying to say,” I bite out, my voice low.

Andrei smirks faintly, always toeing the line of what he can get away with. “You’re not the type to get distracted, Makar. She’s a distraction. A dangerous one.”



“Watch yourself,” I warn, my tone cutting.

“I’m just saying,” he continues, undeterred. “You’ve got a lot on your plate. Meetings, alliances, enemies... now a wife and a baby. That’s a lot of vulnerabilities for a man like you.”

My fingers tighten around the keys in my hand, but I don’t lash out. “It’s not a vulnerability,” I say finally, my voice cold and even. “It’s my responsibility. My legacy.”

Andrei raises an eyebrow, his smirk widening slightly. “Legacy, huh? From where I’m standing, it looks like it’s more than that.”

I step closer, my gaze narrowing. “If you have a problem with how I handle my family, speak now. Otherwise, shut up and do your job.”

Andrei chuckles lightly, raising his hands in mock surrender. “No problem, Boss. Just making sure you’ve got your priorities straight.”

I glare at him, but the tension between us dissipates as quickly as it formed. Andrei has a way of pushing buttons, but he’s loyal. He knows better than to cross a line.

“Get the men on rotation at the mansion,” I say, my tone curt. “I don’t want a single crack in our security while she’s not there.”

“Already done,” Andrei replies smoothly. “I’ll tighten things up. You know me—I’m nothing if not thorough.”

“Good,” I mutter, opening the car door.

As I settle into the driver’s seat, Andrei leans down, his smirk still in place. “You

might want to bring her flowers next time, Boss. Women like that kind of thing.”

## Page 21

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:06 pm*

The living room feels emptier than usual, the silence pressing down on me as I sit curled up on the plush sofa. My hands rest on my stomach, where the faintest curve has started to show. It's not much yet, just enough to remind me of the life growing inside me.

Yesterday's events keep replaying in my mind—the doctor's words, the fear that gripped me, and the way Makar stormed into the hospital like the world was ending. For all his coldness, his detachment, I saw something different in him tonight.

A crack in his armor, just big enough to glimpse the man underneath.

I never thought I'd feel this way about the baby. At first, it was just a complication, an unplanned consequence of one night I didn't expect to change my life.

Now, I can't imagine not having this child. They've become a part of me, someone I want to protect and nurture, even if I'm not sure how.

The sound of approaching footsteps pulls me from my thoughts, and I glance up to see Makar entering the room. He's still dressed from earlier, his tie slightly loosened, his dark eyes unreadable as they land on me.

He doesn't say anything, just sits down in the armchair across from me, his posture relaxed but his gaze sharp. The silence stretches between us, heavy and uncomfortable. I brace myself, expecting some cutting remark about taking better care of myself or how I've caused unnecessary trouble.

When he finally speaks, his words leave me reeling.

“Let’s get it aborted.”

I blink, my breath catching as his statement hangs in the air. “What?”

His face is impassive, his tone matter-of-fact. “You heard me.”

The shock hits me like a punch to the gut. Abort it? The baby—the reason I’m still alive, the reason we’re even married—he wants to get rid of it?

“Why would you....” I trail off, my voice trembling. “Why would you even suggest that?”

Makar leans back, his jaw tightening. “It’s the logical choice,” he says, his voice cold. “The pregnancy is already causing complications. You’re my wife now, and that matters. If something happens to you because of this child—”

I cut him off, anger bubbling to the surface. “So this is about convenience, about me being your wife and nothing else?”

His gaze flickers, something unreadable passing through his expression before he schools it back into neutrality. “It’s about priorities,” he says. “You’re my priority.”

He stands, ready to walk away, his movements deliberate and controlled, as if this conversation means nothing to him.

It means everything to me.

“Is that really all?” I ask, my voice breaking as I reach out and grab his sleeve, stopping him mid-step.

He pauses, his back still to me. “That’s all,” he says firmly, not looking at me.

Something inside me snaps. The flood of emotions I've been holding back bursts through, and I can't stop the tears that well up in my eyes. "You don't care about me, do you?" I ask, my voice trembling. "All you care about is what I am to you. Your wife. Your possession. Is that it?"

His shoulders tense, but he doesn't answer. Slowly, he turns to face me, his expression unreadable.

"Makar," I whisper, my voice cracking as the tears spill over. "Is that all I am to you?"

The sight of him standing there, silent and unmoving, only makes it worse. The weight of everything—his indifference, my own fear and frustration—it's too much to bear.

He steps closer, his dark eyes fixed on me, and for a moment, I think he's going to walk away again. Instead, he reaches out, his thumb brushing against my cheek as he wipes away a tear.

"Don't cry," he murmurs, his voice low and rough.

I stare up at him, my breath catching at the unexpected tenderness in his touch. It's not the answer I wanted—not even close—but it's something. A crack in the wall he's built around himself.

"Makar," I say again, softer this time, my hand still clutching his sleeve.

His thumb pauses, resting against my cheek as his gaze searches mine. For a moment, I think I see something—regret, or maybe even guilt—but it's gone as quickly as it appeared.

“I’ll give you time,” he says finally, his voice quiet but firm. “To think. To decide.”

“Decide what?” I ask, my throat tightening.

His jaw clenches. “What you want.”

The answer is clear: I want this baby. I want the life growing inside me, the one thing that’s become a source of hope in this twisted, impossible situation.

What about Makar?

One thing I do know is that I don’t need time to think.

His face is unreadable, as usual, but there’s tension in the way his shoulders are set, in the way his jaw is tight enough to cut glass.

“I’m not getting rid of the baby,” I tell him firmly, even as tears threaten to spill all over again. “I don’t need to think about anything. That’s my decision.”

His lips press into a thin line, and he steps closer, his gaze narrowing. “Hannah, you need to think logically. Your health—”

“Stop,” I cut him off, my voice rising despite the ache in my chest. “Don’t pretend this is about my health. If it were, you wouldn’t even suggest something so... so barbaric!”

His expression hardens. “Barbaric?”

“Yes!” I nearly shout, my emotions boiling over. “I’m five months pregnant, Makar. It’s too late, even if I wanted to—”

“I know doctors,” he interrupts, his tone cold and matter-of-fact.

The words hit me like a slap, and for a moment, all I can do is stare at him, my mouth slightly open in disbelief. “Doctors,” I repeat, my voice trembling. “You know doctors who would... who would kill this baby, at this stage?”

“I know doctors who can handle complications,” he says evenly, though there’s a flicker of something in his eyes—something defensive, maybe even guilty. “This isn’t about killing anything, Hannah. It’s about protecting you. Ensuring you survive.”

I let out a bitter laugh, though the sound is choked with unshed tears. “You don’t care about me,” I say, shaking my head. “If there was no baby, would you even keep me around, or would I just be another inconvenience to handle?”

His jaw tightens, and he steps closer, looming over me as his eyes darken. “Don’t twist this,” he says, his voice dangerously low. “You’re my wife, and I’ll do whatever it takes to keep you safe.”

“Your wife,” I repeat bitterly. “That’s all I am to you, isn’t it? Just a title. A duty. This is just a problem for you to solve, huh?”

His hand twitches at his side, like he wants to reach for me but doesn’t know how. “You’re not a problem,” he says finally, his voice quieter but still firm. “You’re... important to me.”

The words are soft, almost hesitant, and they do nothing to soothe the ache in my chest. “Important,” I echo, my voice thick with emotion. “Is that supposed to make me feel better?”

He exhales sharply, running a hand through his hair as he takes a step back. “Hannah,

I'm trying to do what's best for you. For both of you."

"If you really cared about me," I say, my voice breaking, "you wouldn't be trying to force this decision on me. You'd trust me to make the right choice."

We're both silent for a long moment, the weight of the argument settling over the room like a heavy fog. My tears fall freely now, and I don't even bother to wipe them away.

"I'm tired," I whisper finally, my voice barely audible.

His expression softens, just enough for me to notice, and he steps closer again, this time crouching in front of me. His hand moves to my knee, his touch hesitant but grounding. "Hannah," he murmurs, his tone low and steady. "I'm not trying to hurt you. I just... I need to know you're safe. That you'll make it through this."

I meet his gaze, my vision blurred with tears. "What about the baby?" I ask, my voice trembling. "Would you really take them away just to keep me safe?"

His jaw clenches, and for a moment, I think he won't answer. Then he says, "If it came down to it, yes."

The honesty in his words makes my chest tighten, and I look away, unable to hold his gaze.

He squeezes my knee lightly, his touch surprisingly gentle. "Your health is my priority," he says quietly.

I let out a shaky breath, my hands clenching into fists in my lap. "If you're so worried about me," I say softly, "then stop trying to control me. Trust me to know what I need. Trust me to protect this baby as much as you want to protect me."



His silence stretches on for so long that I almost think he's going to walk away again. Then he speaks, his voice low and rough.

"I don't want to lose either of you," he admits, the vulnerability in his tone catching me off guard. "That's all I'm trying to say."

The rawness in his words stirs something inside me, but it doesn't erase the hurt he's caused.

"I'm keeping this baby, Makar," I say firmly, meeting his gaze once more. "Whether you like it or not."

His lips press into a thin line, and he nods once, almost imperceptibly. "Then we'll do it your way," he says finally. "I'm not letting you take risks, Hannah. Not with this."

I nod slowly, my breath hitching as the tension in the room begins to ease.

For now, it's enough. The question still lingers in my mind, haunting me even as he stands and moves to leave the room:

If there was no baby, would I still matter to him? Is it the only thing keeping me safe?

Makar stands, his broad shoulders taut as if carrying the weight of the world. His gaze lingers on me for a moment, his expression unreadable, before he turns and heads for the door.

"You're so sure about everything," I call after him, my voice sharp despite the tears still streaking my face. "Maybe for once, you should think about what I want instead of deciding for me."

He pauses in the doorway, his back to me, and I see the slightest shift in his posture. For a moment, I wonder if he'll respond, if he'll turn around and say something cutting in return.

He doesn't.

He walks out without another word, the door clicking shut behind him, leaving me alone in the oppressive silence of the room.

I sink back into the cushions, the fight draining out of me as exhaustion takes over. My body feels heavy, like it's sinking into the sofa, and the tears come again, slow and silent this time.

I think about Vera, her kind words, her reassuring presence. Part of me wants to call for her, to let her comforting voice guide me out of this dark place. Even that feels like too much effort.

Instead, I sit there, my arms wrapped around my stomach, trying to anchor myself to the only thing that makes sense in this chaotic, suffocating life—this baby.

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:06 pm*

The hospital smells like antiseptic and despair. The sharp fluorescent lights overhead do nothing to ease the tension gripping my chest as Hannah and I walk through the sterile halls. My men are stationed discreetly outside, ensuring no one disturbs us, but their presence feels meaningless compared to the storm raging inside me.

I glance at Hannah as she walks beside me, her hand resting protectively over her belly. The bump is more pronounced now, a visible reminder of what we're here to do. Each step closer to the doctor's office feels heavier, like my body knows what my mind refuses to admit—I don't want to lose this child.

The alternative? The thought of Hannah risking her life to bring this baby into the world is unthinkable.

I can't allow it.

I've built my entire existence around control, around ensuring the survival of what's mine. And now, standing on the precipice of a decision that could cost me either her or the baby, I feel that control slipping through my fingers like sand.

We reach the office, and I hold the door open for her. She steps inside without a word, her back straight but her movements careful, deliberate. The doctor stands as we enter, gesturing for us to take a seat across from him.

As I lower myself into the chair beside her, I glance at her face. There's a quiet determination there, one that's both maddening and strangely admirable.

The doctor clears his throat, glancing between us. "Mr. and Mrs. Sharov, I understand

you're here to discuss the next steps?"

Before I can respond, Hannah speaks.

"I want to keep the child," she says, her voice steady despite the tension in the room. "Please detail all the measures we should take to avoid complications."

The words hit me like a physical blow. My head snaps toward her, my pulse pounding in my ears.

"What?" I demand, my voice low and sharp.

She turns to me, her chin lifted in defiance. "I said I want to keep the baby. We've already talked about this, Makar."

"Yes, I know—"

"You agreed to let me do it my way, but I need to know everything I'm in for first."

The doctor shifts uncomfortably in his seat, his gaze darting between us, but I barely notice. My focus is entirely on her, on the fire in her eyes as she challenges me.

"Hannah," I say, my voice hardening. "This isn't about winning an argument. It's about your life. Do you not understand the risks?"

"I understand perfectly," she snaps. "I'm willing to take them. This baby is a part of me, Makar. I'm not giving them up."

Her words ignite something in me—anger, frustration, fear. Beneath it all, there's something else. Something raw and unsettling.

She means it.

This isn't stubbornness or a refusal to yield; it's a choice born of love and conviction. And it terrifies me.

"You're willing to die for this?" I ask, my voice dropping to a dangerous whisper.

Her gaze softens slightly, but the resolve remains. "I'm willing to fight for it," she says quietly. "For as long as I can."

The room falls silent, the weight of her words pressing down on me like a physical force.

The doctor clears his throat again, breaking the tension. "There are steps we can take to manage the risks," he says carefully, his tone measured. "With close monitoring, proper medication, and lifestyle adjustments, we can give both mother and child the best chance."

I look at him, my jaw tight. "What are the odds?"

The doctor hesitates, his gaze flicking to Hannah before returning to me. "They're not guaranteed; but with vigilance, they're not impossible."

I lean back in my chair, my mind racing. The idea of losing Hannah—the one person who's managed to tear down the walls I've spent years building—is unbearable. So is the thought of forcing her into a decision that would destroy her.

I exhale sharply, my gaze dropping to my hands.

Hannah reaches out, her fingers brushing against mine. The touch is light but grounding, pulling me from the chaos in my head.

“Makar,” she says softly, her voice steady but tinged with emotion. “I know you’re scared. I am too, but this baby... they’re worth fighting for. We’re worth fighting for.”

Her words settle over me like a balm, soothing and infuriating all at once.

“Fine,” I say finally, my voice low and strained. “We’ll do it your way. If I see even the slightest sign of danger—”

“You’ll do what?” she challenges, her eyes narrowing.

I meet her gaze, my own hardening. “I’ll do whatever it takes to keep you alive,” I say firmly. “Even if you hate me for it.”

She doesn’t respond immediately, her eyes searching mine as if trying to find the truth in my words.

“Then we’ll just have to make sure it doesn’t come to that,” she says quietly, her hand tightening around mine.

The doctor nods slightly, leaning forward to adjust his glasses. His tone shifts to something more clinical, steady, and deliberate. “To manage preeclampsia effectively, we’ll need to implement several measures. This will require diligence on your part, Mrs. Sharov, as well as careful monitoring by us.”

Hannah squeezes my hand, her grip firm despite the worry etched into her features. I glance at her, studying the determination in her eyes. Whatever this entails, she’s prepared to face it.

“First,” the doctor begins, flipping through a chart, “we’ll prescribe antihypertensive medication to manage your blood pressure. It’s essential to keep it controlled to avoid

further complications.”

“What kind of complications?” I ask sharply, my focus snapping back to him.

“Without intervention, preeclampsia can escalate into eclampsia, which involves seizures and other life-threatening conditions for both the mother and the baby,” he says, his voice steady but serious. “The goal is to prevent escalation entirely.”

I grit my teeth, my free hand curling into a fist on my knee. Hannah, however, nods. “What else?” she asks, her voice calm despite the weight of his words.

“You’ll also need to start taking a low-dose aspirin daily,” he continues, “which can help reduce the risk of severe preeclampsia. In addition, calcium supplements will support your overall vascular health.”

Hannah’s lips press into a thin line, and I can see her absorbing every detail, every term.

“Dietary changes will be crucial,” the doctor adds. “Low-sodium, nutrient-rich foods will help manage blood pressure. Hydration is also vital. Most importantly, you’ll need to prioritize rest.”

“Rest?” she repeats, her brow furrowing.

“Bed rest,” the doctor clarifies, his gaze meeting hers. “You’ll need to minimize physical activity and spend most of your time reclining. Standing or moving for extended periods could exacerbate your symptoms. This might feel restrictive, but it’s necessary to keep both you and the baby stable.”

Hannah’s grip on my hand tightens, but she nods slowly.

“There will likely be side effects from the medications,” the doctor continues. “Fatigue, dizziness, nausea. You may also experience swelling in your hands and feet, which is common in cases like this. I recommend wearing compression stockings to help manage that.”

Hannah doesn’t flinch, though I notice the slight tremble in her hand. “I’ll manage,” she says quietly.

The doctor pauses, his gaze softening slightly. “It won’t be easy. You’ll feel fatigued, uncomfortable, and limited in your movements. But with regular monitoring, we can ensure the best possible outcome for you and your child.”

“How often will the checkups be?” I ask, my voice tense.

“Weekly, at a minimum,” the doctor replies. “We’ll need to check her blood pressure, protein levels, and the baby’s growth and development regularly. In some cases, daily monitoring may be required, but we’ll adjust as needed.”

He reaches for a notepad, jotting down a list before handing it to Hannah. “Here’s the prescriptions for the medications you’ll need to start immediately. I’ve also included a recommendation for a home blood pressure monitor so you can track it daily. Bring the readings to each appointment.”

Hannah takes the paper, her hand shaking slightly. “Thank you,” she murmurs, her voice barely audible.

The doctor stands, his gaze steady as he looks between us. “Do you have any questions?”

I glance at Hannah, waiting for her to speak, but she shakes her head. “No, I think I understand.”



“Good,” he says with a nod. “We’ll be here to support you every step of the way. If you experience any symptoms—severe headaches, blurred vision, abdominal pain—don’t hesitate to come back immediately. Those could be signs of worsening conditions.”

I rise to my feet, helping Hannah up beside me. “She’ll be fine,” I say, my voice low but resolute. “She’ll have everything she needs.”

The doctor nods again, stepping aside to let us leave.

The air outside is cold and crisp, a stark contrast to the stifling tension of the hospital. Hannah clutches the prescriptions tightly in her hand, her other hand resting on her belly as we walk toward the car.

She’s quiet, her gaze fixed ahead, but I can see the weight of everything settling over her like a heavy cloak.

“You’re sure about this?” I ask, my voice breaking the silence.

Her steps falter, and she turns to look at me, her eyes fierce despite the exhaustion lining her face. “I’ve never been more sure of anything in my life,” she says firmly. “This baby... they’re worth it.”

I want to argue, to tell her she’s being reckless, but the words die in my throat. I’ve never seen her look so certain, so unwavering, and I realize that no amount of logic or pressure from me will change her mind.

She folds the prescriptions in half, slipping it into her bag before exhaling slowly. “It’s going to be hard, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” I say bluntly, unwilling to sugarcoat the reality of what lies ahead. “You’re

not doing this alone. I'll make sure of that."

Her lips press into a faint smile, though it doesn't quite reach her eyes. "I hope you mean that, Makar. Because this isn't something I can handle on my own."

I stop, turning to face her fully. "I do mean it," I say, my voice steady. "You and the baby—you're my responsibility. I don't take that lightly."

Her eyes search mine, as if trying to find the truth in my words. After a moment, she nods, the tension in her shoulders easing slightly.

"Okay," she says softly, her voice laced with both determination and vulnerability. "Then let's do this."

We reach the car, and I open the door for her, watching as she settles into the seat. The sight of her—strong, determined, but undeniably fragile—stirs something deep inside me.

I steady her as she lowers herself into the seat, my hand lingering at her elbow longer than necessary. She exhales softly, her shoulders relaxing as she leans back, and for a moment, I just stand there, looking at her.

Hannah tilts her head, her dark eyes meeting mine. There's exhaustion in her gaze, but also a flicker of strength that I can't help but admire. Without thinking, I lean down and press a kiss to her forehead.

Her breath catches, and I feel her hand brush against mine as she whispers, "Thank you."

I don't answer, just close the door gently before rounding the car to slide into the driver's seat. The engine purrs to life, and as we pull away from the hospital, the

tension in my chest begins to ease.

The radio hums softly in the background, a soothing melody filling the silence between us. Hannah's head rests against the window, her hand instinctively cradling her belly.

I glance at her out of the corner of my eye, my grip on the steering wheel loosening as a strange sense of calm washes over me.

For the first time in what feels like forever, I don't feel the gnawing weight of responsibility or the cold, calculating pressure of my life. Instead, there's a quiet contentment—a fleeting moment of peace as we drive through the dark streets toward home.

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:06 pm*

The bag of medications sits on the kitchen counter, glaring at me like a mountain I'm not sure I can climb. I unpack them slowly, placing the bottles and boxes in a neat row: the blood pressure pills, the calcium supplements, the low-dose aspirin, and the prenatal vitamins.

Each one feels like a reminder of how fragile this situation is—how fragile I am.

Across the room, I can feel Makar watching me. His piercing blue eyes track my every movement, his expression unreadable but intense.

“You’re going to burn a hole through me with that glare,” I say without looking up, my voice tinged with exasperation.

“I’m trying to figure you out,” he replies, his tone calm but edged with curiosity.

I finally glance at him, raising an eyebrow. “What’s so hard to figure out?”

He leans back against the kitchen table, crossing his arms. “Why are you so determined to keep this baby? After everything the doctor said, after all the risks... why?”

The question catches me off guard, even though I’ve been expecting it. My hands still on the aspirin bottle, and I turn to face him fully. “I don’t know why, but... they mean everything to me,” I say softly, my voice steady despite the storm brewing inside me.

His brow furrows, his jaw tightening. “Even if it means risking your life?”

“Yes.”

The single word lingers between us, heavy and unyielding.

“I’ve lost so much already, Makar,” I continue, my voice trembling slightly. “My family, my sense of normalcy, my freedom.... This baby? This is something I get to keep. Something that’s mine. I’m confident that I’ll make it. I have to.”

He stares at me for a long moment, his expression softening almost imperceptibly. The hard edges of his face seem to relax, and for the first time since this conversation began, I see a flicker of something warmer in his eyes.

“You’re stubborn,” he says, his voice quieter now.

“I’ve heard that before,” I reply, a faint smile tugging at my lips.

He pushes off the table and strides toward me, stopping just a foot away. His presence is overwhelming, his gaze locked with mine. “If you’re going to be this stubborn,” he says, reaching for one of the pill bottles, “you’ll need help.”

I blink, caught off guard by the sudden shift in his tone. “Help?”

He smirks faintly, shaking the bottle lightly. “I’ll set reminders for you to take these. I’ll make sure you eat the right food. Hell, I’ll even force you to stay in bed if I have to.”

“Force me?” I scoff, narrowing my eyes at him.

His smirk widens, and there’s a glint of amusement—and something darker—in his eyes. “You’d like that, wouldn’t you?”

My cheeks flush, and I glare at him, though I can't stop the small laugh that escapes me. "Maybe I wouldn't completely hate it."

We're standing so close now that I can feel the warmth radiating from him, the scent of his cologne wrapping around me like a net. He places the pill bottle back on the counter and steps even closer, his hand brushing against mine as he leans in.

"Hannah," he murmurs, his voice a low growl that sends shivers down my spine.

"Yes?" I manage, my breath catching as his fingers trail lightly over my wrist.

"You're going to drive me insane," he says, his lips curving into a smirk that's equal parts exasperation and admiration.

"Good," I whisper, meeting his gaze head-on.

For a moment, the air between us crackles with tension, a charged silence that feels both dangerous and exhilarating. Then he steps back, his hand falling away as he picks up another bottle of medication.

"Come on," he says, his tone more serious now. "Let's figure out a system for these."

I watch him as he lines up the bottles, his movements precise and deliberate. There's something strangely endearing about the way he focuses, as though ensuring my safety has become his personal mission.

"Thank you," I say softly, the words slipping out before I can stop them.

He glances at me, his blue eyes softer than I've ever seen them. "Don't thank me," he says gruffly. "Just take care of yourself. That's all I ask."

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The bitter taste of the pills lingers on my tongue, and I grimace as I chase it down with a glass of water. The first dose of this new reality. I set the glass back on the counter with a soft clink and glance at Makar. He watches me, his arms crossed, an amused smirk playing at the corner of his lips.

“Not a fan of the flavor?” he asks dryly.

I glare at him, wiping my mouth with the back of my hand. “They’re awful. Like swallowing chalk soaked in motor oil.”

His smirk widens, and he steps closer, moving the glass further out of the way. “You’ll get used to it.”

“Doubtful,” I mutter, but there’s no real venom in my voice.

Makar doesn’t reply, instead placing a hand on the small of my back and guiding me out of the kitchen. His touch is steady, firm, but not overbearing. “You need to lie down,” he says, his tone leaving no room for argument.

I don’t resist, too tired to push back. The fatigue that comes with all this is relentless, and I feel it in every part of my body.

He leads me into the bedroom, the dim lighting casting long shadows across the space. As I sink onto the bed, the plush mattress enveloping me, I let out a long breath, my shoulders sagging with relief.

Makar kneels beside me, his sharp eyes scanning my face. “Your feet,” he says, glancing at them. “They’re swollen.”

“Tell me something I don’t know,” I quip, trying to inject some humor into the moment.

He raises an eyebrow. “Take off your socks.”

I blink at him, surprised. “Why?”

“I’m going to help,” he replies matter-of-factly.

I hesitate, but the exhaustion wins out, and I sit back, letting him tug off my socks. His hands are warm as they wrap around my ankle, his touch firm but gentle as he begins to massage the arch of my foot.

A sigh escapes me, unbidden, and I sink further into the bed. “I hate to admit it,” I mumble, “but that feels... amazing.”

His lips twitch in amusement. “You sound surprised.”

“Maybe because I am,” I reply, a teasing edge creeping into my voice. “Didn’t think someone like you had a soft side.”

He doesn’t respond immediately, his fingers working over a particularly tense spot. Then he smirks, his gaze lifting to meet mine. “Don’t get used to it,” he says, his voice low.

The words are playful, but the tone sends a shiver down my spine.

His hands move up, kneading the swollen flesh of my calves, and I close my eyes, letting the warmth of his touch soothe me. Then his fingers trail higher, skimming above my knee, and my breath catches.



“Makar,” I murmur, my voice faltering.

His lips curve into a wicked smile as he leans closer, pressing a slow, deliberate kiss just above my knee. “Hmm?” he hums, his voice dark and teasing.

“That’s not... exactly medicinal,” I manage, my heart racing.

His blue eyes gleam as he lifts his head, his expression a mix of mischief and something far more dangerous. “Who said I was practicing medicine?”

Heat floods my face, but I can’t deny the way my body responds to him, the way my pulse quickens under his gaze.

He shifts, his hands bracing on either side of my hips as he leans over me. His presence is overwhelming, and I’m acutely aware of every inch of him—the sharp angles of his jaw, the brightness of his eyes, the faint scent of his cologne.

“You drive me insane,” he murmurs, his voice low and rough as he leans closer.

I swallow hard, my breath hitching as his lips hover just above mine. “I could say the same about you,” I whisper, the words slipping out before I can stop them.

His smirk returns, but there’s a flicker of something deeper in his gaze—something raw and unguarded. He closes the distance, his lips capturing mine in a kiss that’s anything but gentle.

It’s hungry, demanding, a clash of emotions neither of us is willing to name. His hands move to my waist, gripping me firmly as he presses me further into the mattress.

I respond without thinking, my fingers curling into his shirt as I kiss him back with

equal intensity. Every nerve in my body feels alive, every thought drowned out by the heat of the moment.

Makar shifts, straddling me, his weight pinning me in place. His hands trail up my sides, slipping beneath the hem of my shirt, and I shiver at the feel of his fingers on my skin.

“You shouldn’t... do this,” I murmur against his lips, though the words lack conviction.

“Why not?” he murmurs back, his voice low and teasing.

“Because....” My words trail off as his lips move to my neck, his teeth grazing the sensitive skin there.

“Because?” he prompts, his hands moving higher, leaving a trail of fire in their wake.

I don’t answer, too caught up in the way he’s unraveling me, piece by piece.

I feel his palm flatten against the curve of my belly, his fingers splaying out to trace the gentle swell. His lips leave mine, trailing down to my jaw, then to my neck, leaving a line of heat in their wake.

“Makar,” I murmur, my voice barely audible over the sound of my own pounding heart.

His mouth hovers against my collarbone, his breath warm against my skin. “You feel incredible,” he murmurs, his voice rough and edged with restraint. His hand on my stomach shifts, his thumb brushing over the fabric of my shirt. “Our baby,” he adds softly, and for a fleeting moment, I catch a vulnerability in his tone that he rarely lets show.

My fingers tangle in his hair, tugging him closer. “We’re fine,” I whisper, my voice a mix of reassurance and invitation. “You don’t have to hold back.”

Then he stiffens slightly, his kisses slowing until he finally pulls back. His gaze meets mine, his expression conflicted.

“No,” he says abruptly, sitting back on his heels.

I blink up at him, still breathless and caught off guard by the sudden shift. “No?”

Makar smirks faintly, his blue eyes gleaming with a mix of amusement and something darker. “Not tonight,” he says, his tone light but firm. “It’s not a good idea.”

I narrow my eyes at him, propping myself up on my elbows. “Are you serious?”

“Very,” he replies, his smirk widening as he leans back, his hands resting on his thighs. “You’ll have to wait.”

My lips part in disbelief, a mix of frustration and amusement bubbling up inside me. I glare at him, but there’s no real heat behind it. “You’re cruel.”

“Maybe,” he agrees, his tone full of smug satisfaction. “You’re the one who’ll be thinking about this all night.”

He steps closer, leaning down to press a lingering kiss to my forehead before turning to leave the room.

I fall back onto the bed, letting out a soft groan of frustration. Damn him and that maddening restraint.

Damn me for wanting him even more because of it.

When I glance up, Makar is staring at me with those intense blue eyes. My cheeks flush as he leans in to nip at my collarbone.

“You’re staring again,” I tease, trying to mask the breathlessness still lingering from his earlier touch.

“Can you blame me?” he counters, his tone low as he kneels back onto the bed.

My breath catches as he leans down, his lips brushing against my baby bump through the thin fabric of my shirt. The gentleness of the gesture sends a shiver through me, stark against the intensity he usually carries. His hands find my hips, holding me steady as he peppers kisses along the curve of my stomach.

“Makar...,” I whisper, my voice trembling with anticipation.

He looks up at me, his blue eyes dark and smoldering, a dangerous mix of mischief and affection. “You think I’m cruel?” he murmurs, his lips trailing lower.

“Yes,” I manage, though the word comes out more as a sigh than an accusation.

His smirk returns, slow and deliberate. “Then I’ll show you just how kind I can be.”

Before I can respond, his hands slide under the hem of my skirt, thick fingers sliding inside of me. My breath hitches as he crooks his finger, pleasure sparking through my tired body.

“You’re beautiful,” he murmurs against my skin, his voice rough with sincerity.

The words make my chest tighten, a wave of warmth rushing through me. His hands

move with purpose, exploring, teasing, and the tension in my body builds until I'm lost in the sensations he's drawing out of me.

He works me softly, gently, until I'm a whimpering mess against the pillows. I come quietly, my whole body shaking, a soft moan on my lips.

When he finally pulls back, leaving me breathless and flushed, his expression is softer than I've ever seen it. He shifts beside me, lying down on the bed and pulling me close. One of his arms wraps around my shoulders, while his other hand rests protectively over my bump.

His lips curve into a faint smile, and he presses a kiss to my temple, the warmth of his breath brushing against my skin.

For the first time in what feels like forever, I feel safe, cocooned in the strength of his embrace. As my eyes drift shut, his hand stays firmly over my belly, grounding me in the quiet assurance of his presence.

For tonight, that's all I need.

## Page 24

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:06 pm*

The mansion is quiet, the kind of silence that amplifies every thought swirling in my head. I sit in my study, a tumbler of whiskey in hand, staring at the faint swirl of amber liquid. The fire crackles softly in the hearth, but it does nothing to warm the chill that's settled deep inside me.

Hannah's decision to keep the baby has left me reeling. I told myself that supporting her was the right thing to do, the logical choice. Logic has nothing to do with the way I feel.

I want the baby too.

The admission feels dangerous, even now, as it echoes in the confines of my mind. I've spent years convincing myself that attachment is a liability, that caring for anyone or anything is a weakness I can't afford. And yet, here I am, caught between the fierce determination in her eyes and the fragile hope growing inside her.

Every time I see her, my resolve cracks a little more. The way she cradles her stomach, protective and tender, like she's already bonded with the child we created together. The way she holds her head high, defiant and strong, even as the pregnancy drains her energy.

I down the rest of the whiskey in one go, the burn a small reprieve from the ache gnawing at my chest.

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Later that evening, I find myself standing at the doorway to her room. The door is

partially open, and the faint glow of a bedside lamp spills out into the hall. I push it open quietly, stepping inside.

She's asleep, curled up on her side, her hands resting on her belly. Her face is peaceful, the lines of tension and exhaustion smoothed away by sleep. For a moment, I just stand there, watching her, my chest tightening with an unfamiliar ache.

I sit down in the chair beside her bed, leaning forward with my elbows on my knees. My eyes trace the curve of her cheek, the faint rise and fall of her shoulders as she breathes.

"You don't make this easy," I murmur softly, my voice barely audible.

The words spill out before I can stop them, a quiet confession to the sleeping woman before me. "I don't know how to do this," I admit, my gaze fixed on her. "I don't know how to protect you and the baby without losing myself in the process."

My hand rests on the edge of the bed, close enough to feel the warmth radiating from her. "I will," I whisper, the words as much a promise to myself as they are to her. "I will protect you... both of you."

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The next day, I put my plan into action.

First, I double the security detail at the mansion. Guards are stationed at every entry point, and two are assigned to shadow Hannah's movements whenever she leaves her room. Andrei doesn't question me when I issue the orders, though I can see the flicker of surprise in his eyes.

Next, I contact our most trusted doctor—a private physician with experience handling

high-risk pregnancies. He'll be on call 24/7, ready to intervene at the slightest sign of trouble.

Finally, I arrange for the nursery. It's premature, but I can't shake the feeling that preparing for the baby will solidify this choice in a way nothing else can.

That evening, I find her in the living room, curled up on the couch with a book in hand. Her hair is loose, tumbling over her shoulders in soft waves, and there's a faint flush in her cheeks that makes her look almost radiant.

She glances up as I approach, her expression wary but curious.

"Busy day?" she asks, her voice light but tinged with suspicion.

"Productive," I reply, sitting down in the chair across from her.

Her eyes narrow slightly, and I can tell she's trying to read me. "What did you do?"

"Nothing you need to worry about," I say smoothly, though the corner of my mouth lifts in a faint smile.

She huffs, clearly unsatisfied with the answer, but she doesn't press further. Instead, she closes her book, setting it aside as her gaze shifts to her belly.

"You're staring again," she teases, echoing her words from the night before.

"Can you blame me?" I reply, the same answer I gave her then.

This time, there's no teasing in my tone.

The sight of her—strong, determined, and carrying our child—softens something in



me that I didn't even know existed. I want her safe. I want her happy. And for the first time in my life, I realize that I want something more than power or control.

I want them.

I lean back in my chair, my gaze never leaving hers. "How are you feeling?" I ask, my voice quieter now.

"Tired," she admits, her hand brushing over her stomach. "Okay. The meds are helping, I think."

"Good," I say, my tone firm but not harsh. "If you need anything, tell me. I'll make sure you have it."

She tilts her head, studying me with an expression I can't quite place. "You're different lately," she says softly.

"Am I?"

"Yes." Her lips curve into a faint smile, and she rests her hand over her belly again. "I think I like it."

Her words—simple and soft—strike me harder than I expect. I'm not a man used to compliments, let alone one given so freely, with no expectation attached.

"You think you like it," I repeat, my voice low, a small smile tugging at the corners of my lips.

"I do," she says, tilting her head slightly as her gaze locks on mine. "Don't ruin it by being smug."

The teasing lilt in her voice draws me in, as does the faint blush creeping across her cheeks. My smirk fades into something softer, and before I can second-guess myself, I lean forward, my hand brushing against hers where it rests on the couch.

Her breath hitches, and she looks at me with those wide, dark eyes, a mix of curiosity and something deeper swirling in their depths.

“Hannah,” I murmur, my voice rough as I reach out, cupping her face in my hand. My thumb grazes her cheek, and the softness of her skin makes my chest tighten.

She doesn’t pull away.

Instead, she leans into my touch, her eyes fluttering closed for a moment before meeting mine again.

When I kiss her, it’s slow, unhurried. A soft press of lips that’s more tender than demanding, as though I’m trying to convey everything I can’t say out loud. Her lips part slightly, and I deepen the kiss, my hand sliding to the back of her neck to hold her closer.

She responds with the same gentleness, her fingers brushing against my chest before curling into the fabric of my shirt. The sweet, tentative nature of the kiss stirs something raw and primal inside me, but I force myself to keep my movements controlled.

My free hand moves to her waist, resting lightly against her side. The curve of her body beneath my touch is intoxicating, and I can feel the faint swell of her belly pressing against me.

Desire flares hot and insistent, but I rein it in, pulling back slightly to rest my forehead against hers.

Her lips are kiss-swollen, her cheeks flushed, and the way she looks at me—soft and open—nearly undoes me.

“You’re going to make this difficult,” I murmur, my voice hoarse.

Her lips twitch into a small smile. “Maybe that’s the point,” she whispers.

I chuckle softly, brushing a strand of hair away from her face before pulling back entirely. “You’re tired,” I say, my tone gentle but firm. “Fragile.”

“I’m fine,” she protests, but her words lack conviction.

“You will be,” I say, brushing my thumb over her knuckles as I take her hand. “Not tonight.”

We sit in comfortable silence for a while, the faint crackle of the fire in the hearth the only sound between us. I glance at her occasionally, watching the way her fingers idly trace over her belly, her gaze distant as if she’s lost in thought.

“What about names?” I ask suddenly, breaking the quiet.

She blinks, turning to look at me. “Names?”

“For the baby,” I clarify, shifting slightly to face her. “Have you thought about it?”

She shakes her head, a small smile tugging at her lips. “Not yet. There’s been so much else going on, I haven’t had the chance.”

“We don’t even know if it’s a boy or a girl,” I say, my tone casual. “Do you want to find out?”

She hesitates, her brow furrowing slightly. “I don’t think so,” she says after a moment. “I’d like it to be a surprise.”

I nod, leaning back against the couch. “Then what kind of names are you thinking?”

Her smile falters slightly, and she looks down at her hands. “I don’t know,” she admits. “Would it need to be... Russian?”

The hesitation in her voice is clear, and I sit up straighter, my gaze narrowing slightly. “You can call the baby whatever you want,” I say firmly. “It’s your choice.”

She looks up at me, her expression uncertain. Wouldn’t it be strange? A child with your name, your legacy, but—

“It doesn’t matter,” I interrupt gently, reaching out to take her hand again. “This baby is ours, Hannah. Whatever you name them, they’ll carry both of us with them.”

Her lips curve into a small, grateful smile, and she nods. “Okay,” she says softly.

“Good,” I reply, squeezing her hand lightly before letting it go.

The fire crackles softly, casting a warm glow over the room as we sit together, the weight of the day slowly easing. For the first time in a long time, I feel something close to peace.

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:06 pm*

The days blur into a rhythm, each one marked by the quiet preparations for a life that hasn't yet arrived but already feels like the center of my world. I spend my time folding and refolding tiny clothes, running my hands over soft blankets, and arranging the nursery that Makar insisted on setting up weeks ago.

The room smells faintly of fresh paint, the soft cream walls illuminated by the golden glow of a small lamp. It's cozy, inviting—a far cry from the coldness I first felt in this house. As I sit in the rocking chair Makar had delivered without a word, smoothing my hand over my belly, I can't help but feel a mix of hope and trepidation.

Motherhood feels impossibly big, as though I'm standing at the edge of a vast ocean with no idea how to swim. Yet, every flutter, every kick from the baby inside me reassures me that I'll find a way.

A faint knock on the door pulls me from my thoughts. I look up to see Makar standing in the doorway, his broad frame silhouetted by the hall light. His expression is unreadable, but his eyes soften slightly as they drift to my belly.

“Am I interrupting?” he asks, his voice low.

“No,” I say, gesturing for him to come in.

He steps into the room, his gaze sweeping over the carefully arranged furniture and the soft toys stacked neatly on a shelf. “You’ve been busy.”

“I want everything to be ready,” I reply, brushing my hand over the armrest of the rocking chair.

Makar nods, moving to stand beside the crib. He runs a hand over the edge of the wood, his movements uncharacteristically gentle. “It’s... nice,” he says after a moment, his voice quieter than usual.

I smile faintly, watching him. “You’re allowed to say it’s beautiful, you know.”

He raises an eyebrow, a hint of amusement flickering across his face. “It’s practical.”

“Of course it is,” I say, chuckling softly. “Everything in this house has to be practical.”

His lips twitch as though he’s suppressing a smile, but he doesn’t respond. Instead, he turns to look at me, his blue eyes sharp but not cold.

“You’re worried,” he says, not as a question but as a statement.

I sigh, leaning back in the chair. “I’m terrified,” I admit, my voice trembling slightly. “There’s so much I don’t know—about being a mother, about raising a child, about... all of this.”

Makar steps closer, his hands slipping into his pockets. “You’ll be fine,” he says simply.

I laugh softly, shaking my head. “That’s easy for you to say. You’re not the one carrying a tiny human inside you.”

His gaze drops to my belly, and for a moment, his expression softens into something almost vulnerable. “No,” he says quietly. “I’ll be the one protecting both of you.”

The weight of his words settles over me, a quiet reassurance that warms something deep inside my chest.

“What about you?” I ask, my voice softer now. “Do you ever worry?”

Makar doesn’t answer immediately. He moves to sit on the edge of the bed, his posture relaxed but his gaze serious. “I’ve spent my whole life worrying about threats,” he says finally. “About keeping control, about making sure no one can hurt what’s mine.”

I tilt my head, watching him carefully. “Now?”

He looks at me, his eyes searching mine. “Now, I realize I’ve never had anything worth losing until now.”

The honesty in his voice takes my breath away. For a moment, I don’t know what to say, my throat tightening with emotion.

“Makar,” I whisper, my hand instinctively moving to my belly.

He reaches out, his hand covering mine where it rests. His grip is warm and steady, grounding me in a way I didn’t realize I needed.

“You’re not alone in this,” he says, his voice firm but kind. “Whatever happens, I’ll be here.”

I nod, blinking back the tears that threaten to spill. “I know.”

We sit in silence for a while, the soft creak of the rocking chair the only sound in the room. It’s a rare, peaceful moment—one where the weight of our pasts and the uncertainty of our future feel a little lighter.

As I glance at Makar, his expression softer than I’ve ever seen it, I realize that for all his coldness and control, he’s trying. He’s learning to let me in.

The silence between us stretches, not uncomfortable but weighted with something unspoken. Makar's hand is still over mine, the warmth of his touch grounding me as we sit together in the nursery. His gaze drifts back to the crib, but his expression isn't cold or detached as it usually is. There's something softer there, something more vulnerable.

I take a deep breath, letting the quiet settle into my chest. "You're thinking about something," I say, breaking the silence gently.

He doesn't respond immediately, his jaw tightening slightly as though he's debating whether or not to answer.

"I'm always thinking about something," he replies finally, his voice low but carrying the weight of honesty.

I tilt my head, studying him. "What is it?"

Makar looks at me then, his blue eyes meeting mine with an intensity that makes my breath hitch. "You," he says simply. "The baby, how much things have changed since you came into my life."

His words hang in the air, and my heart pounds in my chest as I wait for him to continue.

"I didn't want this," he admits, his voice quieter now. "Any of it. Not at first. I didn't want a wife. I didn't want a child. I didn't want to feel... anything."

I stay silent, sensing that he needs to get this out.

"But now...." He trails off, his gaze dropping to where our hands are joined. His thumb brushes lightly against my knuckles, and when he looks up again, his eyes are



filled with a raw vulnerability that takes my breath away. “Now, I can’t imagine my life without you. Without both of you.”

The confession is like a crack in his armor, and I feel tears well up in my eyes at the sheer sincerity in his voice.

“Makar,” I whisper, my throat tightening with emotion.

“I care about you, Hannah,” he continues, his voice rough but steady. “More than I ever expected. More than I wanted to.”

The words are like a balm to my heart, and before I can stop myself, I lean forward, cupping his face in my hands. “I care about you too,” I say, my voice trembling. “I love you, Makar. I have for a while now.”

“I think I love you too.”

The faintest smile tugs at the corner of his lips, and he leans in, closing the distance between us. The kiss is soft at first, a gentle meeting of lips that feels more meaningful than any kiss we’ve shared before. As the seconds pass, it deepens, his hands moving to my waist as he pulls me closer.

He scoops me up in his thick, muscular arms and I all but melt into him, arousal pooling between my thighs.

I lose myself in him, in the warmth of his touch and the steady strength of his presence. It’s a kiss filled with unspoken promises, a moment that feels like a turning point for both of us.

When we finally pull apart, my head feels light, my balance wobbling slightly as I lean back.

“Hannah,” Makar says sharply, his hands moving to steady me. “Be careful.”

I laugh softly, clutching his arms for support. “I’m fine. Don’t start lecturing me now.”

He glares at me, but there’s no real heat behind it. “You can’t just throw yourself around like that,” he mutters. “What if you fell?”

“Then you’d catch me,” I tease, smiling up at him.

He shakes his head, but his lips twitch into a reluctant smile. “Some things never change.”

“Nope,” I reply, grinning.

He helps me back into the rocking chair, making sure I’m steady before letting go. His gaze drifts back to the nursery, and I watch as his expression softens slightly.

“Since you’re here,” I say, gesturing to the decorations still waiting to be hung, “you might as well help me finish setting up.”

He raises an eyebrow. “You’re putting me to work now?”

“Yes,” I say, giving him a mock-serious look. “Consider it practice for when the baby gets here.”

Makar sighs dramatically but moves to pick up one of the mobiles waiting on the dresser. “Where does this go?”

I point to the hook above the crib, watching as he carefully attaches it. His movements are precise, and I can’t help but smile as he steps back to admire his

work.

“You’re pretty good at this,” I say, teasing.

“Don’t push your luck,” he replies, though his tone is lighter than usual.

We continue working together, him holding up decorations while I direct him on where to place them. Occasionally, he grumbles about the effort, but I catch him smiling more than once, his fondness slipping through despite his attempts to hide it.

When the last decoration is in place, I sit back, admiring the finished nursery. “It’s perfect,” I say softly, my hand resting on my belly.

Makar glances around, his arms crossed as he takes it in. “It’ll do,” he says, but there’s pride in his voice.

I smile, leaning my head against the back of the chair. “Thank you, Makar.”

He looks at me, his expression softening again. “Anything for you,” he says quietly, and for the first time, I believe him completely.

Makar straightens up from where he’d just adjusted a tiny stuffed elephant on the dresser, his sharp, tailored shirt looking almost comically out of place in the cozy nursery. I can’t help but laugh softly at the sight of him standing amidst the pale pastel colors and soft toys.

“What’s so funny?” he asks, turning to look at me with a raised brow.

“You,” I say, grinning. “I never thought I’d see the big bad Makar Sharov fussing over stuffed animals.”

His lips twitch, the faintest hint of a smirk appearing. “Fussing is an exaggeration. I was making sure the elephant wasn’t crooked.”

I shake my head, chuckling. “Unbelievable.”

“We’ve been at this for hours. Haven’t you had enough of telling me what to do?”

“Not even close,” I tease, leaning back in the rocking chair with a contented sigh.

His smirk deepens, and he crosses the room to stand in front of me. “If I didn’t know better, I’d think you enjoyed bossing me around.”

I grin up at him, unrepentant. “Maybe a little.”

He leans down, bracing his hands on the armrests of the chair and bringing his face close to mine. His voice drops to a low murmur. “Careful, Hannah. You might start thinking you have control here.”

I arch a brow, tilting my head slightly. “What if I do?”

His smirk softens into something more genuine, and for a moment, he just looks at me, his blue eyes warm with a fondness that sends a flutter through my chest.

“You’re starving,” he says abruptly, straightening up.

I blink, caught off guard by the sudden change of topic. “What?”

“Dinner,” he clarifies, already moving toward the door. “It’s late, and you need to eat.”

He’s not wrong. The pangs of hunger have been gnawing at me for a while, but I was

too absorbed in finishing the nursery to pay attention.

“Dinner sounds amazing,” I admit, standing slowly.

“Come on,” he says, holding the door open for me.

I follow him out into the hallway, the soft light of the nursery spilling out behind us. But just as I step past him, Makar’s hand catches mine, stopping me mid-step.

“Hannah.”

The way he says my name makes me turn immediately, my gaze locking with his. His expression is serious, his jaw tight as though he’s wrestling with something difficult to say.

“When I said ‘anything for you,’” he begins, his voice low and measured, “I meant it.”

I swallow hard, the intensity of his tone catching me off guard. “I know, Makar.”

“No,” he says firmly, his hand tightening around mine. “I don’t think you do. I haven’t always... been kind to you.”

I shake my head, opening my mouth to protest, but he cuts me off.

“Let me finish,” he says, his voice softening. “I haven’t been kind, and I’ve made choices that hurt you. I need you to know that I do want you to be happy—with me. I want us to build something real. For you, for the baby... for us.”

The raw vulnerability in his voice makes my chest tighten, and I reach up, placing a hand on his cheek. “Makar,” I say softly, “I believe you, and I want that too.”

He leans into my touch slightly, his eyes closing for a brief moment before he straightens up, a small, almost hesitant smile tugging at his lips.

“Good,” he says simply, his voice steadier now.

“Good,” I echo, smiling back at him.

He presses a kiss to my forehead, lingering just long enough to make my heart race. Then he steps back, his hand still resting lightly on my waist as he guides me toward the stairs.

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In the kitchen, Makar moves with surprising ease, pulling out ingredients from the fridge while I sit at the counter, watching him.

“Do you even know how to cook anything that isn’t breakfast?” I ask, grinning as he starts chopping vegetables with precise, practiced movements.

“I don’t always rely on chefs and takeout,” he replies, glancing at me with an amused glint in his eyes.

“I wouldn’t put it past you,” I tease, propping my chin on my hand.

He shakes his head, muttering something in Russian under his breath, but there’s a faint smile on his lips as he continues working.

The smell of garlic and onions fills the air, and my stomach growls loudly enough to make him pause.

“Impatient,” he says, smiling.

“Starving,” I correct, giving him a pointed look.

“Almost done,” he promises, setting a pan on the stove.

True to his word, it doesn’t take long before he sets a plate of steaming pasta in front of me. I take a bite, closing my eyes as the rich flavors hit my tongue.

“This is amazing,” I say, grinning at him.

“Don’t sound so surprised,” he replies, taking a seat across from me.

We eat in comfortable silence, the quiet hum of the house wrapping around us like a warm blanket. Every so often, I catch him watching me, his expression soft and unreadable.

The quiet stretches between us, broken only by the occasional clink of silverware against the plates. Makar eats methodically, his movements precise, his focus seemingly on his food. Yet every so often, I catch his eyes on me, their intensity softened by something unspoken.

“You’re staring again,” I tease lightly, taking another bite of the pasta.

“You’re imagining things,” he counters smoothly, though the corner of his mouth quirks upward.

I chuckle, shaking my head. “You’re terrible at hiding it.”

“Or you’re terrible at minding your own business,” he replies, his tone carrying just enough warmth to make it clear he’s teasing.

We lapse back into silence, the comfortable kind that doesn’t demand filling. I twirl

my fork in the pasta, the weight of the day starting to lift. Yet, there's something lingering on my mind, a question I've been hesitant to ask.

"Makar?" I say finally, my voice quieter now.

He looks up from his plate, his blue eyes locking on mine. "What is it?"

I set my fork down, brushing a hand over my belly. "I've been thinking about names," I admit.

His brow lifts slightly, his expression curious. "Oh?"

"For the baby," I continue, glancing at him nervously. "I know we said we'd wait until they're born, but... if it's a boy—" I hesitate, biting my lip.

"Go on," he says, his tone gentle but urging.

I take a deep breath, gathering my courage. "If it's a boy, I thought maybe we could name him Anatoly."

The name hangs in the air, heavy with meaning. For a moment, Makar doesn't respond, his expression brightening. His fork hovers just above his plate before he sets it down carefully.

"Anatoly," he repeats, his voice low.

I nod, my fingers twisting together in my lap. "I know it's your brother's name," I say softly. "I just thought... it might be nice. To honor him, but if you don't want to—"

He cuts me off with a slight shake of his head. "It's not that," he says, his voice quieter than usual. "It's a good name."



I search his face, trying to decipher the emotions flickering behind his eyes. “Are you sure?”

“Yes,” he says firmly, though there’s a faint hesitation in his tone. “It’s... fitting.”

I can tell there’s more he wants to say, but he doesn’t. Instead, he picks up his glass, taking a slow sip as though to steady himself.

“Thank you,” he says finally, his voice softer now.

“For what?”

“For thinking of him,” he replies, meeting my gaze.

His words are simple, but they carry a weight that makes my chest tighten. I smile faintly, reaching across the table to touch his hand.

“I wish I could have met him. He’ll always be part of your family,” I say gently. “Now, part of ours.”

Makar doesn’t respond, but the faint nod he gives me and the way his fingers briefly tighten around mine tell me everything I need to know.

## Page 26

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:06 pm*

The bedroom is quiet except for the faint rustle of sheets as Hannah shifts beside me. The lamp on the nightstand casts a soft, golden glow over her face, and I find myself watching her, the faint curve of her smile as she stares up at the ceiling.

She looks peaceful tonight—more relaxed than I’ve seen her in days. It’s a rare moment, and I can’t help but savor it.

It’s rare for me to feel this comfortable, this... at ease with someone. Yet, lying here with her feels natural in a way I can’t explain.

Hannah shifts again, her hands brushing over her belly. “He’s been quiet tonight,” she says softly, her tone tinged with curiosity.

“Still convinced it’s a boy?” I ask, raising an eyebrow.

“Just a feeling,” she replies with a shrug. “I could be wrong. Either way, I can’t wait to meet them.”

The genuine excitement in her voice stirs something in me, a warmth I’m not entirely used to.

Suddenly, her hand freezes, her eyes widening slightly. “Oh!”

“What?” I ask, sitting up slightly, my gaze narrowing. “What’s wrong?”

She shakes her head quickly, her smile growing. “Nothing’s wrong. He just kicked.”

“Kicked?” I repeat, unsure why the word catches me so off guard.

“Here,” she says, grabbing my hand and guiding it to her belly. “Feel that.”

I hesitate, my palm resting against the curve of her stomach. For a moment, there’s nothing. Then, the faintest nudge beneath my hand.

I freeze, staring down at my hand as the sensation repeats, stronger this time.

Hannah laughs softly, her eyes shining with delight. “It’s like they’re saying hello.”

For once, I don’t have a snarky remark or a calculated response. I just sit there, my hand still on her belly, overwhelmed by something I can’t quite name.

“He’s active,” I murmur, my voice quieter than usual.

“Or she is,” Hannah counters, grinning.

I glance at her, shaking my head with a faint smile. “Always arguing.”

“Always right,” she retorts playfully.

Her laughter fills the room, warm and genuine, and I can’t help but laugh with her. The baby kicks again, and she sighs happily, resting her hand over mine.

“I want this,” she says softly, her voice almost a whisper.

I frown slightly, leaning closer. “What?”

“This,” she repeats, looking up at me with wide, earnest eyes. “A family. With you. Not just this baby, but... more. A real marriage. A real life. Maybe even more kids.”

Her words catch me off guard, and for a moment, I don't know how to respond.

"You want more?" I ask, my voice softer now.

She nods, her smile growing. "Yeah. Someday. Maybe three more."

"Three?" I repeat, unable to keep the surprise from my tone.

She laughs, the sound light and teasing. "What, too many for you?"

I shake my head, smirking. "I think you're already more than enough to handle."

"Flattery will get you nowhere," she says, sticking out her tongue.

"Who said I was flattering you?" I counter, raising an eyebrow.

Her laughter fills the room again, and for a moment, everything feels lighter—easier. She leans back against the pillows, her hand still resting on her belly, and I find myself watching her again.

"You're taking to this," I say quietly, gesturing to her belly. "Motherhood. You haven't even had the baby yet, and you're already... good at it."

She looks at me, her expression softening. "It's easy to feel that way when you love someone so much," she says, her voice trembling slightly.

The honesty in her words stirs something deep in my chest, and I lean down, pressing a kiss to her forehead.

"You're incredible."

My lips brush against her forehead before trailing down to the curve of her belly, where I press a kiss to the taut skin. The baby moves beneath my hand, another strong kick making me smirk.

“You’re already causing trouble,” I murmur, my tone soft but teasing as I trace gentle circles over her stomach.

Then Hannah gasps sharply, her entire body tensing.

I sit up immediately, my heart lurching. “What? What’s wrong?”

She clutches the sheets, her face tightening with pain. “I—I don’t know. It feels... different. Like—oh God—like something’s starting.”

It takes me half a second to register the meaning of her words. My pulse spikes, and I grab my phone from the nightstand, dialing Andrei without hesitation.

“She’s going into labor,” I bark as soon as he picks up. “Call the hospital. Tell them she’s coming now.”

Andrei doesn’t question me, simply grunting an acknowledgment before hanging up. I turn back to Hannah, who’s gripping the edge of the mattress, her breaths shallow and fast.

“An ambulance,” I say, already dialing again.

Her eyes widen. “No, Makar, it’s fine. We can just—”

“No,” I cut her off firmly, my voice leaving no room for argument. “You’re not walking out of this house. You’re not sitting in the back of some car. You’re going in an ambulance with medics, and you’ll be seen immediately.”

She hesitates, her breathing uneven as another wave of pain crosses her face. Finally, she nods, her hand reaching for mine.

The ambulance arrives within minutes, its lights casting a harsh glow over the driveway as the medics rush inside. I don't let go of Hannah's hand as they check her vitals, their calm professionalism doing little to ease the tight knot of fear in my chest.

"She's stable," one of the medics says, glancing at me. "But we need to get her to the hospital now."

"I'm coming with her," I say immediately, my tone brooking no argument.

The medic nods, and we're moving. The cool night air bites at my skin as we step outside, the stretcher carrying Hannah to the waiting vehicle. I climb in after her, squeezing into the cramped space as the doors slam shut.

The ride is a blur of flashing lights and muted voices, the steady beep of monitors punctuating the silence. Hannah grips my hand tightly, her knuckles white as another contraction ripples through her.

"It's too much," she whispers, her voice trembling. "It's too fast—"

"You're strong," I tell her, my voice steady even though my heart is racing. "You can handle this. You're not doing it alone."

Her gaze meets mine, tears glistening in her eyes, and I squeeze her hand again, letting her feel the strength in my grip.

When we arrive at the hospital, the medics wheel her inside, the bright fluorescent lights and antiseptic smell a jarring contrast to the quiet of the night. I bark

instructions to a nurse as we enter.

“I want her usual doctor,” I say, my tone sharp. “Bring him here now.”

“Yes, Mr. Sharov,” she says quickly, hurrying away.

Hannah is taken to a private room, the sound of monitors and bustling medical staff filling the air. I don’t leave her side, my hand never straying from hers as they prepare her for delivery.

“Sir,” one of the nurses says, hesitating slightly. “Are you planning to stay in the delivery room?”

“Yes,” I reply without hesitation.

Hannah glances at me, her expression a mix of surprise and relief.

“Makar,” she whispers, her voice weak but grateful.

“I’m not leaving,” I say firmly, leaning down so she can see the determination in my eyes. “Not for a second.”

Her lips tremble into a faint smile, and she nods, squeezing my hand.

When her doctor finally arrives, I feel a measure of relief settle over me. He nods in acknowledgment, quickly taking charge and issuing orders to the staff.

“Everything is under control,” he assures me, his voice calm. “We’ll monitor her closely. The baby is coming a little early, but it’s nothing we can’t handle.”

I nod, my grip on Hannah’s hand tightening.

The delivery room is a whirlwind of activity, the sterile environment buzzing with controlled urgency. I stay at Hannah's side, my focus entirely on her as she breathes through the pain, her face pale but determined.

"You're doing great," I murmur, brushing a damp strand of hair from her forehead.

She lets out a shaky laugh, her lips twitching into a faint smile. "I hate you right now."

"I'll remind you of that later," I say, smirking despite the tension in my chest.

Her laugh turns into a grimace as another contraction hits, and I feel utterly helpless. I stay where I am, offering her my hand, my presence, my voice—anything to help her through this.

"You've got this," I say again, my voice steady even as fear and excitement battle for dominance inside me.

As the doctor announces that it's almost time, I realize I've never wanted anything more than to see our baby safely in her arms.

The delivery room falls silent, save for the sharp, joyful cry of a newborn breaking through the tension like sunlight after a storm. Hannah collapses back against the bed, her chest heaving as tears streak her face. My grip tightens on her hand, and for the first time in what feels like forever, I allow myself to breathe.

"It's a boy," the doctor announces, his voice calm and reassuring.

A boy. My son.

The words don't seem real as one of the nurses cleans him up, wrapping him in a soft



blanket. He's small—so much smaller than I expected—but the moment they place him in my arms, I feel the weight of him, warm and alive, and everything inside me shifts.

“Hello, Anatoly,” I murmur, the name slipping from my lips before I even realize it.

He stirs at the sound of my voice, his tiny hands curling into fists as his cries settle into soft whimpers. My chest tightens, and I glance at Hannah, whose exhausted smile somehow radiates more strength than I've ever seen.

“You did it,” I say quietly, leaning down to kiss her forehead. “You're incredible.”

She laughs softly, her voice weak but full of emotion. “We did it.”

The nurses work efficiently, tending to Hannah and ensuring she's comfortable while I hold our son. Her eyes flutter closed, exhaustion overtaking her, and I take a seat beside the bed, cradling Anatoly close.

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An hour passes, maybe more, and I haven't moved. Anatoly sleeps peacefully in my arms, his small breaths rhythmic and steady. I stare down at him, memorizing every detail—his tiny fingers, the soft curve of his cheek, the way he fits so perfectly against me.

Hannah stirs, and my gaze shifts to her as her eyes blink open.

“Makar?” she murmurs, her voice raspy from fatigue.

“I'm here,” I say softly, setting Anatoly down in the bassinet beside the bed before moving to help her sit up. “How do you feel?”

“Sore,” she admits, wincing slightly as she adjusts her position.

I grab the water bottle from the tray table, unscrewing the cap and holding it to her lips. “Drink,” I say gently.

She takes a few sips, her eyes meeting mine as she sets the bottle down. “Thank you,” she whispers.

I nod, sitting back as I retrieve Anatoly from the bassinet. “There’s someone who wants to see you.”

Her face lights up as I place him in her arms, her hands trembling slightly as she holds him close. “Hi, baby,” she whispers, her voice thick with emotion.

Anatoly stirs, his tiny face scrunching as he lets out a soft coo. Hannah laughs, tears slipping down her cheeks as she presses a kiss to his forehead.

“He’s perfect,” she says, looking up at me with a smile that makes my chest tighten.

“He is,” I agree, sitting down beside her.

For a while, we sit in silence, simply marveling at the life we’ve created. But eventually, the weight of the moment shifts, and I see a flicker of hesitation in her eyes.

“What is it?” I ask, my voice steady.

Hannah glances down at Anatoly, her fingers brushing lightly over his cheek. “I’ve been thinking,” she begins, her tone cautious. “About what happens next.”

I nod slowly, waiting for her to continue.

“I’d like to stay home with him for the first year,” she says, her voice gaining strength. “To be here for him, to bond with him.”

“Of course,” I say immediately, my tone leaving no room for doubt. “You don’t need to ask.”

She smiles faintly, but I can see there’s more on her mind.

“After that?” she asks hesitantly, her gaze shifting to meet mine. “Would I… would I be able to have more freedom?”

“Freedom?” I repeat, frowning slightly.

“I don’t mean anything drastic,” she says quickly, her cheeks flushing. “Just the ability to go out, to see the world a little. Maybe even finish school someday.”

I lean back, considering her words. Freedom has never been a concept I’ve been comfortable with—not for myself, not for anyone under my protection. As I look at her, holding our son with such tenderness, I realize this isn’t about control. It’s about trust.

“You can do whatever you want,” I say finally, my voice firm. “Whatever makes you happy.”

Her eyes widen slightly, as though she hadn’t expected such an easy answer. “Really?”

“Yes,” I say, leaning forward to brush a strand of hair from her face. “You’ve given me more than I ever thought I could have, Hannah. I want you to have what you need too.”

Tears well in her eyes again, and she leans against me, her head resting on my shoulder as Anatoly sleeps peacefully in her arms.

“Thank you,” she whispers.

For the first time in my life, I feel like I’m building something real. Something worth protecting. And as I hold both of them close, I know I’ll do whatever it takes to keep it.

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Two days later, the car rolls up to the mansion’s grand entrance, its imposing facade softened in the early evening light. It feels different returning now, like the house itself has shifted to make room for the new life we’re bringing inside.

I step out first, moving to open the door for Hannah. She smiles at me, tired but radiant in a way that takes my breath away. In her arms, bundled snugly in a soft blue blanket, is Anatoly.

“Home,” she murmurs, looking up at the mansion.

“Home,” I echo, offering her a hand to help her out.

We walk up the steps together, and I glance at the guards stationed nearby, giving a brief nod to ensure everything is secure. It’s a reflex now, but as I glance at the tiny bundle in Hannah’s arms, it feels more important than ever.

Once inside, the quiet hum of the house greets us, and Vera appears from the hallway, her face lighting up when she sees Hannah and the baby.

“Welcome back,” she says warmly, her eyes softening as she looks at Anatoly.

“Thank you, Vera,” Hannah says, her voice warm but tired.

I take Hannah’s free hand, guiding her through the halls and up the stairs toward the nursery. The walk is slow, unhurried, and there’s something grounding about the way she leans on me, trusting me to lead the way.

When we step into the nursery, the soft cream walls and gentle glow of the nightlight feel like stepping into another world. Hannah moves to the crib, carefully laying Anatoly down. He stirs faintly but doesn’t wake, his tiny hands curling against his chest as he settles into the plush mattress.

We stand there for a moment, side by side, just watching him.

“He’s perfect,” Hannah whispers, her voice full of awe.

I place a hand on the small of her back, my touch light but steady. “He is,” I agree.

She turns to me, her eyes glistening with unshed tears. Without thinking, I lean down, pressing a soft kiss to her lips. It’s tender at first, a quiet acknowledgment of everything we’ve been through, but when her hand reaches up to cup my cheek, it deepens.

The warmth of her mouth against mine, the way she melts into me—it’s enough to pull me under. Between us, Anatoly sleeps peacefully, a tiny buffer that keeps us grounded in the moment.

She pulls back with a soft laugh, brushing her thumb over my cheek. “We should let him rest.”

“Agreed,” I murmur, though I steal one last kiss before stepping back.

The nursery connects to our bedroom through an arched doorway, and as we step into the dimly lit space, the fatigue of the past few days starts to settle over both of us. Hannah moves to the bed, sinking onto the edge with a sigh as I loosen the collar of my shirt.

“You should rest,” I say, crossing the room to her.

She smiles up at me, a playful glint in her eyes. “You’ve been just as busy.”

“I don’t get tired,” I reply, smirking.

“Liar,” she teases, reaching for my hand.

I let her pull me closer, her fingers tracing the buttons of my shirt. “You’ve been taking care of everything,” she says softly. “You deserve a break too.”

I lean down, capturing her lips in a kiss that’s anything but soft. It’s hungry, insistent, a release of everything I’ve been holding back. She responds immediately, her hands slipping beneath the fabric of my shirt, her touch warm against my skin.

“You’re pushing your luck,” I murmur against her lips, smirking when she laughs breathlessly.

“Maybe I am,” she replies, her voice low and teasing.

I push her back gently onto the bed, hovering over her as I let my hands explore the curves of her body. She arches beneath me, her laughter fading into a soft sigh that sends heat coursing through me.

As much as I want to lose myself in her, I’m acutely aware of the exhaustion in her movements, the way her body still hasn’t fully recovered. I pull back slightly,

brushing a strand of hair from her face.

“You’re tired,” I say, my voice softer now.

Her lips curve into a faint smile. “A little,” she admits.

“We’ll pick this up later,” I say, pressing a kiss to her forehead.

Her laughter returns, light and warm. “You always know how to ruin the moment.”

I chuckle, settling beside her on the bed and pulling her into my arms. “Get some rest,” I murmur, my hand trailing lightly over her back.

The baby monitor sits on the nightstand, its soft hum a constant reminder of the life we’ve brought into this house. Anatoly’s quiet breaths filter through, steady and soothing, as Hannah’s head rests against my chest.

“You’re listening for him, aren’t you?” she asks sleepily, her voice muffled against my shirt.

“Maybe a little bit,” I reply.

She shifts slightly, her hand resting over my heart. “He’s safe. We’re all safe.”

I press a kiss to the top of her head, letting her words settle over me like a balm. As her breathing evens out, I find myself staring at the monitor, the faint sounds of our son lulling me into a rare, peaceful calm.

For the first time in years, I let myself dream—not of power or control, but of a future built on something far more precious.

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:06 pm*

The warm June sun bathes the rows of chairs in golden light as I stand at the edge of the stage, my graduation cap slightly askew and my nerves buzzing beneath my skin. The hum of the crowd fills the air, a mixture of laughter, cheers, and the occasional cry from a restless toddler. Somewhere in that crowd sits Makar, an imposing figure among the happy families, his ever-serious expression softened just slightly by pride.

I press a hand to my belly, the gentle curve of my second pregnancy a constant reminder of how far I've come. The baby stirs faintly, as if in agreement, and I smile, adjusting the cap on my head before stepping forward.

The dean reads out my name, her voice carrying over the crowd. "Hannah Sharov, Bachelor of Arts."

The applause washes over me like a wave as I walk across the stage, my gown swishing around my ankles. My heart swells, the magnitude of this moment hitting me all at once. For years, this had felt like an impossible dream—a goal buried beneath fear, confinement, and survival.

Yet, here I am, standing in the light of something I built for myself, with the people I love waiting for me just beyond the edge of the stage.

As I shake hands with the dean and accept my diploma, my gaze sweeps over the audience. My eyes find Makar almost instantly, his towering frame impossible to miss even seated. He's not clapping like the others—of course he isn't—but his piercing blue eyes are locked on me, his lips curling into the faintest of smiles. My heart skips a beat, and I can't help but smile back.



The ceremony passes in a blur of speeches and cheers, the weight of the diploma in my hands grounding me in reality. When the graduates are dismissed, the crowd erupts into a joyous commotion as families flood the field, searching for their loved ones.

I spot Makar immediately, standing at the edge of the crowd with Anatoly perched on his hip. At almost three years old, Anatoly is already a miniature version of his father, his dark hair a mess of soft curls and his big blue eyes scanning the crowd with curiosity.

“There’s Mommy,” Makar says, his voice low but unmistakably proud as he points me out.

“Mommy!” Anatoly calls, squirming in Makar’s arms.

I laugh, weaving through the crowd until I reach them. Anatoly launches himself into my arms the moment I’m close enough, and I stagger slightly under his weight before holding him tightly.

“You saw me, huh?” I ask, pressing a kiss to his cheek.

“Uh-huh,” he says, nodding enthusiastically. “You’re so cool, Mommy.”

“Thanks, buddy,” I say, grinning as I brush a hand through his messy hair.

Makar steps closer, his free hand brushing lightly over the small of my back. “Congratulations,” he says, his voice quieter now.

“Thank you,” I reply, looking up at him. “For everything. I couldn’t have done this without you.”

His lips twitch into a faint smirk. “You could have,” he says. “I’m still glad I was

here.”

I rise onto my toes, wrapping my arms around his neck. His hands slide to my waist, steadying me as I press a kiss to his lips. It’s gentle, tender, but the way his fingers tighten against me says so much more.

A small voice cuts through the moment, full of exaggerated disgust. “Ew! Gross!”

I pull back, laughing as I turn to Anatoly, who’s wrinkling his nose at us from where he sits cross-legged in the grass.

“Gross, huh?” I say, walking over to scoop him up despite his squirming protests. “You won’t think it’s so gross when you’re older.”

He shakes his head vehemently, his curls bouncing. “Nope. Never. Kissing is yucky.”

Makar chuckles, stepping up beside us. “Don’t worry, kid. It gets better.”

“Not listening!” Anatoly declares, covering his ears with his small hands.

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Later, as we’re gathering our things to leave, one of my friends from university comes jogging over, waving enthusiastically. “Hannah! Are you guys coming to the after-party?”

I glance at Makar, who raises an eyebrow in silent question.

“It’s just at Marcie’s place,” my friend continues, grinning as her gaze flicks to Makar. “You have to come. Everyone wants to meet your husband.”

I hesitate, glancing at Anatoly, who’s now happily showing off his juice box to Vera.

“I don’t know....”

“I’ll stay with him,” Vera says kindly, but before I can respond, Andrei steps forward, smirking.

“I’ll handle him,” Andrei says, ruffling Anatoly’s hair and earning a dramatic “Hey!” in protest. “We’ll have a great time. Won’t we, little man?”

Anatoly beams up at him. “Can we play cars?”

“Of course,” Andrei replies, his tone mock-serious. “I’ll even let you win.”

I laugh, shaking my head. “You spoil him.”

“That’s my job,” Andrei quips.

Makar glances at me, his expression relaxed but expectant. “Let’s go,” he says. “It’s your day.”

When we arrive, Marcie’s house is a cozy, bustling scene, the party spilling out onto the patio and yard. Music plays softly in the background, and the laughter of my friends fills the air as Makar and I step inside.

Almost immediately, we’re greeted with cheers and congratulations, a whirlwind of hugs and excited chatter.

“Is this him?” someone asks, their gaze darting between me and Makar.

“Yes,” I say, smiling as I slip my hand into his. “This is Makar.”

He nods politely, his usual composed demeanor firmly in place, but I notice the way people seem drawn to him. He answers questions with ease, his charm subtle but

effective. No one here knows what he does for a living, and for now, that's exactly how I want it to stay.

"You've got a keeper," one of my friends whispers to me as Makar steps away to fetch me a drink. "He's hot and so nice. Does he have a brother?"

I laugh, shaking my head. "Not one you'd want to date."

She laughs and wanders off, leaving me blissfully alone with Makar.

"Dance with me?" I ask, turning to him.

His eyebrow arches, but he doesn't hesitate. "You're sure you're up for it?"

I nod, taking his hand. "I'm pregnant, not fragile."

A faint smirk plays on his lips as he lets me lead him onto the floor.

The music is upbeat, and while my movements are slower than usual, the joy of the moment is infectious. Makar moves with surprising ease, his hands resting lightly on my waist as we find a rhythm together.

"You're not bad at this," I tease, grinning up at him.

"I'm full of surprises," he replies, his smirk deepening.

I laugh, leaning into him as the song shifts into something slower. His arms tighten around me, and for a moment, it feels like we're the only two people in the room.

As the party winds down, we step outside into the cool night air. The stars are bright above us, the city lights twinkling in the distance.

Makar slips his arm around my waist, pulling me close. “Did you have fun?” he asks, his voice low.

“I did,” I say, resting my head against his shoulder. “Thank you for coming.”

“Like I said,” he murmurs, pressing a kiss to my temple, “it’s your day.”

I smile, savoring the warmth of his presence. But before I can respond, he pulls back slightly, his blue eyes glinting with something unreadable.

“What?” I ask, tilting my head.

“I have a surprise for you,” he says, his smirk returning.

“A surprise?” I echo, raising an eyebrow.

“You’ll see,” he replies, his tone teasing.

My curiosity flares, but before I can press him further, he takes my hand, leading me toward the car. Whatever he has planned, I can’t help but feel a spark of excitement. With Makar, every moment feels like the start of something new.

Ten minutes later, the car pulls to a stop in front of a sleek building tucked into one of the quieter streets of the city. Its modern architecture glints in the moonlight, large glass panels giving glimpses of the softly lit interior.

I glance at Makar, my brow furrowing. “What is this?”

“Come inside,” he says, his smirk faint but tinged with something softer.

I hesitate for a moment before taking his outstretched hand. The warmth of his palm steadies me as we step out of the car. My heart races with curiosity as he leads me to

the entrance.

Andrei is already there, Anatoly perched on his shoulders. My son beams at me, waving enthusiastically. “Mommy! Look, it’s so big!”

“It is,” I agree, smiling as I ruffle his hair.

Andrei lowers Anatoly to the ground, letting him dart to Makar’s side. Makar scoops him up effortlessly, his expression softening as our son wraps his arms around his neck.

I step closer to the glass doors, peering inside. My breath catches as I take in the scene.

Paintings line the pristine white walls, each piece illuminated by carefully placed lights. Sculptures stand on pedestals scattered throughout the room, their forms striking and intricate. The entire space is filled with life and creativity, a celebration of art in all its forms.

“Makar,” I whisper, my voice trembling. “What is this?”

He shifts Anatoly in his arms, nodding toward the door. “Go inside,” he says simply.

My hands shake as I push the door open, stepping into the gallery. The air is cool, carrying the faint scent of fresh paint and polished wood.

“It’s yours,” Makar says, his voice low but steady.

I spin to face him, my eyes wide. “What?”

“This gallery,” he continues, his blue eyes locked on mine. “It’s for you. A place to showcase your work and the work of others. A place where you can build something

lasting.”

I blink, my thoughts a whirlwind. “I... I don’t know what to say.”

“Say you’ll use it,” he replies, a faint smirk tugging at his lips.

Tears prick my eyes as I glance around the room again, the enormity of the gesture sinking in. This isn’t just a gift—it’s a testament to everything we’ve built together.

“I don’t deserve this,” I murmur, shaking my head.

“Yes, you do,” Makar says firmly, stepping closer. “You’ve worked for this, Hannah. You’ve earned it.”

Anatoly squirms in his arms, reaching out to me. I take him, holding him close as he babbles excitedly about the room.

“Do you like it, Mommy?” he asks, his big blue eyes shining.

“I love it,” I whisper, pressing a kiss to his forehead.

As we walk through the gallery, Andrei trails behind us, his usual smirk firmly in place. “I told him this was over the top,” he says, shaking his head.

“It’s perfect,” I reply, my voice firm.

Makar glances at Andrei, his expression cool. “I don’t remember asking for your opinion.”

Andrei shrugs, unbothered. “You never do.”

We reach the far end of the gallery, where a small plaque catches my eye. I lean

closer, my breath catching as I read the inscription.

The Hannah Sharov Gallery: A Space for Art and Community.

My tears spill over as I turn to Makar, my voice trembling. “You named it after me?”

“Of course,” he says, his tone casual, though there’s a flicker of warmth in his eyes. “It’s yours.”

I clutch Anatoly tighter, my heart swelling as I glance between the two of them. Makar stands tall and steady, his usual stoicism softened by the faintest of smiles. In his arms, Anatoly chatters away about how he’s going to draw pictures to hang on the walls.

“I love you,” I say softly, the words slipping out before I can stop them.

Makar’s smirk fades into something gentler, and he steps closer, bending slightly to press a kiss to my forehead. “I love you too,” he murmurs.

Makar’s kiss lingers on my forehead, and when he pulls back, his blue eyes meet mine with a softness I’m still not used to. “Show me your work,” he says simply, his voice low but insistent.

My heart skips, a flicker of nervousness stirring in my chest. “You’ve seen it before,” I reply, brushing a strand of hair behind my ear.

“Not like this,” he counters, gesturing to the room around us. “Not the way you want the world to see it.”

His words settle over me, both grounding and empowering. I take his hand, leading him toward the first painting displayed near the entrance. It’s one of my earlier works, a vibrant swirl of blues and golds that I created during a rare quiet moment in



the early days of our marriage.

“This one,” I say, my voice soft. “It’s about finding peace in chaos.”

Makar studies it for a moment, his hands tucked into his pockets. “I don’t know much about art,” he admits, glancing at me. “But I know I like this. It feels... strong.”

My cheeks warm, and I bite back a smile. “That’s a good interpretation.”

He smirks faintly, his gaze returning to the painting. “Then you’re better at this than you give yourself credit for.”

We move through the gallery, stopping at each piece as I explain the story behind it. There’s a sketch of Anatoly, his chubby toddler cheeks captured in delicate lines, and a soft watercolor of a lavender field that reminds me of the nursery we prepared for our second baby.

“You made all of this while dealing with me and our son?” Makar asks, raising an eyebrow.

I laugh, nudging him lightly. “You’re not as difficult as you think.”

He chuckles, the sound low and rich, and something in his gaze shifts—pride mingling with affection.

Soon, the gallery begins to fill with people. Guests trickle in, their expressions curious and admiring as they wander through the space. I find myself caught in a whirlwind of compliments and questions, my nerves slowly melting away with each kind word.

“This is stunning,” one woman says, gesturing to a piece depicting a moonlit garden. “Are you selling it?”

The question catches me off guard, and I glance at Makar, who stands a few feet away, watching me closely.

“I’m not sure,” I admit, my fingers twisting nervously. “I haven’t thought about it.”

The woman nods, offering me a card. “If you decide to, please let me know. I’d love to have it.”

I thank her, taking the card as she moves on. Makar steps closer, his presence steadying me.

“What do you think?” he asks, his tone neutral.

“I don’t know,” I reply honestly. “It feels strange... the idea of selling something so personal.”

Makar nods, his expression thoughtful. “Then don’t.”

I blink up at him, surprised by the simplicity of his answer.

“It’s your work,” he continues, his voice firm but calm. “If you want to sell it, do it. If you don’t, then don’t. Nobody gets to decide that but you.”

The weight of his words settles over me, and I feel a warmth spread through my chest. “You really think it’s that simple?”

“For you?” he says, smirking faintly. “It can be.”

I smile, leaning into him briefly before turning my attention back to the room.

The night passes in a blur of laughter, conversations, and a growing sense of pride as more people approach me with compliments and inquiries about my work. Each

interaction feels like a small step toward the life I've always dreamed of, one where my passions aren't just a hobby but something real and tangible.

As the crowd begins to thin, I find myself back near the entrance, gazing at one of my favorite pieces—a bold abstract painting full of swirling reds and oranges. It's a reminder of the fire I've found within myself, a spark reignited through love, determination, and freedom.

Makar joins me, his hand resting lightly on the small of my back.

"Tired yet?" he asks, his voice tinged with amusement.

"A little," I admit, glancing up at him. "It's a good kind of tired."

He nods, his eyes scanning the room before returning to mine. "You've done something incredible here, Hannah."

I reach up, brushing my fingers over his cheek. "I couldn't have done it without you."

His lips twitch into a faint smile, and he leans down, pressing a kiss to my lips. It's soft at first, but as his hand moves to cradle my face, it deepens, a quiet declaration of everything we've built together.

When we finally pull apart, the world around us feels brighter, the weight of the evening replaced by a quiet contentment.

"Ready to head home?" he asks, his hand slipping into mine.

"Not yet," I reply, my gaze drifting back to the gallery. "Just one more moment."

Makar nods, his grip tightening slightly as we stand together, watching as the space slowly empties, the echoes of the evening lingering in the air.

In this moment, surrounded by the life we've created and the love we've found, I know we're exactly where we're meant to be.

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THE END