



Innocent Bratva Hostage (Yezhov Bratva #5)

Author: *Rina Lawson*

Category: Urban

Description: I was taken by the enemy, kidnapped by a monster.

A ruthless Bratva leader, decades older, claims me as his rightful prize.

Forced to wear his ring, our sham marriage seals my fate.

Im an innocent, untouched, and now his captive bride.

Bound to his will, my freedom is a distant memory.

Hes the darkness that haunts my every waking moment.

His eyes burn with a passion that scares me, his touch ignites a fire I cant control.

My heart beats with a secret: Ill never be his.

Im caught in a deadly game, where one wrong move means punishment.

My life is now a twisted dance of submission and survival.

He says I belong to him, but I refuse to surrender.

My heart beats with a secret: Ill never be his.

Can I escape the chains of his possession, or will they forever hold me?

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Death never comes when you're ready for it. It doesn't knock; it doesn't wait. One moment, life is normal. The next, it's in ruins—unknown

“Do you think it ever gets easier?” I asked, twirling my coffee cup and watching the steam dance. “Missing someone who's alive but no longer here, I mean.”

Hazel lifted her beautifully arched brow. “It depends on who you're missing and why.” She narrowed her eyes on me. “Are you missing an ex?”

I huffed. “You wish. I miss my mom.”

It'd been three months since she moved to Oregon, and it'd been hard to adjust from seeing her every day to only speaking to her on calls and emails. I missed her coffee, her omelets, and her warm hugs on gloomy afternoons. I'd never thought the day would come when I wouldn't see my mother for this long.

Hazel threw a piece of carrot into her mouth. “Oregon is only six hours away, Gigi. You can always visit her.”

I took a sip of my coffee, savoring the flavors of the full cream milk and honey. “You're right. Maybe I'll move to Oregon soon. I'll need a better job to afford my flight ticket and art school.”

Hazel's eyes gleamed. “Art school? You've not given up that dream, have you?”

Giving up my dream of becoming an artist would mean giving up on life itself. I put the dream on hold for a while so that I could get a degree in psychology. Now that I

had finished college, I intended to pursue becoming an artist with all I had.

I'd found a job at a new art gallery a couple of weeks after graduating from college. The pay wasn't great, but I was happy to be surrounded by such beautiful paintings and creativity. Whenever I looked at the artworks hidden behind display glass and hanging on the walls, all I could think about was how I would have the chance to display mine like that someday. People would pay to see my talent, and they'd be happy doing so. I could already feel the immense joy it would bring me to see people find delight in my creative skills.

I didn't realize I was smiling until I caught my reflection on the glass door to my right.

"Good luck on that, girl," Hazel said as she reached for her strawberry and banana smoothie. "You know I'll always support you."

"I know, Haze," I replied, tapping her nose softly.

She groaned as she sipped on her smoothie. "This tastes really good," she said, setting the glass back on the table. "You should try it sometime."

I peered at the healthier option sitting in that fancy glass, all pretty and pink. Unlike Hazel, I didn't always go for the healthier option; I preferred whatever I thought tasted better, and in this case, that was heavy-creamed coffee and a croissant. "Thanks, but I'll pass."

She shook her head and went back to chewing on her Caesar salad. "Have you spoken to your dad lately? You never talk about him."

My shoulder sagged, a sad sigh leaving my lips before I could stop it. I hated talking about my father, not because I hated him—I loved him just as much as I did my

mother. It was just...things between us were really complicated in a way.

Before his very brief visit last night, it had been six months since I last saw him.

I remembered that day like it was yesterday. It was my twenty-second birthday and the day of my graduation. I could still picture the tears trailing down my face as I hugged my mother. I'd been happy to see her, but my chest ached from missing my dad, too.

My parents had been divorced for years because my mom couldn't handle his complicated dealings with the Russian mafia. She used to panic whenever he was running late or when the phone rang late in the evening. Every knock on the door early in the morning made her dread each step she took to answer, as it could either be my dad coming home exhausted or the police arriving to announce his death.

She'd endured, but one day, she decided she couldn't take it anymore. It wasn't just Dad's safety she was worried about; it was ours, too—hers and mine—and what would happen if he messed with the wrong people.

When she asked for a divorce, Dad granted it without trying to convince her to stay. He must have had the same fear as her. He'd given her the house and half of his assets, and he never faltered on child support until I was twenty-one and done with college.

Their divorce was hard on me. I'd been only fourteen, and it felt like hell watching my parents go from a loving couple to strangers. Everything changed after. My mom still resented Dad, and I barely ever saw him again.

I'd not expected to see him on that day, too—my birthday and graduation.

But he'd been there.

A smile pulled on my face as the memories of him striding up to me with a bouquet of roses and his arms wide open for a hug infiltrated my mind. I'd run up to him at the speed of light, throwing my arms around him and inhaling his scent. Dad always smelled like tobacco and citrus, and God, had I missed him—even more than I missed Mom....

My phone buzzed in my tote bag, pulling me from my thoughts.

Both Hazel and I flinched, startled by the sudden ringing.

"Jesus, that almost gave me a heart attack." Hazel clutched her chest and exhaled while I rummaged for the phone.

After what felt like an eternity, I found it buried beneath a stack of books I always carried. My mom's number flashed on my screen, and a smile spread across my face. "I'm sorry, it's my mom. Just give me a second."

Hazel nodded. "Sure."

I answered the phone. "Hey, Mom."

"Hey, baby." Mom's voice was high-pitched and tinged with excitement. "How are you doing today?"

I leaned back in my chair, pinning my gaze on nothing in particular and imagining Mom's wide smile where she was. "I'm good. I'm out for lunch with Hazel."

"How is Hazel? I loved it when you used to bring that girl home for dinner," Mom said. "Is she okay?"

"She's good, too. We were talking about how much I miss you and Dad."

I could practically feel Mom's smile drop over the phone.

"Honey," she started, her tone dropping, "have you spoken to your dad lately?"

"Um...." Mom would be mad if I told her Dad was over at my place the previous night, but I couldn't lie to her about it. She'd be even more upset if she found out I hid his visit. "Well...Mom, promise me you won't be mad."

She paused. "You know I can't promise until I hear what you have to say."

"Right." My mother would never fall for that. Those tricks hadn't worked when I was younger, and they weren't going to work now. "Dad was at my place yesterday, but before you get angry at him, he only came because I asked him to."

There was a prolonged silence on the other end of the line. I knew Mom must be furious. I could imagine her breathing heavily, steam billowing from her ears.

"Mom, are you there?"

"Baby, you know why I told you to stay away from your father," Mom finally answered. Her voice was low, almost a whisper. She was a lot calmer about the situation than I expected.

"I know." I stirred my coffee to keep myself from getting too emotional. I knew my mother still loved my dad very much, but at some point, she had to make a choice between staying with the man she loved and keeping us safe. She chose the latter. "I just missed him."

"Honey, I miss your father, too. I really do." She sniffled, and I wondered if she was crying. She did that sometimes. I would find her in her room, sobbing, with a picture of my dad in her arms. Anyone would think he was dead. "But your father chose his

job and those people over us. He refused to leave, even when he knew it was dangerous and we could get hurt.”

“Mom—”

“You have to promise me, Giselle,” she said, cutting me off. “Promise me you’ll keep your distance from him.”

My chest constricted, and my throat tightened. I loved my mother so much, but what she was asking for was impossible.

I didn’t care if my father was a thug or even the worst man to walk this planet. I loved him, and I wanted to be around him as much as I could. “I can’t make that promise, Mom.”

“Giselle—”

“I know what you’re scared of, but you should know Dad would never do anything to hurt me or put me in danger. He wouldn’t come if someone was following him or something.”

“You don’t get it. It’s not your father I’m worried about.” She inhaled, still sniffing. “It’s those people he works with. They can’t be trusted. I’m afraid they’ll come for you or him or me if he makes a single mistake.”

I didn’t care if they came for me. I didn’t give a shit if my life was hanging by a thread; I would still choose my father every single time. It was enough that I didn’t have him around most of my childhood, but I wasn’t going to turn him away now.

“Mom.” My voice cracked, and a part of my soul was bleeding because I knew she was right to feel that way, but I couldn’t make that promise to her. “Dad will be fine.

I'll be fine, too. You don't have to worry. Just take care of yourself, okay?"

She was sobbing quietly, and it broke my heart to hear her whimpering over the phone. "I'm sorry for being too emotional. I love you, Gigi."

"I love you, too, Mom. I'll call you again when I'm home, okay?"

"Okay."

She hung up.

I tossed my phone on the table. My fingers hovered over the phone still, and my throat tightened as I fought back emotions.

"Is everything okay?" Hazel asked, her face marred with concern. "You look really sad right now."

"Yeah." I tucked my hair behind my ear and lifted my coffee to my mouth. It was lukewarm now, making it taste even creamier. "She's worried my dad's business will end up putting me in harm's way."

She gave me a pitiful look. "Is it always like this with your parents?"

I drew in a breath, trying to act as unaffected as possible. "Not always. Mom goes ballistic whenever she finds out Dad came around. She's been that way since they divorced."

"You can't blame her, though; she's only worried because she cares about you." Hazel stares at me intently. "You'll be fine. You're one of the toughest people I know."

“Can you blame me?” I forced a smile that didn’t meet my eyes. “Mobster dads have that effect.”

She chuckled. “Tell me about it. When I was younger, I used to think mobster dads were very cool. They always looked badass.”

“Yeah, seems that way when it’s not your reality,” I muttered as I peered outside.

It was a beautiful sunny Saturday morning in New York City. The streets were buzzing with people and cars, and the sky was the bluest I’d ever seen. That was when it occurred to me that I was missing something very important—a memory I would cherish forever.

“What are you thinking?” Hazel asked, dragging my attention back to the present.

“I’m thinking I’ve never had a date with my dad. We didn’t even have a daddy-daughter dance when I went to prom at sixteen.”

Hazel leaned over the table, her hazel-green eyes glistening. “So, you want to ask your dad out on a date?”

I nodded enthusiastically. “Yes.”

My conversation with Mom evoked something in me. I always knew how dangerous my dad’s job was, but it never occurred to me until now how valid her fear was. What if I never saw him again? What if the next time I saw him would be the last?

A shiver ran down my spine, and suddenly, my scalp prickled with terror. I needed to make a bucket list of things that I wanted to do with him. Mom was in Oregon now, and she wouldn’t know I met up with him if no one snitched.

“Perfect,” Hazel exclaimed. “Do you have any idea where you’d want to go with him?”

I shook my head. “I’m thinking of one of the fancy restaurants in the city. We can go fishing, too, and maybe he’d teach me how to shoot a gun.”

Honestly, anything was fine as long as I got to spend some time with him.

My phone beeped with an incoming message from my dad. “Are we psychics or something? I think my parents know we’re gossiping about them. Guess who just texted?”

“Your dad?”

“Yeah.” I grabbed my phone from the table, but it rang just as I was about to open his message.

Hazel leaned back in her seat. “Is that him calling?”

“No. It’s an unknown number.” I peered at my phone for a few seconds longer than necessary, my heartbeat speeding up as time seemed to slow around me. Something about this call sent a ripple of dread through my veins. It was the only explanation for how I felt, and I knew if I picked up the phone, I’d regret it.

“Won’t you answer it?”

I swallowed hard enough to push down the lump in my throat and swiped on the screen, ignoring my internal protests. At first, I didn’t speak; I just listened.

“Hello?” a gravelly voice said on the other end of the line. “Am I speaking to Giselle Rae?”

I listened for any familiarity with the voice, but there was none. I recognized only his Russian accent, and I could already guess that it was one of the people Dad worked with.

My fingers grew cold around my phone, and I clutched it tighter. My pulse picked up, and my heart thudded against my ribcage in anticipation of what was to come.

Something was wrong.

Dad wouldn't let the men he worked with call me otherwise.

"Yes, you're speaking to Giselle Rae," I muttered. "Is there a problem?"

"I'm sorry, devushka," he said in that thick Russian accent. "Your father was murdered this afternoon."

And just like that, the blue sky turned grey, and my world went dark.

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“A body in the morgue and a shipment missing sounds like a fucking problem to me.”

All eyes in the room turned to me: piercing green eyes belonging to Egor Yezhov, the Pakhan of the Bratva; the dark, intense eyes of my cousin, Rafayel Yezhov; and the light blue, murderous eyes attributed to my other cousin, Miron Yezhov.

Every man in this room shared something in common beyond our last name and our connection to the dark underworld; we were all here to mourn the same man.

But not in the way his family and friends, if he had any, would. One thing about men in the Bratva was that we had no friends. Trust was fickle, and love was a vulnerability—everything the mafia was against.

We only needed our fucking wits and brutality to survive, but even that wasn't enough sometimes.

Peter Rae was one of the best men we'd had, and he was dead.

Not just dead—he was fucking murdered . But that wasn't the real problem, at least not for me. The problem was that he'd hidden something very valuable, something we couldn't find on our own, and you know what they say about dead men not telling any tales.

The man had taken a secret that cost blood and money to his grave.

“We'll find whoever is responsible for this, and we'll take them down,” Miron said.

“We'll burn the world if we have to.”

Miron was a cruel bastard. He didn't care that Peter died; he couldn't give a fuck which one of our men was gutted by our enemies. He only cared that he could use it as an excuse for extreme violence. He was the most sadistic of all four of us, and I liked that about him.

Everyone in this room aside from him would be worried about the motive behind Peter's murder and why, but not Miron. He never asked questions. He wanted a name. A target. Someone to put a bullet in.

He and I shared certain similarities; however, he was volatile, while I preferred to be practical.

I leaned back in my chair, flicking my lighter open and closed, the metallic snick echoing through the room as I put my brain to work.

Smoke curled in the air from Egor's cigar, mixing with the scent of aged whiskey none of us had touched. The Pakhan sat at the head of the table, leaning back with his legs crossed and his expression unreadable. His fingers tapped against the glass in front of him in a foreboding way, and his eyes were fixed on one thing—the phone on the table.

It was Peter's phone. Miron had retrieved it from Peter's body before it was taken to the morgue.

"Peter's dead," Egor said, his voice heavy with rage and the need for vengeance, despite his calm exterior. "Except he isn't just dead; he was murdered. Someone openly declared a war against us."

"Now I'm curious about who would be brave enough to do something like that," Rafayel chipped in for the first time. "No one would be stupid enough to declare war unless it was someone powerful enough to do so."

It didn't take much mental gymnastics for me to figure out what the killer was after. I was surprised they hadn't figured it out yet. "Isn't it obvious?"

Rafayel shot me a sharp look. "Isn't what obvious?"

"What they're after." I let the lighter snap shut and met his gaze. "They're after the Tyfun-1."

My cousins exchanged glances.

The Tyfun-1 was a massive shipment of high-grade, synthetic drugs we'd shipped in from Mexico only two days ago. We'd kept it confidential, but I guess secrets leak very easily around here.

"The Tyfun-1 was a secret. There's no way anyone else would have known about it," Miron said, shooting up to his feet and pacing the room.

"Well, I guess we weren't careful enough. Someone knew about it, and whoever it was went after it. The timing makes sense," I explained as calmly as I could. "Peter took the shipment during a raid yesterday. He hid it God knows where, and today, he's dead."

The leather cushion creaked under Rafayel's weight as he shifted on it. "So, you're saying someone killed him in order to take the shipment."

I nodded.

"How do we know he didn't give them the information before he died?" Egor asked. He'd finally stopped tapping against the glass. It looked like I'd piqued his interest.

"Peter would never give up that information even to save his own life." I smiled,

taking a sip of my whiskey and reveling in the way it burned down my throat. “That’s where trust comes in.”

“We still need to find whoever is after the Tyfun-1 before they do more damage,” Rafayel suggested, his face contorting with rage.

I shook my head, my lips curling with a smirk. “That won’t be necessary. All we have to do is find the Tyfun-1. Whoever is behind Peter’s death will come to us himself. He can’t hide in the shadows for long.”

Miron finally stopped pacing and leaned against the wall. “How do we find it?”

Egor’s eyes and mine shot to the phone in the middle of the table at the same time. I could tell he was thinking the same thing as I was.

“This phone has some of the answers we need,” Egor said, picking the device up and rotating it between his fingers. The screen was cracked and still had remnants of Peter’s blood on it.

“Let’s see what’s on it,” Rafayel said, straightening up.

Egor held the power button until the phone came on. The lock screen was a picture of a girl in her early twenties wearing a graduation gown and smiling at the camera.

She had an uncanny resemblance to Peter, but unlike him, her smile was filled with an innocence that made me shake my head. Such innocence had no business in a world like ours; she would only wither away and die.

Egor scrolled through the phone for a moment, and then he turned the cracked screen toward us. “This was the last call he made the night before he was murdered.”

I narrowed my eyes to see the number saved as My Cherry with a heart on fire and a kissy-face emoji on it.

Irritation crawled up my skin at the sight of it. Emotions like love were a vulnerability; it couldn't be said enough times for anyone with ears to actually listen.

“That must be his daughter,” Miron noted. “What business would she have with the Tyfun-1?”

Egor pulled the phone closer to himself, scrolled through it, and turned the screen toward us again.

This time around, there was a message displayed on the screen, and the recipient was the same My Cherry with the heart on fire and kissy-face emojis.

I read the message out loud. “The typhoon's eye holds the calm—Tyfun-1.”

Rafayel scoffed. “The fuck does that mean?”

“No idea,” Egor said. “But she clearly knows something.” He slid the phone toward me. “Find her. Find the shipment.”

I picked up the phone, rolling it between my fingers.

I didn't know what Peter's daughter was like, but if she indeed knew about the drugs, then it made sense she would be on the run right now. That was what anyone with common sense would do: run.

Miron huffed a laugh. “Look at that doe-eyed girl. Does she seem like the type to know stuff about hard drugs?”

“From what I heard, Peter stayed away from his family after divorcing his ex-wife. If he called her last night and sent a text, then he must’ve told her something.” I stopped spinning the phone and thought for a moment. “What time was Peter murdered?”

“His body was found near the bay at eight a.m. today,” Miron answered. “Considering rigor mortis had not begun to set in yet, chances are he was murdered between six and seven a.m.”

“Right.” I tapped the screen, waited for it to turn on, and scrolled back to the message. “The message was sent at eight-thirty a.m.” I flicked through the screen. “He scheduled the message.”

Rafayel grabbed the phone from me. His eyes widened enough to show his surprise. “That means he probably suspected this would happen. He knew someone was watching or following him.”

I nodded and turned to Miron. “Do you have any idea where he might’ve been coming from?”

“His daughter’s.”

I scoffed. “Looks like we have all the answers we need. Now all we have to do is find Peter’s little girl, and we’ll find out what she knows.”

“Easy, big guy,” Rafayel teased, his lips curling with a smirk. “We’re not so sure what she knows and doesn’t know. That could be a cryptic message with nothing more to it. He wouldn’t be stupid enough to drag his daughter into this mess.”

Rafayel was right.

Peter’s daughter had no ties to the mafia, at least not officially. Her mother made sure

of it when she got a divorce from Peter. No one knew anything about her aside from the fact that her name started with the letter G, and he provided everything she needed, even from a distance.

But that changed now that we knew she was the last person he contacted before he died. We weren't going to take any chances.

"She knows something," Miron said with certainty. "Or she at least must've seen or heard something."

Rafayel glanced at me, his cold, dark eyes filled with curiosity. "And if she doesn't?"

I flashed a cocky smile. "You think I'll kill her, too?"

"We don't hurt women or children, remember? We don't harm the innocent."

"Tell me, Rafayel, have you ever seen me hurt a woman or a child before?" I kept my face blank, leaving it up to him to figure out if I found his concern offensive or not.

It was disrespect to the codes I live by for him to question my morality like that, and he knew it. The mafia world was so dark and bloody that those moral codes were the only thing that made us slightly human.

His Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed. "You're obsessed with the drugs."

"Am I?" I finished the rest of my whiskey in one gulp, my brows knitting only a little at the taste. The whiskey burned, but I welcomed it, letting it settle like armor in my gut, and then I set the glass down with quiet finality. "I'm concerned about what would happen if those drugs got into the wrong hands, Rafayel."

"Cut it out, both of you." Egor's gaze fled in my direction. "There's a chance

Peter's murderers have the information we do. Make sure you find her before anyone else does and get what we need."

That wasn't a request from Egor; it was an order.

"She won't just hand over information," Miron muttered. "Want me to come with you? I could get the information out of her with just one torture session."

"She'll talk," I answered simply, pushing up from the couch and pocketing the phone. "I'll make sure she does."

"What happens if she insists she doesn't know anything?" Rafayel asked, still staring at me as if I were a seven-horned devil who was about to condemn an innocent soul to hell. He'd been the closest to Peter, so I wasn't surprised he was trying to keep Peter's daughter safe.

I couldn't claim his concern was entirely unfounded because, at that moment, I was ready to do whatever it took to recover those drugs.

I smirked. "Then she'll have to convince me."

And I wasn't very easy to convince.

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They said there were five stages of grief—denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. But I didn't feel any of those when I got the call that Dad died. I didn't feel anything.

Even now, I felt nothing more than fog in my brain and a heaviness in my chest that made it hard to breathe. I couldn't cry even when I was dying to. I knew I would get some sort of relief if I did, but I couldn't.

A couple of days had passed since I got that call, and I still couldn't understand how I went from sipping coffee in a beautiful café to standing in a cemetery where the scent of roses and damp earth clung to the cold air, mixing with the lingering sting of loss.

I was surrounded by friends and a few of Dad's family. Mom couldn't make it down here because I'd fixed the burial as quickly as I could. I couldn't stand the thought of Dad remaining in the morgue in the state his body was found in. I'd seen him. I'd seen the hole right in the middle of his head and the stitched-up stab wounds. I'd felt the coldness of his skin when I touched him.

None of it made sense to me. None of it ever would.

Today wasn't like it was on the day he'd died. The sun wasn't out in full force, and the streets weren't buzzing. The sky mourned with me, gray clouds hanging low as if they, too, carried the weight of my father's death.

Dad was gone, and I was expected to stand here and read a few words from a piece of paper like they could convey everything I wanted to say. I was supposed to bury him and move on like my world hadn't been torn apart. What a joke.

I clutched the paper in my hand and smiled at everyone who came to pay their last respects. They all looked at me with pity, as if they could see how much I struggled to hold myself together.

I glanced down at the paper in my hands, trying to read from it, but I couldn't see past my blurry vision. I wasn't going to cry, but it was hard to stop the tears from welling in my eyes.

Reading something pre-written wasn't going to suffice.

I crumpled the paper, squeezing it harder than necessary, and conveyed what I truly wanted to say.

"I always knew death was inevitable, but I never thought I'd have to stand here and say goodbye to my father so soon." I paused and drew a shaky breath. "My father, Peter Rae, was many things. A provider. A protector. A man who carried his own demons but still tried to shield me from them. He was far from perfect, but he was still my father who loved me very much, and now he's gone."

A sob from one of the well-wishers distracted me. It was my father's youngest sister, Aunt Bianca. She was the only one of his siblings who didn't fear him or judge him so cruelly, and she was the only one of them who showed any real pain at his death. Dad would be happy to know that she was here to send him off. I doubt he'd be happy to know that Mom couldn't make it.

"People say that time heals all wounds and that grief fades. But how do you heal from a loss that doesn't just leave a wound but rips out a piece of you entirely?" I paused and took another deep breath. "My father lived a life in the shadows. He made choices I didn't always understand, but beneath it all, he loved me, and he didn't deserve to die this way. He didn't deserve this. I don't know who took him from me, and I don't know why. But I do hope he rests in peace and knows I loved him very

much.”

Tears trailed down my face for the first time after my speech, my hands trembling as I thought of my father. I wondered what he felt in his final moments, how scared he must’ve been knowing his life had come to an end.

I wondered if he thought of me and Mom, if he was sorry he wasn’t around more.

The weight of my own words pressed against my chest, suffocating. I swallowed hard, willing myself not to break, not in front of all these people. Not now.

Then, I felt it.

A shift in the air. A presence that was more unsettling than comforting.

I lifted my gaze, and that was when I saw them.

A small group of men stood near the back of the crowd, dressed in black, their expressions cold as ice. They didn’t belong here—not in the way everyone else here did, and I knew who they were right from the moment I saw them.

They were the Russian mafia my father worked for, and they were here to pay their last respects, too. At least they didn’t consider him a worthless animal who didn’t deserve to be mourned, but it didn’t stop my fingers from curling into my palms.

This must’ve been the second stage of grief—rage.

Dad would have been here if it weren’t for those men. He wouldn’t have been murdered so cruelly if he didn’t get entangled with them.

Red-hot anger flared in my chest, followed by the immense need for revenge.

I stiffened, my chest heaving with more hatred for them than I could control.

I had spent my entire life knowing these men existed. They were dangerous. Cold. Merciless. And now, they stood here, acting like they had any right to grieve him.

My gaze swept over them quickly, my heart hammering as I tried to process the reality of their presence. And then I saw him.

A man stood slightly apart from the others; his posture was relaxed, yet his piercing blue eyes were sharp and watchful. He was tall and broad-shouldered, with a rugged jaw and an air of authority that made my pulse stutter. His dirty-blond hair was neatly cut, but there was something about him—something unruly.

Our eyes met.

A silent current passed between us, something unreadable, something that made my skin prickle. He didn't look away. Neither did I.

Mysterious. Dark. Like all of them.

But there was something different about him, something I couldn't place.

The priest's voice pulled me back, signaling the end of the ceremony, and I blinked, breaking the stare.

A prayer was said, Dad was lowered into the ground, and his grave was covered. That was it. That was the end of everything he was.

I stayed beside him hours after everyone else dispersed, just wanting to be near him. Life was fickle; I knew that now, and it broke my heart that I could never get the father-daughter date I'd so badly wanted. I couldn't fish with him or go for a fancy

dinner with him ever again.

This was the end of Peter Rae.

I had no idea how long I sat beside Dad's grave, telling him all the things I wished we'd done and how much I was going to miss him, but the sun had set already, which meant I'd been here alone for at least five hours.

The cemetery was empty now. Only the sound of the evening breeze rustling the trees and the chirping of birds returning to their nests kept me company.

As the sun dipped lower in the sky, I stared at the freshly turned soil. The air smelled of damp earth and dying flowers, and a hollow ache settled in my chest. Everyone had left except me and him.

I could leave, but he was stuck here forever.

As much as I wished I could remain here with him, I couldn't. He wouldn't want me to put my life on hold; he'd want me to be strong and achieve my dreams, and I was going to do just that.

The only problem was that I knew his killers were out there, roaming freely. The police had not yet found a single clue about who killed him and why, and I realized I would never fully find peace if no one was punished for this.

Sighing, I rose to my feet and smoothed out the black dress that was supposed to be for our date, and then I smiled at my dad's grave. On his gravestone, I had them carve, Here lies Peter Rae, a loving father and a mobster with a good heart. He'd laugh if he were here to see it.

“Rest well, Dad. I hope the ground isn’t too cold and lonely.” I ran a hand over the tombstone, smiling through tears. “I’ll come by whenever I can.”

I blew a kiss to him and turned around to leave but stopped when I felt the hair on the back of my neck rising. It was the same sensation I’d gotten earlier today, as if someone was watching me.

And I was right; someone was.

From a distance, I recognized the icy, piercing blue eyes, that strong jaw, and those broad shoulders. It was the same man from the funeral—one of the men from the Bratva.

Had he been waiting for me the entire time? If so, why?

It didn’t matter. Dad was dead now, and it was better not to get involved with men like him.

I looked away and began walking toward the gate of the cemetery.

It wasn’t safe; I needed to leave.

He must’ve noticed me glancing at him because he started toward me. He was pretty composed, but his strides were so long that he was quickly catching up even when I hastened my steps.

My pulse quickened, my stomach churning with fear. What if...what if they were here to kill me, too?

God, why hadn’t I thought of that and left earlier with everyone else?

I had to run—fast.

But before I could start running, strong, warm hands wrapped around my wrist and tugged me around.

I threw my hands up, ready to defend myself, when I saw the smirk on his face—his very handsome face. Shit, this wasn't the time to admire a dangerous man, but I swore he looked like he'd been sculpted from a special type of clay by God himself.

“Hello, Giselle,” he said in a deep, throaty voice that I would've absolutely fallen for if we'd met under different circumstances.

I swallowed, pushing down the lump in my throat. He had a sexy Russian accent that added to his charm. “What do you want?”

“I'm sorry for your loss,” he said, ignoring my question. There was no emotion in his voice. I would feel more sincerity from a robot than I would from this man.

All the rage from earlier came back. I wanted to yell, to scream and tell him this was all his fault—their fault. That my dad wouldn't be six feet under if they didn't turn him into a criminal.

I kept my composure and muttered a low, “Thank you.”

“I need to have a word with you,” he said calmly, like a predator luring his prey to their death. “I'd appreciate it if you could spare me a minute of your time.”

“Well, I don't have a minute to spare.” I made to leave, but he didn't let go.

His smirk dropped, and his face hardened. “I wasn't asking.” He sounded gravelly this time. “You're the last person your father contacted before he died. What did he

tell you?”

My blood turned to ice with fear, but I didn't let him see it. Men like him were prone to feed on other people's terror. Unfortunately for him, I wasn't one of those people who would cower under his scrutiny.

“Do you just go around asking people what their calls with their fathers are about?” I cocked a brow against my better judgment. “Do you also want to know everything my father and I ever talked about since I was a child?”

There was a flicker of something dark and dangerous in his eyes. “Be careful how you speak to me.”

“Or what? You'll kill me like you did him?”

He scoffed. I could see the way the fading sunlight cast shadows against the sharp edges of his face. “I did not kill your father, but he took something that belongs to the Bratva.”

My stomach twisted. “I don't know what you're talking about.”

His jaw ticked. “I need you to think before you answer my questions.”

Was he threatening me now?

I straightened my spine, lifting my chin. “Even if he did, what the hell makes you think I'll tell you?”

“Because,” he said, his voice low, almost a warning, “this isn't a game, solnishko . I do not have the time or patience to play with you.”

I froze at the nickname. The Russian endearment felt foreign on his lips, foreign and taunting, like he knew something I didn't.

"I have nothing to say to you," I snapped, trying to yank my arm back. His grip tightened just enough to remind me that he was stronger, that he was in control.

I glared at him, my heart throbbing wildly against my ribcage. He stared right back with an unreadable yet dark expression on his face.

Suddenly, the evening wind got heavier, and the air around us grew thick with tension. I knew right then and there that I should've chosen my words very carefully.

I was alone here, which meant he could kill me and bury me alongside my father, and nothing would happen. No one would even know where I was or who did it. Dad was gone, but I had Mom to live for. I didn't think she would survive it if anything happened to me, too, but I wasn't going to back down either.

Whimpering at the thought of what this crazy man could do to me, I lowered my gaze to my hand. His fist was still wrapped tightly around my wrist, and it hurt like crazy.

As if realizing for the first time that he was hurting me, his gaze flickered downward, and his grip loosened.

My wrist was red where he had held me. A flash of something I couldn't wrap my head around crossed his face. Was it guilt? Annoyance?

It was gone before I could place it.

He released me. "You should watch your back, solnishko."

I held his gaze for a second longer before stepping back. "And you should stay the

hell away from me.”

Without another word, I turned on my heel and walked away, leaving him standing there in the fading light, watching me.

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Giselle looked just like her father. They had the same eyes, the same raven-black hair, and, most of all, she'd inherited his defiance—all that stubbornness that made him loyal to a fault.

But she was also different in every other way.

I could tell how innocent she was just by looking into her eyes. She was pure and soft, a quality that would get her killed in a world like ours.

She was everything I hated, but when she stood her ground in front of me today, knowing I could kill her if I wanted and fighting to hide her fear, something in me had shifted in a way I didn't understand yet. I hadn't stopped thinking about her since I got back from the funeral that evening.

There was something about Giselle that I found hard to ignore, and whatever it was, I wasn't quite sure I liked it. My job was to gather information about the whereabouts of the Tyfun-1 from her, nothing more.

I leaned back in my chair, the dim light from my desk lamp casting sharp shadows across the room. My fingers drummed against the polished wood as I replayed our conversation—if I could call it that—at the cemetery.

Despite her attempts to seem composed in front of others, I could see the sadness in her eyes that indicated she was on the verge of breaking down. She gripped the piece of paper for her speech tightly, seeking comfort from it.

When our eyes met, I could see the intense hatred she held for me and for the mafia. I

knew she blamed us for her father's death even before she uttered a word. She loathed us, despised everything we represented.

But it was different for me because although I'd seen her in that goofy picture Peter used as his wallpaper, she was way prettier in person.

Her piercing emerald eyes were the first thing to catch my attention. They were brighter than shattered glass catching the light. And then there was her thick, dark lashes and her raven-black hair that framed the curve of her shoulders.

She was petite and looked almost too delicate to touch, but there was an intricate tattoo right there on her wrist where I'd held her.

Damn it, I hadn't even realized I was holding her then or how tight my grip was.

I refused to allow any other thoughts of her or her beauty in my mind. I needed to concentrate on one thing, and that was what she knew about the Tyfun-1.

She knew something. I could tell from the way her pulse jumped when I mentioned her father's last call—the way she tried too hard to act indifferent. She was hiding something, and I was going to find out what it was. If the secret didn't lie in that text or the last call he made, then it was in their meeting the night before he was murdered.

A sharp knock on the door pulled me from my thoughts. "Come in."

The door creaked open, and Dobryn stepped inside the office, closing the door behind him. Dobryn had worked for me for years, and he was one of the men I trusted the most.

I studied the dark expression on his face. "What is it?"

“The police found out about the Tyfun-1.”

I sat up, jaw clenching. “How?”

He shrugged. “I have no freaking idea how they found out. It’s all over the news. “They’re calling it Typhoon-1, and just like us, they’re working hard to get their hands on it. Apparently, they see it as a major threat—something about how dangerous the synthetic formula is.”

“The cops aren’t that smart; I’m certain we’ll get our hands on it before they do. We have Peter’s last message and his daughter.”

He didn’t agree, which meant he had something else to say. The suspense was killing me, and I could feel my frustration start to bubble.

“What else?”

He cleared his throat. “The police aren’t the only ones looking for it.”

“Fuck.” I fought back the rage flaring inside me. “Who else?”

“The Irish, maybe the Americans, too. Somehow, word got out that no one has any idea where Peter stashed the drugs before he died. Now everyone’s trying to find it.”

I grabbed onto my tie, loosening the knot that now felt like a noose around my throat. Perfect, just what I needed.

Dobryn scrutinized my expression cautiously. “You look grim yourself,” he noted as he sat on the chair across from my table. “Let me guess, the meeting didn’t go as planned, did it?”

I leaned back in my chair, swiveling from side to side. “The girl is harder to get through than I thought.”

She might not have known exactly who I was, but she recognized that I was from the mafia and understood how cruel I could be; yet, she stood her ground. I didn’t know whether to praise her for her boldness or consider it plain stupidity on her part. Either way, I was impressed. No one outside the mafia had ever stood up to me like that.

“Is there a chance she really doesn’t know about the Tyfun-1?” Dobryn asked, giving me the same doubtful look Rafayel had days ago. “She might’ve heard without knowing what it was.”

I shook my head. “She knows.”

“How can you tell?”

“Her reaction.” I steepled my fingers in front of me, thinking back to my conversation with Giselle. “She didn’t ask what the Tyfun-1 was or what the text meant. To a normal person, that text would’ve been nothing more than gibberish, but she wasn’t curious.”

Dobryn nodded in agreement. “What’s your plan now?”

I shrugged. “I’m still thinking the best way to go about the girl, but after meeting her today, I know it won’t be easy to get anything out of her. It’ll take time, and I’ll have to get her to trust that she won’t be in danger somehow.”

“We don’t have time, sir. The cops are on our tail. They already know Peter worked for us. It’ll be a matter of time before they figure everything out and raid our businesses.”

“That won’t happen.” I pulled out my drawer and, grabbing Peter’s phone, I tossed it to Dobryn. “We have to keep them busy for now.”

He caught the phone mid-air. “How do we do that, sir?”

I thought for a moment. “First, we’ll have to release the phone to the cops ourselves so it doesn’t become a problem later. We already have the information we need from it; they can have it.”

He narrowed his eyes on me. “You always have a plan, Boss. I’m sure this isn’t just you trying to keep the cops busy.”

He was right. It wasn’t just me trying to keep the cops busy; it was me luring in my prey without having to do too much.

The evidence in that phone would lead to only one person—Giselle. If things worked out the way I planned, she’d make a very good damsel in distress, and I would play my part as her prince charming who’d come to her rescue.

“What if they see that she’s innocent, and they let her go?” Dobryn asked, his brows drawn with worry. He glanced at the phone that still had dried patches of Peter’s blood, at the cracked screen, and I wondered if a part of him was afraid.

From what I heard, he was the one who found Peter the morning he was killed, right in his apartment. I still remembered the way his hands had been shaking when he handed the phone to Egor, the rage in his eyes. He could’ve murdered a person in that moment and not felt anything.

But I thought he also understood that was the reality of our world. On most days, we would be the killers, ripping hardened men from their families. But one day, our luck may run out, and we’d be the ones lying in a casket.

“If she’s innocent, then we can benefit from the investigation somehow. The police won’t stop until they tear the case apart and track every message, every call. If Peter left any clue about the location of Tyfun-1, they’ll find it for us. And in the process, they’ll put more heat on anyone who tries to claim it.”

“So, we’re using a cat to keep the rats away?” Dobryn smirked. “Smart.”

“That, and we’ll use the cats to lure the rats into a trap.” A sly smile curled on my lips. “Who knows, it might even lead us to who killed Peter and how they found out about the drugs.”

Dobryn rose to his feet and clenched his fingers around the phone. “I’ll hand this over to the police like you instructed and keep you updated on their investigation. One more thing, sir. What do I tell the Pakhan when he asks about Peter’s daughter?”

“Leave the Pakhan to me.”

He nodded and left the office.

Alone, my thoughts drifted to Giselle once more. If things went as planned, then I would be seeing her again soon. A twisted wave of amusement rushed through me as I imagined her scowling and seething at the idea of me being her savior.

She was going to hate it, but she would have no other choice but to play along with me; either that or she would possibly lose her freedom. I hoped she would make the right decision when the time came. She was too smart not to.

There was the fact that this would benefit her, too. I bet she was curious about who murdered her father, if not why. Most people are driven by their need for vengeance and justice, I doubted she was much different.

One thing I knew for sure, though, was that she would need me one way or another when the time came.

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I jolted awake, my heart throbbing against my ribcage and a trail of sweat running down my temple.

Sleeping had become elusive. The nightmares were haunting, and it was impossible to forget Dad in the state I last saw him—lifeless, drained of color and life. Most nights since he died had been like this: me waking up from one nightmare or forcing myself to remain awake so I wouldn't have another.

But tonight was different. It wasn't the nightmare that woke me up; it was the thudding on the door—or maybe not. Maybe I hadn't heard anything, and I was dreaming.

I listened for a moment, but there was nothing.

Right, I really was dreaming.

It was thirty minutes past one in the morning. No one would be knocking on my door that late. My mind tried to reel me back to thoughts of the Russian mafia. What if they were here for me? They wanted something, and knowing them, they would stop at nothing to get it.

I sighed, refusing to let the thought bubble any further. That wasn't entirely impossible, but I had doubts that was the case. I was certainly either dreaming or imagining things.

Swinging out of bed, I pulled on a robe, slid my feet into the fluffy panda slippers I always had at the side of my bed, and made my way to the kitchen for a glass of

water. If I wasn't able to sleep after, I could just grab the coloring book I got from a bookstore down the street and shade something in to calm my nerves. That always worked.

Turning on the kitchen light, I filled a glass with water and chugged down half of it at once. My heart wasn't throbbing as much anymore, but I could still feel the anxiety churning away in the pit of my stomach. God, I hated this feeling.

Another knock on the front door shattered the silence of the night. This time, the knock was louder and more demanding.

It wasn't a dream or some figment of my imagination this time. It was real. Someone was at the door at this time of the night. No one had ever visited me this late before; no one had any reason to.

My hand trembled as I set the glass on the kitchen island and contemplated what to do for a while. Calling the cops was an option, but I couldn't ring them until I was sure that whoever was at the door would harm me.

Opening the door without ensuring I wouldn't be in any danger wasn't a good idea either, but I couldn't stand here all night without knowing why someone would visit me at this hour.

Something was wrong, and I needed to know what it was.

I tiptoed to the front door with wobbly legs and peered through the peephole. Two men in police uniforms stood on my porch. I couldn't hear what they were muttering to each other, but I let out a long breath once I saw it wasn't the Russian mafia.

Still, I couldn't be relieved until I knew why they were here.

Did something happen? Did someone get hurt?

A terrible thought crept into my mind, sinking its claw into my chest as I reached for the door handle with shaky hands and unlatched it.

Red and blue lights flashed against the darkened street behind the two officers, making it seem that this was a crime scene that they were there to investigate.

It took a moment for me to find my voice. “Good morning, officers,” I greeted, my gaze shifting between them. “Is there a problem?”

The taller nodded. “Are you Giselle Rae?”

My heart sank to my stomach. This wasn’t a mistake; they were here for me. “I am.”

“We need you to come with us to the station, ma’am,” he answered, pulling out a pair of cuffs from his pocket.

I took a step backward on instinct, wondering if I’d heard him right. “I’m sorry, I’m really confused right now. Why?”

The shorter officer exhaled sharply. “You’re under arrest for the possible involvement in the production and trade of a harmful substance called Typhoon-1.”

“Typhoon-1,” I repeated.

I hadn’t heard that name before, but I’d read it somewhere—in the text Dad sent to me the day he died. He’d spelled it Tyfun-1, so I assumed it was pronounced differently until I met that man at the cemetery.

How was I under arrest for possible involvement in the production and trade of the

substance when I didn't even have a freaking idea what it was?

My head began to spin violently as I pieced the puzzle together. Did Tyfun-1 have something to do with what the man at the cemetery said? Did Dad steal from the mafia, and if he did, was that the reason he was murdered?

I had so many questions, but more importantly, what made them think I had something to do with it? Surely, they wouldn't just come to arrest me based on mere assumptions or the fact that my father had something to do with it.

"Officer, I think there's been a mix-up somewhere. I have no idea what that is. I am not involved whatsoever with it. Please believe me."

"You have the right to remain silent," one of the officers said, ignoring my explanation as he grabbed my wrist and forced it behind my back. The cold steel of the cuffs locked around my skin. "Anything you say now can and will be used against you in a court of law. You also have the right to an attorney."

Panic clawed at my throat, and breathing became three times harder. They weren't listening to me. "No, you can't do this. I can't go to court. I don't have an attorney."

"Please, rest assured. We'll provide an attorney for you if you cannot afford one for yourself."

"You need to listen to me, please. I have no idea what Tyfun-1 is."

"This way, ma'am." The taller officer guided me toward one of the police cars parked in the driveway.

The night air felt colder as it bit against my skin, and the flashing lights were suddenly too bright for my eyes to adjust to.

This wasn't one of those nightmares that haunted me while I slept; it was a reality. I was being whisked away in the dead of the night for a crime I knew nothing of a few days after my father was murdered. How bad could my luck get?

All I could think of was the text from Dad.

The Typhoon's eye holds the calm—Tyfun-1.

I sat stiffly in the interrogation room, my wrists hurting from where the cuffs were biting into my skin. The walls were a dull gray, the kind that made the room feel smaller than it was and more suffocating. A single flickering light buzzed overhead, casting an ominous shadow on the table in front of me.

I wasn't sure how long I had been sitting here, but it felt like hours. My pulse had yet to settle, and it beat a relentless rhythm against my ribs.

The door creaked open, and a man stepped inside, carrying a folder under his arm. He was tall and broad-shouldered, with sharp features and calculating eyes. His badge gleamed under the harsh fluorescent light: FBI.

He pulled out the chair across from me and sat down, flipping open the folder. "Giselle Rae." His voice was calm but firm, as if he already knew every answer I could give him. "I'm Special Agent Mark Fetcher."

I swallowed. "I'd like to say it's nice to meet you, Agent Fetcher, but I'd like to know why I'm here."

"Well, Miss Rae, how quickly you leave here will depend on how you cooperate with us." He tapped against a sheet of paper. "Your father was involved with Tyfun-1, a

synthetic substance that, if used, can cause irreversible damage to the human body.”

“I know nothing about the substance or my father’s involvement with it,” I protested. “I said it when your men came to pick me up from my home in a robe, and I’m saying it now: I have no idea what it is!”

Agent Fetcher ignored my protest and slid a paper toward me. It was a white-and-black picture of the text Dad had sent me before he died. “Do you recognize this message?”

I swallowed. “I do.”

He nodded and retrieved the paper from me. “We’ve been trying to track the substance before it entered the country but have had no luck. After it arrived, we were able to trace it to a warehouse your father managed. Unfortunately, he was smarter and ran away with it before we got there.”

My chest constricted, and the air stalled in my lungs.

So that was it? That was really the reason he was killed? He’d lost his life over something that useless?

My eyes pooled with tears as my heart broke into a million pieces. “I don’t know what Tyfun-1 is,” I insisted amidst a broken sob. “What makes you think I somehow had an involvement in my father’s business?”

“Because you were the last person he saw the night before he died, and he sent you a very specific message. Listen, all we need to do is find the drugs, and we’ll let you go. I know he passed on whatever information he had to you in that message.”

I scoffed with frustration. “Read the message. Does it make any sense to you?”

His eyes flicked to the paper and then back to me. “No.”

I slammed my hand on the desk. “Right. I guessed so. That is exactly how it looks to me. I can’t make sense of whatever message my father was trying to pass as well.”

The tension in the room was palpable, and I could hear the sound of my blood whooshing in my ears through the silence. I held my breath, hoping I’d been able to convince him I knew nothing about the drugs because I really didn’t.

Agent Fetcher leaned forward, reducing his voice to a whisper. “Miss Rae, I hope you understand you can be charged with obstruction of justice with your refusal to cooperate.”

“Charging me won’t change anything because I really have no freaking idea what Tyfun-1 is and where my father hid it. I didn’t even know it was a substance before you said it.”

He sighed, sitting back in his chair. “Then you leave us no choice.” He snapped the folder shut, his expression shifting from friendly to cold. “You’ll be held in custody until trial. Given the weight of this case, you’ll be facing real prison time until we determine your involvement.”

My chest tightened. “Prison?”

Panic surged through me. I had no money for bail. No lawyer. No way out. Mom was still grieving; she’d be absolutely heartbroken if she found out about this, and getting a lawyer wouldn’t change anything. I could really end up behind bars for this.

The grey walls felt like they were closing in on me. I wanted to protest even more, to plead with him to let me go, but the words that came out of my mouth weren’t what I intended. “I don’t want my mother to find out about this.”

He tilted his head, his brows furrowing. “What?”

“My mother,” I repeated. “It would break her heart if she found out I was here. Please don’t call her. Find a lawyer for me if you believe I really know something about the drugs, but I can’t let my mother find out.”

He sighed and rose to his feet, ignoring my pleas.

I was even more desperate than ever for his assurance. I needed him to tell me Mom wouldn’t find out, but before I could say another word, the door swung open with a sharp creak.

An officer in uniform entered the interrogation room. He walked up to Agent Fletcher and whispered something to him.

I nearly froze in my seat when Agent Fletcher glared at me, clear disappointment clouding his gaze, and nodded.

My hands turned clammy. I was already in enough trouble as it was. I couldn’t stand anything else going wrong.

What’s the matter now?

The officer left the interrogation room, and Agent Fletcher turned to me with a smirk. “Looks like today is your lucky day, Miss Rae. You might’ve been able to escape us today, but you won’t for long. You’ll be back in that chair soon enough.”

My stomach churned, and I was confused as to what he was talking about. What did he mean by that?

I didn’t care to ask. I was okay with anything as long as it meant I was able to leave

this place.

Agent Fetcher led me out of the interrogation room, and my breath caught when I saw who my savior was.

It was the man from the cemetery, and I didn't even know what his name was.

Just like the first time I met him, he wore a crisp black suit, his presence heavy like a storm in the room. It was commanding, powerful, and suffocating. His blue eyes flicked to me for half a second before settling on Agent Fetcher.

A flash of something—nervousness—passed over Fetcher's face.

The mysterious man stepped forward, his voice calm but laced with steel. "You can't keep her detained if you have no evidence she was involved with the synthetic substance you're looking for."

Agent Fetcher's throat bobbed. "Mr. Yezhov—"

"As for her trial, my lawyer will take care of that," Mr. Yezhov said, cutting Agent Fetcher off.

His deep, gravelly voice carried so much authority that even I shivered at the sound of it.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Yezhov, but she's still a suspect on the case. We have to follow all due procedures before we clear her."

A dangerous smirk played on the mysterious man's lips. "I wasn't asking, Agent Fetcher," he drawled.

Agent Fetcher's eyes grew red with rage, but I could feel even he knew he was no match for this mysterious man.

He inhaled beside me, and then, as if summoning his courage, he said, "You interrupted our interrogation session, sir. And I'm afraid only a relative can bail her at this point."

"Is that so?"

Agent Fetcher nodded.

The mysterious man stepped forward with slow, calculated strides and curled his arm around my waist. "That means I can bail her."

My body stiffened to his touch, my skin prickly with heat at the close proximity between us. He smelled like citrus and cigars, a scent so alluring that I wanted to lean into him and inhale every bit of it.

Agent Fetcher laughed nervously. "You're not related to her."

The mysterious man lowered his head, and his blue eyes bore into mine. "She's my fiancée."

My brain fogged, and my mind went silent. Air drained from my lungs as I tried to process what he just said.

His fiancée?

What?

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:57 pm

Giselle sat stiffly beside me with her arms crossed and her eyes fixed ahead of the road as if she was still trying to make sense of what had happened. She hadn't said a word to me since we left the police station, and I had no idea if it was best to enjoy the silence or be weary of it.

It was almost five a.m., still pitch-black outside, and the glow of passing streetlamps cast a glow on her face.

I stole a glance at her, my lips curling with a smile at how beautiful she looked even while she was seething.

"Why did you lie that I was your fiancée?" she asked, finally turning to face me.

I navigated the car into the Yezhov estate. "Because you are, at least for now."

She winced as if I'd said something hurtful to her. "Do you even understand what you're doing? What happens if the police finds out you lied? That would make you an accomplice and me a criminal."

"Well, would you have preferred rotting away in their cell and being interrogated every day for who knows how long, five to ten years? Because I sure as hell know you can't afford a lawyer, and you don't want your mother getting involved."

She opened her mouth to argue but shut it as if realization dawned on her, even if she couldn't understand my reasoning.

"You should be thanking me for getting you out of there, not questioning my

intentions.”

She shot venom at me with her eyes. “Listen, Mr. Yezhov—”

“Andrei,” I corrected her. “Just call me Andrei.”

“Fine.” She inclined her head with a nod. “Listen, Andrei, I know my father worked for you, and I really don’t understand why you’re going this far or why I’m even involved in this. Can you at least explain what’s actually going on so I don’t lose my mind trying to piece the puzzle together myself?”

I slammed on the brakes, and the car screeched to a stop. Giselle jerked forward, and I threw out a hand to protect her head from hitting the dashboard.

“What the hell was that about?” she asked, furrowing her brows as she sat up.

“You really have a knack for driving people insane, don’t you?” I pulled out a pack of cigarettes from the dashboard and slid a stick between my lips. I held out the rest of the pack to Giselle. “Do you want one?”

She held a hand up, displaying the intricate tattoo on her wrist. “No, I don’t smoke.”

I huffed. I knew she didn’t smoke; I’d tried to find out everything about her. She was truly the epitome of innocence, and her delicate appearance would’ve completely suited her if she wasn’t so sharp-mouthed.

The metallic click of my lighter echoed in the quiet space as I lit it, inhaling deep before exhaling a slow stream of smoke.

I glanced at her. “Do you really want to know everything?”

“Don’t leave out a single detail,” she ordered.

No one ever gave me orders aside from Egor, but I was willing to let this go for the sake of everything she’d been through.

I leaned back in my chair and allowed the cigarette to slip between my fingers. “Your father hid something before he died, a shipment with something valuable.”

She coughed, waving off a plume of smoke rolling in her direction, and I rolled down the car windows, transferring the cigarette to the hand closer to the window to let the smoke out.

“And let me guess, this valuable shipment was Tyfun-1?”

I nodded. “You were the last person to see him alive and the only person he sent that coded text to, so everyone thinks you know where he hid the shipment.”

Her brows drew together. “But I don’t know where it is.”

“Good luck explaining that to the cops, the Bratva, and the rats lurking around you, trying to get their hands on the shipment.”

The color drained from her face. “Wait, what do you mean by the rats lurking around me? Is there someone else trying to get their hands on the shipment aside from you and the police?”

I took another drag of my cigarette. “That shipment is worth at least a billion dollars. It’s incredibly hard getting it into the country, and you know what they say about high demand and scarcity and how it affects prices. It’s only natural that other crime organizations and rival mafia families will try to get their claws on it.”

“Look, I really don’t want to get involved in this.”

“Too late, you’re already involved. Do you even understand how much danger you’re in?” I didn’t want to scare her, but I needed her to understand just how dire the situation was. “By crime organizations, I don’t just mean the Italians. I mean the Romanian syndicate, the Outfit, the Irish mob, the Albanians—people who won’t ask nicely like the FBI did.”

Her pupils dilated, the emerald swollen by the black. “What do I do now? How do I escape them?”

“There is no escape for you, solnishko . You won’t be safe anywhere else.” I tossed the half-burned cigarette away and rolled up the window. “That’s the reason I’m taking you under my protection. You’re going to play the role of my fiancée until all of this is over if you want to stay safe.”

She laughed, but it was mirthless—a blend of fear and disbelief. “How am I supposed to believe you’ll keep me safe? You’re just like them. Just as cruel and soulless as the rest of those vultures. How do I know this isn’t some sort of trap?”

“You just have to trust me.”

“No, I can’t just trust you, Andrei. Not after everything has happened. I need to know why you care enough to try and keep me safe.”

“You’re right. I’m just like them, soulless and cruel, but your father worked for me, and I respected him very much. He was kind and loyal. That isn’t something you find easily in the mafia,” I explained, holding her gaze so she could see that I meant every word. “He died working for me, which makes you my responsibility now.”

She let out another humorless laugh. “Great speech. You expect me to believe that?

Like you said, you're just like the other guys. All of this could be a show just to get information from me."

I didn't expect her to believe me, but I meant every word I said. It was true that I approached her to get the information I needed about how to find the missing shipment, and I got her arrested just so I could play Prince Charming and come to her rescue; she'd trust me that way.

But that wasn't the only reason.

Peter and I might not have been as buddy-buddy as he and Rafayel, but we were damn close, and I knew his daughter was all that mattered to him. I'd be failing him if I allowed her to get hurt. "Trusting me is a choice you have to make."

"Yeah, right. I don't trust you, so I guess I'm out of here." Her hand moved toward the door handle.

I grabbed her wrist to stop her. This time, I was cautious not to hold her too tight.

I didn't expect her to be so light because, with one pull, I was close enough for our bodies to rub against each other.

She gasped, her wide eyes locking onto mine.

"You're not going anywhere," I said, my voice low, steady. "Not until this is over. Not until I say so."

Her breath hitched slightly, but she didn't look away. "Last time I checked, I'm a grown woman who is capable of making my own decisions. You can't tell me what to do."

“I can if the decision you’re about to make will hurt you. I’m not trying to control you. This is just my own way of keeping you safe, Giselle. You don’t have a choice.”

She moved away from me and rolled her head back. The car became silent again, save for the finger I was tapping on the steering wheel as I waited for her to say something.

What felt like an eternity passed before she exhaled, her shoulders sagging with defeat. “If I trust you, then there’s one thing I’ll ask for. It’s not for you to keep me safe or anything else.”

Was she bargaining with me right now? I didn’t mind, as long as she didn’t refuse to be under my protection. “What do you want?”

She peered right into my eyes with her chin high. “I want you to find the people who did that to my dad, and I want them to pay for it. I need them to suffer the same way he did before they stole his life from him.”

A fair request, I must say.

I’d been waiting for that rage, for that need for revenge, and now I had it. “I’ll find them.”

“How do I know you’re not just saying that?”

“If we’re working together, then you must learn to trust me. Peter wasn’t just your father; he worked for the Bratva, and he was loyal. Avenging him and keeping you safe is the least we can do.”

She glanced at me, her lips thinning as she studied me. “I’m choosing to trust you, Andrei. I hope I don’t regret it someday.”

I wanted to assure her that she wouldn't regret her decision to trust me, but I'd never been a man of too many words. I intended to show her that trusting me would never be a mistake.

Rather than giving her the assurance she needed, I held her gaze, silent for a long moment.

She had fire in her. I could see it now, the same spark Peter had.

But fire could be dangerous.

And right now, she had no idea just how much the need for revenge could consume her. She had no idea how much a deal with a man like me could cost her.

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Andrei's mansion was nothing short of breathtaking. Its sheer size was overwhelming: a sprawling estate tucked behind iron gates and guarded walls. Every inch of the place screamed wealth.

Inside, the ceilings stretched high, adorned with intricate chandeliers that cast a dim golden glow over the grand hallways. The floors were polished marble, and the entire place was expensively furnished.

Everything was sleek, modern, and expensive—from the deep mahogany paneling to the leather furnishings, to the heavy drapes that kept the sunlight at bay. It looked and felt like it was designed to intimidate, just like its owner.

Anyone who walked in here could guess his personality. It felt like he was woven into every detail—the sharp lines, the absence of unnecessary decoration, the dominance of black and charcoal tones. Cold. Untouchable. Dangerous. Even the artwork on the walls was carefully curated, a mix of classic oil paintings and abstract pieces, all in moody shades of gray and crimson.

I'd never been in a place this grand before, and although I could already tell from his expensive Lamborghini that he was rich, this just added layers to it.

Andrei wasn't just rich; he was fucking wealthy.

The room I occupied, which was one of the many guestrooms in the mansion, looked more like it was designed for a billionaire guest, not for a broke, fresh-out-of-college girl like me.

The white and gray monochrome décor made it look like one of those houses Instagram models would post in, and the queen-sized bed was softer and more comfortable than the one I had at my place. Everything was better here.

I rolled on my side, staring at the blue sky through the window. It was morning again, the fourth morning I'd spent here, and I could already tell it wouldn't be long before I lost my mind from boredom.

There was nothing to do here except watch TV and eat all day. He had maids and chefs, so I didn't need to lift a finger to get anything done. He wouldn't let me go back to my place to get some of my things because it wasn't safe, and I had been too scared to ask if I could hang out with Hazel or at least visit a gallery. I knew he would say no, so it was pointless to ask.

My phone rang, and I dug my hand under my pillow to grab it. My pulse started racing when I saw Mom's number flash on my screen.

Shit. I couldn't let her know what was going on. I couldn't let her suspect something was wrong or that I wasn't home. She'd be worried if she knew.

I inhaled, reminding myself to remain calm and composed before answering her call. "Hi, Mom."

"Hi, baby." Her voice cracked, as if she'd been crying. I knew she would be. No matter how long she and Dad had been separated, their love for each other was something that never withered.

"Hi, Mom," I repeated as I turned around to face the ceiling. "Have you been crying?"

"No," she lied despite her sniffing giving her away. "I wasn't. I just—"

“Mom,” I whispered, cutting her off before she could think of another lie. “I know you loved Dad. I know you miss him. I do, too. It’s okay to cry.”

“Oh, baby. I’m so sorry. I should be there with you, taking care of you and consoling you.” She broke into a full sob now, and hearing her cry shattered something in me. It brought back all the pain I’d tried to forget. “I know how much you loved your father, and maybe if I hadn’t left him, he would still be alive.”

Bargaining: That was the third stage of grief, and Mom was there right now. She thought things wouldn’t have turned out the way if she’d done one thing or the other differently.

It meant she was grieving the right way. She’d been in denial when she got the news that Dad died, and then she’d been mad at Dad and his murderers. Soon, she’d be depressed, and then she would accept things for what they were.

I couldn’t say the same for myself. I skipped denial and went right into rage. I needed revenge. I needed to see the people who hurt my father pay for what they did. Maybe that would help me grieve the right way. That would help unburden the pain I carried.

Keeping my voice calm, I said the only words I could find: “It isn’t your fault, Mom. It’s all on them. They would have killed him either way.”

I could hear Mom fighting to suppress her sobs. “I’ll find a way to come to you, Gigi. I checked for available fights today, and I should be able to get one for the weekend.”

I sat up quickly, my chest aching with a frantic beat. “You can’t!”

She was safer in Oregon. And then there was the fact that there was no easy way to explain any of this to her if she chose to come back. How was I supposed to tell her I’d been arrested for my involvement in shipping a drug I knew nothing about and

that I'd been bailed out and was now living with a member of the Bratva—the same people she hated with a passion?

There was a moment of silence before she spoke again. “Why?”

I needed to come up with a lie, quick. “Because I’m spending some time with my friend. I feel better here.”

“Um—is this a friend I know about? What’s her name?”

“It’s not exactly a girl.” I gritted my teeth at how easily I could lie. “It’s my boyfriend.”

She laughed. “Boyfriend? Giselle, honey, you never told me you had a boyfriend. How long have you two been dating?”

I slid my hand through my hair and bit my lip. The more lies I told, the more I would have to continue to tell. My brain couldn’t keep up. “I have to go now, Mom. He’s here. I’ll tell you everything later. Just promise me you won’t book that flight.”

“Okay, okay, I promise. But let me know if you need me, and I’ll find a way to come to you as quickly as I can.”

“Sure, Mom. Take care of yourself, okay? I love you.” I hung up immediately and made a sign of the cross. At least I was certain she wouldn’t get on the next available flight and come to New York; that counted for something.

I rolled out of bed and went downstairs for breakfast. As usual, Andrei wasn’t home. We’d not shared a single meal together since I got here, and he was hardly ever around. He usually went out before I woke up and returned in the dead of the night when everyone else was sleeping.

As much as I tried to keep out of his business, my curiosity was piqued. I wanted to know where he went each day and why he always came home so late. I was certain it had something to do with mafia business, but what was so important that he couldn't handle it during the day like every normal person?

I filled my plate with food—bacon, toast, sausages, and scrambled eggs. The breakfast on the table was enough to serve a family of five; Andrei never ate anyway, so I didn't see any use for the excess. I guess that was how rich people ate. Every meal was prepared like a feast.

I served myself a cup of hot coffee and took the first bite of my bacon. It was well-seasoned and soft to chew, just the way I liked it.

While I wanted to enjoy my breakfast, I couldn't help the way my thoughts drifted to Dad and everything that had happened so far. I wondered what he'd been thinking in his last moments and if he'd somehow known he didn't have very long to live. Was that why he insisted he needed to see me?

And the text about Tyfun-1, what the hell did it mean? What message was he trying to pass? I knew it had something to do with where he hid it, but it didn't make any sense, no matter how much I thought about it.

“The Typhoon's eye holds the calm,” played on a loop inside my head. What the hell did he mean by Typhoon's eyes and the calm? I knew it was a clue, but how was I supposed to figure out what it meant?

I sighed, digging my fork into one of the sausages and chewing aggressively as my thoughts went all over the place.

Dad scheduled that message hours before his death, which meant he was being followed, and he knew it. He wanted me to find where he hid Tyfun-1; he wouldn't

have sent me a text otherwise.

But why me? Why did he trust me with something so important and dangerous?

He was the only person who could answer those questions, and he was dead now.
What was I supposed to do?

There was so much to unfold.

So much mystery.

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The bass thrummed through the floor, pulsing like a second heartbeat beneath my feet. Neon lights flickered in rhythmic flashes, painting the private lounge in hues of red and gold.

We were at Moroz Lounge, one of our newest investments in New York, and Egor had put me in charge of it. I always came here at night when I needed to wind down, and Dobryn was in charge of supplying the women who would entertain us.

Tonight wasn't any different. Dobryn had a group of girls over, two women for each man. They draped over the plush leather seats, their laughter a soft hum against the pounding music as they did their best to catch our interest. It was always like that, every woman around here trying to please us; some of them would lay on their backs and allow us to walk on them if it meant they could win our favor. It was boring as fuck having to deal with that.

One ran her fingers along the sleeve of my jacket. She had a sly smile on her face as she whispered something I couldn't even make out into my ears.

Usually, I'd be turned on by her enough to fuck her once, wanting to let out some of the dangerous steam that had grown through the day from handling mafia business.

But tonight was different. I barely acknowledged her presence or her touch. If anything, I was repelled by it. My mind was too busy thinking of someone else.

Giselle, my little prisoner.

I wondered what she was doing at home right now—if she found relief in the fact that

I was away, or if she would prefer to have me around a little more. I could guess the former was the case. I hadn't seen her much since she moved into my mansion four days ago; with Peter dead and Tyfun-1 missing, I was busier than usual.

"You're distracted." Dobryn's voice cut through the noise as he leaned back with a drink in hand, watching me with knowing eyes.

I exhaled sharply, picking up my glass but not drinking from it. "Just thinking."

"Let me take a guess, you're thinking about the girl," Miron suggested, his dark eyes catching the flickering neon light.

I didn't answer. But we both knew it was her I was thinking of. No woman had ever struck me the way Giselle did; no woman had ever managed to invade my head so much in such a short amount of time. There was something about that girl, and I hoped I wasn't the only one who felt that way, though I had a feeling I would shoot anyone who thought of her in a way that wasn't proper.

Dobryn nodded to the women, signaling for them to leave.

They obeyed, their heels clicking against the tiles as they made their way to the dance floor.

Dobryn stared at me intently, his brows furrowing. "How did you go from wanting to get information from her to thinking about her?"

I swirled my whiskey, wishing I had an answer to the question he just asked.

"Is there news on the whereabouts of the Tyfun-1?" Miron asked.

"Nothing yet. The cops haven't found any clues that could help us track the

shipment,” Dobryn answered. He’d been keeping up with one of the detectives working on the case.

“Egor won’t like the news,” Miron said with a shake of his head. “He’s desperate to find that shipment, especially with the other families on a hunt for it. We’ll lose a lot of money if we can’t find it, and that will be a big problem.”

I tilted my head and glared at my cousin. “Do you want a chance to find it yourself? I bet you’ll have better luck with it.”

“I bet I will.” He sat back and plopped his legs on the coffee table. “Have you had your men search her home? If he went to her that night, it’s possible the shipment is there.”

“That wouldn’t make any sense.” Dobryn’s gaze bounced between me and Miron. “That would mean putting his only daughter in grave danger. Peter wouldn’t be stupid enough to do a thing like that.”

I agreed with Dobryn.

Peter was loyal. If he had to make a choice between betraying the Bratva and giving up his life, he would choose the latter, and I suspected that was exactly what happened. It wasn’t rocket science that whoever killed him must’ve tried to get him to talk about the Tyfun-1 and where he hid it. No one else had found it, which made his choice very obvious.

But one thing he would never do was give his daughter’s life for the Bratva. He loved her very much; that bit was clear. She was all that mattered to him, and he often spoke about how he couldn’t wait to finish his job so he could buy a house on an island somewhere and live with his family.

My jaw clenched with rage.

That dream had been taken from him.

“If he didn’t want her to get mixed up in all this, he wouldn’t have sent her that text and dragged her into this mess,” Miron argued. “He put her in the most danger because everyone trying to get their hands on the shipment will only be looking in her direction.”

I rolled the glass between my fingers, the weight of it grounding me as Miron's words sank in. He wasn’t wrong; the moment Peter sent that message, Giselle became a target. And whether she knew it or not, every move she made was now being watched by men who had no problems with spilling innocent blood.

“He must’ve had a reason,” Dobryn said.

“Whatever his reason was, he put his daughter in danger,” Miron countered, looking more serious than I’d seen him in a while. “She’s under your protection now, which means there’s a target on your back as well. She’ll become a liability in the long run.”

“So, what do you suggest?” Dobryn asked. “We leave her out there to get killed like her father was?”

“No, you extract the information you need out of her and find the shipment before anyone else does. It’s the only way to keep her and yourself safe,” Miron replied, his attention pinned on me. “People fear you, but you know what happens when desperation sets in.”

Desperation made people irrational and even more inhuman. I couldn’t relate to that, though; I preferred to make calm, rational decisions, especially when everyone else was in a state of panic.

Miron was right, though. I needed to watch my back now that I had Giselle with me. No one would be stupid enough to put a target on my back usually, but this wasn't a normal day. She had something valuable, and people would give their lives just to get their hands on it—on her.

I already had Dobryn tighten security around the mansion two days ago, and I was willing to triple it if that meant no one even sniffed the air around Giselle.

“Don't worry about my safety. I can handle it quite alright.”

“Have you not been able to get some information out of her yet?” Miron asked. “She's been at your place for a couple of days now.”

I shook my head and put my glass on the table for a refill. “She insists she doesn't know anything about it.”

“She doesn't know or won't tell?” Miron asked.

I shrugged. “I'll have to find out which it is.”

“The offer for the torture session is still open,” Miron chimed in, staring at one of the girls from earlier like a predator stalking its prey. “Let me know if you need my help.”

My chest tightened with the need to protect Giselle. No one was allowed to hurt or torture her. No one was allowed to go even an inch closer to her without my permission.

“Speak about torturing my prisoner one more time, and we'll have a real problem,” I drawled, staring right into Miron's eyes before taking a sip of my drink.

“Easy, big guy,” Miron teased with a lopsided grin. “I was only joking.”

I ignored him and shifted my attention to Dobryn. “I can’t force the information out of the girl. She’s like a flower that’ll wither if not properly taken care of. I don’t want that for her, not while she’s under my protection.”

“If she’s like a flower, then how about you water her?” Dobryn suggested.

I almost rolled my eyes. “Explain.”

“It’s simple. I hate to be the one to say this, but you’ve got the charm, man. Any girl would fall for you very easily, and she isn’t an exception. She’ll fall for you sooner or later. Use it to your advantage.” He leaned in, and his lips curled. “You know how women are when they’re in love. She’ll spill everything in no time.”

I thought about it for a moment. Romance wasn’t my thing—it never had been—but there was some truth to what he’d just said. I didn’t have to fall in love with her; all I needed to do was pretend I was and get her to fall in love with me until I got the information I needed.

My stomach fluttered with amusement.

Things had been boring lately, at least until the shipment went missing and Peter got murdered. A little game of hearts with my little prisoner wasn’t such a bad idea.

“So, are you in?” Dobryn asked with a lift of his brow.

Miron stared at me with that dark amusement lurking in his eyes at what my answer would be.

I stretched my legs out in front of me. “It’s not a bad idea. Actually, it’s a pretty good

one.”

She was alone now and vulnerable. All I needed to do was pull the right strings, and in no time, she would start to see me as her only source of comfort. The emotions would come naturally when that happened.

Miron clasped my shoulder, grinning. “There he is. I was afraid you were starting to get softer.”

I huffed out a low chuckle. “It’ll be a cold day in hell when I start to get softer, Miron.”

He laughed, finishing his drink and slamming the glass on the table. “And here I was thinking hell was starting to freeze over.”

“With your existence, I doubt that will ever happen,” I teased, sitting back and enjoying the show in front of me for the first time this evening.

I was curious to see how this game would end if I played my cards right.

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Dinner was beef stroganoff paired with mashed potatoes and a glass of expensive red wine. It'd been days, and I still couldn't get used to the fancy dinners. They were delicious, but after watching the chef put so much time and effort into making it, I would honestly prefer a burger and fries from McDonalds.

It was nearly nine p.m. when I finished. Most days, I had dinner by six or seven at the latest, but I had slept through most of the evening, and when my growling stomach finally forced me to wake up, it was already eight p.m.

Luckily, the chef had asked what I would like for dinner during lunch, so she made it earlier.

After my meal, I sauntered back upstairs, ready to slide under the duvet and go back to sleep, when I passed a door at the end of the hall, far away from my own room. One of the maids had told me it was Andrei's room. It was locked at all times, and no one was allowed to go in there when he wasn't home.

It was open today, though, and I couldn't resist the temptation to peep inside. Given the type of man Andrei was—cold, cruel, calculating—I needed to see what the inside of his room looked like. Perhaps he had a human body hidden under his bed.

I pushed up onto my toes and crept over to the slightly open door. A Caravaggio-style dramatic art of lone, brooding figures sitting right above his bed caught my attention when I popped my head inside to make sure there was no one there.

The painting was one of a kind. From afar, I could tell whoever the artist was had taken his time and crafted such a magnificent piece of art with gentle strokes of his

brush.

I wanted to make something as beautiful as that one day.

Maybe I could use it as a source of inspiration.

I looked behind me to make sure there was no one watching before I gently pushed the door open to make more space for my frame, and I sauntered inside.

His room wasn't very different from what I imagined: white walls and ceilings, with a touch of dark grey décor and furnishing. A king-sized bed sat in the middle of the room, and a recliner was right in front of the glass wall at the other end.

I neared the painting, folding my arms and taking in the details. From what I could tell, the painter was telling the story of a man who'd become a darker shadow of himself while walking down a path no one else could. There were what appeared to be dead bodies littered behind him, and it seemed like his soul died a little with each step he took.

On the other hand, it could be interpreted as a man killing old habits and walking down a new path to self-discovery. The pieces of his soul vanishing could also be seen as them returning to him. It was a beautiful yet thought-invoking painting. I wondered what it meant to Andrei and if he had a different perspective.

I jerked away from the painting when I heard the creaking of the bathroom door as it suddenly opened, but before I could slip away, Andrei stepped out.

My heart stopped beating, and my jaw dropped. He'd been home all this while. When then the hell had he returned, and how come I never noticed?

Goodness, it must've been when I was sleeping. Shit. How was I going to explain

this—me being in his room, so close to his bed, and staring at the painting on his wall? What if he thought I was here to steal from him?

Those were real problems, but what bothered me the most was the look of him with his wet blond hair and a white towel wrapped around his waist. His bare chest was exposed, giving me a perfect view of his broad shoulders, abs, muscled chest and—Goddamn it, he was hot.

His piercing blue eyes met mine.

I wished he'd look away just so I could gather my thoughts and regain my composure, but I was completely taken aback by him, by those beautiful blue eyes that held nothing but darkness and that handsome face. This man was gorgeous in a way that should've been illegal.

No one had the right to look that good, especially not him.

My heart rate doubled, and my stomach fluttered with heat. It was dangerous to be in the same room as him when he was barely covered. I wasn't afraid he would do something inappropriate; I was afraid I would want him to do something inappropriate, like stride over to him and....

That was it; I had to stop my mind before it went too far with thoughts like this. "I-I'm sorry," I stuttered. "I shouldn't be here."

Holding my breath, I turned around, intending to walk away as quickly as I could, when his deep voice stopped me right before I could take my first step.

"You shouldn't, but here you are anyway."

I could feel his gaze on me, burning up my skin and making it harder for me to

breathe, to think, to talk.

I turned around to face him. “I saw the door open, and I—”

“You saw it as an invitation to sneak into my room,” he said with a smirk, drying his hair with a small towel. “You’re very gutsy, solnishko .”

My eyes darted to the painting on the wall and right back at him. “I don’t know what I was thinking. I should leave now.”

He scoffed. “I was going to come see you anyway. I have something to tell you. It’s better I do it now.”

God, I really hated my life. There was no escaping from this man. He’d been away for the five days I’d spent at his house, and suddenly, tonight, when I was in his room, and he was only in a towel, he had something to tell me?

I let out a deep breath. “What is it?”

“The news of you being my fiancée spread like wildfire. I wasn’t expecting it to, but it seems people can’t ignore other people’s business very much.” He gave me a look that made me want to vanish into thin air, like he was judging me for trespassing, too.

I rubbed my clammy hands on the thick flare dress I was wearing and forced myself to stare into his eyes. I had to keep my chin up. I couldn’t show fear or nervousness around this man or he’d feast on it like a wild beast.

“Good thing the news spread. Isn’t that what you wanted when you lied at the police station?”

“It wasn’t what I intended, but I don’t mind, solnishko .” He walked to a drawer at

the other end of the room and grabbed a bottle of deodorant. “Now that I think of it, you’d make a perfect fiancée.”

I narrowed my eyes at him and frowned. “You’re not thinking we’re actually engaged now just because the news went round, are you?”

He stared at me, a witty grin emerging on his face. A fire of amusement danced in his eyes for a moment before he finally spoke again. “Do you hate the idea of being my fiancée that much?”

I shrugged. “For starters, I am not your fiancée, and if it were up to me, I wouldn’t be here. There, you have your answer.”

“You and that smart mouth of yours.” He inched closer, his chest flexing with every step.

Seriously, how often did this man workout, and how much protein did he consume to grow all that muscle? As if being tall wasn’t enough, he just had to be intimidating as well. Nature wasn’t being fair at all when it gave him all the good looks and the attitude.

I hated to admit it, but I could totally see myself falling for him if we’d met under different circumstances.

Who wouldn’t fall for a man who looked like a God, even though he might’ve been the devil himself?

He was close enough for me to get a whiff of his shampoo and the minty scent of his deodorant. “For someone who wouldn’t be here if you had a choice, you’re a little too relaxed, solnishko . You’re even trespassing.”

My throat went dry and remained dry no matter how much I swallowed.

I rolled my eyes, pretending to be as uninterested as I could. “I’m only here for one reason, Andrei.”

He cocked his brows.

I rolled my eyes again. “I want to find the men that killed my father.”

“And yet you haven’t given me the information I need,” he drawled, studying me with squinted eyes.

That was because I didn’t have the information he needed.

For a moment, I considered making a deal. I could pretend I knew where the shipment was and would give it to him if he found the people who murdered my father, but that could be a double-edged sword.

I couldn’t trust Andrei or anyone else in the mafia. If I lied about knowing the whereabouts of the shipment, they could imprison me and torture me, maybe even kill me if they found out I didn’t really have it and was trying to manipulate them.

No, I couldn’t play a dangerous game like that.

“I would’ve given you the information already if I had it,” I explained, my tone sounding more desperate than ever. “I spent the last couple of days wracking my brain for a clue on what that text meant. I’m sure it means something. I just haven’t figured it out yet.”

He nodded doubtfully. “Am I supposed to believe that?”

“Yes.”

“Well, you need to wrack your brain harder, solnishko . Think until you figure it out. In the meantime, I need you to do something for me.”

“Do you want me to lie that I’m your wife this time?” A teasing smile played on my lips. “Maybe we can spice it up and add that we have seven children. How does that sound?”

Andrei laughed.

And it wasn’t the sardonic type of laughter a sadist would huff right before they killed someone. His laugh was throaty, rumbling from his chest in a very genuine way. His blue eyes glinted, and he looked so handsome.

It was a weird sight, yet it made me want to laugh along with him.

“You have a great sense of humor, Giselle.”

I tilted my head. “Thanks, I got it from my dad.”

His smile vanished at the mention of Dad’s name, and that darkness crept back into his eyes. Something in the atmosphere shifted.

“I don’t need you to pretend you’re my wife,” he deadpanned, his jaw twitching. “I need you to keep playing the role of my fiancée.”

“Aren’t I already doing that perfectly?”

His lips flattened, making him look dead serious and even more terrifying. “Get ready. You’re accompanying me to my commander’s dinner party tomorrow.”

I raised a brow.

“You’re coming as my partner for the night at the exclusive gala event. You need to look your best.”

He wasn’t asking; he was ordering.

“I don’t have something to wear,” was the only argument I could make. “I need to go back home and find a dress, a purse, and heels, as well as get stuff for my makeup and hair.”

“That won’t be necessary. Get whatever you need online, and I’ll pay.”

He’d pay just like that? I almost laughed. “Okay, but I have to warn you, I’m greedy, and I go for really expensive things.”

“Even better. My fiancée has to look the part,” was all he said.

I stood there, blinking at him like a complete moron. I shouldn’t have brought that up. I mean, for a man as rich as him, a \$ 10,000 dress was nothing. I bet it wouldn’t even matter to him if I spent twice that amount. That was a dumb argument on my part.

I’d never been to an exclusive gala event, and I’d always wanted to be at one where I would network for when I became an artist. But for some reason, all I could feel right now was the anxious churn of my stomach.

Going to an event like that wasn’t the problem, I was good with handling crowds, but going as his fiancée— that was something I hadn’t prepared for. Refusing wasn’t an option; his tone and the way he turned his back on me and went back to his business made it clear he wasn’t going to entertain any arguments.

The decision was made. All I had to do was play along.

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:57 pm

I leaned against the black Mercedes with my arms crossed as I watched the entrance of the mansion.

The night air was crisp, carrying the distant hum of the city, and a crescent moon sat up in the sky. It was a beautiful night, but all of that barely mattered when my attention was fixed on the door, waiting for Giselle.

And then she walked out in a dress she'd ordered that morning.

It was strapless and red, clinging to her in all the right places, and the rich color complemented the gold in her skin and the sharpness of her emerald eyes. Her raven hair cascaded in soft waves, framing her face.

She was beautiful in a way I considered unworldly, too perfect for a world like this. Everything about her, from the curves of her hips to the swell of her breasts to the gleaming in her eyes, caught me off guard for a moment.

My pulse kicked up, and a pang of desire made my heart beat faster. I couldn't take my eyes off her for a second, not even as she descended the porch with an elegance that couldn't be taught. She was a natural, born for a life worthy of a queen.

I straightened up, trying in earnest to hide the desire lurking inside me as she approached me with a smile.

"How do I look?" she asked with glee.

"Not bad." I tried to sound as cool as I could despite reaching the brink of pure

obsession.

She pursed her lips. “Not bad? Is that supposed to be a compliment? I spent hours shopping and getting ready for tonight, and that’s all you can say?”

I wanted to tell her how jaw-droppingly gorgeous she looked, how any man would fall at her feet just to get her attention, but I didn’t. Instead, I opened the passenger door. “Get in.”

She heaved a frustrated sigh, but luckily, she didn’t argue. She just went along, sliding into the passenger seat without a word of argument.

I closed the door and rounded the car to the driver’s seat. “Buckle your seatbelt.”

She did.

“Remember the rules?” I asked, ignoring the way she pouted her plump, pink lips to show her displeasure.

“How could I forget? I’m supposed to be the perfect fiancée. I have to stick by your side and wear a pretty smile at all times. I mustn’t do anything to embarrass you.”

“Good, and if someone asks, tell them we’re in love.”

She flashed a sly grin at me. “In love? No one will believe that. I mean, do we look in love?”

“I don’t care. Your job is to make them believe it.”

She met my gaze. “And what story do I tell them if they ask? My father died working for you, and we’d never met before? At least I need a convincing love story they’ll

buy.”

“Keep it simple and short. We met once and fell in love at first sight. We’ve been dating secretly and only decided to go public with our engagement after your father died.”

She let out a breath, looking unbothered. “I’ll do my best to remember.”

“Your best has to be good enough.”

She exhaled a low chuckle and leaned back in her seat. “Sure.”

Something about the way she said it made my jaw tighten. Like she knew exactly what the game was and was playing along. Sometimes, I couldn’t tell if I was the one manipulating her or if I was getting fooled instead.

I started the car, suppressing the urge to glance at her again. This was going to be a long night.

The drive to the gala was smooth, but the tension inside the car was palpable all thirty minutes it took us to get here—at least for me, it was.

Giselle sat comfortably beside me, lightly tracing the edge of her clutch. She was at ease—too at ease for my liking—while I struggled with the urge to not lose my self-control around her.

All along, the only thing I could think of was those stiletto heels she was wearing digging into my back and her screaming my name as I took care of her. Every moment of it was pure torture.

Cameras flashed in a frenzy outside as we pulled up to the grand hotel entrance. The Bratva had deep roots in the city, and any public appearance by its high-ranking members was bound to draw attention.

I stepped out first, fixing my jacket before turning to open Giselle's door. She accepted my hand, her fingers grazing mine as she emerged from the car.

A current rippled through me, making my throat dry. This woman had a certain effect on me that I found really troublesome. I had to address it later.

She looped her arm through mine and smiled at me, then she leaned in and whispered, "Does this work?"

I nodded, inhaling the soft warmth of her breath as it caressed my neck. "It's perfect."

I threw the car key to a valet in front of us and led her into the hotel. Through the corner of my eyes, I noticed as she took in the grandeur of the place—obscene chandeliers, marble floors, and an atmosphere thick with expensive perfume and rich gossip. The entire place was a spectacle of wealth and power.

We weaved through the crowd, with me nodding at familiar faces, only stopping for a brief talk when I met Antonio Morozov, the host of the event. He was a chubby old man in his fifties, rich as fuck, and owned large businesses in New York and the whole continent of North America.

"Andrei Yezhov," he exclaimed as he approached, holding a glass of champagne and wearing his funny smile. No one would assume the amount of bloodshed he was capable of if they judged him by his looks alone. "I'm glad you could make it."

"It would be rude to not honor your invitation."

“You haven’t changed one bit,” he said with a chuckle, and then his gaze fled to Giselle. “And who is this beautiful lady with you?”

I wrapped my arm around Giselle’s waist and pulled her closer. “She’s my fiancée, Giselle Rae. I believe you’ve heard of her.”

“Ah, yes, I have.” Antonio’s gaze swept over Giselle, and he held out a hand. “The rumors said she was a beauty to behold. I must admit she’s a lot prettier in person.”

“Thank you for the compliment,” Giselle responded before I could, stretching her hand out to Antonio. “I’m flattered.”

He kissed the back of her hand, his lips lingering a little longer than I thought was necessary. “I’m glad I could make you feel that way.”

To my surprise, Giselle didn’t pull her hand away; she just wore that alluring smile and allowed him to do his thing.

A ball of jealousy bubbled inside me. I didn’t like his lips or hands on her, and I certainly didn’t like that she was smiling at him so widely that her emerald eyes sparkled with delight.

I didn’t care that I was being irrational; I should be the only one who could pull that sort of emotion from her, not him or any other man.

Antonio finally released Giselle’s hand after what seemed like an eternity, though the smug smile on Giselle’s face as she peered at me told me she allowed him to do that on purpose. She wanted to get a rise out of me, and I hated the fact that it was working.

He took a sip of his champagne, smiling like a teenager who had just invited his crush

to prom. Antonio had been married five times, and he had more mistresses than even he himself could keep up with. If anything, I found him acting like a sweet, innocent old man repelling.

“You should make out time for us to meet again soon, Andrei. We have business to discuss.”

“I’m booked and busy these days. I’m certain you’ve heard of the missing shipment; we’re trying to recover it.”

He nodded and speared Giselle a suspicious glance. “Any luck so far? I heard something really interesting.”

I knew what he was about to say. He heard about Giselle being the clue to the missing shipment and now he wanted to extract information from me.

“What did you hear?”

He looked like he was considering whether to tell me or not. He made his decision after a moment, though. “We’ll talk about it next time. For now, I think you should just have some fun with your fiancée.”

I opened my mouth to speak, but Giselle cut me off before I could even start. “Thank you very much. You’re so sweet.”

Before I could steer Giselle away, someone else interrupted.

“Yezhov,” a deep, smooth voice called out, drawing my attention.

I turned to see Viktor Volkov, an associate from the Bratva in Russia, standing beside us with a glass of whiskey in hand. He was a tall, well-groomed man with sharp blue

eyes and a reputation for being both charming and dangerous—a combination I wasn't particularly fond of at the moment.

“Volkov,” I greeted curtly, keeping my arm around Giselle's waist. I didn't care that I was acting extra possessive of her tonight as long as it kept the other men away from her.

His gaze slid to her with blatant interest. “And who might this stunning woman be?”

“My fiancée,” I said, my voice firm. “Giselle Rae.”

A slow, knowing smile curled on Viktor's lips as he took her hand and pressed a kiss against her knuckles, much like Antonio had done. “A pleasure to meet you, Miss Rae.”

Giselle, ever the charmer, responded with an easy smile. “Likewise, Mr.—”

“Please, call me Viktor,” he said with a smile, holding her hand just a second too long before finally letting go. His attention remained fixed on her as he took a sip of his whiskey. “I didn't know you were engaged to such a gorgeous woman at that.”

I could sniff his intentions from a mile away. Bloody horny bastard. It was the first time I'd ever felt the need to put a bullet between someone's head for something that wasn't related to mafia business.

A slow smile played on my lips. It was more like a warning for him to steer clear. “Now you do.”

He ignored my warning and smiled even wider at Giselle. She smiled back. I regretted telling her to smile; I should have told her to do the opposite. “Would you do me the honor of a dance, Miss Rae?”

I stiffened, my grip tightening on Giselle's waist. "She—"

"I would love to," Giselle interrupted, turning to face me with a teasing glint in her eyes. She knew exactly what she was doing.

She was trying to drive me to the edge with jealousy, and it was working.

My jaw ticked, but I didn't argue. I simply held her gaze, silently warning her that this game she was playing was dangerous. She only smiled, slipping her hand into Viktor's as he led her toward the dance floor.

My blood simmered as I watched them dance.

Viktor pulled her close, his hand pressing against the small of her back while they moved to the slow rhythm of the music.

She looked up at him, laughing at something he whispered, and I felt my fingers curl into fists.

This was what jealousy felt like. It was something I'd never imagined I would be in the position to experience, yet here I was, veins bulging and eyes red. I could barely think straight or keep my composure.

I grabbed a glass of whiskey from the table behind me and finished it in one long gulp. The liquor burned down my throat, but it did nothing to dull the bitterness curling inside me as the world blurred, leaving only the sight of both of them together to burn into my memory.

Viktor spun her around, wrapping his arm around her waist this time and bringing his face closer to hers.

That was all it took for me to snap.

I slammed the now empty glass on the table, and before I knew it, I was striding over to them. I didn't care to hide my displeasure as I pulled Giselle away from him and hauled her closer to myself.

My brows furrowed. "That's enough dancing with my fiancée."

A sly smile tugged at the corner of Viktor's mouth. "Your fiancée is a delight to be around. I must've kept her longer than I intended because I genuinely enjoyed her company."

Delight.

I almost chuckled at the word. The sly fox really thought living in England for a couple of months made him British.

I returned his corny smile with one of my own. "I'd appreciate it if you could step to the side. I'd love a dance with my fiancée now."

He nodded at me with indifference and flashed a smile at Giselle. "See you around later." He strode off after that.

Like hell you will.

Giselle's gaze locked on mine, and her lips twitched. "Was that you being jealous just now?"

I snaked an arm around her waist, and she placed one of hers on my shoulder. "Weren't you doing it to get a rise out of me?"

“Was I?” She gave me a taunting smile. “I have no idea what you’re talking about. Is there something else you love aside from taking women hostage and being a possessive jerk to keep other men away?”

“Possessive jerk,” I repeated in a low voice. If a man had said that to me, he’d be bleeding all over the polished floor, but Giselle could get away with anything. “I don’t take women hostage.”

“Hmmm,” she muttered with a cock of her head. “I wonder what the word is for you holding me hostage.”

“I’m keeping you safe until we find the shipment.”

She nodded slowly. “That sounds very reassuring, Mr. Yezhov, but you still haven’t answered my question.”

There wasn’t much I liked aside from coming up with solutions and the thrill of bloodshed. But there were a few, like new suits and shiny new guns.

She wouldn’t like to hear that, though, so I came up with something else. “Cookies.”

Her eyes gleamed as she laughed. “You? Cookies? That’s surprising.”

My chest warmed as I watched her laugh. “Is it?”

She nodded. “Lucky for you, though, I love to bake. If you’re good to me, I might bake you cookies someday.”

The corners of my lips quirked. “I guess I’ll have to be really good to you then.”

The music was over before I knew it, and we finished our dance with me twirling her

effortlessly across the room. We bowed to each other, but just as she was about to back away, her legs caught mine, and she stumbled forward. Her arms flailed, and a gasp left her lips.

My instincts took over, and I caught her, wrapping one arm firmly around her waist while the other steadied her hand in mine.

She pressed against me, her emerald eyes wide with surprise as they locked onto mine. Her fingers tightened around my shoulder, her lips parted just slightly, and I could feel the rapid beat of her heart against my chest.

The tension between us was palpable, and in that moment, the entire world came to a halt, leaving just the two of us.

For a second, neither of us moved. Neither of us spoke.

I took her in, felt the warmth of her body against mine. The pull between us was intense and undeniable. I couldn't wrap my head around why I was deeply drawn to her, but everything about this woman had an effect on me that I didn't think was possible.

I should've let her go. I should've stepped back and created a distance between us. But I didn't.

Instead, I held her a moment longer, my grip firm and my gaze locked on hers. Her skin was warm beneath my fingers, her scent intoxicating, and fuck if I didn't want to tilt her chin up and press my mouth to hers right then and there.

I could tell from the way her chest heaved with each breath that she felt the same way. I wasn't the only person drunk with desire; she was, too.

If all of this was a game, and one of us was going to get burned at the end of it all, I would happily dive into the fire and swim through the flames.

Without a second thought, I said the words I'd been holding back. "You're mine, solnishko . Only mine."

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:57 pm

“You’re mine, solnishko . Only mine.”

Those words hadn’t stopped playing in my head since that dance with Andrei at the party, and the fluttering in my stomach hadn’t stopped either.

There was something smoldering about the way he said those words, the possessiveness in his voice and the darkening of his eyes. I knew he meant every bit of what he said—that I was his alone.

Rolling down the window, I stared at the streetlamps and the half-moon adorning the sky. I needed anything to distract me from the burning intensity of his gaze on me.

We were on our way back from the party, and after everything—the dance, the searing jealousy I could sniff from him, and the way he held me—I would honestly rather be anywhere else but right next to him. That was how much I wanted to avoid him.

I couldn’t wait to get home, run upstairs, and lock my door.

One of his men had come to drive us home as he was particular about not driving after how much alcohol he had.

He’d been scrolling through emails and replying to them most of the drive back home, but now he was just sitting there, staring at me.

My cheeks heated with a blush, and my stomach fluttered with butterflies. I couldn’t shake off the feeling of him gazing at me.

The driver pulled over by the entrance of the mansion. Andrei stepped out first and moved around the car. Before I could reach for the handle, he opened the door by my seat and held out his hand to me. I hesitated, meeting his gaze for a second before slipping my fingers into his.

The moment our skin met, a spark shot up my arm and ignited a warmth in my chest that I pretended not to notice. There was a shift in his expression, and I knew he could tell how uncomfortable he made me, how irresistible I found him.

None of this was normal. I shouldn't feel the way I did when he was close. My pulse shouldn't race at his touch or even in response to his smile, but it did.

His presence was pure torment to my body, but not because I hated him. Hatred would have been far better than this attraction.

His grip tightened as he helped me out of the car.

The minute I steadied myself outside, I tugged my hand away from him and made my way into the mansion.

He was right behind me, the clacking of his suede shoes on the marble floor synching with the clicking of my heels.

I could feel his stare on me. I could sense his need for me. And I wanted him just as much as I suspected he wanted me.

We reached the corridor, and the realization that I was going the wrong way hit me. This way led to his room, not mine. My room was at the other end of the hallway.

Shit.

I stopped walking and spun around to leave, but instead, I almost crashed into him. I managed to steady myself before I could fall any further.

Andrei was faster than light, springing into action and trying to catch me.

Our bodies brushed, sending a jolt of awareness through me.

The heat in my stomach intensified at the contact.

I tried to convince myself that it was nothing and that I only felt the way I did because I'd never been this close to a man who wasn't my father, but I knew I was fooling myself.

I hadn't felt the butterflies in my stomach when I danced with Viktor, and my heart certainly hadn't beaten faster when Antonio kissed the back of my hand.

Only Andrei made me feel this way.

I should've been used to it by now, but the fact that I knew we were alone now made it even more dangerous. We could both act on our desires, and no one could stop us.

Right, it was too dangerous. "I'm sorry," I muttered and readied myself to walk away as quickly as I could, but he wrapped his hand around my wrist the same way he had the first time we met.

"What are you sorry for?"

I tilted my head to look at him and forgot to breathe the moment his eyes met mine.

"Uh—I..." I couldn't come up with a single reason or excuse. My mind was mush right now, and my thoughts were soiled with sinful, dirty thoughts.

His lips curled as he inched nearer.

My brain fogged, making it impossible for me to react to how dangerously close he was to me now.

He lifted his hand, and I inched away, but I couldn't get very far before my back collided with the wall. "What are you doing?" I gasped.

"Relax, solnishko . I'm not trying to hurt you."

I knew he wasn't trying to hurt me. It was surprising how much I trusted him.

His fingers brushed against my cheek as he tucked a loose strand of hair behind my ear.

The touch was gentle, almost reverent, and it sent a shiver racing down my spine. His fingertips lingered for a second longer than necessary, tracing the line of my jaw.

"Tell me what to do, solnishko ," he whispered, his voice deep and husky. "I shouldn't want you this much, but it's getting harder to stay away from you."

I swallowed, my pulse hammering as I stared into those piercing blue eyes that had now turned dark with need. "Then don't." Don't stay away from me.

A ghost of a smirk touched his lips as he ran a finger down my neck. "Don't say words you might regret, solnishko . I'm warning you."

I gasped, aching all over with need. My nipples hardened, and a throb awakened between my legs. "I don't think I'll regret this."

His gaze lingered on me for a bit, then he leaned over and cupped my cheeks. His lips

hovered above mine for a second before his lips claimed mine.

Something snapped inside me the moment I tasted the whiskey and felt the movement of his lips against mine.

I melted into him, my hands gripping the lapels of his suit as his arms tightened around me, and I kissed him back.

It was slow and gentle at first, but then it shifted into something ravenous and primal, like a hunger that had survived a thousand years of famine.

He deepened our kiss, his tongue sweeping into my mouth, claiming, demanding, and full of passion.

I moved with the rhythm, moaning, as he growled in response, pressing me further against the wall.

The world faded around us. The only thing that existed was him—his warmth, his taste, the way his hands slid down my sides, pulling me closer.

His legs slipped between my thighs, and his hand glided down my waist until he was grabbing my ass and squeezing it.

I gasped from the pleasure rippling through me.

Holy shit.

Tonight was the first time a man ever touched me this way, and I meant that literally. I had no idea if physical intimacy always felt this amazing or if Andrei was just good at it, but I didn't want it to stop.

I needed him to explore me in other ways—ways I didn't know a man could explore a woman.

His intrusive leg pushed my legs further apart. His mouth left mine and trailed down my throat with a series of hot kisses.

My body became a host of molten fire; my core ached, and my nipples hardened with anticipation of what was to come.

He licked my neck, bringing his face further down until he reached my breasts. His hands came up to the back of my dress, and he undid the zippers.

The dress slid down my body until it pooled around my legs. My breasts sprung free, and my nipples hardened more as the cold air brushed over them.

“Cristos ,” Andrei grunted as he swept his gaze over me. His eyes glistened with lust and admiration. Christ. “You're so beautiful, solnishko .”

I drew my hands up to cover my breasts, but he caught them midair, pushing them down and taking up the task himself.

A sensual shiver ran through my veins as he cupped one of my breasts, teasing the nipple as he took the other one in his mouth and began to suck.

My head rolled back, and I gripped the back of his head as I cried from pleasure. This was even better than I'd ever imagined or dreamed of. Every cell in my body was cocooned with pleasure; I swore I was losing my mind.

He slid his free hand between my thighs and glided it upward. I groaned as it came into contact with my most sensitive organ.

Andrei grinned with satisfaction. “You’re wet, solnishko .”

My cheeks heated with embarrassment; he was right. I felt the pool of wetness between my legs the moment he started to kiss me, or maybe even before that.

Before I could think of a retort, he thrust one finger inside me and pressed his thumb firmly on my clit.

“God...” I moaned, reveling in the waves of pleasure surging through me. “Oh, God.”

He tilted his head, sliding his fingers in and out of me as he circled his thumb on my clitoris. He smirked when he saw the effect he had on me, the pure ecstasy on my face, and how my cries grew louder.

“God isn’t here, baby,” he grunted in that deep voice of his. “But I am. I’m the only god whose name you’ll be screaming tonight.”

His bragging evoked something inside me. I wanted to challenge him, to drive him to the edge and see how far he’d take this.

I flashed a teasing smile at him and whispered, “Is that all you got?”

He smirked back, sliding another finger inside me, pushing it deep enough that I could feel it hit my G-spot, and then he started to thrust.

All I could hear was my own moans synching with his groans and the squishing sound of my juices as he made it his mission to pleasure me.

“You’ll have to find out yourself, solnishko ,” he growled against my ear before dropping to his knees in front of me.

I breathed, “What are you doing?”

“Wondering what my delicate flower’s petals taste like.” Raising my leg to his shoulder, he shifted my panties to the side and buried his face between my legs, replacing the finger on my clit with his tongue.

I jerked forward when I felt the first swipe of his tongue on me. It was as if electric waves were sizzling through me, dragging me to a world far beyond.

It felt good, so good that my fingers slipped through his hair and clutched his head for support as he ate me like a madman. I moaned, groaned, and cried with pleasure as the sensation of his tongue stroking my clit threw me into a volcano of ecstasy.

“You like it?” he asked, his breath warm against the organ between my legs.

Like it? Hell, no.

I loved it.

Every bit of it.

I spread my legs further apart to grant him more access and buckled my hips, grinding on his tongue for pressure. “Fuck... Andrei...I love it.”

I felt him smile. “Good girl.”

My muscles contracted as I reached a crescendo. “Andrei,” I gasped, feeling my heart rate increase and my body thrum.

“Yes, come for me, baby,” he growled, pressing his tongue firmer on my clit and licking me harder.

A pang of jealousy seared through my chest at the thought of him doing this with other women, making it his life's mission to pleasure them the way he was doing with me. He was skilled, and the only way anyone could learn a skill like this was through experience.

At forty-one, and given his reputation, I was certain he'd been with more women than he could even remember. I hated this; I wanted to be the only woman in his life.

Fuck, what was wrong with me?

My thoughts were halted, only allowing me to mutter, "God, Andrei."

An orgasm surged through me at that moment. A cry tore from my throat, and my body spasmed uncontrollably.

Andrei didn't stop fucking me with his tongue until my clitoris reached the limit of pleasure it could take. It was now more sensitive than ever.

He rose to his feet with a triumphant smile on his face. "I love how you screamed my name when you came, baby." His lips crashed against mine, the taste of my juices mixing with the taste of whiskey still on the tip of his tongue.

I kissed him back desperately as I gasped for breath.

He was still fully dressed in his suit, much to my dismay. I tugged against his tie, unknotting it and tossing it to the floor before ripping his suit jacket off.

He grinned against my lips and pulled away from our kiss. "Naughty girl."

I swallowed and bit down on my lips. "I'm only this way with you."

He cupped my cheeks and ran his finger along my lips. "I'm sure you are. How about we take this upstairs?"

I nodded. "But..."

He cocked a brow. "But?"

"I haven't done this before," I muttered, breaking eye contact. Who would believe I was still a virgin at twenty-two?

His grin grew wider. "Don't worry. I'll take it easy on you, I promise."

He lifted me bridal style and carried me to his room.

Andrei's space was always tidy and organized. A pristine set of white bedsheets adorned the bed, accompanied by four pillows in matching covers and a cozy white blanket.

I wondered if he had the maids change them every morning.

As he lowered me gently on the bed, my gaze darted to the bulge in his pants, and my cheeks warmed. He was hard, and I could tell it was big from the imprint on his pants.

He undressed, and his cock sprung free.

I looked away, gasping for breath. I was right; he was freaking big, and that was going to be a lot to take in.

He crawled right on top of me with a dark glint in his eyes and a smirk that made me forget how to breathe. He was gorgeous to look at, even with all that iciness and

muscles. He looked like he was better off walking a runway than being in the mafia

“Why are you looking away, solnishko ?” he asked, sliding his hand under my ass and squeezing it.

I lifted my hips, and we both groaned as my arousal crashed with his erection. A deep ache settled in my core. “I need you inside me, Andrei.”

His jaw clenched, and he leaned in, kissing down my throat and pressing his hard, warm dick to my entrance. “Beg.”

“Please,” I begged. I was desperate, and I didn’t care about anything else at that moment.

His dick lingered on my entrance for a moment, and then he slowly pushed inside me.

A scream burst from my throat as I felt my insides stretch painfully. I grasped his arms, my nails digging into his flesh as I clutched tightly.

He paused, peering at me with genuine concern. “I’ll stop if it’s too painful.”

I shook my head, wanting to get it done and over with. “No, don’t stop. Please, just fuck me.”

He hesitated, and then he entered fully with one deep plunge of his hips.

My eyes watered, and I could feel the trickle of blood down my thighs. That was it; I’d given my virginity to a man I should feel nothing but hatred for.

I had a feeling I was going to regret this, but tonight, I just wanted to drown in this bliss. To revel in every spark I felt with him.

His lips brushed against mine, teasing, before he finally claimed them in a slow, intoxicating kiss. His thrusts were slow and sensual, the pain I felt blending with pleasure.

I wrapped my legs and arms around him, grinding my waist to meet his pace.

“It feels so good to be inside you, solnishko ,” he whispered. “You’re so tight and warm. So perfect.”

I adjusted to him, and the pain slowly vanished, leaving only the pleasure. Every thrust was sensual and deep, and when he looked into my eyes, nothing else mattered.

This was better than I expected; every bit of it was a memory I wanted etched in my brain forever.

He took my nipple in his mouth, nibbling it as his finger found my clitoris again.

I pushed up against him, reveling in the heat of his body.

His groans made my heart beat faster. I didn’t want this to end, even as I felt my orgasm build once again.

I was in an ocean of ecstasy, and I didn’t care if I’d drown; I just wanted to sink deeper and deeper until I was completely swallowed by it.

Andrei grunted, slamming his hips against mine and fucking me like it was our last day on Earth. A sheen of sweat formed on his forehead, and the veins on his temple bulged.

An animalistic groan tore from his throat as he came with one final thrust.

We climaxed at the same time as I let out a desperate whimper, a second orgasm tearing through me.

Andrei emptied inside me, some of the warm liquid dripping between my thighs.

We were both jerking, panting, and sweaty by the time we came to.

He pressed a kiss to my back, and I flinched when he spanked my ass. “I’ll bring a towel and get you cleaned up, solnishko .”

The regret started sinking in as he left, the realization that what just happened would change everything. We were no longer just a captor and his captive; we were something more now. Lovers wasn’t the word; a man like Andrei couldn’t love someone like me, but there was a spark between us that had now exploded into a forest of wildfire.

But the biggest problem was how my feelings for him had changed.

I no longer had a bone of hatred for him in my body. Instead, I felt butterflies and the need for something deeper than sex or even physical touch.

This was going to complicate everything—the reason he kept me here in the first place, my need for revenge, and my hatred for the mafia.

Because he was no longer just someone my father worked for before he was killed.

No.

He was a man who made my heart race.

I think I’d just fallen for him.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:57 pm

The morning air in my home office was still, save for the quiet hum of the city beyond the tall windows. Sunlight streamed through the sheer curtains, casting golden streaks over the dark oak desk where I sat.

It was a Saturday morning, and all I had to do today was tidy some documents on my computer and make a compilation of all the business deals we'd struck in the last couple of weeks.

The call with Egor had been going on for five minutes as we caught up on business and everything else related to the Bratva. Neither of us had any interest in the other's personal life, and quite frankly, we had no reason to.

He was married, and I was.... Well, I was a bachelor whose thoughts had been occupied by his prisoner for over a week now.

It'd started the night of Antonio's gala event—or maybe even before that.

I hadn't seen much of Giselle these days. It seemed she had been pretty intentional about avoiding me since that night, and I'd given her as much space as I thought she needed. I wasn't certain I could go on like that.

Her very existence was a torment to my soul, yet I ached for her presence like my life depended on it. In one word, I was fucked.

"I heard you're parading Peter's girl as your fiancée," Egor said over the phone. "You even took her to Morozov's party."

He wasn't very pleased with his findings; I could tell from the gravelly tone of his voice as he said it.

"Dah." Yes. I leaned back in my seat, my fingers drumming against the desk. "It's nothing but a show."

He was silent for a moment.

"Have you found out anything about the Tyfun-1?" he finally asked. "It's the reason you're putting on this show, isn't it?"

I exhaled slowly and raised my hand to scratch my temple. "Nothing yet. The girl is smart. She wouldn't give up information that quickly."

"It's been two weeks, Andrei," Egor countered. "That's enough time to find out if she knows anything."

"I'm certain she does. Given it's her lifeline, I'm sure she's holding onto it for dear life." I exhaled slowly. "I'll get the information out of her soon enough. It might take a little more time."

"We don't have time. The longer the shipment is out there, the sooner those vultures will find it. We'll incur losses and lose partners."

"That won't happen," I promised, keeping my voice even. "We have the girl. They can't find it without her. We need to earn her trust first. She won't give up anything if she perceives us as enemies."

Egor sighed. "Her father worked for us. She'd be a fool to think of us as enemies."

I inclined with a nod. "That may be true, but he also hid the shipment from us, and

his last text about it was to her. I'm sure she suspects he must've had his reasons. She thinks he didn't trust us."

Giselle was too stubborn and clever for her own good. She was loyal to her father despite him having thrown her into a life-or-death game before his passing. I couldn't quite tell if that was bravery or foolishness.

"I think you're too soft on her."

I chuckled. "Soft? She's not the type of woman who would break under pressure. Earning her trust is the only way to get her to talk. Besides, she's only a tool I'll toss to the side after all of this is over."

"And you're confident this approach of yours will work?"

I glanced at the sparkling bottle of water I'd placed on my desk earlier. "I am."

"I'm not a fan of it. We're men of honor, and we don't play with a woman's feelings," he said plainly. "Make sure it ends as soon as it can."

I remained silent.

For now, I couldn't see an end to this game between Giselle and me, and it was against my code of honor to make a promise I couldn't keep, especially to the Pakhan .

Egor must've suspected the reason for my silence. He cleared his throat. "There is something more going on between the two of you." It wasn't a question. He knew. He could tell.

I'd never been the type to make excuses. I usually switched tactics if one didn't work

in my favor, no matter how cruel it seemed. But here I was, choosing the easy way out with Giselle.

“Finding the Tyfun-1 is more important than whatever’s going on in my private life,” I said icily. “We should keep our focus on it.”

I couldn’t see him, but I could’ve sworn Egor’s brows furrowed when hearing me say that. “In this case, what goes on in your private life determines whether or not we find the shipment. If the girl becomes a liability, I’ll have no other choice.”

I gritted my teeth, and my chest flared with rage. I kept it under control, though. I knew how things in this part of the world worked and how liabilities were cut loose. I’d been at the executing end a couple of times, so it was rational for Egor to give a warning like that.

Still, his threat awakened something in me—the need to protect her even from my own family.

“She won’t become a liability,” I said, my tone sharp and leaving no room for discussion.

There was a brief pause before Egor exhaled a slow sigh. “I’ll take your word for it. Have Dobryn keep an eye on the other rats, just in case they somehow get their hands on it first.”

“I will. If someone got their hands on it or has gotten close to finding it, we would know. They’d be in a hurry to get it onto the black market, and the news would spread like wildfire.”

“Let’s hope you’re right,” Egor muttered. “And about the girl, you better be careful. You said she wouldn’t become a liability, and as much as I trust you, it will be

dangerous for the wrong woman to have you wrapped around her finger.”

My jaw ticked. “Giselle is not the wrong woman. Her father worked for us for years. And like I said before, all of this is a show.”

Egor didn’t miss the edge to my voice. “Is it? You’ve never hesitated before. Don’t go soft on me now. If she betrays us and gives the information to the wrong person, it’ll be a lot of trouble.”

My grip tightened on the phone.

“She won’t. I’ll make sure of it,” I assured him. “I’ll get the information we need soon, before anyone does. She’s under my protection, so no one can get access to her.”

He made a low, thoughtful noise. “I’ll trust you. Remember, whether or not we find the shipment is in your hands.”

The line went dead.

I heaved a sigh, setting the phone down on the desk.

This call was clearly a warning. Egor wanted to make sure I had Giselle under control and not the other way around. He was Pakhan , and I had to get the information I needed from her before his patience ran out.

I ran a hand over my jaw, my muscles tense with frustration.

I hadn’t lied when I said all of this was a show because that was exactly what I’d planned for it to be—nothing but a show to get the information I needed from her.

The plan had been to use her. It still was, but there was also something else lurking beneath all my schemes and manipulation tactics. It was my attraction toward her, which had now molded itself into a weakness of mine.

I should've spent all of my time thinking of new ways to manipulate her and get the information quicker. Making a map of how I planned to use her to retrieve the shipment was more important. Instead, all I could think of was her.

My attraction to her was poison, and it would be the death of me soon. I knew it, yet I couldn't resist her, especially since that night after the gala.

Sex never meant much to me, but I couldn't forget the way she pressed against me, the feeling of taking her virginity and making love to her.

Normally, I would've lost interest in her after two weeks had passed, and she did everything she could to avoid me. But it seemed that only made me even more drawn to her.

No woman had ever avoided me the way she did. They would usually become clingy, clamoring for my attention and love.

But not Giselle. She didn't even care that we'd shared some intimacy, and that was driving me insane.

I needed to remind her that she wouldn't be able to avoid me forever.

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:57 pm

Exactly seventeen days had passed since the night Andrei and I had sex. Except it wasn't just sex; there was no way a word like that could describe what we shared.

We weren't in love with each other, at least not on his part, but lovemaking was the only term that could explain what had happened between us.

I'd been avoiding him ever since. I was too embarrassed that he didn't feel the same way and was only using me to get information on the missing shipment.

I felt different today, though. If that was all he wanted, he could have tortured me to get the information from me and discarded me when he realized I didn't have the answers he needed.

The fact that he was probing me for the information was all I needed to know that he cared for me to an extent. He really kept me here to keep me safe.

Avoiding him the way I'd been for the past few days was wrong. I should be thanking him instead, and honestly, I couldn't avoid him forever when I had no idea when I'd be leaving.

After I got out of bed and brushed my teeth, I slipped on a pair of shorts and an oversized shirt Andrei had gotten for me before heading down to the kitchen.

The chef, Miss Pushkin, smiled as I entered. "Good morning, Miss Rae."

I smiled back at her as I walked to the counter, where she was mixing something for breakfast. "Good morning, " I said, staring into the ceramic bowl on the counter.

“What are you making?”

“Fluffy pancakes,” she answered. “They’re for you. Mr. Yezhov doesn’t like them, so I’ll make something else for him to eat.”

“Oh.” I leaned against the counter. “What does he like?”

She shrugged. “He’s not a big breakfast person. He usually just has black coffee and moves on with his day, but it’s the weekend, so I am thinking of what to prepare.”

I thought for a moment. He said he wanted to taste my cookies, but I didn’t think it was a healthy breakfast option, so I opted for something else.

“Does he like cheese pancakes with sour cream and honey? I mean, it’s popular in Russia, isn’t it?”

Miss Pushkin’s smile widened. “ A syrniki meal. Why haven’t I thought of that before now?”

“Well, now you don’t have to think too much. Is it okay if I make it myself?”

Her smile dropped, and she sighed. “Mr. Yezhov may not like the idea of you in the kitchen. You’re a guest.”

I almost rolled my eyes. I was more of a prisoner. “Don’t worry about him. I’ll explain I wanted to do it.”

She looked hesitant for a moment, and then her lips curled. “Okay. I’ll let you make it, but I’ll be right here just in case you need my help.”

I wasn’t sure if she was letting me make it because she didn’t trust me or because she

was really scared Andrei would be upset. Either way, I was grateful.

I combined some flour, farmer's cheese, egg, baking powder, and other ingredients to get the paste. After mixing them together, I went on to make the pancakes on low heat.

When I finished, I topped the pancake tower with strawberries and blueberries, sour cream on the side, and honey on top.

"That looks almost too beautiful to eat," Miss Pushkin pointed out with a grin. "How did you learn how to make this?"

My chest tightened as memories of Dad flooded my mind. He used to make this dish often when I was a child. I was too young to understand him then, so he simply told me he learned how to make it from his bosses.

I wonder if he knew then that he'd be dead someday and I'd be making this for one of the men he worked for.

Miss Pushkin tapped my shoulder, her lips pulled into a frown. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine." I set the food on a tray with a cup of coffee. "I'll take this upstairs."

She nodded in response.

I took the food upstairs to Andrei's office. I stretched out my hand to knock but paused when I heard him on the phone. He was talking to someone, but I had no idea who it was.

"That won't happen. We have the girl. They can't find it without her. We need to earn her trust first. She won't give up anything if she perceives us as enemies."

My stomach churned. What did he mean by earning my trust first? Was this all a game of some sort to him?

No. It couldn't be.

I was overthinking and overreacting. Andrei wouldn't play a game like that with me. Still, I couldn't just trust him blindly. I needed to be sure.

I pressed my ear to the door to hear him better as he continued the conversation with whoever he was talking to.

He chuckled sardonically. "Soft? She's not the type of woman who would break under pressure. Earning her trust is the only way to get her to talk. Besides, she's only a tool I'll toss to the side after all of this is over."

My world tilted for a moment. It felt like the air had been sucked out of my lungs.

What was that?

"Besides, she's only a tool I'll toss to the side after all of this is over."

I repeated the words in my head, hoping at some point that they wouldn't sound as horrible as they did when he said them. But no matter how many times I did, the painful clenching in my chest didn't ease.

I was nothing but a tool to Andrei. The things we'd done meant nothing to him. Not the dance at the party, or the kiss we shared, or the sex we had. It was all a game to him—all a plan to get information from me.

My eyes stung with tears, and my heart twisted into a knot.

I was so stupid. What the hell was I doing, thinking I could mean something to him? He wasn't a normal man. He was a man who made a living off crime. He'd been with many other women before me. How could I think this was something special?

I'd been so naïve.

The tears now streamed down my face as memories of our night together came flooding back. I'd given my virginity and everything to a man who only wanted to use me.

I let out a quiet, broken chuckle as I stared down at the tray of pancakes I was holding. I was even stupid enough to make him breakfast like I was his wife or something.

All the while, I was nothing to him.

Nothing but a pawn in his game of chess.

My blood boiled, rage simmering beneath the surface. My heart throbbed between devastation and fury as I set the plate on the console by the side of the office.

I stared at the office door for a moment; it was the barricade between me and the man who made a fool of me.

I wiped my face.

An asshole like him didn't deserve my tears.

He was never going to get anything out of me ever again, not my body and definitely not the shipment he was crazy about finding. It was a promise I made to myself. I was never going to be fooled by him again.

Lifting my chin, I squared my shoulders and walked away.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:57 pm

The house felt eerily quiet when I stepped out of my office. It was almost seven p.m., and I'd worked so much that I skipped breakfast and dinner.

I also hadn't caught a glimpse of Giselle despite being in the same house, which was unusual. As much as she was avoiding me, I'd usually see her hurrying upstairs or to the garden outside or find her fast asleep when I came home from work.

But I had been so buried in work that I hadn't even stepped out until now.

I didn't realize how hungry I was until I saw the food arranged on a console near my office door. There were pancakes topped with berries, honey, and sour cream on the side, which was strange because Miss Pushkin wouldn't leave my food outside the office, especially uncovered, and she wouldn't serve me this for breakfast or lunch.

There was a cup of black coffee next to the pancakes. I liked my coffee hot enough to burn the tongue, but seeing as there was no steam pouring from it, I guessed it had gone cold.

I lifted the tray and inspected the food on it.

Yeah, the coffee was room-temperature cold, the pancakes had dried out, and the berries were soft from being left outside the fridge for long.

Whoever left the food here must have done so hours ago, and it definitely couldn't be Miss Pushkin or any of the maids. Unless it was—

Giselle.

It had to be her, but why would she bring food to me only to abandon it outside my door?

Dread crept into my chest as the pieces started to click together. Seeing as it was breakfast, she'd brought it earlier, and then she must have overheard my conversation with Egor.

Shit, that was it.

She'd left the food out here in rage over what she heard.

I needed to find her and explain things.

I set the food back on the console and hurried to her room, swinging the door open and striding in. "Giselle?"

She wasn't on her bed or in the bathroom. She was probably in the kitchen or the living area; at least, I hoped she was.

I jogged down the stairs and made my way to the living area. She wasn't there either.

Miss Pushkin was making dinner when I entered the kitchen. The air smelled like beef curry.

"Have you seen Giselle?" I asked.

Miss Pushkin shook her head. "I haven't seen her since she made your breakfast and took it to your office this morning."

My fists clenched, and my chest constricted with fear. Where the hell was she?

I stalked through the house, my heart pounding faster with each empty room I searched.

“Giselle,” I called out, my voice firm as it echoed through the halls.

There was no response. No sign of her anywhere.

She wasn’t inside the mansion; I could tell that much by now. There was only one way to find out where she was. There were CCTV cameras everywhere. One of them must’ve caught her leaving or something.

My patience was razor-thin by the time I reached the security room. Dimitri, the deputy head of security, was standing near the monitors, his arms crossed, but he straightened the moment he saw my face.

“Where is she?” I asked, my tone sharp enough to cut.

He blinked rapidly. “Who’re you looking for, sir?”

“Giselle,” I bit out, gritting my teeth. “She’s not anywhere in the house.” I glanced at the monitors. “Did you see her leave the building?”

He shook his head. “No, sir.”

I took a step closer, my muscles coiled tight. “Check every video that was recorded between morning and now. Check every corner of this property, and don’t stop checking until you tell me where exactly she went.”

“Yes, sir.” He turned to the screens, and as his fingers tapped on the keyboard, one camera after another flickered to life, displaying various angles of the estate. Every room, every hall, every possible exit- no sign of her.

He replayed the videos from today and found Giselle leaving the front gate hours ago.

Cold anger settled in my bones.

“How the fuck did she slip past you?” My voice was low, deadly, and filled with rage.

He turned ashen from head to toe, his throat bobbing as he forced himself to swallow. “I didn’t see her leave, sir.”

“And that is the fucking problem. What the hell do I pay you for if anyone can just come and go as they please?” I barked.

This would’ve never happened with Dobryn here. He was vigilant, and not even an insect could fly past him without him noticing. Everyone else here was useless.

I stalked up to Dimitri and grabbed the collar of his shirt. “Pray I find her, or you’re a dead man.”

Tossing him away like he weighed nothing, I stormed back to the house. I was angry at myself, angry at the security men who couldn’t do their jobs properly.

I didn’t have the right to be angry at Giselle, not after what I knew she’d heard outside my door, but still, I was. She’d just thrown herself to the wolves by leaving.

Just as I reached the foyer, one of the maids stood by the hallway, her jaw shivering as if she’d just been pulled out from an icy lake.

“What is it?” I asked.

I wasn’t in the mood for a chat, but she might’ve had an idea where Giselle was or

went to.

She scratched the back of her head, her hands trembling. “It’s about Miss Rae,” she said in a barely audible voice.

I didn’t like suspense. “Speak.”

“Well, yesterday, she asked me to get her a pregnancy test strip,” the maid said nervously. “I think Miss Rae might be pregnant.”

A shockwave rippled through me.

My blood thundered in my ears, and everything else ceased to matter.

“Did she get it?” I asked, my voice eerily calm, which was a perfect contrast to the storm brewing beneath.

The maid nodded. “Yes, sir. I got it and gave it to her.”

I tilted my head. “Do you know what the result was?”

She shook her head. “She didn’t tell me, and I couldn’t ask. I had no right to as it was a matter of her privacy, but she wouldn’t have asked unless she was—”

“Pregnant,” I helped complete.

Realization slammed into the pit of my stomach like a train. It was exactly seventeen days since we made love; if she’d been ovulating, then there was a good chance she was pregnant, considering we didn’t use any protection.

The possibility that she was pregnant made me even angrier because now she wasn’t

just putting herself in danger; she was also risking our child.

I needed to find her and bring her home. It was even riskier for her out there if she was pregnant.

Hurrying to the security room, I wrote down Giselle's number on a piece of paper. "Find out where she is immediately; we don't have time to waste."

He nodded. "Yes, sir."

"Order the other men to get ready. Tell me the minute you can trace her address."

Dimitri sat down on one of the computers in the room and got to work. He was one of the best hackers I had.

As I returned to the main building, I pulled out my phone from my pocket and called Dobryn.

He answered on the first ring.

"Giselle's gone missing." I broke the news before he could utter his first word on the call.

"How the hell did she get past security, and why did she even leave?"

"As for how she managed to slip past security, you'll have to ask Dimitri yourself." I raked a hand through my hair and sighed from the frustration I was feeling. "As for why, she overheard my conversation with the Pakhan . It's been hours since she left, and I have no freaking idea where she could be."

"We'll have to find her before someone else does," Dobryn said. "It'll cause a lot of

trouble if she gets into the wrong hands and gives them information about the shipment.”

I couldn’t give two shits about the damn shipment right now. All I wanted was for Giselle to be back home and unharmed. The shipment could wait; it didn’t matter nearly as much as she did to me.

“Dimitri is trying to track her location now. Take the men with you and comb the city as much as you can. I’ll tell you if we find her first.”

“What are you going to do when you find her?”

I couldn’t tell him about the pregnancy until I knew for certain that the result was positive. “I’m bringing my girl back home.”

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:57 pm

I hadn't realized how terrible my decision to run away was until now. I'd thought I could simply go back to my apartment and move on with life as usual or book a flight to Oregon to stay with Mom.

I was wrong.

There were at least five men stationed in front of my home when I got there. All five of them were tall, dressed in suits, and had that murderous look on their faces that Andrei's bodyguards had.

To be honest, I couldn't tell if these men were some of Andrei's associates whom I hadn't met or if they belonged to one of the rival families he mentioned. Regardless of the answer, I was determined not to get caught by them.

I'd turned around and found a café where I sat most of the afternoon. I didn't have my credit card or any money on me, so I'd pretty much starved through the day, and now that it was nighttime, I was out of energy and with nowhere to sleep.

Running away like that was a hell of a bad decision. I should've kept my anger in check and recovered some of my things before leaving. There was no turning back now that I'd left, though.

I would rather sleep on the streets of New York City than return to Andrei's mansion.

The cold air cut through my skin like blades. I was still wearing the shorts and shirt I'd worn earlier today, but they barely protected me from the cold.

The city blurred around me—dark alleys, flickering streetlights, shadows stretching across the cracked pavement. I had no destination, yet only one thought kept me from breaking down.

Freedom.

I was free from Andrei now. Free to live however I wanted.

As long as I was free from him, I could stay at Hazel's place until I got a job and a new apartment. The only problem was my battery was dead, I didn't have her number off-hand, and I didn't have transport money to make it to her place.

I was basically stranded.

I sighed, wrapping my arms around myself to keep warm from the cold. I just had to make it through tonight. Everything was going to be better tomorrow.

A burst of blinding headlight flashed in my direction, and I heard the screeches of tires as a model of car I couldn't quite see came to a halt beside me.

Raising a hand to block out some of the light and narrowing my eyes to see who it was, my heart stopped.

Men in suits similar to the ones I'd seen in front of my apartment slipped out of the car.

Alarm bells went off in my head. The danger signs were glaring, and I couldn't waste a moment. I jumped to my feet and made a run for it.

A black SUV skidded to a stop in front of me, blocking my path. More men in black suits poured out of the SUV and joined the race.

My heart hammered in my throat as I realized that these weren't Andrei's men. They weren't Russian. They were from one of those mafia families he'd warned me about,

I turned the other way, running as fast as my tired legs could carry me, but I only made it so far when a third car drove toward me at high speed, only stopping when it came in close contact with me.

My blood turned to ice, and my pulse spiked. I collapsed on the floor, panting for breath.

This was it; I was going to die tonight. No one was going to save me.

Andrei had no clue where I was, so he couldn't find me. No one could.

A man in his late fifties stepped out from the third car, grinning with sick amusement as he prowled toward me.

I stumbled back, my body coiling with fear.

I hated him instantly. I despised the awkward twisting of his lips as he grinned and the scar across his forehead.

"Well, well," he drawled as he closed the distance between us. "Looks like I just found myself a prize."

He had a slight Romanian accent. Was he from the Romanian syndicate? They weren't as infamous as the Italians and the Bratva, but they were well known for their heavy involvement in child and women trafficking, drug trafficking, fraud, and whatever else I was too scared to think of.

Cold sweat slicked down my skin, and my breath caught in my throat. "Who the hell

are you?”

He winched and clutched his chest dramatically. “You’re hurting my feelings, fat?,” he sneered. “Too bad you haven’t heard of me when I know so much about you.”

“What do you want?”

His grin eased into a wicked smile. “Now that’s a smart question, little one.” He stretched his hand out to touch my face, but I pulled away and glared at his hand.

“Don’t touch me, you fucking pig!”

He laughed maniacally and leaned in. Suddenly, he grabbed my hair and yanked it back, sending a jolt of pain down my spine and forcing me to confront his soulless eyes. “I’m a very patient man, little one, but the next time you move your tongue so freely will be the last time you have one.”

I chuckled despite the pain and fear I felt. “You think I don’t know what you want? You can’t get it out of me if I don’t have a tongue.”

“Who says you need a tongue to give me the information I need?” His gaze flicked to my hands, and I quickly hid them behind my back. “You can write; that is all I’ll need.”

My stomach churned, my throat burning with unshed tears.

He let go of my hair.

One of his men stepped forward and handed him a towel, and I cringed as he wiped his hand like I was carrying a deadly disease.

“Let’s make this easy for both of us, shall we?” he drawled, straightening up to his feet. “I only need one piece of information from you: Where is Tyfun-1?”

I scoffed. “Why would I tell you? I don’t even know who you are.

He tsked and shook his head. “Forgive my manners. I’m Gavril Lupescu.”

I spat at his feet. If I had to die, I would at least go out as a badass. I imagined Dad went out the same way, and it was the reason no one had been able to find the shipment.

“Your name is as disgusting as you are. I don’t have the information you need, and even if I did, I wouldn’t tell you where it is. What’s the assurance you won’t just kill me after I tell you?”

“Good point,” he drawled. “You’re a smart one. Now, depending on my mood, you may make it out alive. Refusing to tell me, on the other hand, will seal your faith completely, and it won’t be pretty.”

“I don’t give a shit.”

“Oh, trust me, you do.” His eyes glinted with something dark and evil. “Imagine your beloved mother crying her eyes out at your wake. She won’t even be able to hold an open-casket funeral because of how bloody and damaged your body will look.”

Tears sprung to my eyes, my heart shattering as the mental image of my mother at my funeral flashed in my head. “Fuck you!”

“Wrong answer.” He sighed dramatically before signaling his men. “Take her.”

Two men stepped forward. They pulled me up from the ground and started dragging

me to the SUV.

I struggled—kicking, fighting, clawing, and biting. It was all useless. They were too strong, and I was too weak.

They shoved me into the SUV and slammed the door shut behind me. The engine roared beneath me, and as the car lurched forward, the city faded behind us.

My mind raced.

I had no idea where they were taking me, and I knew it was impossible, but I hoped Andrei would save me.

The warehouse smelled of damp metal and gasoline. I had no idea where it was or how far we had driven, but I suspected it was on the outskirts of the city.

I was tied to a chair, my wrists bruised and hurting from the rough rope biting into my skin.

The dim lighting, along with the monster sitting across from me, made me feel like I was stuck in some sort of nightmare.

God, please let this be nothing but a bad dream.

Gavril paced in front of me. His tone shifted between amusement and rage, but the cold expression on his face remained constant.

“I’m asking one last time, Giselle. Where is Tyfun-1? I know your father hid it before he died, and you got his last message. Where is it?” he asked with a sharp tone.

I swallowed hard, my throat dry. “I don’t know. I really don’t know where he hid it. I didn’t know what Tyfun-1 was until after his death.”

He smirked, his eyes darkening with rage. “If you insist.” He held his hand out behind him, and one of his men stepped forward, handing him a shiny new blade. “You leave me no choice then.”

A shiver ran down my spine, and panic stole my breath as he rubbed the blade on his suit jacket.

If he was going to kill me, I hoped he would just go straight to it and spare me the torture, but men like Gavril wouldn’t just kill someone they considered an enemy. He was too much of a sadist. He’d torture me, make me beg, and then he’d leave me to rot to death.

Tears blurred my vision, but I dared not blink them away. Whatever he wanted to do to me would be a hundred times worse if he sensed I was afraid, and I wasn’t in the mood to feed his ego.

He pushed off the chair and stalked toward me, holding the tip of the knife up so I could get a good view of the pointy end.

I thought about Mom, thought about art and selling off a piece in a gallery filled with people who appreciated raw talent. I hadn’t gotten a chance to live that dream yet. I hadn’t lived at all.

Andrei would be looking for me by now. It was one thing that he considered me a tool, but I was his lifeline, and he wouldn’t just let me escape. He’d try to find me no matter what it would cost him.

I needed to stall Gavril until he did.

“Maybe I can think of something,” I said sharply. “My father left a clue behind. I’m not sure where exactly the shipment is, but I’ll figure it out.”

He stopped walking, and his brow quirked up his receding hairline. “What clue?”

“A text.” I inhaled, trying to remain calm. One mistake, and my life would be over. “The one you said he sent me before he was murdered.”

“You’re trying to buy some time, aren’t you?” He leaned toward me, bringing his face so close that the smell of tobacco and liquor on him made me gag. “You think the Yezhov boy will come to save you. Too bad you’ll be waiting until your last breath. You’re nothing to a man like him.”

Every fiber of my being trembled with the fear that no one would come to save me. I felt like a trapped animal, helpless and exposed for vultures to circle and dine on.

What if Andrei couldn’t find me? I’d be trapped with a beast like Gavril. I’d take my last breath alone and in pain.

My eyes burned, my heart threatening to explode from my chest, yet I wouldn’t give him the satisfaction of seeing how scared I was.

“Am I nothing, or are you afraid he’ll actually find me?” I straightened up and met his stare. “You know he won’t let you go that easily if he finds out you have me.”

“Stupid bitch!”

The first blow landed across my ribs. Pain seared through my side, and my vision flashed white for a moment.

Gavril shook his head with fake pity. “Such a shame. I wouldn’t have to be

unpleasant if only you could be cooperative and not run your pretty mouth.”

I clenched my fist and groaned, but I wasn’t going to cry. “Is that all you’ve got?”

He grabbed my chin so tight his nails were literally tearing into my skin. “Watch your mouth, child. I’ll have your tongue next time.”

My breathing was labored. I’d grown too weak and exhausted from the lack of food and everything. My mind wavered between giving in to his demand and trying to find where the shipment was and letting him torture me to death.

No, I wasn’t going to give in. I couldn’t give in. I couldn’t break. I hadn’t gotten my revenge on the people who killed my father yet.

I closed my eyes, reminding myself I couldn’t let this man break me so easily.

My eyes tore open as a loud bang reverberated through the warehouse. It was a gunshot from outside.

The air shifted, and the entire place turned into a chaotic mess as more gunshots rang out, the sound drawing nearer with each shot.

Smoke and the smell of gunpowder filled the air, and Gavril’s men scrambled toward the source of the chaos.

“Come on, you idiots!” Gavril screamed at his men, who’d gathered around to protect him. “Kill that bastard and bring him to me.”

Some of the men obeyed, and the others stayed back, using their bodies as a shield for Gavril and pointing their guns toward the smoky entrance.

It all happened quickly, and before I could process everything, the men around Gavril were...dead.

Vomit crept up my throat at the sight of them. There was blood, so much blood.

I raised my feet as some of the blood trailed toward me, and my panic flared in my chest. I'd never seen a dead body. It was hard to process that these men had been alive only a second ago, and now they were nothing but corpses with bullet wounds. I'd never been exposed to such brutality before.

Gavril pulled a gun from one of the dead bodies and pointed it toward the entrance. "Whoever you are, show yourself." He then pressed the gun to my temple, the tip of it ice cold against my skin. "Show yourself, or the girl dies."

"Go on," a deep voice said from the foggy darkness ahead. "Kill her. I dare you."

Andrei.

It was Andrei's voice.

Relief washed over me as he emerged from the darkness. His eyes were blood-red with rage, his face colder than anything I'd ever seen.

For the first time since the day I met him, he didn't look mysterious and snobby; he looked angry—really angry.

The gun began to quiver as it was pressed against my temple.

Gavril pulled it away and pointed it at Andrei; then, as if clouded with confusion, he pointed it at me again. "Take one step forward, and I'll pull the trigger," he warned, cocking the gun.

I held my breath, my gaze fixed on Andrei.

Andrei didn't look at me. His full focus was on Gavril. He was glaring at him with that murderous rage still in his eyes. "I'd always thought you were a smart man, Gavril. It seems not."

Gavril laughed, but it was a mere hollow sound to mask the fear in his eyes. "I should have killed this stupid bitch earlier."

"Killing her will be the difference between you leaving this place dead or alive," Andrei drawled, a low warning in his voice. "If I were you, I'd run."

"Fuck you, Yezhov." Gavril whipped the gun back toward Andrei and pulled the trigger.

Andrei ducked behind a crate to take cover. His men rushed in, and Dobryn pointed a gun at Gavril, who'd started to make a run for it. "Don't shoot him," Andrei barked, shooting up to his feet and racing after Gavril.

A growl slipped from Andrei's throat as he caught up with Gavril and smacked the back of his head with his gun.

Gavril stilled, and then he thudded to the ground like a sack of grain.

"Tie this bastard up and make sure he wakes up," Andrei ordered.

"Yes, sir." Dobryn pointed at three men to carry out the task.

Andrei's eyes locked onto mine. The storm in his blue eyes had calmed, but he still looked angry. "We meet again, solnishko ." He walked toward me and, kneeling in front of me, started to loosen the ropes. "What the hell were you thinking, running

away like that?”

My stomach twisted with nerves.

I wasn't thinking. I just wanted to escape him, to be far away from him. The things I heard him say over the phone this morning had shredded my heart apart, and I needed some space to myself.

He was angry, rightfully so.

After loosening the rope, he helped me to my feet and peered into my eyes with his cold, blue gaze. “Don't ever do something like that again,” he gritted out through clenched teeth.

I should have been afraid of him, but I wasn't. Despite the anger laced in his voice, he had come all the way to this place to save me.

I felt safer with him than I had the last couple of hours. I was grateful he'd come.

So, rather than trying to escape him again, I wrapped my arms around him and hugged him. “Thank you, Andrei.”

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Her body was cold against mine. As she hugged me, she felt even more fragile, and the rage from earlier seemed to vanish in her presence.

All that mattered to me right now was that she was safe and unharmed. Dread coiled in my gut at what could've happened if I'd arrived a minute later than I had.

I supposed Gavril had already figured out she really had no clue about the shipment. The son of a bitch would have tortured her and killed her just to spite me and feed his twisted, sadistic fantasy.

I pulled back and inspected her for injuries. She had bruises on her wrists, over her tattoo, and a few under her chin. I wondered if there were more in places I couldn't see.

"Are you hurt?"

She bit her lips, hesitating. "Not so much. Luckily, you came on time to save me from that monster."

All the anger from earlier returned in full force.

My nostrils flared, my muscles twitching. "I'll kill that bastard for touching you."

"No, Andrei—"

I signaled Dobryn to come over. "Take her outside. I still have some business with that sick Romanian asshole." Cupping her face, I pressed a kiss to her forehead. "This

won't be pretty, look away.”

She opened her mouth to protest what she knew I was about to do, but before she could say a word, I'd already strutted across the warehouse, picking up the knife Gavril dropped earlier and marching up to the bastard who dared to lay a hand on my woman.

Gavril was bound at the center of the warehouse with his hands tied behind him the same way he'd done to Giselle,

My men had already roughened him up a bit, and he was a whimpering, swollen, and bloody mess right now.

It wasn't enough for me, though. He deserved more for daring to touch what was mine.

I thought of how scared Giselle must've been, the pain she must've felt when he hit her, and that was enough to unleash the beast inside me.

“If you wanted to run, you shouldn't have let me catch you,” I said, my tone even and dangerous. “What you're about to face will be worse than death.”

His swollen lips curled into a smirk. “Wow, wow, wow. What do we have here?” He glared at me, his gaze filled with condescension. “If it isn't the little Yezhov cub.”

My fingers flexed on the blade. “I see you're a man of many words, Gavril.” I pressed the blade to his lips. “I should start with your tongue, but it'll be a shame not to hear your screams.”

“You should, or you might regret it.” His gaze fled to Giselle. “I regret not doing the same to that bitch. Tell me, Yezhov, did you stick your cock in that whore? If so,

I wonder why she ran from you. Maybe it's too tiny for—"

I slashed the blade across his face before he could finish his sentence.

He let out a whimper, useless rage gleaming in his eyes as his blood trailed down his face. "You should choose your next words very carefully," I warned, crouching next to him. "The less nonsense you say, the quicker I'll send you to hell."

He spat blood onto the concrete floor, his chest heaving with each breath. "Fuck you, Yezhov. You think you've won? More rivals will come after you. Guess I'll see you in hell soon enough."

"You should save a room for me then." I straightened up, shrugged off my suit jacket, and tossed it to one of my men; then I rolled up my sleeves. "For now, I'll focus on giving you a warm send-off." Holding a hand over my shoulder, I yelled, "Spanner!"

One of my men stepped forward and handed me a spanner. Two more men held Gavril's jaw open.

"This is for calling her a whore." I hooked the spanner on one of his front teeth and yanked it out.

Gavril's scream echoed across the warehouse. He struggled against his bonds, cursing in Romanian.

"Ubludok."

I knew what that one meant: bastard.

I flicked his blood off my fingers in disgust. "Her name is Giselle, and you don't deserve to say that name. You don't deserve to breathe the same air as her," I growled

as I pulled out a second tooth.

His cries grew louder with each tooth. I didn't stop until a total of six bloody stubs were lying on the floor.

Gavril whimpered, his breath jagged and strained. "Kill me," he muttered. "Kill me and get this over with."

A slow smile formed on my lips. "Not so fast." I tossed the spanner to the ground and picked up the blade again. "We're just getting started."

By the time I was done with Gavril, I was covered in splatters of his blood. My crisp white shirt was splattered with bloodstains, and I was wiping some of the blood running down my arms with a towel.

Gavril's body parts decorated the floor—teeth, fingers, one of his ears, and one of his big toes.

His whimpers were weaker now as he dangled between consciousness and death. His head hung low, his suit was soaked in his blood, and his body was barely holding onto life.

Even now, I hadn't gotten the satisfaction I needed. The rage inside me demanded more pieces of him, but he was close to giving up the ghost, and death was a mercy—one he didn't deserve.

Throwing him in a gutter and leaving him to die made more sense.

"What should we do with him, sir?" Dimitri asked.

I glared at the half-dead in front of me. “Dispose him,” I ordered. “He’ll be a waste as a prisoner.”

Dimitri nodded.

I rolled down my sleeves and threw on my suit jacket to hide the splatters of blood. Giselle would be shaken if she saw them, and after everything she’d been through, the last thing I wanted was to traumatize her further.

Drawing in an even breath, I turned toward the door where Giselle was meant to be but froze when her emerald eyes met mine.

They were wide with horror and disbelief, and her face had paled with fear.

I glanced at Dobryn, and he shook his head, his way of telling me she hadn’t seen anything. She hadn’t watched me pull out Gavril’s teeth or chop off his fingers and toes, but that didn’t bring me the relief I needed.

Because she’d heard it all.

She’d heard his screams and whispers, heard me laugh as I executed the torture, heard my threats.

For the first time, I saw something in her eyes that wasn’t hatred or desire. She was afraid of me.

I approached her and reached for her arm, but her breath hitched, and she flinched away. Her lips trembled, and her gaze bounced between my face and my hand.

“Are you afraid of me?”

She swallowed and lowered her gaze to the floor.

“Look at me, Giselle,” I ordered.

She obeyed; her eyes bore into mine.

“Are you afraid of me?” I repeated, holding her gaze. “Do you hate me for torturing the bastard who laid his hands on you?”

She shook her head.

“I want to hear you say it, solnishko . I want to hear you say you’re not afraid of me.”

“I’m not,” she answered. “But...what you did to that man, you enjoyed it, didn’t you? I heard you laugh.”

“Dah.” I stepped closer, caging her against the wall. “I’d kill a thousand more men if they hurt you, solnishko . I’d burn the world down to keep you safe.”

And I meant every word I said.

“Why?” Her lashes fluttered, her breath shaky. “Why would you go that far for me?”

Because she was the one person I would risk everything for. She was the only person I would never hurt, even if she buried a knife in my chest.

I hadn’t realized how much she meant to be until I saw her bound in that chair, bruised and afraid. I hadn’t known how far I was willing to go for her until I felt the rage in my chest as I watched that bastard leaning over her and smirking in her face.

That was when I knew I’d ride to hell and back for this delicate flower.

She wasn't just a pawn in my game, not anymore. She was more precious to me than anything else—an obsession, perhaps. Property.

She was mine.

Mine to own and protect.

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The ride back home was suffocating; that was the only word I could use to describe the odd silence and the tension hanging in the small space of Andrei's Mercedes like a storm about to break.

Andrei's grip on the steering wheel was tight, his knuckles stark white against his tan skin. His jaw was locked, muscles twitching with suppressed anger.

I kept my gaze fixed on the window, watching the darkened landscape blur past with my hands curled into fists on my lap.

Tonight still felt like some sort of dream.

Today, as a whole, felt like a nightmare I so badly wanted to wake up from. I'd gone from happily making breakfast for Andrei to hearing him talk about me as if I was some sort of tool; then, I was kidnapped and almost killed by some fat Romanian with a receding hairline.

It seemed the god of luck wasn't on my side today.

Still, I was lucky he came to save me despite the anger he would've felt when he realized I was missing. I was pretty certain I'd be dead by now if he didn't.

I sighed and leaned back in my seat, tugging against the seatbelt.

Now that the relief of being saved by him had subsided, the anger from this morning returned with full force. Come to think of it, none of this would have happened if he hadn't said what he did.

As much as I'd like nothing more than to go home, take a hot bath, eat dinner, and go to bed, I needed to make sure we were on the same page. I'd clearly overestimated whatever spark there was between us, and now I was the only one who was heartbroken by it all.

Andrei briefly looked away from the road to glance at me. "Are you okay?"

"No, I'm not." I crossed my arms over my chest and refused to look at him. He was smart, so I expected he had already figured out why I left in the first place.

"Are you mad at me?"

I rolled my eyes and pursed my lips. "Is there a reason I should be?"

"Tell me. You're the one who is clearly upset about something."

I looked at him beneath hooded lids, my anger barely contained. "Are you joking right now?"

"No, I'm not. You ran away from home and put yourself in danger. I want to know what you were thinking when you did that."

I hissed. "I was thinking I didn't want to be your pawn anymore, Andrei. That is what I was thinking. I heard you talking to someone this morning. I heard everything you said about me and what I meant to you."

"And you thought getting yourself in danger was the best thing to do?"

I narrowed my eyes on him, anger burning through me. "Forgive me. Maybe I should have walked in and given you a hug for using me as a means to an end."

His fingers turned ashen. There was a flicker of regret on his face.

“How long were you outside my door?” he asked quietly. “How much did you hear?”

“Enough to know I meant nothing to you. I liked you, I trusted you, and you made a fool out of me, Andrei.”

“I didn’t make a fool out of you.”

“Then explain it,” I said sharply. “Explain the things you said, and don’t even think of lying to me because I can see through that bullshit. I need you to be honest.”

He sighed heavily. “It’s more complicated than you think, solnishko .”

I shook my head, laughing bitterly. “You were very clear with what you said. You know what is complicated? Taking my virginity, making me feel things for you, and manipulating me just so you can use me to find some stupid shipment.”

I’d expected more from him, and because of that, I’d been hurt more. Men like Andrei weren’t capable of love. I should’ve known that, but I thought it was different. I thought we would be different.

And I’d been fucking wrong.

It hurt even more that he didn’t care to explain. He didn’t deny it either because he knew it was true.

A part of me still wanted to believe that he cared for me beyond needing me to find the shipment, but I knew he didn’t, and I didn’t want to put myself through that pain again.

He remained silent.

For a moment, the only sound in the car was the hum of the tires against the pavement and my own unsteady breathing.

“I’m sorry you heard that,” he finally said after a moment of silence. His voice was quieter but no less intense.

My chest tightened, and a dull ache spread across my ribs.

Sorry? That was all he could say?

He wasn’t sorry for what he said or for manipulating me that way; all he was sorry about was that I’d heard him.

“You’re such a jerk, Andrei. I shouldn’t have trusted you.” My voice cracked, but I managed to push through. “To me, you’re no different from Gavril. You’re both heartless bastards who’d do anything to get what they want, whether it’s killing someone or using and manipulating that person.”

The car swerved slightly as he turned abruptly onto a secluded road and slammed the brakes.

I gasped as he turned to face me fully, his blue eyes burning with something raw. “You think I’m like that son of a bitch?” he asked, his voice thick with emotion. “You think I only wanted you because I need to find the shipment?”

I pursed my lips. “Do you not want to find the shipment?”

He exhaled loudly. “I do, but that isn’t the only reason I wanted you, Giselle. I doubt a day will ever come where I won’t want you.”

I let out a dry, humorless laugh. “Liar. You’ll toss me to the side when you get your hands on the shipment.”

He leaned in dangerously close. “I’ll want you, even after I get my hands on that shipment. Nothing will change between us, Giselle. I mean that.”

My pulse quickened, my chest fluttering as I heard him say he wanted me and would still want me regardless of the shipment.

Was there a chance he felt the same way about me? He’d come all the way here to save me and killed the man who hurt me. Maybe it wasn’t all a lie, and he felt the same way about me, but that was only a possibility, a chance I didn’t want to take a second time.

I wanted to believe him, but I knew deep down that everything he said could be nothing but a lie to keep me wrapped around his finger until he got what he needed from me. I’d be a fool to trust him again.

I looked away, shifting my gaze to the streetlamp outside my car window. “Bold of you to think I would fall for that.”

“You think I would lie to you?”

I whipped my head around to glare at him. “It wouldn’t be the first time, would it?”

He heaved a sigh as if bubbling with frustration. “I’ve never lied to you, and you know it.”

“Do I?” I shrugged and shook my head. “I don’t think so.”

Our gazes remained locked on each other for a moment. Neither of us was ready to

back down, but we'd only get more upset with each other than we already were if we chose to continue the argument.

Finally, Andrei retreated. "Fine, I won't force you to believe me."

"Thank you. That sounds a lot better," I replied with a roll of my eyes. It was better for me to keep my guard up than to believe him and get hurt again.

"I heard from one of the maids that you asked her to get you a pregnancy test," he said calmly. There was no anger in his voice, and it wasn't demanding either.

My period had been delayed for two days, and there were signs of pregnancy—my boobs hurt, I had crazy mood swings, and I was eating like a starved horse. Those sometimes happened to me for some months; the difference was that I hadn't had unprotected sex so close to my ovulation period those times.

I wanted to make sure that wasn't the case.

Things were still complicated between me and Andrei. I had a target on my back and a shipment to find, it wouldn't be ideal to get pregnant with all the chaos around me.

"I did.

He stared at me intently. "Are you pregnant?"

"Thankfully, I'm not. It was just a pregnancy scare." I paused and narrowed my eyes on him. "Were you afraid a pawn in your game was carrying your child?"

His brows knitted, and the muscles on his arm flexed. "You're not a pawn to me, Giselle. And yes, I was afraid, but not because I thought you were pregnant with my child. I was afraid both you and the baby were in danger."

I tucked a lock of matted hair behind my ear. I couldn't even stay mad at him when he said things like that to me. "The test came out negative. I'm not pregnant. Happy?"

"Listen, solnishko , because I am not going to say this again," he said, his tone serious and his eyes heavy with an emotion I'd never seen before. "At the start, yes, you were just a means to an end to me, but not anymore."

I held my breath, my shoulders tensing. "Are you saying I mean more to you now?"

"Yes, you do. And I like the idea of starting a family with you."

I huffed. "Getting me pregnant is not exactly the way to start a family with me."

"No, it's not. You're mine, Giselle. I'll marry you."

Staring at his face, I looked for hints to show he was joking, but there were none. He looked dead serious as he said those words to me.

I didn't want to believe him, but I knew he wasn't bluffing. Andrei Yezhov would never joke about a thing like that or say things he didn't mean.

I wasn't his, though. I wasn't a piece of property he could claim or put a ring on and chain to his side forever, but I knew better than to argue or turn down his proposal.

A shiver ran down my spine at the thought of being shackled to this man—his brutality and the mafia. Yet I couldn't go away.

Not after I'd watched him brutally kill the man who hurt me.

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“You can’t force me to marry you,” Giselle snapped, her raven hair falling over her face in a disheveled manner.

I tilted my head to look at her.

My God....

There was nothing I would rather look at first thing in the morning aside from the beautiful view in front of me.

She wore a thin nightgown that showed off most of her cleavage, and her nipples strained against the useless fabric.

My body twitched in response to how sexy she looked in it, my balls tingly with need.

I remembered it all, how she came on my tongue, how she moaned my name as I fucked her that night. I needed to feel her again soon, or I’d lose my fucking mind.

It had been two days since she had run away and been kidnapped, and I was happy to see some of her fiery spirit return.

To be honest, I’d been quite worried when she didn’t protest the marriage like I was expecting her to.

Giselle Rae wasn’t a pushover, and she certainly wasn’t the kind of girl who would give in to a marriage she didn’t want to begin with, especially not with a man she was

pretending to hate.

She'd barged into my room this morning with the wind behind her, her emerald eyes wide with defiance. She was seething, hands crossed over her chest and her foot tapping the floor impatiently.

I rolled out of bed bare-chested, and her cheeks turned red with embarrassment. Still, she didn't back down.

I bit back a smile as I walked to the recliner and sat on it. "Don't you think it's too early for so much noise?"

"Noise?" She gave me a once-over. "Not a chance. We need to talk. I gave it some thought, and I realized I didn't want to get married to you."

"Hmm." I nodded slowly. "Who would have thought? I'd assumed you came here to see my morning boner."

A rosy hue appeared across her face, and she shook her head. "Shameless. You're a pervert."

I smirked. "I'm not the one who barged into someone's room without knocking first. Tell me, solnishko, which one of us is the pervert now?"

"Pervert," she repeated with a roll of her eyes. "Anyway, I'm not here to engage in your games. I can't marry you."

I leaned back, watching her. "Why?"

Her eyes widened. "Why? Because I don't love you, and I'm pretty sure you don't love me, either. You're only marrying me because of that damn shipment."

“Is jumping to conclusions your specialty?”

“Is forcing a woman to bend to your will yours?” she returned. “You forced me to live with you, which is basically kidnapping, and now this?”

I tilted my head from side to side. “You’re remembering it all wrong. I saved you from the police and brought you here to keep you safe. I saved you yet again, and you were very willing when you followed me this time.”

Her lips eased into a sly smile. “Is that what you tell yourself before you fall asleep at night? That I followed you willingly, and hence, you did nothing wrong?”

“No, I tell myself you’re mine.”

She raked a hand through her hair, clearly frustrated with how the conversation was going.

A rush of warmth spread through me.

I liked it when I could draw a reaction like that from her.

I was the only person who could do that, the only person allowed to draw a reaction of any sort from her. No one else.

The doorbell rang downstairs, and I smiled.

She glared at me suspiciously. “Who’s that?”

“The designer for your wedding dress. I booked her for this morning,” I said. “Make sure to pick the prettiest dress she has.”

“Not happening.”

“Being stubborn won’t change anything.”

“We’ll see about that,” she insisted, her arms still crossed over her chest and her eyes wild with fiery defiance. “If you’re that desperate to get married, why not try on the wedding dress yourself? I’m sure Dobryn would agree to be your groom.”

She didn’t look like she was going to back down anytime soon, so I resorted to something else—something she wouldn’t be able to refuse.

“You still need my help to find the bastards that murdered your father, don’t you?”

Her expression shifted to something sad, her hands dropping to her sides. “Is this how you want to play this?”

“Nothing is free in this world, Giselle. You should know that by now.”

“It won’t be for free. I’ll help you find the shipment.”

I sat up and ran my fingers through my hair. “How? It doesn’t seem like you have any clue about the shipment so far. I won’t cut a deal with you unless you have something to offer. And so far, I have a lot more to offer than you do.”

“That isn’t fair, Andrei.”

“That’s as fair as it can get, solnishko . The choice is yours now.”

She thought for a moment, her eyes wandering from the walls to the ceiling and then me. “Fine, I’ll test the dress or whatever. I’ll marry you, too, but don’t think I’m doing any of this because I like you. I’m doing it for my father.”

I loved the lies she told herself, how she'd managed to make herself believe the only reason she was agreeing to this was because of my shiny offer. We both knew the truth: that she wanted every bit of this as I did.

I didn't mind, though; if lying helped her cope with everything, then I was okay with it. "We have a deal then."

"Pervert!" she muttered as she turned and left the room.

Now that I'd gotten her to consent to our marriage, there was only one thing left. I had to break the news to my cousins, and I already had a feeling Egor wouldn't take a liking to it.

He'd probably seen through my bullshit the day I told him she was nothing but a pawn.

Egor was smart and hard to deceive. It was one thing about him I admired and hated at the same time.

Regardless of whether or not he'd already guessed that Giselle meant more than a tool to me, it wasn't going to be easy to convince him to let me marry her.

Grabbing my phone from the nightstand, I sent a text to the group chat.

Andrei: "Anyone free tonight? Let's meet at the club. Drinks on me."

Miron's message popped up next.

Miron: what's the occasion?

Andrei: you'll find out if you're present.

I dropped my phone, cracking my fingers and neck as I tried to imagine what their reaction to the news would be.

Miron took things surface-level; he'd joke about it.

Rafayel would be more interested in whether or not I loved her.

Egor was too unpredictable. I couldn't say what he'd do. But I had to break the news first to find out.

Giselle's giggles traveled up to my room. It was the first time I'd ever heard her giggle that loudly.

My curiosity was piqued, so I went outside to see what was happening.

Her hands were raised to her shoulder level. She and the designer were discussing something I couldn't make out, and she looked really happy.

A smile curled on my lips, and warmth spread through my chest. I never thought I would smile at the sound of someone giggling, but Giselle had made many things that once seemed impossible come true.

She had no idea what she meant to me and how much I was willing to risk just so I could have her by my side.

Maybe she'd find out someday.

Another message popped up on my screen. It was from Egor, which was surprising because neither he nor Rafayel ever responded in the group chat.

Egor: 8 p.m.

I tightened my grip on the phone, feeling the beat in my chest grow louder.

Tonight, I was going to risk it all.

“Are you really getting married to the girl?” Dobryn asked, staring at me in disbelief.

Miron and Rafayel had the same looks on their faces, as if I was committing a crime against humanity or something even worse, like drowning a puppy.

It wasn't as dramatic as I'd suspected, but Egor's absence played a role in that, I supposed.

Despite being cousins, everyone tensed in his presence to some degree, but it wasn't out of fear; it was how much we respected him.

I stared ahead, pretending to have the slightest interest in the stripper dancing on a pole ahead.

Her red hair cascaded over her back in curly waves, her silver lingerie catching the neon light.

I used to enjoy strip shows like this until I met Giselle. Now, all I could think of was going back home to my woman; just watching her sleep would spike up my dopamine more than a half-naked woman dancing on a pole.

I peered at each and every one of the men sitting in the VIP section of the club with me.

Miron and Dobryn had the same excitement in their eyes. Rafayel looked like he

would rather be anywhere else than here.

The sly fucker missed being home with his wife, Leonora. He'd changed a lot since he met her, and I hadn't understood him and how much he was willing to sacrifice because of her until now.

I would go against everyone and everything in my path just to be with Giselle, including the Pakhan .

"Last time I checked, my middle name wasn't the Joker," I said, glancing at Dobryn.

Miron grinned cockily. "The Pakhan will lose his shit when he hears this bullshit."

"I'm already losing my shit," a deep, rough voice said from the entrance door.

We all turned our heads to see Egor stride in. With his domineering manner, the man commanded respect when he entered a room, and for some, he evoked fear.

"What was that quote about speaking of the devil?" Miron teased, wearing his usual irritating smirk that made him appear like a maniac with a dagger.

He thought he was the joker in the group. His smile would give children nightmares instead.

Egor settled on the empty couch beside Rafayel and crossed his legs, his brows lifting. "What was that bullshit about you marrying the girl?"

I sat still, holding his gaze. "It's not bullshit. We're getting married in three days."

He tilted his head, anger burning in his eyes. "Is this all still part of your game to win her trust."

“It’s not a game. I want her regardless of the shipment.”

The room grew quiet and heavy with tension.

I knew it wouldn’t be easy to convince Egor to allow this marriage.

It wasn’t that he didn’t believe in love; he himself had hopelessly fallen for someone and married her.

As Pakhan , it was his duty to make sure the security of his empire remained uncompromised. One mistake could be the end of all of us, and it was his job to stop that from happening, even if it meant wasting a life.

The stripper made a move at the wrong time, catching his attention.

“Get her out of here,” Egor ordered.

Dobryn flew up to his feet and ushered the stripper out.

“You do realize this could be a mistake or a trap, don’t you?”

I’d given enough thought to that possibility, but Giselle had grown up away from the mafia world. I’d kept track of her, her friends, and the countries she’d visited. She hadn’t had any sort of contact with the mafia until now.

I didn’t see how she could be a threat aside from withholding the information on Tyfun-1. And even then, I believed she wouldn’t hold on to that information for very long.

“It is not a trap.” That I was very certain of.

“Would it make a difference if I told you not to go ahead with the marriage?” he asked.

“It wouldn’t,” I answered honestly. “She’s mine, and I won’t stop until I have her.”

“And you’re willing to go against me for her?”

“There will be no need for that if you don’t try to stop me.”

Egor’s jaw tensed. His dark eyes locked onto mine and remained there, as if he was trying to see through my thoughts.

The silence between us thickened, pressing against the walls of the VIP section, muffling the bass-heavy music thumping outside.

“You’ve lost your fucking mind,” he finally said, his voice low but sharp. “This isn’t some playground romance, Andrei. You don’t get to throw away everything for a woman just because she makes your cock hard.”

Anger rippled through me, but I forced myself to stay seated, to not rise to his provocation.

Giselle wasn’t someone who merely made my cock hard. She was someone I cared about. Someone I was willing to die for. “This isn’t just about that,” I said, my tone even. “She’s mine. I need her.”

Egor’s lips curled into something between a sneer and a smirk. “Need?” he echoed, leaning forward, elbows resting on his knees. “That’s a dangerous word. Need makes men desperate. Desperation makes men sloppy. And sloppy men die young.”

Rafayel shifted beside him, his fingers tapping against the armrest of his chair. “Not

if it's real," he said. "You feel the same way about Freya. It's the same way I do about Leonora."

Egor turned his glare on him. "How are you sure it's love and not some weird obsession and need to own her? She'll be nothing but a distraction to him if that's all he sees her as."

Rafayel shrugged. "I can't say for sure." His voice was calm, deliberate. "I thought Leonora was a distraction once. That she'd make me weak. Instead, she gave me more to fight for. If Andrei feels the same about Giselle, then stopping him won't change a damn thing. He'll still go after her, with or without your blessing."

Egor exhaled sharply, his patience clearly thinning. "You think this is the same?" He gestured at me. "He barely knows this girl."

"You didn't know Freya enough either when you chose to put everything at risk and chase after her like your life depended on it," I cut in, ignoring the death stare he was giving me. "Her father worked for us for years. I think I know her enough to want to be with her."

Miron let out a low chuckle, shaking his head. "Giselle must have some magic between her thighs if you're willing to go up against the Pakhan for her."

I ignored him.

Egor studied me; his expression was unreadable, but I could see the calculations happening behind his eyes. He was weighing risks, measuring the potential for disaster against my determination.

Finally, he sat back with a slow, deliberate sigh. "You want to be with her against all odds?" His voice was quieter now but no less dangerous. "Fine. You're responsible

for everything she brings with her, too.”

I didn’t blink. I was willing to handle anything as long as I had her by my side. “I accept that.”

He nodded once, but there was no victory in it. “If she turns out to be a threat, I won’t hesitate to put a bullet in her myself.”

Something dark and lethal unfurled inside me, but I kept it buried. “That won’t happen. Giselle can’t even step on a flower, let alone become a threat to us. It’s not her you’re worried about; it’s the information she has.”

“At least you’re thinking straight now. You should be getting answers from her, not trying to marry her after what happened.”

My teeth gritted at the reminder of Gavril kidnapping Giselle and hurting her. The bastard was dead; still, a part of me wanted to bring him back to life just so I could kill him all over for what he did to her. “It won’t happen again. No one will ever get their hands on her or the shipment.”

Egor’s smirk returned, but it was colder now. “Let’s hope not.”

With that, he rose to his feet. The conversation was over. He’d made his stance clear. “I’ll be at your wedding. Text me the date and venue when you’ve decided on it.”

I had a date and a venue in mind already.

She was going to be my wife in exactly three days, and we were getting married in my mansion. A Yezhov wedding was usually a big deal, but I didn’t want to draw attention to Giselle or myself with so many vultures circling over a single carcass.

We were going to have a small wedding with very few guests. I didn't tell Egor that, though. He was pissed already as it was; engaging him in further conversation wasn't going to be helpful to either of us.

As he strode toward the exit, Miron exhaled a dramatic breath. "Well, that was fun."

Rafayel gave me a look. "You really love her?"

"Love?" I filled the empty glass in front of me with whiskey and lifted it to my lips. Taking a sip of my drink, I leaned back in my seat and allowed the liquor to simmer in my stomach. "Do I need to love her?"

He narrowed his eyes on me. "You're not getting married to her just because you view her as a possession that belongs to you, are you?"

"Is that such a bad thing?" I asked with a smirk. "Will you run after the Pakhan and tell him not to allow the marriage if I admit that is the case?"

"As much as I'd hate to, I won't allow you to mess with her. Her father worked for us for years. The least we can do is keep his daughter safe."

"Interesting," I drawled. "And who will you be protecting her from, me?"

"I won't hesitate."

A laugh ripped from my throat. I was amused at how much Rafayel had changed. I was even happier that if, for some reason, I was no longer here, there would be someone who cared enough to take care of her and protect her.

I thought of what it meant to love someone for a moment. I knew how much I wanted Giselle, how much I'd changed since I met her, and how happy she made me without

even trying.

I thought of the rage I felt when she'd gotten hurt and how much I wanted to keep her safe.

Was that what love meant? Caring about someone so much that you would want to protect them, even at the cost of your own life? Wanting to make them happy and smiling at you thought of them?

If that wasn't love, then I was satisfied with whatever it was as long as I had her.

"I don't know if I love her or not, man," I answered honestly. "I do know I will burn in hell before I let anyone hurt her, and when she smiles, it feels like the world stops spinning and she's the only person in the universe. Is that enough reason for me to want to marry her?"

He nodded once, like that was enough for him. "I hope you'll both be happy."

"Thank you."

Miron grinned beside me. "That's either the dumbest thing you've ever said or the beginning of something legendary."

I smiled coldly. "We'll find out soon enough."

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:57 pm

“Make sure to smile at the altar. We don’t want our guests to think I forced you into this marriage.”

Giselle whipped around, glaring at me from where she sat on the vanity table, waiting for her makeup artist. If looks could kill, I’d be long gone by now.

Her perfectly arched brow shot up, and she frowned. “Are you going to stand there and pretend you didn’t actually force me into this?”

I played ignorant as I folded my arms and stepped toward her. It was our wedding day, and I’d almost died of a cardiac arrest today—twice, actually—just thinking of how beautiful she would look in her dress.

Giselle Rae was going to be fully mine today.

She was going to be my wife, the mother of my children, and not even the heavens would ever be able to come between us. I was going to make sure of that.

“Did I?” I nodded to the sparkly diamond ring I’d given her for our engagement, which was only a week old. “You looked happy when I slid that into your finger.”

Her cheeks turned red with a blush, but she didn’t back down. “Is that what you tell yourself at night, Andrei? You tell yourself I must be happy with this marriage because I accepted the ring.”

I nodded, smiling as her frown deepened. “Yes. And guess what? I don’t just tell myself that. The thought of it helps me sleep well at night.”

She rolled her eyes and sighed. “If only everyone could be as delusional as you.”

“I’m not being delusional, solnishko . I’m laying my claim on what’s already mine.”

I’d laid my claim on her since the first time I saw her at that funeral. I knew right then and there that I wanted her, and I was going to do whatever it took to get her. The pregnancy scare only intensified my need to make sure she was bound to me.

“Whatever.” She waved her hand, the ring glinting in the overhead light. “Don’t forget I only agreed to this marriage because you promised to help me find the people responsible for my father’s death.”

I’d made that promise, and I was going to keep it.

Contrary to what she thought, I’d not only decided to marry her to fulfill my own needs and possessiveness. I’d done it because it was the best decision I could make to keep her safe.

Without this marriage, she was just the girl who had a clue about the shipment everyone was trying to lay their hands on. To the outsiders, she would be nothing but my prisoner and an easy target for them to track down and use to their advantage.

But Andrei Yezhov’s wife, even the sound of her name, would make our enemies tremble with fear. Only a madman would try to get their hands on her, knowing what I was capable of doing to them for touching what was mine.

It was now also legally my responsibility to find her father’s killers and help her get her revenge on them. Plus, keeping her close came with its own advantage; she would have no choice but to help me find the Tyfun-1.

Our marriage was all pros and no cons.

Egor wasn't going to be overly excited about this, however. He had been concerned that I would get distracted, but I reassured him that wouldn't happen.

"You have my word."

A skeptical look fluttered in her eyes as she watched me, but she didn't protest. "And my mother...I don't want her to find out about this wedding. She won't take the news too well, so I plan to visit her in Oregon and explain things to her after all of this is over."

"I already made sure of it."

"Thank you." Her eyes were cloudy with sadness. "I always thought Dad would walk me down the aisle, and we'd at least have a dance at my wedding. Now look at me, getting married only weeks after his funeral and not having even my mom or best friend present."

A lump formed in my throat to her sadness. She was supposed to be happy today—as happy as I was.

I couldn't make her wish come true. I couldn't bring her father back, but I was going to find the people who took him away from her and make them pay for what they did; that was a promise.

She exhaled loudly, and her tongue darted out, swiping over her lips. "The wedding is starting in an hour; you need to leave."

I raised my shoulders, completely clueless as to why she was asking me to leave.

She hissed, "You're the groom. You can't see the bride while she gets ready for the wedding. It's tradition."

I threw my hands up, feeling defeated. “Fine, I’ll leave. I already know you’ll look gorgeous in that wedding dress anyway.”

I winked at her, and she shook her head.

A smile curled on my lips as I left the room.

Beautiful.

Jaw-dropping.

Stunning.

Those three words didn’t hold a candle to Giselle’s beauty as she walked toward me, beaming with a smile.

Her gown flowed around her like a wisp of cloud, the delicate lace clinging to her curves. The sunlight glinted off the intricate embroidery, making her look ethereal.

Her dark hair cascaded in soft waves, a veil draped over her shoulders, but it did nothing to hide the radiance of her face.

Breathtaking.

That was the only word I could use to describe her. Nothing compared to her beauty today, not even the afternoon filtering through the delicate canopy of flowers arching over the altar or the bouquet of white roses she was holding.

Absolutely nothing.

Rows of white chairs lined the aisle, each adorned with soft, cascading blooms, their fragrance sweet in the gentle breeze. Birds chirped in the distance, their melodies mingling with the soft strains of a violin, playing a slow, haunting tune.

Everything was perfect, but none of them outshined my wife-to-be.

A possessive surge of desire and pride roared through me as I stretched out my hand.

Her emerald eyes locked onto mine, her smile fading a little. She peered at my hand for a moment as if reconsidering, as if realizing there was no going back the moment we said our vows on the altar of roses.

I could hear the whispers among our guests, who were mostly just members of the Bratva and their wives. I knew what they were all thinking. Some of them thought I was making a mistake; a few others guessed I was forcing Giselle into this, but their whispers didn't matter.

All that noise faded behind the scenes as I waited for her to take my hand.

And she did.

Her hand felt small and soft on mine as she took it, and I led her to the altar.

The officiating priest smiled at us and began a sermon about how finding a good wife was equivalent to finding a treasure.

I didn't pay any attention to him or his sermons. All I could focus on was the beautiful woman standing beside me—the woman with whom I was going to share the rest of my life.

When it was time to exchange our vows, Giselle turned to me and exhaled a shaky

breath. She was nervous, and it was obvious enough for a blind man to see.

“Do you want to repeat after me, or do you have your vows prepared?” the priest asked, his gaze bouncing between us.

“I’ll say my vows,” Giselle answered. She inhaled one more time, and, looking into my eyes, she began, “I vow to stay by your side, to be your strength and confidant.” She paused, and her throat moved as she swallowed. “To honor you, and to never betray you no matter what happens.”

My jaw tightened as she said her vows. She’d carefully chosen her words to affirm her loyalty to me while carefully avoiding anything that hinted at love or affection for me.

Still, a part of me was relieved that she wasn’t lying and putting up a front just to win my trust because if a day ever came when she’d tell me she loved me, I would know that she truly did.

It was time for me to say my vows, and I didn’t hesitate. I didn’t mince my words or try to play games. I took her hand in mine, caressing the back of her hand with my thumb.

“I, Andrei Yezhov, vow to dedicate the rest of my life to you, Giselle Rae,” I started, peering into her emerald eyes, even as they shifted nervously. “I promise to protect you, to love you, and be your source of strength. I’ll stick by your side through thick and thin, and I’ll never let you go, no matter what happens.”

Her lashes fluttered, and scarlet tainted her cheeks. She didn’t pull away from me despite the hitching of her breath.

The priest gestured for the rings, and Dimitri walked over, opening the box.

Taking hers first, I slid the diamond-encrusted band onto the finger on which she already had her engagement ring.

For some, a ring was a symbol of love and partnership, but it was different for us.

It was a symbol of possession, a reminder that she now belonged to me—that she was now fully mine.

She took mine, and her hand trembled as she slid it onto my finger. Her eyes shone with tears, but they were not because she was sad or anything; they were from longing for someone.

I knew she was thinking of her father, wishing he was here to witness his little girl getting married.

I reached out, wiping her tears away and smiling. If her father could see us, I hoped he was cheering us on because I meant every word I said, and I was willing to die if that was what it took to keep her happy.

“By the power vested in me,” the priest announced, “I now pronounce you husband and wife.”

A thunder of applause exploded from our wedding guests, and for the first time, a small smile appeared on Giselle’s face.

I hoped her smile would be wider than that someday, and I hoped she would truly be happy. I would do anything to make sure of that.

The priest had a grin on his face as he turned to me and said, “You may kiss your bride.”

Before Giselle could react, I stepped forward, pulled her closer, and stole her lips in a passionate, sensual kiss, reveling in the thought that she was now mine.

She broke our kiss, trying to pull away, but I held to myself.

“You’re mine now, Giselle. Mine to protect, to love, and to torment,” I whispered into her ear. “Mine to fuck.”

The reception passed in a blur. I accepted congratulations I didn’t care for with champagne in one hand and the other hand around Giselle’s waist to mark my territory.

She played her part well, just like I’d taught her the night I took her to Antonio’s party. She smiled when necessary and nodded at the right times, but I could feel the tension and exhaustion in her posture.

When the reception party ended, I guided her inside, leading her up the staircase to the room—my room—which now belonged to the both of us.

The moment the door clicked shut behind us, she turned to face me, her arms crossing over her chest.

“I didn’t agree to share a room with you,” she said. “Remember what we discussed earlier: I only agreed to this so you’ll find the men that killed my father.”

I stepped closer, towering over her and resting my hands on the wall above her. “And I will.” I brushed my fingers along her jaw, tilting her chin up. “But this marriage is real, solnishko . You’re expected to share a room with me from now on.”

She swallowed hard, her pulse fluttering at her throat. I could see the war inside her, the way her mind tried to deny what her body already knew.

She wanted me. I'd seen it in the way she looked at me when she thought I wasn't paying attention, in the way she shivered when my arm tightened against her waist at the reception.

"What if..." she gasped. "What if I don't want to."

"There are no what-ifs, my darling," I whispered against the skin along her neck. "You're mine in every way now."

The air stilled, the world around us fading into nothing. The only sound in the room was the throbbing of her beating heart. The only thought in my head was this petite woman who already had me wrapped around her pretty fingers without even knowing.

My cock throbbed with need. Every fiber of my being yearned for her, to touch and feel her.

"I need to take a shower," she suddenly said, sliding under my arm and hurrying off toward the bathroom.

I laughed at how nervous she was around me. She could deny her attraction to me all she wanted, but she couldn't fool her body into not wanting what it wanted.

"Are you going to bathe in that?"

She stopped walking and turned around. "What?"

I smirked darkly as I strode over to her and turned her around. "Your wedding dress,"

I answered almost inaudibly as I tugged on the zipper before pulling it down slowly.

Goosebumps spread over her body as my fingers brushed her skin. She'd stilled as if fighting her reaction to my touch.

After I unzipped the dress, I took my time to push the straps off her shoulders and watched the wedding gown slide off her and pool around her legs.

Desire crept into my veins like a flood, my lust surging through me at a pace that tempted the strength of my restraint.

My hands balled into fists as I struggled against losing control.

I held her from behind, pressing my erection against her ass so she could feel how much I wanted her, and then I cupped her breasts, fondling them.

She moaned, placing her hands on mine and collapsing completely against me. Her ass ground over my erection, her body growing warm with need.

I kissed her ear, exploring every part of her body with my hand. She moaned at every touch and leaned into every kiss.

Turning around to face me, she wrapped her arm around my neck and pulled me closer.

Her emerald eyes glinted with desire, and when she licked her lips, every part of my body jerked in response.

I had her now, yet I could feel my self-control slipping. My desire for her was no longer just lust; it was poison, and I was willing to drink every last drop of it.

I cup her cheeks, peering into her eyes for a moment before I leaned in and claimed her lips, kissing her slowly at first while I cupped her ass.

She kissed me back, moaning into my mouth.

Her hand moved from my neck, sliding down my back until she was grabbing my ass and fondling it.

I smiled against her lips. “You’ve grown bold, solniskho ,” I whispered.

She grinned, catching my lips between her teeth. “Isn’t that what you wanted? For me to want you just as much?”

“I would give my soul for that to happen,” I growled, sliding my hand between her thighs and parting her legs.

“Too bad that may never happen,” she rasped shakily, arching into me. “You already have so much control over me; it’ll be unfair if I yearned for you too.”

I grunted when I felt how wet she was—how badly she wanted me. A victorious grin spread on my lips. “It looks like you’re already crazy with need for me, solnishko .”

God.

How much did I want to get on my knees and lick every last drop of wetness between her legs? A goddess like her deserved to be worshipped, to be eaten like a last meal.

I didn’t mind if she was poison; I would die happily if it meant I dined with her and drank from her cup.

She bit her lips, her eyes wild with a fire only the thrust of my cock inside her could

extinguish. “I don’t want you.”

I thrust a finger inside her, pushing up until I could feel it clash against the walls of her cervix. “But you need me,” I purred.

She moaned, her head rolling back and her hair falling over her face as I pushed another finger inside her.

“Fuck,” she breathed, her warm breath coating my skin. She held my arms, her nails digging into my flesh.

I started to pump her, burying my face between her breasts and giving them equal attention as I tweaked the nipples and fucked her with my fingers.

“You’re so beautiful, solnishko ,” I whispered, peering up for a second to enjoy the view before me. Her face had contorted with pleasure, her eyes closed, and her hair a mess.

If I could, I would frame this image of her in my mind forever.

Her moans grew louder as her climax edged, and my cock grew harder with the desire to be inside of her.

“Will you come for me, solnishko ?” I purred against her skin.

“Yea...” she rasped. “Yes. I’m coming.”

Her body tensed, her eyes rolling.

I didn’t allow her to come, though; I slid my finger out of her, replacing it with my dick as I drove inside of her slowly.

I grunted with pleasure as I pushed inside her, reveling in the way her pussy wrapped around my cock. She was so warm. So tight. So wet.

No woman I'd been with before her ever felt this good. Not a single one of them.

This wasn't enough.

I pulled out, led her to the bed, and flipped her over onto it, giving myself a nice view of her beautiful ass.

She moaned when I spanked her, and my cock twitched at the way her ass recoiled in response.

Fuck. I was burning with desire for her.

I pressed my cock to her entrance from behind and thrust in.

She arched her waist, and I slid in even deeper, gripping her hips as I began to slam in and out of her.

Her ass cheeks clapped with each thrust, and my balls grew heavier by the second. The sensation of my cock sliding against her walls was divine, nothing but sheer pleasure shooting up my veins.

I'd never believe too much in religion, but I could swear this was heaven. It was my heaven to be buried deep inside her like this.

"Andrei," she moaned, gripping the sheets and biting against the pillow.

A smirk tugged on my lips. "Do you like the way I fuck you, solnishko?"

She groaned but didn't reply.

I spanked her again, a little harder but careful not to cause her more pain than pleasure. "Tell me you like the way I take you," I ordered, pounding her even faster and deeper.

"I like it," she muttered desperately, her voice soft and sultry with pleasure. "I like the way you fuck me, Andrei. I love the way you make me feel."

"Good girl." I reached for her clitoris, teasing it with my finger as I pounded her from behind.

She arched into my touch, moving her hips to the rhythm and crying with pleasure.

I groaned at the way her ass bounced on my dick with each movement. "Fuck," I groaned, feeling my balls get heavier.

Giselle tightened around me, and her moans grew needier than before. She clawed at the sheets and moaned my name. "Andrei, I'm..."

"Come on my dick, baby." I thrust into her, deep and hard. "Come for me, solnishko."

Her moans were reduced to a whimper for a moment, and then suddenly, a passionate scream ripped from her throat. Her body shuddered beneath mine, and her walls clenched so hard that the motion drew my own ejaculation from me.

I increased my pace as my climax built, grinding my hips against her ass until I exploded.

"Fuck," I growled, pulsing until I emptied completely inside her. That was the best

freaking sex I'd ever had. The best.

After I emptied, I rolled to the other side of the bed, taking her with me so that she was lying on top of me.

Her eyes were closed, her legs still trembling from the intensity of our lovemaking.

"Giselle." I whispered her name passionately as I combed my fingers through her hair.. "Look at me," I demanded.

Her thick lashes fluttered, her emerald eyes meeting mine.

My heart lurched in my chest. Every fiber of my being was drawn to this woman who was now mine.

Her existence and everything in it now belonged to me—her breath, her body, her life. Everything.

Would Peter approve of me for his daughter if he were alive? I wasn't certain. He'd tried his best to keep her away from the mafia, and he'd done a good job until he decided to drag her into this ruckus before his death. I still couldn't wrap my head around why he'd put her in harm's way like he did.

But I was certain I was going to keep her safe.

No one would ever touch a hair on her head without my permission, no matter who it was.

I'd lived forty-one years, and this was the first time I ever truly wanted—needed—anyone the way I did. I wasn't going to lose her to anyone for whatever reason. This was a promise I was making to myself.

She trailed a line along my chest. “What are you thinking about?”

“You,” I answered honestly.

She raised her head to look at me, her brows drawing curiously. “Me?” She huffed a laugh. “I’m right here with you. Why would you be thinking about me?”

“Because you’re mine now, and you will be for the rest of your life,” I purred into her ear, brushing my thumb across her lips. “Let another man touch you, and I’ll serve you his head on a platter.”

She giggled, her eyes lighting up. “That won’t be necessary. I’m yours, Andrei.”

“You’re mine.” I cupped the back of her head and pulled her closer.

She licked her lips, and a blush crept up her cheeks. She looked so innocent, fragile, and pure—everything that I wasn’t.

I inched closer, pressing my lips against hers before I claimed them in a passionate kiss.

If she thought I was done with her, then she was wrong because I hadn’t even started yet.

Tonight was going to be long.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:57 pm

The morning air was crisp and still, and the serenity before me was a kind that only came from being in a place that invoked a deep sense of nostalgia.

Two weeks had passed since Andrei and I tied the knot, and it still felt like it was yesterday. I couldn't believe I'd gone from hating the mafia and despising Andrei's existence to wearing his shiny diamond ring around my finger.

I was supposed to hate this, so why didn't I? Why was I barely pretending to not like the fact that I was now married to the same man who should be my enemy and acting like I only accepted his proposal to avenge my father?

I glanced at the diamond rock sitting pretty on my ring finger and sighed. It was gorgeous, and I swore it must've cost a fortune, too. I loved it, and I loved that I was now a Yezhov, despite the pang of guilt in my chest.

What would Dad say if he were here? Would he have let me go ahead to marry a mafia enforcer, or would he have been against it? I couldn't tell, to be honest.

I'd been struggling to make peace with Dad's death, my marriage to Andrei, and finding the shipment for the last couple of days; it was the reason I asked to spend some time away in the vacation house Dad used to bring me when I was way younger.

The vacation house was on the outskirts of the city, far away from the buzzing noises and busy life of New York.

From my window, the ocean stretched endlessly, shimmering beneath the golden

embrace of the morning sun, its rays spilling over the waves like liquid fire.

This place used to be a sanctuary for Dad. He'd spent a considerable amount of time here after his divorce with Mom, and I wondered if he knew that it would someday be my source of peace, too—a place where I'd come to reflect on the mess my life was like he used to do.

Or maybe he had other plans for me.

It was right here, in this very room, watching the sunset, that I'd drawn my very first painting.

The corners of my mouth lifted as memories from that day flooded into my mind. Dad had been very supportive, promising to get me more paints and brushes so that I could develop my artistic skills further.

Mom hadn't liked it very much. She wanted me to get a degree first and then pursue whatever interest I had in painting. They argued for a while, and Dad ended up giving in to Mom's demands.

That hadn't stopped him from supporting my dreams, though. He invested in many art collections just so I could use them as inspiration to improve my painting skills.

I stepped away from the window and walked down to the basement, where Mom had packed away some of the things the last time she was here. I rummaged through the stack of old artworks I created when I was younger.

The stack was covered in dust and cobwebs, and some of the papers were already old and grey from age. The first painting I pulled out was one of Mom and Dad sitting together under the sunset on their tenth wedding anniversary. Dad had his arm wrapped around Mom, and she leaned against him with a wide smile.

The second painting was an eye—a grey eye. I still remembered the day I painted this very vividly. I'd gotten the inspiration from a portrait Dad brought home. It didn't mean much to me then, but now that I thought about it, it looked weird.

It wasn't just artwork; it resembled a secret message—one of those you'd find in sci-fi movies. Or perhaps I was overthinking it, and it wasn't anything at all.

I hurried out from the basement to Dad's room, where the painting hung above his bed.

His room still felt like he'd been here only recently and would walk in anytime to pick up his wallet. He always forgot to take it with him whenever he was going out.

His bed was neatly made from the last time he was here; his clothes were well folded except for his brown winter coat, which he always hung on the armrest of the recliner.

He was gone, but his presence lingered as if he was still here. As if he could come back at any time and hug me the way he used to.

I ambled over to the recliner and, picking up the coat, I inhaled it. It still had Dad's signature musky leather scent on it. It still had his sweat stains and a packet of cigarettes he hadn't touched in his pocket.

Tears flooded my vision, and my chest grew heavy.

I missed Dad. I missed him so much. It had been two months since he died, and a part of me was still hopeful it was all a lie. I had always seen how people faked their deaths in movies, and I wished he would come back and tell me it was all a fabrication—that he wasn't really dead—but I knew that would never happen.

Bringing him back was impossible, but I was going to do everything to find the people who murdered him and make them pay.

That was a promise.

Dad, if you can hear me, I promise to make sure whoever did that to you is punished. It's a promise from your little girl.

Hugging his coat and inhaling the scent that I'd missed so much, I laid down on his bed and cried myself to sleep.

It was already mid-afternoon by the time I woke up to my phone buzzing under the pillow.

I pulled it out and gasped when Mom's number flashed on my screen. She was requesting to FaceTime me, and it was the first time since she'd left for Oregon.

My mother could always sense when something was wrong. She could for as long as I could remember.

Jumping out of bed and running to the bathroom, I quickly washed my face and dried it with a towel. I peered into the moon-shaped mirror on the wall for any signs that my eyes were swollen and sighed gratefully when it was only red from crying and sleeping.

Mom picked up on everything, but I could easily lie that I was just sleeping, and that wasn't even exactly a lie.

There were already two missed calls from her when I returned to Dad's bedroom and

picked my phone up to call her back.

She answered on the first ring, flashing a smile that didn't quite meet her eyes. Her light brown eyes had sunken, and she had eyebags, probably from lack of sleep or crying, maybe both.

The shirt she wore had been given to her by Dad on what was supposed to be their anniversary a year ago. It usually fit her tightly, but now it appeared to be at least two sizes bigger than her.

Seeing her this way broke something inside me. I couldn't bear how much she was suffering. Dad's death affected her a great deal, and while she refused to admit it, I knew she was in so much pain from losing him.

I smiled so she wouldn't see that I was sad, too. I didn't want her to worry about me.

"Hi, Mom," I greeted.

Her smile grew wider. "Hi, pumpkin." She gave me a good stare and knitted her brows inquisitively. "I was afraid you'd look terrible from grieving, but you're glowing."

I chuckled and tucked my hair behind my ear. "Am I?"

She nodded. "I'm so happy to talk to you on Facetime. I'm happy you don't look down, either. I was worried since you're alone there, and I know you miss your father a lot."

Honestly, if I didn't have Andrei, then I would have probably been curled up in my apartment, refusing to eat or do anything. I'd never said it to him, but Dad's death wasn't pulling me down so much because I had him. He gave me something to

channel my grief on, and I would forever be grateful to him for it.

“I know. There’s something I need to tell you, and I will, but when we meet. Okay?”

She pouted playfully. “Why can’t you tell me now?”

“Because it’s not something we can discuss on the phone.” And I wanted to be there to see her reaction. I knew she was going to hate it when I broke the news to her because of how much she hated the Bratva, but I was married to Andrei already, and she wouldn’t have a choice but to accept him. Not that he would let me get a divorce even if I wanted it.

The only way our relationship was going to end was if he didn’t want me anymore, and Andrei didn’t seem like the kind of guy who would be inconsistent enough to not want to own me for the rest of his life.

“Are you dating?” she asked. “Engaged?”

More like married, but I nodded. “Something close. It’s not anything bad, trust me.”

At least it wasn’t. If things remained like this, and I could find Dad’s murderers, I knew I would have a happy life with Andrei.

He was rich, so financial security wasn’t going to be a problem. He was protective and would tear the world apart to make sure I was safe. And he loved kids, so that was a plus.

Mom watched me with a genuine smile this time. “Do you love him?”

My heart skipped a beat, and my smile vanished. My chest fluttered, my entire body reacting to that question. “Love?”

I hadn't given that a thought yet. I couldn't answer that question.

To me, Andrei was my protector. He was someone who I smiled thinking of, someone I loved kissing and making love to. I'd never seen him unhappy, but I knew I would move mountains to not see him sad.

Simply put, he was everything to me. If that wasn't love, then I had no idea what it was.

I breathed, "I don't know, Mom. I think I like him."

"Liking him is not enough, Giselle. You need to know for sure if you love this person," she said softly. "Does he make you happy? Do you want to make him happy? Those are the questions you should ask yourself. See if you can envision yourself spending the rest of your life with this someone. Then you'll have your answer."

The answers to the questions were a solid yes. I didn't need to think twice, but a part of me also didn't want to accept that I was slowly falling in love with Andrei.

How did it even happen? When did he gain so much control over my heart? It felt like it was just yesterday that I met him in the cemetery, and now I'd already fallen for him.

"Is that your father's vacation house?" Mom asked, her voice pulling me back to the present.

"It is. I needed some time alone, so I came over." I grabbed Dad's coat and raised it. "Mom, see?"

She narrowed her eyes. "That's your dad's favorite winter jacket."

“It is.” I placed the jacket on my leg and grinned. “It still smells like him. His boots are right where he used to keep them, and he still had a pack of cigarettes in the pocket waiting for winter.”

Mom laughed. It was hearty, filled with fond memories, and it was sweet to hear her laugh again. “You know, I always found it really weird how your father only smoked during winter. I found it even more weird that he always had a fresh pack of cigarettes sitting in his pocket.”

“Me, too.”

Mom and I spent the next thirty minutes talking about Dad. We spoke about his weird but funny habits and our fondest memories of him.

Somehow, Mom didn’t cry speaking of him, and I didn’t feel too sad either. The memories of his lifeless body lying on that table with a bullet in his head had blurred as we spoke of the life he lived.

Dad wasn’t just a memory in our minds.

He was the love we carried in our hearts; he was everything to us, and his existence was more real than real could get. That was how I wanted to remember him from now on because, with Andrei’s help, I was going to make sure his legacy would live on.

By the time we hung up, I had grown hungry and sleepy again. I pocketed my phone and rummaged through it for lunch ideas, eventually deciding on grilled wings with veggies.

Yawning, I sat up and ran my fingers through my tousled hair. My gaze flickered to the painting hanging above me.

I scoffed.

Shit, I'd almost forgotten the reason I came to this room to begin with, and I could have asked Mom. There was a chance she could know a thing or two about the message.

On the other hand, that could also put her in danger, and I wasn't going to risk it.

Sighing, I narrowed my eyes on the painting, trying to think of any hidden clues that whoever created it could've been trying to pass, but none came to mind.

Pulling out my phone from my pocket, I scrolled to the last message I received from Dad and read it for the hundredth time. The typhoon's eye holds the calm—Tyfun-1.

I replayed the words on a loop inside my head, hoping I would discover something, anything to give me a hint on where Dad could've hidden it, but still, I came up with nothing.

Lowering myself on the bed, I turned to my side, and suddenly, an idea came to my mind.

The lake house.

Dad and I used to go there because it was quiet and calm. The scenery was even more beautiful than it was here. I wondered if the message had anything to do with that house. Would I find anything helpful if I went there?

It didn't make any sense yet, but it wouldn't hurt to try, just in case.

Just as I picked up my phone to send a text to Andrei about visiting the lake house, I heard the screeching of tires outside.

I hurried to the window to see who it was. Only Andrei knew I was here. He'd placed four guards outside, yet he'd also instructed me to be on alert and call him if I suspected anything. After the whole showdown with Gavril, I knew better than not to take his warning seriously.

I still had nightmares from that day, but rather than my cries, it was Gavril's screams I heard. I should've been terrified of Andrei—horrified that he could do that to a man. Instead, I found some comfort in knowing that he would never let anyone who hurt me get away with it.

Maybe I wasn't all that good and innocent. Maybe I was just as dark and twisted as Andrei after all because a pig like Gavril got what was coming to him. Who knew how many innocent people he'd tortured like that?

I huffed a breath and shifted my attention outside when the sound of the car engine died down, and I heard the door open,

It was Andrei.

He'd driven his white Lamborghini today.

The wind ruffled his dirty blond hair as he climbed out of the car and shut the door.

My jaw dropped at how handsome he looked in the white pair of shorts and shirt he wore. It wasn't his usual style, as I'd grown accustomed to seeing him in black suits and shirts.

He had a different look today—one that made the butterflies in my stomach flutter. His legs were made of solid muscles, and so were his arms, and my goodness...there was no way his handsomeness was ordinary.

I wondered what his parents looked like. They must have been quite attractive to have a son who looked this good.

To be honest, I wouldn't mind having a child with him. He was handsome, strong, and intelligent. Giving my child some of those good genes wouldn't be a bad choice.

As he walked toward the entrance, I padded to the front door and opened it before he could ring the doorbell.

Piercing blue eyes met mine, and it was hard to bite back the smile on my lips. "Hi."

He didn't smile back. Instead, he pulled me in for a gentle hug and kissed the top of my head. "How are you?"

I pulled back, noticing the crack in his usual demeanor. "I'm good. Is everything alright? You look..." I trailed off, unable to find the right word to describe the look on his face.

"I'm fine, solnishko . I came to discuss something."

My stomach twisted. Something wasn't right. I wonder what it was he came to discuss.

I moved out of the way to let him in, and closing the door, I sauntered after him. "Would you like something? Coffee, maybe?"

"A cup of black coffee will do."

I smiled at him. "I'll be right back."

I went off to the kitchen and made two cups of coffee—one black coffee and one

latte. They matched our different personalities in a way.

Returning to the living room, I placed the cup of black coffee in front of him and sat on the couch across from him with mine, curling my legs on the couch.

“You said you wanted to discuss something?”

“I do.” Bringing the coffee to his lips, he took a sip of it, but rather than wince from the bitterness, his face remained a blank mask. “It’s about your father.”

I straightened forward; my interest was piqued. “What is it about Dad? Have you found his killers?”

“Not yet, but I found something helpful.” He took out his phone from his pocket and tapped on it a few times. Placing it on the coffee table, he pushed it toward me. “I did a little digging to find his murderers, and I found something really interesting.”

I picked up the phone and zoomed in on the picture on the screen. It was a bullet. It still had stains of blood, even though it had clearly been wiped.

This was the bullet that killed my father.

My fingers tightened around the phone, and my teeth clenched. A blend of anger and sadness surged through me. “What did you find out?”

“I’d suspected your father was murdered by a rival family who wanted to get their hands on the shipment, but I could’ve been wrong.”

“If not a rival gang, then who?”

He set the coffee on the table and pinned me with a stare. “The bullet in that picture

was taken out from your father's body the day he was killed. The problem, however, is that the bullet is a very specific kind. Only someone from law enforcement could have had access to it."

I froze in my seat, the air draining from my lungs. I knew where this was going, and I hadn't prepared myself for it.

I opened my mouth to speak, but nothing came out.

"Why would someone from the law enforcement kill your father, Giselle?" Andrei asked, the iciness in his voice sending a tremor through me. He eyed me with quiet suspicion. "I want honest answers."

My palm dug into my flesh, and my heart rate doubled.

Lying to Andrei now wouldn't be a good move. On the contrary, it could be a recipe for disaster.

This was a moment of truth, the right time for me to come clean about everything I knew—everything I'd been hiding.

I held my breath and stared back at him. "My father was an FBI agent."

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:57 pm

My entire body tensed, my muscles coiling like a spring.

I didn't like to show emotions like shock, surprise, or sadness, but I couldn't hold back the way my body went rigid, as if I had just been struck.

"What did you just say?" I asked, the words hoarse as if they'd been dragged from my throat.

"My father was an FBI agent," she repeated, shifting her gaze to the cup on the coffee table to avoid meeting my eyes.

The air between us turned heavy, the tension palpable and suffocating.

I couldn't believe it. I couldn't believe Peter worked for the FBI, that he worked against us, the Bratva.

"That's impossible," I said, refusing to believe Peter would lie and betray us like that after how much we trusted him.

Giselle shook her head and rubbed her hands together. "Sadly, it wasn't impossible because he really did work for the FBI. I only found out the night before he was killed."

"If you knew so much, why didn't you say anything earlier?" I scrutinized her for any signs she was lying or making things up, but there weren't any. "Why did you keep it to yourself even after he was murdered?"

“I was afraid.” She looked at me with tears in her eyes, her voice cracking. “Do you think it would have been easy for me to walk up to you and tell you my father was a mole planted by the FBI? I didn’t know you or trust you. For all I knew, you could have killed me. You could have been the ones behind his death.”

A band of tension wrapped around my ribcage.

It made sense that she wouldn’t have trusted me that easily, but it didn’t make the news any easier to take. It wrenched my heart completely to know Peter had worked with me for over a decade, and all along, he was nothing but a spy.

We’d trusted him. We’d mourned him after his death, but he was never on our side, never on our team. He was freaking FBI all along.

I thought of my cousins and other members of the Bratva, knowing the betrayal they would feel when they found it. It would put everything at risk, including Giselle.

I inhaled, refusing to let the anger in my chest take control over logic. I needed to remain calm and hear her out first.

“So, when were you going to tell me about your father and that he was an FBI agent?” I asked with a tilt of my head, observing her.

Tears spilled down her cheeks, and she shook her head.

“You were never going to tell me, were you?”

“I’m sorry,” she muttered through the tears. “I wanted to, but I just didn’t know how you would react to it. I was afraid you would kill me or even do something worse to make me pay for my father’s betrayal. I swear I didn’t hide the details because I wanted to betray you.”

My jaw twitched, my hands balling into fists. “You don’t get it, do you? Your father betrayed me, but you choosing to keep that information from me was the biggest betrayal, solnishko . You knew how that would affect my family, and you still chose to not say anything.”

I wondered if she understood how serious things were. If I got taken down, it wouldn’t be long before the other rivals found her, and the thought of what they would’ve done to get information from her drove me crazy.

It would be a hundred times worse if any of those bastards knew her father worked for the FBI. They would torture her more as a traitor to get back at the dead man and the entire law enforcement for the times they fucked them up. She didn’t get it. She didn’t understand why I was so fucking mad right now.

She wiped her face with the back of her hands and sniffled. “Fine. Ask me anything. I’ll tell you everything I know. I promise.”

“Tell me everything you know about your father being FBI and why he joined the Bratva. Do not leave out a single detail,” I warned, my tone harsher than I intended. “It’s the only way we can keep the Bratva safe and find out who’s behind your father’s murder.”

Her tears made my chest clench painfully. I hated to see her cry, but I needed to put up a serious front to get the truth from her.

If Peter really had worked for the FBI, then they already knew enough to take us down. I needed to know who sent him, why, and how much he told them.

“I don’t know how it started. The night he came to see me, he was in a hurry and said he didn’t have much time,” she started, placing her hands between her thighs. “He told me he’d been sent to work for the Russian mafia as an undercover agent. He

pretended to be a loyal dog to you guys while giving out information to the FBI.”

I swallowed hard. It was hard for me to come up with a mental image of Peter actually betraying us like that. He’d been loyal, more loyal than any of the men who’d ever worked for us, yet all of it was fake.

“But he told me the closer he got to you and the other members of the Bratva, the more conflicted he felt about it. Although you were into illegal businesses, you never hurt innocent people.”

I scoffed. Right, that was supposed to make me feel better about his betrayal. It was the same thing all the traitors said after they were caught.

It all made sense now, the raid the night the shipment arrived and how the FBI found out the Tyfun-1 was being smuggled into the country.

The pieces of the puzzle were coming together now, and it wasn’t so shocking because I’d always known if they had that much information, then someone was feeding them with it.

It had been Peter all along.

What didn’t make any sense to me was why the FBI would murder him so coldly and how other rival families got to know about the shipment.

There was a mole in the FBI; that was the only logical explanation for it.

Giselle’s shoulder sagged as if she was releasing a weight she’d held for so long. “That night, although he didn’t tell me exactly what it was, he said there was something the Bratva had and the FBI needed. I suppose it was the shipment you’re looking for.” She paused and lifted her chin. “He couldn’t bear to betray the Bratva,

so he hid the shipment rather than turn it over to the FBI.”

I sat back, rubbing my jaw as I thought.

The night the warehouse was raided, Peter managed to hide everything before the police arrived. This wasn't because he was smarter; it was because he was the whistleblower, and he knew they were coming.

He probably considered giving it to them but decided at the last minute not to.

“If he had the shipment they badly wanted, and he worked for them, then why would they kill him?” I asked. It was more of a rhetorical question, but I also hoped Giselle would have an answer to it.

She was the only person Peter had confided in before he died. He must have sensed that his death was near and told her everything that mattered.

“Dad told me he'd formed a bond with the Bratva that went beyond just work; he felt terrible about betraying you, so he decided he was going to quit his job and stop living a double life.” She held her breath. “That's probably why they killed him.”

I dragged my hand through my hair, exhaling sharply. This was a whole lot to take in, and I had no freaking idea where to start.

On one hand, I was mad at Peter's betrayal. On the other hand, I felt there wasn't much to be mad about. He was just doing his job, and in the end, he risked his life and chose not to give away our most important shipment.

It was conflicting being in the situation I was in, and I wondered what my cousins would think about this if I told them.

“I’m so sorry about everything,” Giselle whispered. Her eyes were red and swollen, her breath shaky from crying.

All of this was breaking her apart. It affected her more than anyone else.

She’d suddenly lost the father she loved very much, and the peaceful life she had got thrown off balance.

She had to move in with a man she barely knew, got kidnapped, and almost died. Now, we were talking about the last time she met her father—a memory I suspected she’d so badly wanted to forget.

Although it would have made things easier if she’d told me the truth from the start, I understood why she didn’t, and I couldn’t be mad at her.

I also couldn’t blame her for her father’s mistakes, and the sight of her tears made something inside me crack open. I couldn’t bear that the woman I cared about was sad and in pain.

Standing up from the couch where I was seated, I walked over to her and pulled her closer, wiping her tears and pressing a kiss to the top of her head. “There’s nothing to be sorry about, solnishko . None of it was your fault.”

“But he betrayed you,” she choked out.

“He did, but he also made a crucial decision that saved all of us in the end.” I cupped her cheeks and tilted her chin so she would look into my eyes. “I promised to find his murderers, and I’m not going to rest until I do.”

Burying her face on my chest, she clutched my shirt and sobbed even more loudly.

I instinctively wrapped my arms around her to provide her comfort and warmth. The sound of her cries was a wreckage to my soul.

I hated it.

I would do anything to make sure she never cried like this ever again. The only sounds I wanted to hear from her were her laughter, her giggles, and her moans, not this.

“But my father betrayed the Bratva,” she repeated. “You must hate him for it. You must hate me, too.”

I ran my fingers through her hair slowly, rubbing her back to calm her down.

When she finally stopped crying, she lifted her now puffy face and met my gaze, adding, “I think I might know where Dad hid Tyfun-1.”

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:57 pm

The drive to the lake house was the worst two-hour drive of my entire life. My stomach churned endlessly, and my heart wouldn't stop hammering in my chest as I desperately prayed we would find the clue we were looking for here.

Andrei sat beside me, gripping the wheel with precision. Another car tailed closely behind us, and Dobryn and two other men were inside.

It'd been a relief to finally come clean to Andrei about Dad being a double agent and everything else he'd told me the night he came to see me.

To be frank, I'd expected Andrei to be raging mad at me as I told him everything. He'd been rightfully upset, but he'd understood me and even comforted me.

That moved something inside of me, and for the first time, I believed he truly cared about me, perhaps way more than I could ever comprehend.

I stared out the window, watching the dense forest stretch out on both sides of the winding road. The sun had gone down already, and the headlights were barely cutting through the darkness.

Andrei must've noticed how nervous I was because he stretched a hand out and squeezed my thigh. "Are you okay?"

I placed my hands on top of his and smiled. "I am. I'm just anxious. What if I'm wrong, and the answer we need isn't at the lake house?"

He briefly shifted his gaze away from the road to look at me. "Then we'll think of

some other way to find it. Don't beat yourself up too much."

I wished it was that simple—that I could snap my fingers, and all the disturbing thoughts would go away, but it wasn't.

Memories of my childhood flooded my mind as soon as we pulled into the driveway. They were all bittersweet recollections of Dad and I laughing as he chased me around the house and Mom calling out to let us know dinner was ready.

I missed those days.

Pain pierced through my chest at the thought that I would never again hear Dad's voice.

Andrei got out of the car first, slammed the door, then walked over to my side and held the passenger door open for me.

I exhaled sharply to get myself ready for whatever I was going to find inside.

"Thank you," I muttered to him as I climbed out.

He closed the door and positioned himself beside me.

We both stared at the building that held so much of my childhood.

The house stood tall and ominous against the night sky. It hadn't changed much—dark wooden panels, a wraparound porch, the same old rocking chair swaying slightly in the wind.

Mom had made all my blankets and sweaters sitting on that chair. She would hum and tell me stories as she knitted them.

I still remembered one of those days very vividly. We'd been waiting for Dad to come home after he'd been away for almost a month. Mom had been knitting a pink, long-sleeved sweater when Dad's car rolled in.

I'd jumped up and lurched toward Dad, throwing myself on him the minute he stepped out of the car. He'd picked me up and spun around as he peppered me with kisses.

That, too, was only just a memory now.

"Are you ready to go inside?" Andrei asked. His brows were furrowed, and his lips were pinched with worry as he looked at me.

I bobbed my head. "I was born ready."

He smiled and pushed a lock of hair away from my face. "Good. Stay close to me, and let me know if you find anything, okay?"

"Sure."

He gave a sharp nod to his men, signaling them to check the perimeter. They moved quickly, disappearing into the shadows with their guns drawn.

I swallowed hard before stepping onto the porch.

The old floorboards creaked beneath my weight as I reached for the silver doorknob and unlocked it.

A cough ripped from my throat when we made our way inside the house and turned on the light.

The air was thick with dust, cobwebs, and the decaying smell of old books. The white sheets covering the furniture had turned brown, and some of the wooden furniture had started to grow mold from the lack of ventilation.

The house had been abandoned for years. Neither Mom or Dad wanted to visit the place that held memories of their past, so they'd closed it down and decided to stay away.

I ran my fingers over the wooden table in the foyer, brushing away dust residues.

Andrei wrapped his arms around my shoulders. "We don't have much time," he reminded me gently. "We need to find what we came here for and leave before anyone else notices we're here."

I nodded, reminding myself I wasn't here to relive old memories. There was plenty of time to do that later. For now, I was here to find something, and I needed to focus on that.

I moved through the house, searching for clues until I came to a halt in front of the large painting hanging on the living room wall. It was an abstract piece, with chaotic strokes of deep blues and grays, but my eyes locked onto one detail—the eyes hidden within the brushstrokes.

The typhoon's eye holds the calm.

If this was the typhoon's eye, then.... I racked my brain for a minute, repeating the words from the text message.

Typhoon. Eye. Calm.

I was sure there was a message here. I'd found the eyes; what remained was the calm

. I narrowed my eyes on the details of the drawing, taking them in. The blue and gray strokes looked like a storm.

Suddenly, it all made sense.

My father had always told me to look for the calm within the storm. The eyes, in this case, were the calm within the storm. This was the clue I'd needed all along.

My heart raced, and an enthusiastic smile spread across my face. "It's behind here!" I announced. "Tyfun-1 is behind this painting."

Andrei stepped forward and observed the painting, his finger hovering over it. There was a flicker of hope in his eyes, and he didn't ask a single question before he gestured to his men. "Take it down."

Dobryn nodded. "Yes, sir." He looked around. "We need something sharp to peel it out from the wall."

"I'll get you something." I gingerly walked to the kitchen, picked out two knives from Mom's cabinet, and returned to the living room. "Will this do?" I asked as I held out the knife to Dobryn.

"It should work." He took the two knives from me and handed one to the other man.

Andrei pulled me back, and we watched from a distance as they carefully pried the painting from the wall.

My breath hitched when a hidden door emerged from beneath the painting. I'd been right. I found the shipment at last!

Andrei's jaw ticked, but he didn't show any excitement. He stepped forward and

twisted the door handle; then he shook his head at me.

It was locked.

I had no idea where the key was; Dad hadn't mentioned it at all. "Maybe we could kick the door down?"

"There's an easier way out." Andrei and the men stepped back as he pulled out his gun from the holster strapped around his chest and pointed it at the door. He craned his neck to look at me. "Close your eyes."

I did as he said, plugging my fingers into my ears.

He fired at the lock, the sound echoing through the house.

The door creaked open, revealing stacks upon stacks of sealed crates.

This was it—the reason my father was killed and the reason we'd traveled this far. Behold, the Tyfun-1 that had thrown the entire organized crime world off balance for the last couple of months.

Andrei exhaled, and a smile tugged at the corner of his lips. He had found what he was looking for.

"What do we do now?" I asked, peering at him.

"We move them," Andrei answered calmly, nodding at his men to get to work.

My eyes widened. "All of them?"

There were so many of them. It would take an hour at least before we were able to

move them all to the car.

I couldn't help but wonder how Dad was able to get them all in here. Did he have any help? I didn't think so. It must've taken him hours, at least, to load all of these in here.

Andrei's phone rang just as Dobryn and the other men moved into the room with the shipment.

He answered, putting the phone on speaker.

"There's been a problem, sir," Dimitri said over the phone, his voice heavy with panic. "I think someone else knows the location of the shipment. I found—"

Before he could finish his sentence, the distant sound of approaching vehicles sent a jolt of panic through me.

Headlights cut through the windows, followed by the blaring of sirens.

My stomach dropped, my blood freezing to ice instantly,

"That is what I wanted to tell you," Dimitri finally said. "The police put a trail on Giselle. They've been monitoring her movement since she was kidnapped."

Andrei slid his hand into my pocket and snatched my phone. "Fuck!" he cursed. "That Romanian bastard! How didn't I think he would try to fuck me over from his grave?"

He didn't need to explain anything. I could tell from the rage on his face that my phone had been tracked.

Although Gavril was dead, he'd set a trap that led the police directly to me. They must've been watching all along, waiting for the right time to strike.

"Give your order, sir," Dobryn muttered, reaching for his gun. "Do we fight or make a run for it?"

Andrei's body tensed, but the rage on his face vanished. He remained calm—plotting and calculating.

A loud knock rattled the door, reverberating the entire house. "This is the police! Open up now!"

A shiver ran down my spine, and panic flared in my chest. "We need to get out of here."

Andrei shook his head. "It's too late. We're already surrounded, and we'll be arrested the second we step outside that door." He heaved a sigh, and I honestly wondered how he managed to remain so calm. "Whose name is this house under?"

My brows drew together in confusion. I didn't see how that was important in this situation, but I answered anyway. "It's under my name."

It was transferred under my name after Dad died—this house and the other assets he'd left behind.

"The police are here for one thing, and that is Tyfun-1." Andrei peered at me with all seriousness in his expression and tone. "You're already a suspect, solnishko . If they find these here, you'll not be able to escape getting a sentence. Finding the drugs in your house is proof that you hid it away, and that is all they'll need to lock you away for as long as possible."

My bones trembled with fear and unease. He was right. Why hadn't I thought of that before?

If they managed to burst through that door and found these, I was finished. There would be no getting out of this. No bail. No plea deals. Nothing.

My vision blurred as I turned to Andrei. "What do we do?" My voice cracked, barely above a whisper.

The police pounded again. "This is your final warning! Open the door, or we're coming in!"

Andrei contemplated for a minute. When his gaze met mine again, his eyes were dark, and something lingered inside. It was the same look I'd seen the night Gavril kidnapped me—that need to protect me against all odds. "Burn it."

I blinked, my jaw falling open with shock. "What?"

Dobryn's head snapped up. "Andrei...."

It was the first time I'd heard him call Andrei by his first name. The first time I'd seen him question his orders. This was serious, freaking serious.

Andrei gave Dobryn a sharp stare. "Do I need to repeat myself a second time? Burn everything and make sure there are no traces."

The room fell into stunned silence.

I stared between the two men, my own mind racing with a million thoughts.

The shipment was worth millions, at the very least. Burning it meant all that money

would be gone just like that. Coming here, my father's death—everything would have been for nothing.

His men hesitated, looking at each other, waiting for him to take back the order.

Andrei's expression remained stone cold. He wasn't taking back his order; he wasn't even going to allow anyone to convince him to.

I thought of what it would mean for the Bratva, if that would put him at odds with the Pakhan and the other members. The last thing I wanted was for him to sacrifice something important just to keep me safe.

He'd risked everything to save me; maybe I could try to make him change his mind.

"Andrei," I breathed. "You can't—"

He turned to me, his blue eyes locking onto mine. "Don't even think about it, solnishko ," he said, cutting me off. "I'm not letting them take you."

My throat tightened, my breathing louder.

Dobryn swallowed hard before pulling out a lighter. "Yes, sir." He flicked it open, the small flame dancing in the dim light. Then, with a nod from Andrei, he tossed it onto the nearest crate. The fire caught instantly, spreading like a hungry beast.

The smell of burning chemicals filled the air as smoke began to rise. The flames licked at the wood, devouring the Tyfun-1.

The police outside grew impatient. "Open the door!"

Andrei grabbed my wrist, pulling me close. "We have to go. Now."

I could hardly move, my mind reeling. He had just burned everything. For me.

But there was no time to process it. The flames grew higher, the room filling with thick smoke. The police would break in any second.

Andrei yanked me toward the back door, his men close behind.

“We can’t outrun them,” I gasped, still looking back as the flames consumed the drugs.

“They’ll be too distracted trying to put out the fire. We need to leave now,” Andrei said, already dialing a number on his phone. “Trust me.”

Within seconds, an explosion rocked the house. The fire had reached something combustible. The walls trembled, and the windows shattered from the pressure. The police outside shouted in confusion.

The distraction was all we needed.

Andrei dragged me into the woods behind the house, his grip firm and unyielding. My heart pounded as we ran, the sound of sirens and shouting growing distant behind us.

We didn’t stop until we reached the hidden SUV waiting on the other side of the forest. Andrei shoved open the door, pushing me inside before climbing in himself.

Dobryn and the others piled in, and before I could catch my breath, we were speeding away from the inferno we had left behind.

I turned to Andrei, my hands trembling. “You...you really burned it.”

He looked at me then, his expression softer than I'd ever seen it. "I told you, Giselle. I won't let them take you."

Tears pricked my eyes, but I forced them back. I had no words. Only the overwhelming realization that, no matter the cost, Andrei would always choose me.

Even if it meant losing everything.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:57 pm

Egor sat back in his leather chair, drumming his fingers against the armrest. His gaze bore into mine sharply.

A day had passed since the showdown with the police at the lake house. Luckily, we'd managed to escape after the fire, and Dobryn had his ear on the ground for any news—anything that could implicate Giselle—but there wasn't any so far.

But that wasn't the end of everything.

I'd gotten a text from Egor an hour ago about meeting him in one of the casinos owned by the Bratva in the city. He'd recently picked an interest in this place, and as old as it was, I had to admit it was one of the best we had.

Our frequent visitors were politicians, heads of other criminal organizations, and corrupt cops.

The music blaring from the speakers outside somehow seeped into the office, while the smell of cigarettes wafted in through the gap between the door and the frame.

I sat on the velvet couch across from the mahogany desk where Egor was sitting, gaze pinned on him as I tried to see through the blank expression on his face. More men had died for less, but I had doubts it would get to that, considering we were family and I'd done what needed to be done to protect Giselle.

Without her, we would've never found that shipment to begin with, and Egor wasn't the kind of guy who would ignore that.

He'd somehow heard about the burnt shipment on the news last night and given the blank expression on his face. I couldn't quite pinpoint how angry he was. There was no way he was happy about this; the shipment had cost millions of dollars.

But I had no regrets. I would happily bear the wrath of his rage if it meant keeping Giselle safe.

His brows rose, a wicked smirk tugging on his lips. "Tyfun-1. Gone."

I swallowed, taking a deep breath before I replied. "Burnt."

He scoffed. "You're gutsy, Andrei."

"Runs in the family."

He nodded. "A bad trait with us Yezhovs. I want the full report on why my shipment, worth millions, is now nothing but a pile of ashes."

I cleared my throat, circling the rim of the glass in my hand. He wasn't going to like the answer he would get, especially since he already didn't approve of Giselle. Still, I couldn't lie to him. He had to know the truth.

"The police tracked us down to the lake house. That fucker Gavril must've stroked a deal with them or something because they found us."

He exhaled loudly, waiting for me to finish.

"There was no way that shipment was leaving there with us. It was either we got caught trying to smuggle it out, or we left it there."

His brows drew with a frown. "If you'd left it there, at least we could've found a way

to get it back. It's not that hard to find a cop to bribe."

"It is not, but the house was under Giselle's name. If they found it there, they would have reasons to cuff her and shackle her to trial like a fucking dog. I wasn't going to let anyone touch her."

"Hmm." He rubbed his jaw, nodding slowly with understanding. "So, all of this—the reason I lost millions worth of shipment—is because you were trying to protect a woman?"

"Not just a woman," I corrected. "My wife. I would burn a million more shipments to see that she is safe."

A moment of silence stretched between us. I expected his rage, and I was ready for it. I didn't give a shit if he chose to put a bullet in my head right now; I would die a happy man knowing my woman was home and safe.

But rather than the bloodshot eyes I expected, he grinned.

He pushed up from his chair, strode across the room, and placed a hand on my shoulder, squeezing tightly. "You did the right thing."

I narrowed my eyes at him, confused that he was applauding me.

"You chose honor over greed. You protected what's yours." Egor's grin widened, approval gleaming in his eyes. "That is the core of the Bratva."

Relief washed through me. I hadn't expected him to let it go so easily or even applaud me for it; I'd readied myself for the worse, but hearing those words settled something in my chest.

I nodded. “Thank you.”

He shook his head as he returned to his chair. “There is no need to thank me, Andrei. We’re family—brothers. The most we can do is look out for each other. The girl is a Yezhov now; she is part of the family, and keeping her safe also comes first.”

My lips curled with a smile. “You seem like you’ve finally accepted her.”

He chuckled and took a swig of his drink. “It wasn’t the girl I had problems with. It was you.”

“Me?”

“I needed to know for certain you knew the responsibilities that came with marriage,” he explained. “A woman is not an item for our possession, but you choosing to put her first means you already knew all of that.”

He wasn’t wrong.

But Giselle was the reason I learned all of that. With most women I’d met before her, it was always just sex, entertainment, and nothing more. With her, it was different.

She was the flicker of light in my dark tunnel.

The only good part of my dark existence.

I sighed, thinking back to Rafayel’s words. This was what love was, and she was the first person I’d ever held such a strong desire for.

A knock came on the door, and Miron sauntered in with his hair tousled and a wild look in his eyes.

He reeked of tequila and pussy.

I wrinkled my face in disgust. “There’s something called taking a shower after fucking. You must not have heard of that, you fucking idiot.”

He smiled and slumped next to me on the couch. “Look who’s talking.” A playful grin tugged at the corners of his lips, and his eyes glinted with mischief. “Marriage becomes you, dear cousin.”

“And being a drunk, pussy-whipped idiot becomes you,” I replied, patting his back. “You need to get your shit together soon.”

“I’ve seen how you men live. I’ll be damned before I let myself become that kind of a mess.”

I nodded. I’d thought the same thing months ago, and here I was, risking it all for a woman I never thought I’d meet.

She’d been freaking worried this morning, afraid of how this would turn out. I needed to go back home to her. I needed to see her face and watch her give that delightful smile when I broke the news to her.

Rising to my feet, I smoothed out my suit and nodded to the Pakhan. “I’ll be leaving now. I’ll give you an update if there’s any soon.”

He nodded back. “Khorosho.”

Dobryn was leaning on the white S.U.V. when I reached the parking lot. His face wrinkled with concern when he saw me. “How did it go, sir?”

“Luckily, he wasn’t angry.” I climbed into the back seat, pulling out my phone to text

Giselle that I was on my way home.

The car roared beneath me, and soon, Dobryn reeled it out of the parking lot. “Where are we going now?” he asked, peering at me through the rearview mirror.

“Home....” I trailed off as I thought of Giselle. I hadn’t gotten her anything yet ever since we got married.

We’d been able to find the shipment with her help, although I’d had to destroy it to protect her. It was still a million times better than one of the rivals getting their hands on it.

“Stop by a florist shop,” I ordered as I pocketed my phone.

Dobryn’s gaze met mine in the mirror. “Flowers?” he asked. “That’s a first for you, Andrei,” he teased.

I shook my head. He needed to pick a side; one day, he’d choose to call me sir, and the next day, I was Andrei.

Dobryn was the only one of my men with whom I had that sort of relationship. He’d been by my side since we were teenagers, and I trusted him more than anyone else. We were more friends than anything else.

Ignoring his teasing, I asked, “What type of flowers do women like?”

He made a noise with his throat as he thought. “Roses, lilies. There are a ton of them. Depends on which one matches her personality.”

“I’ll have to decide when we get to the store.”

He pulled over in front of a floral store minutes later.

The moment I stepped into the store, one of the florists was holding a bouquet that caught my attention.

I smiled.

The soft pink petals were layered and perfectly symmetrical, like porcelain roses. I knew instantly that this style best suited Giselle's personality.

That was exactly what I needed.

"What is that called?"

The florist smiled at me; her brown eyes lit up. "Camellias."

"I need a bouquet of those for my wife." Today was the first time I'd used that word, and it tasted delicious on the tip of my tongue.

My wife.

"I'm sorry, sir, but this has been booked already," she said, her smile fading into an apologetic look. "This was grown in a greenhouse and cost a fortune to fly in. It's very pricey, but I can get you something similar."

"I don't want something similar," I deadpanned. "I want this. When can you get another one into the city?"

She chewed on her lip. "By tonight, but—"

"No buts." I pulled out my black card and slid it over to her. "I want it flown in by

tonight. I don't care how much it costs."

And there was no way in hell I was going home tonight without the damn camellias.

When I got home, Giselle was standing in the living room, arms crossed, waiting. Her hair was loose, falling in dark waves over her shoulders. Her lips parted slightly as her gaze dropped to the box in my hands.

She held her chest and exhaled. She ran to me, pressing up on her toes to hug me.

I snaked one arm around her waist, hugging her back. She smelled jasmine and vanilla tonight—delicious and sweet.

"I was so worried, Andrei," she whispered, hugging me tightly, as if I would vanish into thin air if she pulled away. "You told me you were coming home hours ago."

I pulled back first and pressed a kiss on the top of her head. "I was coming home until I saw something that looked just as beautiful as you."

She peered at the box again but completely ignored it. "Did you get into trouble? Was the Pakhan mad at you?"

I looked at her long and hard—the way her brows creased with worry and her emerald eyes darkened with fear. It was the first time I'd seen her worry for me, and it was cute.

My chest warmed at the thought that this woman, who had hated me passionately just a few months ago, cared about me so much. "He wasn't," I finally replied, cupping her cheek. "It's nothing. We lost a shipment; they'll make a new one in a few months."

It's no issue."

"Are you sure? You're not lying to me just so I won't worry, are you?"

I smiled at her. "I'm not. It really wasn't an issue."

She let out a breath. "Thank goodness. I was losing my mind from how worried I was." She finally shifted her attention to the black matte box tied with a pink ribbon I was holding. Her brow lifted curiously.

"Take it, it's yours," I said as I held out the box to her.

She eyes the box suspiciously, slowly taking it from me. "What's inside?"

"Open it and see for yourself."

She sighed. "Aren't you full of surprises, Mr. Yezhov?"

Opening the box, her eyes dilated.

Camellias, white and pink. They were pure and delicate, untouched by the filth of this world. Just like her.

She covered her mouth as she gasped. "Camellias?" She glanced at me, completely shocked. "These are so expensive and hard to find in New York."

I grinned proudly as I watched her admire the flowers.

Her fingers hovered over the petals, hesitating. "They're beautiful."

"They are, but not nearly as beautiful as my wife," I said. They'd cost ten thousand

dollars, but that was nothing. I would spend a hundred times more than that to see that look of pleasant surprise on her face—and that gorgeous smile that made my heart flutter.

She looked up at me, a flicker of warmth shimmering in her emerald pools. “Why, Andrei?” She gently set the flowers on the coffee table and moved closer to me. “Why are you doing all of this? You even went as far as burning an expensive shipment to save me. That could have gotten you in big trouble.”

I reached for her face, brushing my knuckles against her cheeks and relishing in the way she leaned into my touch. “Because I didn’t want you rotting away in jail, solnishko . And I got you flowers because you’re my wife. You deserve that much from me.”

She placed her hands on mine, her eyes boring into me as if she needed more answers. She already knew I didn’t want her rotting in jail, but she didn’t yet understand why.

“Were you afraid your reputation would get damaged if your wife was in jail?” she asked softly, her gaze never leaving mine.

“My reputation is nothing.” I traced a circle over her lips, feeling the warmth of her breath on the tip of my finger. “It’s because you’re important to me, more important than anything else in my life.”

Her breath was shallow, and a flush crept across her cheeks and spread all the way to her neck. Her teeth sank into her bottom lip, her eyes wild with need.

I tilted her chin up, and she wrapped her arms around my neck.

My insides raked with more than just desire. What I felt was devotion, need, and

something even deeper—all wrapped together.

Her body grew taut, her fingers restless from where they were locked together behind my neck.

I placed a finger beneath her chin, and then I captured her lips in a slow kiss.

I intended to pass on one message: She was mine, not in the way a master owned a slave or a person owned property.

She was mine in the way a man cherished a woman.

All mine.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:57 pm

It'd been two months since the whole fiasco with the FBI and Tyfun-1. Luckily, the cops hadn't found anything to implicate me with the drugs, and the news about it had become irrelevant.

A lot of things had changed—like my relationship with Andrei.

I'd started to truly enjoy his presence, with no fear or doubts attached, and I missed him in his absence—like a part of me had been torn away.

He'd changed a lot, too, over the months.

Although he was still that dominant, fearful, and brutal man others feared, he'd become softer with me. He smiled more now and didn't have to pretend to be cold whenever we were together.

To be honest, I didn't think I could've pulled a better man than him on my own, even if I tried.

It was the middle of summer, and the weather outside was scorching. Andrei wouldn't be home until evening, and I'd grown tired of watching TV.

I went to the pool outside, sliding off my robe and slipping into the water. I groaned as a blissful chill cascaded over me, washing away the sweltering heat of summer.

The two bodyguards stationed around the pool were something I'd have to discuss with Andrei when he came back home.

Despite how everything had died down, he still believed I had to be guarded whenever he wasn't home, and he'd threatened to chop off one of the men's balls if he found even a scratch on me when he came home.

He didn't try to restrict my movements. I could go wherever I wanted and do whatever I pleased, but he believed there could still be enemies out there who might harm me, so I needed to have my bodyguards with me whenever I stepped out of the mansion.

And then there was the betrayal I'd felt when Dobryn agreed.

A smile spread across my lips at how overprotective he had become. The more comfortable we grew with each other, the more he wanted to keep me safe.

I immersed my entire body in the shimmering pool, holding my breath for a few minutes before surfacing and filling my lungs with air for a moment. Then, I held my breath again and dipped back into the water once more.

I didn't know how much time I'd spent in the pool, but by the time I got tired and chose to float instead, the water had already begun to feel cold against my skin, and the sun dipped lower, its once-blazing rays now a golden caress.

I stared at the sky, lost in the beauty above me.

Three weeks ago, I'd decided to tell Mom the truth about me and Andrei, and while she'd been disappointed she wasn't invited to the wedding, she didn't seem very upset that I'd gotten married to someone in the mafia.

She didn't hate the mafia; she'd known Dad was a double agent, and what she feared was what they would do to him when they found out.

Mom smiled as she thanked Andrei for protecting me and ensuring my happiness. She didn't care if he was a seven-horned devil; all she cared about was that he kept me safe and helped me through my grief.

"You look at peace."

I almost flinched at the deep sound of his voice, and when I glanced up, Andrei was standing at the edge of the pool, watching me with a flicker of adoration in his eyes.

"What?" I heard him clearly, but I hadn't noticed him come in, and that was the only logical reaction I could offer, along with the grin playing on my lips.

"You look at peace," he repeated, crouching at the edge of the pool and smiling back at me. "And you look sexy in that thing you're wearing."

I swam toward him, resting my elbow on the edge just by his feet and tilting my head to look at him. "It's called a two-piece swimsuit."

"Ah, I see." He whipped his head around and glared at his guards, a silent signal for them to look away.

I laughed. He hadn't just grown more protective; he'd become even more possessive and jealous as well. It was cute to see. "You know they've been watching me swim every day for weeks now, right?"

"Well, they're not allowed to watch you swim anymore. No man is allowed to watch you swim beside me."

I huffed. He'd just saved me from having to discuss the bodyguard situation. "How was work today, husband?"

“I had a couple of meetings with the Pakhan and a couple of members of the Bratva. All I could think of while I was there was coming back home to you.” He placed a finger beneath my chin and leaned in. “I missed you.”

“Me, too.” I squinted and grinned. “I think I missed you more.”

He pretended to think for a moment. “I doubt it.”

Something about the way he said it reminded me of my dad. He would pretend to think the same way and always claimed he missed me more than I did.

I heaved a sigh. Maybe he used to miss me more, but now I was the one missing him. There was a splinter of pain in my chest at the realization that I’d never see Dad or hear his voice again, no matter where in the world I went.

He was gone forever.

“You’re thinking of your dad again, aren’t you?” Andrei asked, scrutinizing me.

We’d grown so close over the last couple of weeks that I didn’t have to pretend when I was around him. I didn’t need to hide when I was sad or when something was bugging me. Andrei had become that shoulder I knew I could lean on whenever I needed it.

I nodded. “You just reminded me of my dad. When I was little, I used to tell him I missed him more, and he would tell me he doubted it—that he missed me more.”

“What’s your fondest memory of your father?” Andrei asked.

I thought for a while. There were many of them, but I couldn’t choose any as the fondest because they all held equal importance to me. However, there were a few that

stood out the most in my memory.

“When he gave me piggyback rides.” I chuckled as a mental image of those moments flashed in my mind. “Oh, and I think my fondest memory of him was when he took me on a fancy date at the age of ten.”

“A date?”

I bobbed my head. “It was a seafood restaurant an hour’s drive from where we lived. We spent time together, just the two of us, and he fed me lobsters. I ended up chasing him with a crab leg.”

Andrei’s head rolled back, and he let out a throaty laugh. His blue eyes gleamed with sheer happiness, and a pool of heat gathered between my legs. I was amazed at how incredibly handsome he looked.

He was a beautiful sight to behold.

“Did you actually chase him with a crab leg in a restaurant?” he asked, a wide grin stretched on his lips.

“I don’t know what I was thinking. And he didn’t even care what others would think. He played along.”

“So, my wife has been crazy for longer than I thought.”

“I was born insane.” A shiver ran through me. The sun had started to disappear beyond the horizon, and the water had gotten colder.

Andrei walked to the lounge chair, grabbed the towel I had placed there, and returned to the pool. He wrapped the towel around me and said, “Let’s take you inside before

you catch a cold.”

I climbed out of the pool and noticed his gaze lowering to breasts. My nipples were hard, both from the cold and the intensity of his stare, and they were poking against the fabric of my swimsuit.

My breathing grew harder, and my pulse spiked.

“You look magnificent,” he whispered as he inched closer, his eyes dark with dangerous desire. “Let’s get you warmed up.”

Before I could say a word, he lifted me bridal style.

I wrapped my arms around his neck, reveling in the heat seeping from his body and into mine as he carried me to our room.

His throat bobbed as he swallowed hard, his body pressing against mine and enveloping me with warmth.

We barely made it past the bedroom door when I shifted from the position in one fluid motion, wrapping my legs around his hips and tracing his lips with mine.

His arm snaked around me, and one of his hands slid under my swimsuit, finding my bare breast and cupping it.

I raked my fingers through his hair and kissed him. It was a hot, searing, primal kiss that evoked something deeper than lust from both of us. It was need, mixed with deep yearning.

He deepened the kiss, dragging his thumb across my nipple and twisting it lightly.

I moaned into his mouth, bucking when I felt his erection poke against my sex, and ground against him, desperate to ease the throbbing between my thighs.

He slid a hand through my thong and cupped my sex, and then, fisting the thong, he ripped it off me and pressed a firm finger to my clitoris.

I gasped, the ache in my core becoming more intense with anticipation. “Andrei,” I moaned.

“Get down,” he ordered as his gaze landed on my face, the look in his eyes dangerous.

I stopped grinding and stared at him with raised brows. “Why?” I asked. I needed him now.

“Because you’re riding me today.” He pushed a finger deep inside me, curved it, and thrust it a few times.

My body quivered at the contact, and a sultry cry left my throat. God, I needed to feel him inside me right now.

“Now, solnishko ,” he groaned when he pulled his finger out of me.

I got off him and waited for him to take off his jacket. He unbuttoned his shirt, tossing it to the floor, and then reached for his pants.

“Let me,” I offered. I knelt in front of him, taking my sweet time to unbuckle his belt and salivating at the sight of his erection. He was hard, and I was thirsty to have a taste of him.

His dick sprung out as I pulled down his pants, and I swallowed at the sight of

precum on the tip.

“Do you want to taste it?” he asked, his voice so rough and husky that it unraveled me completely.

I nodded.

“It’s all yours, solnishko . Do as you please.”

I wrapped my hand around the shaft and swiped my tongue over the tip. A smile pulled at my lips when I tasted the salty bead of precum. It honestly wasn’t as bad as I thought.

“You like it?”

“Yes.”

A pleased grin appeared on his face. “Stuff your face with it.”

Like a good girl, I took the length of his dick in my mouth, pumping with my fist and choking on the sheer length of him.

My jaw ached, my throat burning to stop, but I didn’t.

The satisfaction in his groans was all I needed to hear. The way he wrapped my hair around his fist and thrust it into my mouth sent a ripple of heat through me. The more I took him in my mouth, the more my pussy wept to have him inside me until I could feel the wetness of my arousal dripping down my legs.

My sex yearned for some pressure, so I pressed my thumb against it as firmly as he usually did and circled it until I could feel my orgasm build.

Holy crap! This was perfection.

The fact that I could bring both him and myself so much pleasure.... The feeling was heavenly, and it filled me with much more confidence than I could have imagined.

I pulled away, rising to my feet and pushing him down onto the bed. Then I climbed on top of him and slid down on his cock until it was completely inside me.

We both groaned, and a shiver ran through me as our eyes met. A blush crept up my cheeks, but I didn't let that stop me as I began to bounce on him, grinding back and forth until I could feel him deep inside me.

Andrei cupped my breasts, teased my nipples, and stroked my clit. His fingers dug into my ass, his growls growing more sensual.

A delicious tremor spread through my body, setting every nerve alight. I squirmed as my orgasm built, riding him faster and faster until I clashed against the tides of our climax.

Andrei growled, his fingers digging into my ass as he fucked me from beneath.

I slowed my pace, reeling in the aftershock, with my body trembling and my breath labored, and then I collapsed on top of him, jerking as his cock moved inside me.

"That was...intense," I said, gasping for air.

He pushed my hair from my face and pressed a kiss to my cheeks. "You're so perfect, solniskho."

He flipped us over in one fluid motion so I was beneath him this time.

My eyes widened. “Are we...?”

“We’re just getting started,” he said with a grin, and then he buried his head between my thighs.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:57 pm

The air was thick with the aroma of burning cigars, the low murmur of laughter and conversation blending with the shuffle of cards and the clinking of crystal glasses.

My fingers drummed idly against the felt-covered table, my gaze sweeping across my opponents.

They were all seasoned members of the Bratva with hands that were scarred from bloodshed and dark eyes that threatened death.

Antonio Morozov and Victor Volkov.

We were all cut from the same cloak—all three of us—bred with cruelty, brutality, and bloodshed. Different in many ways yet similar in more than one.

And at this table, every card we tossed was a matter of our pride. The joy that came with victory surpassed winning a war with a rival family.

I'd always been a good player, only lost a game a couple of times. My skills were unbeatable, and everyone here knew it.

But it was different tonight. Giselle's presence made it different.

She sat on the edge of a leather chair across the room, her back straight and hands folded neatly in her lap. Her raven hair was slicked back into a neat bun, and she looked absolutely gorgeous in the fitted red dress she wore.

All eyes had turned in her direction when she stepped into the room moments earlier,

and it took a clearing of my throat and me giving the men at the table a silent warning with my eyes before they took their lusty gazes off my wife.

I was the only one allowed to look at her, the only one allowed to lust after her. I didn't mind putting a bullet through some of their skulls so the others wouldn't dare to cross the line with what was mine.

"You're distracted," Antonio Morozov said, his dark eyes narrowing on the cards I was holding.

I leaned back, shifting my gaze from Giselle to him. I could still see her watching me from the corner of my eye, her brows furrowed with concern.

It was the first time she'd ever come to watch me play. Her presence was distracting, but I'd be damned before I lost a game with her here.

Because it wasn't about me or my pride tonight; it was about her. I wasn't going to let her down.

I rubbed my temple with my middle finger. "Distracted?" I chuckled lightly. "More like motivated."

Antonio's eyes widened as I pushed my entire stack forward. "What in fuck's name are you doing, Yezhov?"

I smirked. "I'm all in."

The table went silent, and everyone stared at each other. It was not like me to go all in for a game, but a little change to my usual tactics wasn't such a bad idea, especially not when I had to impress my woman.

I glanced at Giselle, noting how her lips parted and the plea in her eyes. Winking at her, I mouthed, “I’m doing this for you.”

Her lips curled with a smile, and she nodded with understanding. “Good luck,” she mouthed back.

Volkov stared back and forth between Giselle and me. His lips quirked, amusement bouncing in his eyes. “Ready to risk it all, Yezhov?”

I didn’t like the smile on his face or the challenge in his eyes. For all I knew, the sly bastard was going to do everything he could to ensure I lost, just to make a fool of me in front of Giselle.

Unfortunately, my desire to win surpassed his. “Bring it on, Volkov!”

Antonio’s eyes narrowed on me. He snarled. “You’re doing this on purpose, aren’t you? Trying to push us to the edge and see who shivers first?”

“Trying to push you?” I scoffed. “No, I’m just feeling a little lucky tonight.” And my lucky charm was sitting just across the room.

Victor snorted, tossing his chip to match my bet. “Let’s see where lucky takes you.”

I met his gaze, itching with the need to make things a little more interesting. “I hope it takes me right to bed with my wife.”

He winced in disgust. “That woman can do a lot better than a cocky bastard like you, Yezhov. Take that as a compliment.”

“Gladly.”

We both turn to Antonio, waiting for him to make his bet.

He scratched his jaw in contemplation, then folded with a muttered curse. “Fuck you two arrogant sons of bitches.”

I clasped his shoulders. “Don’t get too emotional over a game, old man.”

He frowned at me, the silver in his mustache catching the light as he inhaled his cigar and puffed a ring of smoke in the air.

It was just Victor and me now.

The dealer burned a card and then flipped the river.

A flush.

Victor’s smirk wiped off his face as he put his card down. “ Kakogo blyad’ chyorta?!”

What the fuck?!

The room erupted in a mix of groans and begrudging admiration.

I leaned back with a smile, allowing the satisfaction to settle in, but my gaze went straight to her.

Giselle released a shaky breath, relief flashing across her face before a wide grin curled on her lips.

“Looks like we have a winner,” I said to the grumpy men in front of me. I tapped Victor’s shoulder in fake consolation. “Better luck next time, Volkov. And make sure

to keep your eyes off my woman.”

“I’ll get you next time, Yezhov,” he said with a snarl.

I got to my feet, smirking at his promise. “You’ll be needing a lot of luck for that to happen.”

I signaled one of my bodyguards in the corner to collect my winnings and walked over to my wife.

When I reached her, she jumped to her feet and threw her arms around me, peppering me with kisses. “You won,” she said, her eyes glinting with excitement.

I wrapped my arms around her waist and pressed a kiss to her temple. “No. We won, baby,” I replied.

“I think we need to celebrate.” She leaned in and whispered. “Let’s sneak away from here.”

I took her hand in mine. “Come with me.”

She squinted. “Where are we going?”

“You’ll see.”

I led her to the rooftop of the building, closing the door behind us to avoid any interruptions and burying the noise of the chaos below.

The rooftop was quiet, and the city stretched out before us, a glittering expanse of lights and movement. The night breeze was cool, carrying with it the distant sounds of cars racing down the street.

Giselle stood beside me, her hands covered in mine as she admired the full moon and the bed of stars in the sky.

Our fingers grazed, and it felt like the entire world had been set ablaze, the heat licking through my veins and the air cracking with a jolt of tension.

The weird feeling in my chest intensified, and my pulse raced. It was a reminder of what she meant to me—what I'd just discovered she meant to me.

I watched her, something in my chest fluttering as I admired how beautiful she was under the moonlight. The wind ruffled her hair, her thick lashes casting a shadow under her eyes.

While she watched the city and the sky overhead, I watched her with nothing but yearning in my heart. It wasn't sex or anything that I needed; it was her. Her heart, her touch, her whispers—everything.

"The sky is beautiful tonight," she said in a voice that was barely audible.

I didn't take my eyes off her even for a moment. "It's not as beautiful as you are."

She craned her neck to look at me, her eyes meeting mine and holding my gaze for a moment, and in a way, that ignited something deep inside me.

"Andrei," she said softly, her chest heaving and her eyes gleaming with a type of vulnerability I'd never seen in them before.

"I'm here, solnishko . What do you need?"

"What do you feel for me?" she asked, her eyes searching mine and her lips trembling. "I've been wanting to ask for a while now, and I'm tired of pretending I'm

not curious, that I don't feel anything for you. I need the truth from you. No games. No lies."

Her words hit like a punch to the gut. I had spent so long keeping my emotions locked away, convincing myself that what I felt for her was nothing more than a possessive need for her, but all of it was a lie. She was way more than that to me, and I realized it long before I even admitted it to myself.

I reached out, brushing a strand of hair from her face.

She didn't pull away. "You want the truth?" I murmured.

She nodded, her breathing hollow. "Yes, I want the truth because, to be honest, I think I've fallen in love with you. I don't know when or how it happened, but you're all I think about and all I care about. I honestly can't think of anything or anyone else aside from you. I love you, Andrei. More than I ever wanted to, but so much that I can't picture my life without you. I love you."

I smiled, my entire existence warming at the sound of her voice—at the weight of her confession. It must've taken a lot for her to finally share her feelings with me. "You're cute when you tell me how much you love me, solnishko."

Her eyes shimmered in the dim light. "Andrei..."

"I love you, too, Giselle," I admitted. "I tried to tell myself it was nothing, that I was incapable of an emotion like that, but that was me lying to myself. You're everything to me, Giselle. You're my entire world, and I don't want to fight it anymore."

A tear rolled down her face. "You love me?"

I took a step closer, my fingers grazing her arm and sending a shiver through her.

“More than I’ve ever loved anything else.”

She hesitated for only a second before she whispered, “And you’ll love me forever?”

“Forever is the deal, baby.”

I cupped her face in my hands, tilting her chin up before claiming her lips.

She melted into me, her hands fisting my shirt as if she never wanted to let go. The kiss was deep, desperate, months of restraint crumbling in an instant.

When we finally pulled apart, she rested her forehead against mine. “I was afraid you’d never admit it.”

I ran my thumb over her lower lip. “I’ve never been afraid of anything in my entire life, solnishko . But right now, losing you is the only thing that truly terrifies me.”

She smiled, the kind of smile that made my world tilt. “Then hold on tight and don’t ever lose me. In return, I’ll be by your side until the end of the world.”

“I don’t plan on losing you, not now or ever.” I kissed her again, sealing the promise between us. And for the first time in my entire life, I knew I’d found home.

I knew without a single doubt she would be mine forever.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:57 pm

Seven Months Later

“It’s your birthday in less than an hour,” Mom said over the phone.

For the first time since Dad died, she sounded happier, as if she’d finally gotten to that final stage of grief.

Acceptance.

The stage where even though the pain was still there, it just became easier to live with.

I believed I’d also gotten to that stage.

There were days when I missed Dad so much and wished he was still here, but those days were fleeting, and I found myself cherishing the memories we had when he was here.

I’d shifted my focus to finding my own path in life and living in the moment. Andrei was the moment; because of him, I could live happily and smile freely again, something I never thought I would experience after Dad died.

I stared blankly at the wall above me and sighed. “Yes, Mom. It’s my twenty-third birthday in an hour, and the only company I have is an empty house.”

It was the first time I’d ever been home alone for a while now. Andrei made it a duty to always come home every evening so we could spend quality time together, and at

times when he wasn't home, I usually had some of the staff with me.

Tonight was different, though; he'd called earlier to let me know he had a business meeting and wouldn't be able to make it home until tomorrow morning. And surprisingly, the staff had their day off today, and I hadn't wanted to make them stay just so I didn't get lonely.

"Where's Andrei?"

I spun on my side. "Not home. He won't be home tonight, so it's just me."

"Oh, honey. I'm so sorry," she cooed. "It's your big day tomorrow. Maybe you two can go out on a fancy dinner and then—"

"Mom," I cut her off before she could finish. "Don't even start."

She'd been going on and on about us making a baby so she could come over to see her grandchild.

Andrei and I had talked about having kids someday, but he'd told me he was only ready when I was ready, and I could take my time to explore and see if I had anything I wanted to do first since I was still very young.

"I'm just saying. I miss you so much, baby," she said, her voice laced with a bit of sadness. "I wish I was there with you."

"Me, too, Mom. I miss you so much." It had been a year since the last time I saw her, and I couldn't wait to eat her breakfast and feel her hugs again.

"I've gotta run now, sweetie. Happy birthday," she said, and she blew me a kiss over the phone.

I giggled. “Thank you, Mom. I love you.”

“Love you, too, baby.” She hung up.

Dropping the phone, I sighed and glanced at the clock. It would be midnight an hour from now, and I’d officially be twenty-three.

It was my first birthday with Andrei, and I’d really thought we would be able to spend every second of it together.

As much as it stung not to have him around, I knew it wasn’t his fault. He always put me first in every decision he made since we met; what would it be if we didn’t spend this birthday together? There were still many more birthdays ahead, and I knew I would have him all to myself on my birthday someday.

Swallowing the disappointment, I decided to get water and, if I could find the right ingredients, bake myself a cake. After that, I was going to tire myself out and sleep throughout the night. With any luck, he would already be here before I woke up.

I dragged myself to my feet and grabbed a bottle of water from the fridge. I opened the cap and downed half the contents of the bottle in one gulp.

Taking what was left of my bottle of water, I walked to the cabinets, opening each of them and checking for the ingredients I needed. Baking soda, baking powder, vanilla extract—

A sharp noise in a corner of the house caught my attention. I stopped moving and listened.

It sounded like rustling and footsteps. No one was supposed to be home aside from me.

My scalp prickled, the hairs at the back of my neck rising. The bodyguards usually stayed at their spots outside, and they would never come in here without informing me first.

I ignored the flare of panic in my chest, picked a knife from the set on the kitchen counter, and quietly followed the source of the noise.

It led me to one of the visitor rooms downstairs, and the closer I got, the louder the noise became. I couldn't tell for sure if it was someone inside or if my mind was playing tricks on me.

I gripped the edge of the knife and followed the noise, pushing the door open cautiously and readying my hands to launch an attack on whoever the intruder was.

But rather than an intruder, I gasped in surprise at the view in front of me. The room was dark except for the warm glow of red, scented candlelight. "Candles?"

My stomach fluttered as I stared at the room at large in awe.

On a small center table in the middle of the room, a cake with flickering pink number twenty-three candles rested on top of it

"Happy birthday, solnishko ."

Andrei's voice curled around me like velvet, deep and filled with something rich and possessive.

I turned sharply, my pulse racing as Andrei emerged from the shadows.

"You—" I started, but my words faltered when I saw him.

He looked perfect in the dim light, his dirty blond hair slightly tousled and the crisp

lines of his shirt undone at the collar. His eyes—those ruthless, beautiful blue eyes—watched me with amusement, hunger, and something softer, deeper.

“I thought you had a meeting,” I whispered.

He neared me and ran a finger down my face, his touch so gentle that I felt all the panic from earlier seep away. “I did, but you’re more important than any meeting, Giselle.”

Happiness bubbled inside me; it was almost overwhelming, and tears of joy welled in my eyes.

I placed my head on his chest and wrapped my arms around him. “Thank you, Andrei.”

“I’m your husband, solnishko . It’s my job to make you happy.” He raked his fingers through my hair and gave my scalp a gentle massage for an entire minute while I listened to the beat of his heart.

When I finally pulled away, my grip on the knife loosened, and it dangled freely between my fingers.

Andrei chuckled, plucking it from my grip before placing it on a nearby table. “And what were you going to do with this, wife?”

My cheeks flushed with embarrassment. It seemed smart at the time, but any man like Andrei could’ve easily overpowered me and grabbed the knife from me. The smartest thing to do would have been to call for help, but I was too scared at the time to be smart.

I pouted as I stared up at my husband. “I thought there was an intruder,” I admitted, feeling a little ridiculous now.

“The house is well guarded. Even a fly can’t get past those men outside. No one would even dare to harm you.” His voice was serious, his gaze darkening. “Not on your birthday. Not ever.”

Emotion clogged my throat as I looked at him. This man, who had a reputation for being dangerous and merciless in the world, was mine. And he would do anything for me.

It felt like, although Dad had died, he made sure to leave a guardian angel for me before he did. It seemed as though he knew he would die, and he knew hiding the shipment would somehow lead me to Andrei.

I was grateful.

Andrei’s face creased with worry. “Are you okay?”

I drifted back to the present and nodded. “I just thought of Dad. I mean, isn’t it funny how I was able to meet you because of the shipment he hid?”

“Tell me about it. You think Peter had this all mapped out before he died?” Andrei asked with a playful grin. “That he wanted me to meet you?”

I shrugged. “He was a genius. It’s not completely out of the box. He worked with you, so he must’ve known how great of a person you are.”

Andrei chuckled. “Your father watched me murder men in cold blood a few times. There is no way he would have wanted a man like me for his daughter.”

I looked him straight in the eyes and corrected him. “Every father wants a man who would love and protect their daughter. You’re all of those things, and I’m sure he would have approved.”

Even if Mom hadn't been a fan of it at first, she'd adjusted pretty well.

Andrei took my hands and kissed the back of my palm. "And I promise to always love and protect you, Giselle."

My heart thrummed, and a wave of happiness spread in my chest like wildfire. "I love you, too, Andrei."

He pressed another kiss to the back of my hand before craning his neck to glance at the cake. "Time to blow out your candles, wife," he murmured, his fingers brushing my jaw.

It didn't matter how much he called me wife; a giddy sensation filled my stomach like butterflies dancing each time I heard him say it like that.

I turned back to the cake, my heart pounding as I made a silent wish. Then, with a deep breath, I blew out the candle.

The room plunged into darkness for a moment before Andrei flipped the switch. Light flooded the space, and I gasped.

The walls were covered in shelves holding blank canvases, paints, and brushes of every kind. A completely blank easel stood in the center. The room smelled like fresh wood and was a dream come true.

"Andrei," I whispered, my fingers grazing along the brushes lined up on the table. A surge of overwhelming happiness filled me as I inspected everything, taking in the brushes and the canvas. It was.... I hadn't expected all of this at all. "Are these—"

"They're all yours," he said simply. "This studio will be yours from now on. You love to paint, and now you'll have a place to do it."

Tears pricked my eyes, my chest rising with emotion. “You did all this for me?”

His lips curled into a smirk. “I’d do anything for you, solnishko .”

I threw my head back, hoping the happy tears blurring my vision didn’t begin to spill. “I never told you I love to paint. How did you know?”

The corners of his lips quirked. “I saw you in my room that night. I saw how intently you’d been looking at that portrait on my wall, and I knew. Only someone with a knack for artwork would take so much time to admire the detailing. I’d also seen some of your paintings as the vacation house.”

My chest ached with love and affection that I couldn’t contain. I turned to him and threw my arms around his neck.

He caught me easily, his strong arms locking around my waist, and he pulled me against him.

“You like it?” he asked, his voice rough.

“Like? I love it, Andrei,” I murmured, my voice heavy with emotion. “I love you.”

“Fuck, solnishko . I love it when you say you love me like that,” he growled in a deep, husky tone.

I smiled. “Then I’ll say it again, Andrei.” I tightened my arms around him. “I love you, husband.”

Something flickered in his gaze, something dark and desperate. Then, his mouth crashed against mine.

The kiss was ravenous and desperate, his hands possessive as they desperately

explored every part of my body.

Andrei didn't just kiss me; he claimed every fiber of me like he owned it—and he did.

My fingers tangled in his hair, tugging as his hands roamed my body and pressed me closer.

He backed me up until I was against the table. His hands slid down to my thighs, and he lifted me effortlessly onto the surface.

“You don't know what you do to me, solnishko ,” he murmured against my lips, his breath hot and teasing. “You don't know how insane you drive me.”

“Then show me,” I whispered back. “I want to feel the things I do to you. I want to feel you inside me.

His response was a low growl rumbling from his chest as he tilted my chin up, his lips teasing over my jaw and my neck. His fingers made quick work of the buttons of my blouse, pushing it aside to reveal my bare skin.

I shivered with need as dark desire pooled in my belly. My nipples hardened to the cold air, my core throbbing as I undid the bottom of his shirt and ripped it off to reveal a firm wall of muscles and abs.

I ran my hand over his body, feeling the sturdy muscles there. Fuck.

Andrei trailed kisses down my throat, and his hands slid up my thighs and beneath my skirt.

His hands explored me with a slow, deliberate intensity, as if memorizing every curve and reaction he drew from me.

Each kiss, each touch, sent electrifying waves of heat through my body, setting me on fire with a need that only he could satisfy.

He parted my legs with a nudge of his thigh and positioned himself between my legs, and soon, the tip of his cock was pressed against my entrance.

I wrapped my arm around him and buried my face in the crook of his neck, surrendering as he slammed into me.

He grunted with satisfaction, and I moaned right into his face.

Every thrust of his hips as he made love to me drove me wild. I needed more. I wanted more of the sensual feeling that ran up my core. I needed more of the heat from his body and the sweet words he whispered into my ears.

His touch was heavenly; each fondling of my breasts and tweaking of my nipples in his mouth sent a rush of trepidation through me.

My teeth sank into my bottom lips, my core pulsing with the need for more as he drove in and out of me.

I buckled my hips so he could go deeper, grinding my waist. A wave of sweet sensation swept through me.

He wrapped his hand around my throat gently, kissed my neck, and dipped a finger into my parted lips.

I moaned, taking his finger and sucking it.

He groaned, his veins bulging and his thrust becoming needier. “Touch yourself, solnishko . I want to see you do it.”

I obliged like a good girl, cupping my breasts, twisting my nipples, and relishing in the pleasure that cocooned me.

Andrei watched me with dark, lusty eyes as my hands roamed my body.

“You’re going to be the death of me,” he whispered into my ears. His teeth scraped my earlobe, and then he licked it, sending a shiver down my spine. “And you’re going to be the reason I live, solnishko .”

I smiled and leaned in, burying my face in the crook of his neck again. I could feel my orgasm building—the feeling like a volcano about to erupt.

I moaned, moving my hips along to the flow as Andrei took me like both of our lives depended on it.

The squishing sound of my wetness as he rammed in and out of me—the clapping sound of our bodies, our moans, and the smell of sex in the air—was intoxicating. I didn’t want this to end—not now, not ever.

Andrei took my thumb, pressing it against my clitoris and circling it. I whimpered from the pleasure, desperate to find my release with the stimulation.

And then my orgasm slammed through me like an earthquake.

I bit down on Andrei’s neck to keep myself from screaming, every part of my body trembling ferociously.

He chuckled. “Good girl.”

Ramming into me a few more times, he tensed, and I tightened my arms around him as he came with a powerful groan.

We remained in that position for a moment, with Andrei buried inside me and our sweaty bodies pressed against each other. We were both gasping for breath, both stuck recovering from the aftershock of our orgasms.

He pressed a kiss to the top of my head. “Happy birthday, solnishko . I thank God for the day you were born.”

I cupped his hard jaw and smiled, warmth spreading through me. “I thank God for you, muzhenyok.”

His eyes crinkled. “ muzhenyok?”

I chuckled. “Yes.”

I’d been thinking of a sweet nickname for him for a couple of days now, and I came across the word. It was an affectionate way to say husband, and I didn’t think there would be a more perfect word for Andrei.

“ Solnishko,” he whispered in a husky voice. “ Ya tebya lyublyu.”

Solnishko. I love you.

“I love you, too, muzhenyok,” I whispered back.

Our eyes locked, and then he leaned forward, claiming my lips in a searing kiss. I knew right here at this moment that there was no gift in the world that could compare to this.

To him.

To us.

THE END