



Innocent Bratva Twins

(Dubrov Bratva #14)

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Category: Urban

Description: My hot Bratva boss locks me up and does with me what he wants.

I'm fresh out of college and got my dream job as an executive assistant.

I must not submit to my hot boss, who is 15 years my senior and off-limits.

And I must not give in when he kidnaps me and knocks me up with his twins.

I'm an innocent girl. A virgin who has no idea Bratva guys like him exist.

His suit molds perfectly against his muscled form, lighting forbidden parts of me on fire.

His large, calloused hands explore my hidden curves, making me desperate.

I try to escape his office unharmed, but unfortunately he has other plans.

He locks me into his penthouse and loses control, ruining me.

He teaches my weak, pliant body what pleasure is.

He shows my soft, warm curves what desire is.

But when he's done with me and leaves me ashamed and desperate...will he come back?

Will my Bratva boss be a daddy to our babies?

The Dubrov Bratva are the ruthless keepers of the city, the cold protectors of the women they claim, and the gentle daddies of the babies they make. Love them or hate them, you have no choice but to obey them the minute they decide that they want you for life.

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:36 pm

Boston winter snow falls thick on the ground outside the office building.

I step around an old man sprinkling salt over the stairs that lead up to the entrance.

We clear the ice with heating built into the stone beneath the steps, but Tony has been the caretaker of this building for three decades, and this has been his job every winter.

You can't teach an old dog new tricks. That's what they say, anyway.

"Morning, Tony," I say, tugging the door open.

"Good morning, Mr. Andreev. A beautiful one it is," he says, his old face cracking into the usual friendly smile that he wears daily.

"Did Clara bring you coffee yet?" I ask, standing in the doorway.

"Not yet, sir, I told her I wanted to finish the salt first."

I nod, then turn into the building, heat caressing me as I close the door.

Clara, who works in the lobby as our receptionist, jumps out of her seat to greet me. Her red hair is pulled back in a slick bun, and the big round glasses she wears and fogged up for some reason.

"Good morning. Can I get you anything, sir?" she sing-songs happily.

"No, thanks. I'm expecting a delivery around midday, though."

“I’ll let you know as soon as it arrives,” she nods.

The elevator carries me silently up to the top floor of our high-rise office building. I go over the day's tasks in my mind, ready to dig into the work I need to finish.

It’s been busier these last few months. Ever since my sister, Jade, married that Kuznetsov, business has been flooding in—a good thing, too, because we need to focus on creating a foundation of strength and wealth for the future.

It’s better than getting lost in ideas of revenge against the Enzos for taking Grigoriy’s life.

They're a powerful, wealthy family with resources that would be impossible to fight against.

We will have revenge. But we all know it’s a dish best served cold. And I’d rather plan it down to the last detail than rush in and lose anyone else I love through stupid, rash decision-making.

The Enzos will pay. I’ll make sure of it. But I won’t risk my family to make that happen. We’ll build our strength first.

I still miss my little brother like crazy.

Not a day goes by when he’s not in my thoughts; whether the memory makes me smile or fills my heart with a dark, aching pain, Grigoriy remains a constant in my mind.

His life ended far too soon and much too young.

But dwelling on the loss and the burning hatred I have towards the Enzos does not

make life better for the rest of my family.

At thirty-six, I'm the oldest of my siblings, and it is my responsibility to guide them towards something that can heal their pain instead of tearing their lives apart.

Jade already proved that focusing entirely on revenge is pointless.

Silver doors slide open with a soft ping, and I step out of the elevator onto the top floor.

The receptionist on this floor is dressed in a dark grey suit. Her brown hair is pulled back so tightly it's tugging at the skin of her face. Every single hair is smoothed down to perfection, and her lips are pursed and stiff.

She stands dead straight and greets me with a sour expression.

"Mr. Andreev, I'll have your coffee with you in a minute, sir.

Your messages are on your desk. Your first meeting is at ten in the boardroom three.

You will be meeting Miss Brown at exactly three this afternoon.

I have sternly reminded her not to be late. "

"Thanks, Nicole," I smile. She's only around twenty-five, but with the demeanor of someone in their sixties. "Did you have a good weekend?" I ask, realizing that I've never thought of Nicole as having any kind of life other than work. What the hell does she do for fun?

"Yes, sir. It was sufficient."

Sufficient? What does that even mean?

She's the stiffest, most boring person I think I've ever met. I'm serious about my work, but Nicole is rigid and structured to a point I sometimes wonder whether she's human or an android.

A slight smirk of amusement brushes over my lips, and I turn away from her before she can see it.

If she relaxed a little, she'd probably get on with a lot more people in the office.

In fact, if it wasn't for her severe personality, I would have promoted her to be my executive assistant.

She's capable and qualified, but for fuck's sake, I don't need that kind of tension.

HR has been interviewing new employees for the second office space I've opened up in town to handle the overflow of our rapidly expanding business.

I requested they find me an executive assistant at the same time, for the main office, to help me manage my day-to-day schedule and keep my life organized.

My only requirement was that the person has to have a good academic background with good results, showing dedication and the ability to handle the work they'll be doing. Thinking about it now, I should have told them the person needed to have a bit of a personality, too.

I'll find out later today who they've hired for me.

On paper, and from the HR reports, Miss Brown looks brilliant.

Competent, young, energetic, eager to do well, and ready to work.

She's going to need a fuckton of energy to handle the workload I am about to hand over to her.

I hope she's a quick learner. I don't have time to be babying anyone, and it's not like I can ask Nicole to help me train her in our internal processes—she'll probably scare the girl away.

Another smirk flashes over my face. Poor Nicole.

She's probably doomed to live alone for the rest of her life.

No one in their right mind would volunteer to marry someone so sour.

Unless she's secretly a dominatrix.

I squeeze my eyes shut, pushing away the horrific image that flashes through my mind. What the fuck, Nico? Those are not things I ever want to imagine.

Damned intrusive thoughts.

Heading into my office at the corner of the building, two massive glass windows stretching over most of the space, I shrug off my trench coat and hang it on the hook by the door.

I set my laptop down on the desk and stretch my neck, rolling it in a slow circle and feeling the flex of muscles before I sit down.

Hopefully, I'll have time to get to the gym today.

The work I did in the warehouse this weekend was pretty strenuous, but nothing beats a good session with the weights.

Sunlight streams in despite the ice-cold winter air outside. If I don't look down at the snow-covered streets below and only focus on the sky, I can pretend it was a summer's day.

I can't believe it has almost been a year since we lost Grigoriy.

Andrei is still missing. I was never close to Andrei Volo. I met him a handful of times and hardly paid him any attention, but he meant a lot to Grigoriy. He was his best friend, and I know he supported my brother through a lot. His disappearance is my responsibility. I owe that to my brother.

Even with our heavy workload, I've sent search parties out, and every now and then tendrils of information filter in about Andrei, but nothing substantial. Nothing that has led to him being found, dead or alive.

My sister's husband, Radmir Kuznetsov—his entire family, in fact—is allied with the Dubrovs. And that's why our business has been booming.

We aren't particularly close with either family, but the marriage opened doorways and partnerships that have been beneficial.

My family scrapes the surface of the bratva world and how dark it can get. We don't get involved with that shit as much as possible. The stories I've heard about how they do business, and what they do to people who piss them off ... It's pretty fucked up.

I prefer a more diplomatic approach.

Of course, one day, when it comes to avenging my brother's murder, that will be a

different story.

The day both drags and flies by in a busy, crazy, chaotic blur of responsibilities.

The electricity failed in the new office building because of weather issues. The computers we ordered didn't arrive. On top of that, I've been managing the existing office and trying to rally everyone to take on a little more work until we can get the new employees up and running.

It's fucking chaos.

Glancing at my watch, desperate to take a break and eat something to ease my growing hunger before I turn into a savage—skipping meals never looks good on me—I groan when I note it's already three.

Miss Brown will be here any second.

Lunch will have to wait.

Coffee will have to fill the void for now.

I stick my head out of the office and call out to Nicole. "Coffee, please. And send Miss Brown in as soon as she arrives."

I duck back into my office. Shit. I forgot to send the email to Luka. My brother has been asking for that breakdown for days now.

Hurrying to my laptop, I sit down and race against time to get it done.

I smell the sweet, warm scent of jasmine washing over me, and it makes me look up.

The woman standing there smiles nervously, looking down at me with her big green eyes glittering and bright.

“I’m sorry, the lady outside told me I should just come in—I should have knocked,” she says, shifting from one foot to the other.

I swear my mouth is hanging open as my eyes graze over her from head to toe.

The baby blue dress she’s wearing is professional, but gorgeous and feminine, hugging her body and complementing every curve—curves I should not be noticing, but it’s impossible to deny how perfectly they are.

Her light brown hair, gold in the light, is hanging loose over her shoulders in glossed waves. She reaches up and tucks a curl behind her hair.

“If you are busy, I can wait outside?” she asks, her anxiety growing visibly. I realize I’m just staring at her and haven’t said a damned word.

I stand up, knocking my knee on the desk and swearing under my breath.

She bites her lower lip, and the gesture distracts me even more.

I glance down at my desk and grab a folder, shuffling papers around without purpose, just to pull myself together.

“Miss Brown. Sorry, I was just finishing up something important. Do you want to take a seat? I’ll be right with you.” I gesture towards the sofas in the far corner of my office.

She nods politely and makes her way there, sitting down and crossing one shapely leg over the other. I watch her, every little move seductive, feminine, and beautiful.

Fuck.

This isn't good.

Pull yourself together, Nico.

After taking a full minute at my desk, I eventually make my way over to the sofas and sit down opposite her.

“Miss. Brown, it's good to finally meet you.”

“Serafina,” she smiles.

I glance at her folder. Words on paper. Nothing could have prepared me for the magnificent beauty sitting opposite me right now.

“Serafina.” I smile. “I'm Nico.”

Leaning forward, I take her outreached hand and shake it. “Welcome to the office. I'm looking forward to working with you.”

“Me too,” she says, and my eyes are on her lips, perfectly sensual, light pink, plump and soft....

“Um. Where will my desk be?” she asks, and I realize I'm staring again.

Dammit.

“That’s your desk in the corner there. It’s temporary, just until the end of the week. You’ll be sharing my office for the time being because the workload is ridiculous, and your office isn’t set up. I’m sorry about this. It will be finished by Friday at the latest.”

“That’s perfect. All I need is my laptop and a space to work. I’m excited to get started. HR warned me it was extremely busy at the moment and that I needed to hit the ground running.”

She’s gorgeous, magnetic, radiant—and I can’t stop staring. I need to stop staring. I don’t think I’ve ever been this unprofessional in my life. She’s caught me off guard, and it takes a lot to knock me into this kind of stunned silence.

I need to end this meeting—make some excuse and pull myself back together.

“Well, let’s start by getting you situated at your desk.

Your profiles have been set up on your laptop.

HR tells me you are familiar with the programs we use, so you can log in and settle down, and then we can go through our tasks for tomorrow.

Ease into it this afternoon and kick off properly in the morning.”

“That sounds perfect.” She stands up before I do. My eyes are devouring her body as she turns her back to me and bends down to pick up her purse. Her ass forms a perfect heart shape.

Those blue stilettos match her dress.

I clear my throat and stand up as well. She turns and bumps into me. I reach out and

grab her waist to steady her as her body brushes against mine, and sparks fly between us.

Her cheeks glow red. “Sorry,” she murmurs, smiling shyly.

“No problem,” I mutter, not wanting to step away from her, but forcing myself to do so.

Serafina makes her way to her temporary desk and gets to work without needing my guidance or assistance. She sits down and busies herself. She definitely isn’t someone who needs to be babied or fussed over. But I realize I’m disappointed. I want her to need me. What the hell is wrong with me?

Sitting down at my desk, I pretend to be busy with an email, but my eyes are constantly drifting in her direction.

My reaction to her is confusing, unexpected, and worrying. She’s fucking incredible. But how can I know that after meeting her for the first time ever right now?

She’s nothing like I expected. My professional walls practically collapsed at the sight of her, and I need to put them back up immediately.

I better tell them to hurry the fuck up and get her office ready.

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:36 pm

Early on Friday morning, Nicole stands as I walk past reception. She still makes me nervous, even though I've been working here for a full week already; I can't figure out if she likes me or not. She doesn't seem to like anyone, not even Nico. But at least she's polite to him.

I've never seen someone stand up so straight before. She always looks uncomfortable.

I'm supposed to ask her whenever I want coffee, but I'm too terrified to ask her for anything.

Yesterday, I wasted an hour after work looking for contact details when it would have taken Nicole two seconds to e-mail them to me if I'd been brave enough to ask her .

She's terrifying. I tell myself it's nothing personal and do my best to pretend not to notice her abruptness when I interact with her.

"Serafina," she snaps, rigid and cold. As though my name was an insult.

"Hi, Nicole. How are you this morning?" I greet her with a wide smile, shifting the weight of my laptop bag from one hand to the other.

"Fine. Yes. Your office is officially ready. Do not disturb Mr. Andreev. Go directly to your own office," she demands.

"That's great news. Thanks so much. I'm looking forward to seeing it."

“Yes.”

She stares at me. Yes what? I don't bother asking. I shoot her one last smile and make my way towards the small office right next to Nico's. It's freshly painted and still has the slightest hint of paint smell. They've cracked one of the sliding windows open a bit, and cold air is blasting inside.

I'd rather put the air filter on instead of freezing to death. It's literally snowing outside, and my office is an icebox.

I hurry over to the window and tug it closed. A cold shiver runs through me.

The smell is so faint it'll probably be gone by lunchtime.

I put my laptop bag onto the dark wooden desk and reach out to brush my fingers over the bright green leaves of a gorgeous monstera I chose for the corner.

Because they were still setting up when I started working here, Nico let me choose the decor.

My eyes roam the room, and the smile on my face spreads wider.

It's gorgeous and modern and neat—warm brown and green tones against white walls create a minimalist vibe with hints of nature.

On the far wall opposite the massive window, Nico had them put a giant painting of a monstera leaf—it's gorgeous, and it makes me smile that he would do that.

I tell myself it was just a design element and not a personal gift, nothing I should read into, although it was clearly put there to match the plants I chose.

I can't believe I'm working as an executive assistant to the CEO, right on the top floor with views that most people would kill for—and, according to Time magazine, my boss is one of the sexiest, most eligible bachelors in the city.

They're not wrong. He's fucking gorgeous. His dark hair and bright amber eyes are a deadly combination. His rugged, masculine strength makes me want to blush every time I'm in the same room as him, because it floods me with desire.

It's a challenge to work with such a gorgeous man, but I have to push those thoughts aside because this job is incredible.

When I dreamed of my first job straight after graduation, this is exactly what I would have envisioned, but never believed possible.

I'm the luckiest girl in the world.

Twenty-one and about to establish myself in the corporate world of business. I accelerated my accomplishments by adding extra college courses during high school. It paid off. Now I am ahead of the game.

My first week on the job has been eye opening and fantastically challenging for a number of reasons; the work is freaking incredible, I love being pushed out of my comfort zone and given chances to prove myself.

There is a challenge every hour because everything is new, and I'm still getting the hang of it all.

I'm managing things for this office and for the other office being set up in town at Baker Street.

I've been working my ass off every hour of every day, and I think I'm proving myself

to be an invaluable asset for Mr. Andreev.

Nico .

My heart flutters just thinking of his name.

Every night since I started working here, I've gone to bed fantasizing about him until I fall asleep.

It's pathetic, I'm fully aware.

But a girl can dream.

There's no harm in a little late-night imagination.

I grin, remembering all the things I let him do to me in my mind last night. Okay, maybe it's getting a bit out of hand, and I should probably put a stop to my own thoughts, but he's beyond gorgeous. In fact, I've never seen a man, in my entire life, who could compare to him.

He's sexy. Dangerously sexy. Stupidly good-looking.

I sigh, rolling my eyes at myself.

My hands brush self-consciously over my hips, and I glance down at the black bodycon dress I'm wearing.

Dream all you want, Serafina. Guys like that don't go for girls like you.

I'm smart.

Clever enough to know better.

I might let my mind wander a bit on my own free time, but when I'm in the office, I need to focus on the work. And it's easier said than done.

Because this wandering mind of mine isn't exactly in my control when I'm around him.

Stupid hormones.

Thank goodness I don't have to share an office with him anymore. At first, I loved the idea of being right next to him all day, but I quickly learned how distracting it was.

Now I have my own beautiful space.

"Serafina, can you come into my office, please?" His voice is deep, even though the speakerphone on my desk.

Nicole has already told me how it works.

I lean forward and press my finger against the dark red button. "I'll be right in, Mr. Andreev," I respond quickly.

"Nico."

"Sorry." My heart flips. He keeps insisting I call him by his first name, but it doesn't feel right.

It's too familiar. Too comfortable. And whenever his name touches my lips, I get all giggly and shy, which is not like me at all. It's embarrassing.

Actually, what would I know about how to act around men?

I've had one boyfriend, who turned out to be a complete asshole, and all my life I've been taunted about how inexperienced I am with relationships.

I don't know anything about guys, to be honest. But I do know that they don't make me nervous. Not like he does.

Whatever.

It hardly matters when I have such an incredible career opportunity to focus on.

Gathering my notebook and my favorite pen with glitter inside that floats up and down when I flip it, I take a deep breath and head to Nico's office. My stomach tightens with tension as I push his door open and step inside, knocking lightly on the wood as I enter.

"Good morning, Mr. Andreev," I say, smiling.

"This is the last time I'm going to tell you, Serafina. Call me Nico . Next time, I'll give you a written warning. Or punishment." He's grinning at me, but I take note of the flash of authority in his amber eyes. Eyes I could so easily get lost in, piercing and commanding attention.

"Sorry," I say, over-enthused.

He stands up from behind his desk and walks towards me.

His suit, pitch-black and crisp, is perfectly molded to his muscular form, made for him, accentuating each bulge in his body, taunting me as I watch his movements.

His strong face and dark shadow of stubble make him look wild and dangerous, yet his eyes are kind and calm, as though he's in control of everything.

I turn away and hurry towards the sofas where we usually have our morning meeting to go over the things we'll be doing that day.

He follows me, but as he walks close to me, he reaches out and brushes his hand over my lower back. I stop, completely frozen by his touch. My heart is racing so fast, I'm convinced he'll be able to hear it.

His hand leaves my body as quickly as it brushed over me, but the effect of his touch lingers, like fire on my skin, a feverish desire in my thoughts.

"Do you like your office, Serafina? Is there anything you want to change?" he asks as he settles into the sofa with the confidence and ease that I wish I had whenever I was around him.

Oh, I'm confident in my ability to do my job. I'm confident I can perform all of the duties required of me as his executive assistant. But I am not confident that I won't trip over my own tongue and say or do something embarrassing.

He unbalances me in strange ways that I've never felt before.

"I love my office. I wouldn't want them to change anything. It's so gorgeous. Thank you so much for letting me choose the decor. The view is breathtaking and I'm just—I can't tell you how much I appreciate it." I smile with genuine excitement.

"I'm glad to hear it. I want you to be happy here with me, Sera.

I'm not letting you escape any time soon.

You belong to me now,” he grins, and his eyes flare with suggestion.

My body sparks with desire and I sit down, quickly pulling my notebook onto my lap and staring down at the pages to hide my blushing cheeks.

Obviously, I’m misreading the meaning in his words. Nico isn’t flirting with me, no matter how much I would love for that to be happening.

Nico clears his throat gruffly and picks up the leather folder he takes his notes. “Alright, let’s get straight to it.” His voice is all business and zero flirtation now. His face has gone stern, and while I’m not the best at reading him, he looks embarrassed.

Why would he be embarrassed? Maybe he realized that it sounded like he might have been flirting, and that horrified him. The idea of flirting with me.

I bite my lip. Dammit. Work. Think about work. “We have a lot to do today. There is a delivery of office equipment at Baker Street, and I was hoping to find time to clean up the filing system in your office. It’s a bit of a disaster.”

“A disaster . Is that so?” When I look up, expecting him to be offended, his amber eyes are locked on me, and his smile is dangerously sexy.

My words are stuck in my throat, but my lips part as though I’m going to say something—

He laughs, and I quickly press them back together.

My cheeks are burning hotter now, and all I can think about is that I’m making the biggest fool of myself ever .

Thank goodness I have my own office now.

“Um,” I murmur, looking at the blank page of my notepad and scribbling something useless on there as though I'm writing important things down. “What else did you want me to do today?”

“Set up another meeting with Swan and Associates.

Maybe Wednesday afternoon, next week? I need to go over that proposal again and make sure my presentation notes are on point.

We only get one chance with them. They are apparently ruthless in the industry.

Then Jacksonville Properties wanted to show me an investment opportunity.

Please call that woman back—what was her name again? The lady with the really sharp face?”

“Camilla,” I confirm, wondering how he would describe me to other people.

“Yes, her, that’s the one. Tell her I’ll come to see the place on Saturday. Oh, and for Wednesday’s presentation, I’m going to send you the file. Go over it and make sure it’s perfect. Then, what else...right, mm...”

He’s looking down at his leather folder, running the silver fountain pen over notes he’s made. I watch him, fascinated by his expression, his masculine energy and authoritative voice. My heart is getting wild again as I picture him taking control of me, pushing me up against a wall—

“Shit, did you send that e-mail to—”

“I did,” I confirm, one step ahead of him.

“My brother?”

“Yes, I sent it.” I smile.

“You’re a star. I can’t believe I forgot again.”

We work through the list of tasks, and it takes everything in my power to stay focused and not let him distract me.

When the morning meeting is over, I hurry out of the office, careful not to trip over my own feet, and it’s only when I settle down at my own desk in my own space that I take a deep breath and relax.

Holy shit, that man is affecting me in ridiculous ways, and I need to find a solution—to block out these thoughts I’m having.

This is my job .

I can’t have feelings like that towards my boss . If there is one sure way to fuck this whole thing up, it would be to blurt out some unprofessional comment that makes him uncomfortable.

Ugh.

Get a grip, Sera.

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Not having her in my office anymore is a blessing and a curse.

It was nearly impossible to focus with her right in front of me day after day, so that, at least, is easier. But now I just think about her all day and make excuses to ask her to come to my office, or for me to go to hers.

What the fuck is wrong with me?

The level of attraction I have towards her is astounding.

Again, I'm on my way to her office, under the guise of asking her about the paperwork I emailed to her an hour ago. Sure, I need to discuss it with her, but technically, I could just wait for her to respond. It's nothing urgent.

I walk into her office to find her with her chair spun towards the window, her back to her desk.

She reaches her arms high in the air above her head and lets out a loud, tired yawn as she stretches and leans back slightly.

Then she tilts her head to the side and starts massaging her neck.

My eyes trace over the perfect curve of her long neck as she rubs her fingers into her skin.

I imagine taking over for her, wrapping my hands around her neck and rubbing the knotted muscles—the sounds she would make, soft moans of delight. I'd whisper in

her ear what a good girl she's been, how well she's been doing.

My hands would wrap around the front of her throat and brush down her chest, over those gorgeous breasts of hers—

My body floods with lust and I close my eyes, trying to stop the fantasy from going any further. I open my eyes again and walk towards her desk.

Sera turns around, spinning in her chair, and catches me watching her. Straight away, her face turns red with embarrassment, which amuses me.

She practically chokes in fright.

“Nico,” she stammers. “I was just—I was—“ She's tripping over her words.

“You were taking a breather?” I fill in for her.

She bites her bottom lip, a little habit of hers that causes my cock to stir every fucking time.

“Mmhmm,” she nods quickly with her brows knitted. Sera grabs a printout of something and stands up, shuffling the papers into a neater stack as she speaks, almost too fast to hear.

“The acquisition documents aren't finished, but I thought I could color code the spreadsheet for you to make it easier when you're in the meeting, and you should know that the board members of Chase and Chase, your Thursday meeting, are at each other's throats over the stock that two of the members sold without informing anyone else.

The cohesion in that company is falling apart, and it might affect the pitch.

I can't imagine them wanting to discuss investment opportunities while they're worried about internal affairs.

Oh, and Juniper, is that her name? From HR?

She asked me for a copy of my passport. Why does she need my passport?

It doesn't matter, I've already sent it.

I don't know why I bothered you with that.

I'll ask her what that's about. Did you get the presentation?

I sent it back to you. There was an error on the third slide.

I fixed it. You might not even notice. Oh, and—"

She's clearly talking to cover up her embarrassment at being caught in a vulnerable human position.

The longer she talks, the more difficult it becomes to hide my grin.

Does she know how endearing she is? How charming?

When I watch her, I get the distinct sensation that she has no idea she is the most gorgeous woman I've ever seen.

She is oblivious to her own beauty, and that makes her a hundred times more attractive to me. So does her shyness. Like right now.

I told my arms across my chest as I listen, not saying a word because I'm curious how

long she'll go on.

She's barely paused to take a breath.

"And the systems management team at Baker Street is sending over a report on the security setup so that you can approve it—"

I decide to save her from herself.

"Serafina," I say her name gently, pulling her from her panic.

"Yes, sir. I mean, Nico."

"You've been doing a brilliant job. I'm really impressed with your efficiency and the dedication you've shown so far; I know it hasn't been easy, taking on so much so quickly. Don't be worried about me catching you taking a minute for yourself."

"It was only a minute. I promise," she says tightly.

I chuckle, shaking my head.

"You're allowed to be tired, Serafina. It's human."

She sighs in relief, closing her eyes for a moment. "It's strange how being in such a corporate environment makes us forget we are all just people—tired, hungry, not perfect all the time."

She's perfect all the time.

"If you don't give yourself space to relax, even for a moment, you're going to turn into a rigid mess."

We both glance out of the door towards Nicole's desk at exactly the same time. When our eyes meet again, we start laughing, thinking the same thing, not needing to say anything.

Serafina sits down again, rubbing her hand over the back of her neck unconsciously.

“My tension also always builds in the same spot. If you'd like, I could massage your neck for you. I've got a strong grip, you'd be melting in my hands...” My cock stirs with excitement.

What the fuck, that's not appropriate, Nico.

Her cheeks turn crimson, and her lips part as she takes a sharp breath.

Her green eyes are wide with shock.

I've crossed a line. But that doesn't stop me from crossing another. “I know a lot of ways to ease stress.” Fuck, I'd love to show her.

She giggles, and the delicate sound rushes through me like a summer breeze, igniting my desire tenfold.

How is it possible that everything she does turns me on? I can't pinpoint something specific; it just appears to be everything about her that drives me crazy.

She sets the papers she's straightened ten times now down on her desk and shrugs one shoulder up as she tilts her head to the side—another cute gesture. “I've never had a massage before,” she laughs.

“That's terrible news. We should change that.”

Sera shakes her head. “Perhaps I’ll have time for some fun or relaxing things once we have Baker Street up and running.”

“You should make time to release your tension, Sera.” My voice drops and my eyes narrow as I watch her, thinking about how I’d love to bend her over this desk and fuck her so hard that little plant gets knocked right off the corner.

For a moment, neither of us says anything. She caught the change in the tone of my voice. I can see desire in her eyes. I have to ignore.

Change the subject, say something, don’t just stand here like an idiot.

“Can you move Friday’s three o’clock meeting? I can’t see them at that time.”

She frowns and pulls her diary open. “Friday?” she asks, confused for a moment. “Oh, Friday. Of course,” she nods, scribbling a note next to the time.

It’s not a meeting she’s attending.

At least twenty-five percent of my job is related to the bratva, and those meetings are not attended by anyone other than my most trusted staff, the ones who work in the back end of our company.

I wouldn’t want to expose her to that world, so I keep it separate. She doesn’t know about that darker side of the business—or the darker side of me—and I would like to keep it that way.

Except her innocence and my secrets make her even more of a forbidden fruit, even more tempting to me. She’s off limits in so many ways, and it makes my desire for her more dangerous—and, of course, more enticing.

The idea of protecting her from something, anything, the idea of being the one to keep her safe—it turns me on like crazy.

Why would I be so possessive of her?

She has a feminine delicacy about her that I want to hold. I want to reach out and touch it. If I kissed her, I would taste it on her lips.

“When would you like me to move that meeting to?” she asks, her eyes on me.

“What meeting?” I ask. Oh fuck. Focus, stop daydreaming about her.
“Right—yes—anytime the following week,” I answer quickly.

She nods again, making notes.

“That’s it for the moment,” I say, taking a step away from her. It’s better if I get out of here. Being around her right now is dangerous.

I rush back to my office, closing the door behind me to give myself some privacy.

Shit, man. I need to pull myself together.

What the hell is wrong with me? She’s making me lose control in ways I did not think possible.

If I don’t stop heading down this path, I’m going to end up doing something dangerous, like kissing her—and once I kiss her, there is no telling what will happen.

Will I be able to stop myself from going further?

From tearing her apart? Fuck . She’s so fucking gorgeous.

I sink into my office chair, huffing out a loud, annoyed breath.

Ever since she started working here, I've been obsessing over her. It's refreshing, though, which is why I've been enjoying it so much.

It's amazing not to be so caught up thinking about the loss of my brother or his missing best friend. It's like taking all of my worries and stress and setting them aside for a moment, just enjoying myself.

Allowing myself to think about her is a luxury.

Perhaps one I can't afford to indulge in.

Leaning back in my office chair, I close my eyes for a moment, pressing my hands against them to massage away the images of her in that tight black dress.

The way it hugs her waist, curving out over her lower back, the dip just before it swells over her ass—what a perfect ass she has...

I want to bend her over the desk and slap her ass, watch it jiggle ever so slightly. My cock goes hard just thinking about it—

I walk into her office and pull the door closed behind me.

She is leaning over her desk with her back to the door, making notes on a piece of paper.

She hears me come in and stands straighter to look at me.

"Is there anything I can do for you, sir?" she asks in her sweet, innocent voice, her eyes glittering with hope, eager to please me in every single way.

“Yes, my angel. You can bend over that desk again,” I say, closing the gap between us.

“Oh,” she says in surprise. “Sir—“

I set my hands on her waist and move her to face the desk, pushing her forward at the same time. She gasps in surprise, turning to look at me over her shoulder.

“Be a good girl, don’t fight me on this,” I growl.

“But sir — ” she squeals.

Her words are cut short as I run my hand between her thighs, up the inside of her leg. Her breathing gets heavier; my heart races as my cock throbs with the anticipation of thrusting into her.

I brush my hand over her ass, pushing her dress up, letting my eyes wander over her perfect form.

Then I pull her panties aside and slide my —

What the fuck am I doing? My hand is pressed against my cock, rubbing back and forth over my pants. It’s rock-hard, threatening to rip through the seams of my pants. I’m so fucking turned on right now.

I’m at my desk. Anyone could walk in.

This is not the time or place to be getting lost in fantasies about my new executive assistant.

I’m allowing myself to cross dangerous lines here.

Fuck's sake, Nico. Pull it together.

I huff, my jaw clenching tightly as I sit up straighter in my chair and pull my laptop towards myself. Work . Focus on work.

But it's impossible.

She's right next door, and I'm already thinking up another excuse to go and talk to her.

I can't stay away from her.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:36 pm

The presentation is perfect. I've gone over it twice more just to make sure, even after Nico approved it.

He's obviously confident enough not to need it, but I wanted to understand the entire presentation so I didn't look like a lost tart in a poppy field when I was sitting in on the meeting with him.

Glancing at my watch, I note we have exactly fifteen minutes.

"Nico?" I say his name as I walk into his office, and he looks up from his laptop. "It's time."

"Ahh. Shit. Yes, it is," he groans.

"What's wrong?" I ask, knitting my brows. It's not like him to be this flustered or distracted before a meeting. He's proven to be ahead of the game in pretty much every respect so far.

"Ugh, it's just some issue at one of the warehouses, but my brother said he'll head down there and sort it out. Let's get going."

I walk ahead of him towards the boardroom, where we are meeting with Swan and Associates, a husband and wife duo. Nico is not the only one in the office who has warned me that they can be ruthless. They'll apparently cut you off mid-meeting if they aren't interested.

That's so much pressure. I'm really glad I'm not the one doing the talking today.

We get there a few minutes before them. I move around the boardroom, making sure the temperature is comfortable, the air flow is correct. There is already a jug of iced lemon water on the table, and Nicole will come in and offer everyone coffee once the meeting has started.

When they arrive, Nico steps towards them with a confident, wide smile. He looks so incredible, like he could own the world if he wanted to.

“Mr. and Mrs. Swan. Welcome. Thank you for coming today.”

“Please, call me Penelope.”

“Jason.”

They each shake hands with Nico.

“This is Serafina.” He gestures towards me, and I greet them both, hoping my smile looks genuine, because I’m feeling nervous.

This is my first really big meeting with such high-up clients, and my stomach is filled with butterflies, dancing wildly.

I brush my hands over my crisp white dress.

It stops just above my knees. I wore white heels to match.

It has a high neckline, with cut-outs over my collar bones, long sleeves, and is tightly fitted; it makes me look like I’m wearing the dress version of a power suit.

It makes me look like I know what I’m doing.

Nico pulls my chair out for me when I sit down.

Nicole comes in and asks who would like coffee. Both of the Swans say yes, so Nico and I say yes as well. It seems polite not to leave them drinking coffee alone.

Nico eases into the presentation in such a way that everything is natural and flows comfortably. I stay quiet and make notes here and there.

The Swans, so far, are paying attention, but not giving away any sign of interest.

A knock at the door draws our attention as we all turn to look. Nicole walks in with a tray of coffee and a tight expression on her face. This isn't unusual, but her eyes are darker than they normally are, filled with worry.

"Sir," she says, setting the coffee down, "I'm so sorry, but there is an emergency call for you."

Nico tugs his cellphone from his pocket. It's been on silent, but I catch a glimpse of seven missed call notifications on his screen.

"Damn." His brow furrows. "I'm really sorry about this. We're having a major issue at one of our sites. I will only be a minute, but I need to take this call."

"No, of course, go ahead. We understand," Mr. Swan says, reaching towards the coffee and picking up his wife's mug, setting it in front of her.

He puts one sugar in without having to ask, clearly knowing her preferences, and throws her a sweet smile.

I watch them with curiosity.

They work together, they live together, and they look utterly in love. The secret looks and small smiles—it's actually really cute.

Nico leaves and while I don't think they feel it, I am immediately awkward. Do I talk to them? Make small talk? Ask them about their interests.

Or do I wait it out in silence?

I busy myself with adding sugar to my own coffee and getting Nico's coffee set up in front of his chair for when he comes back.

When that's done, it's back to being awkward.

I glance at my watch. It's been four minutes.

Penelope glances at her watch, too.

"Honey, did you contact Devin?" she asks her husband.

"Not yet."

"I'll do it quickly now, make use of the time."

She stands up and walks up and down the boardroom while she chats on the phone. She is elegant, and every movement she makes is feminine. I can't stop myself from admiring her. She's older, in her late fifties, but holds herself with incredible confidence and grace.

When the phone call is over, Nico has been gone for fifteen minutes, and I sense that things are not going well.

Mr. Swan stands up. “Let’s reschedule. Time is money. We can’t be expected to wait all day.” He looks disappointed. Bitter.

Mrs. Swan nods. “I agree. Emergency or not, we don’t have all day to sit around waiting. We have other presentations to see today, and I need to get to the attorney’s office.”

I stand up quickly. I have to save this meeting. If they walk out now, we’ll never get them back.

“Please, wait. If you allow me, I can go ahead with the presentation without Nico.”

The husband and wife team glance at each other. She tilts her head to the side and raises her brows. “I’m still keen to see the presentation,” she says.

Her husband nods. “Alright,” he agrees, taking his seat again.

Oh shit. What have I done?

I pick up the folder. No. Not the folder. I put it down again and pick up the remote control for the large screen on the wall.

Okay.

I can do this.

I’ve read that presentation a hundred times.

Flicking the video on, I know it will play at a certain pace, and I will talk over it, keeping time to the video. The only moments I might need to pause are if our clients have questions.

Holding the remote, I stand near the screen so that they can see both me and the screen.

My voice comes out so much stronger than I expect it to.

I sound confident and sure of myself.

The more I speak, the easier it becomes as the knot in my stomach loosens. As my nerves disappear, I am filled with a thrilling excitement. I can't believe how well this is going.

Both Jason and Penelope are watching me with interest, nodding and listening intently. I have their full attention, and by the looks on their faces, they like what I'm saying.

I hit the pause button when Penelope politely raises her hand.

"What about the after-effects of flooding the market like this—would it drop sales?"

"No, not at all. This would be the starting point for increased growth. If you look at the data on the next piece—give me a second, I'll pull it up —"

My eyes are drawn to the doorway, where I spot Nico leaning against the open frame with his arms folded over his chest. My heart leaps into my throat. How long has he been there? Is he angry Ithat started without him? I want to explain that I had no choice.

There is a slight smile on his perfect face.

I gesture for him to come inside and take over.

He shakes his head.

Oh.

Okay.

Um.

“I see, yes, is this the standard market reaction for your method of launching?” Penelope asks, studying the information on the screen.

“We have fine-tuned our methods based on split testing each sector.

We are confident our method will work for your product; however, we will still conduct a split test for the first three weeks during launch.

We find that taking all precautions, moving in such a way that allows us to continuously update our target ranges—”

My eyes keep drifting to Nico. He’s watching closely. But I can’t let him distract me now.

Pay attention. Focus on the client, Serafina.

Throughout the remainder of the presentation, Jason has a few questions, and Penelope comments once or twice about how creative our methods are.

By the end of it, they both look excited.

“I’m sorry again that I had to rush out like that,” Nico says, walking back into the boardroom and taking his seat.

“Oh, it’s no problem at all. Serafina ran us through the presentation, and we”—Jason glances at his wife, who nods —“are ready to go ahead with your proposal.” He smiles widely and looks between Nico and me.

“Tell us where to sign,” he chuckles.

I can’t believe it.

I did it.

They were impressed.

Nico is busy piecing together an official timeline, going over a few details with them, and I’m sitting to the side, grinning.

They set a start date, sign a basic contract regarding deposits, and take the longer, more detailed one with them so that they can go over it before signing that one.

We all stand, smiling and excited for the new project we are going to work on together. We’re going to create the best launch campaign for their product.

Nico shakes Jason’s hand. When Penelope takes his hand, she doesn’t let go. She grins and says, “Your assistant is incredible. Hold on to that one.”

Nico’s face lights up with a smile, too. “She is incredible. And she’s more than an assistant. I don’t know how I would manage without her,” he agrees.

My heart somersaults and I bite down, fighting to keep my glowing face from catching fire as my cheeks turn red.

The Swans leave, happy, invested, and confident that we are the right fit for their

company.

The boardroom is quiet after they're gone, and I head back to the table to gather our things and turn off the screen.

My heart is beating fast. I'm waiting for Nico to say something; in fact, I'm expecting him to critique my presentation and tell me what I could have improved or done better.

My lips are pressed tightly together, and my eyes are turned away from him.

He walks towards the table, with his back to it he leans against it, folding his arms over his broad chest.

I steal a glance at him and my heart clenches tightly.

His eyes are piercing into me like daggers. Intense, amber orbs of heat.

His mouth is curved upward on one side. Amusement touches his expression.

It confuses me.

I stop what I'm doing and stand straight as I look at him, prepared for his feedback.

He tilts his head to the side.

"That was amazing, Serafina."

"I had to start without you because—oh," I stammer. I was so set on defending myself that I didn't listen properly.

He chuckles. “Were you nervous?”

“A little,” I grin.

“It didn’t show. You looked like you owned the entire company with the way you were giving that presentation.”

I bite my lip, the heat building in my cheeks, creating a red blush that makes me more embarrassed, my cheeks heating even more. It’s a vicious cycle.

Nico pushes off the desk and walks right up to me, so close I can feel the heat of his body against mine.

He lifts my face with his fingers beneath my chin.

Our eyes lock, and I can’t breathe.

“You were incredible, Serafina. I’m really proud of you,” he whispers, a dark hint of suggestion touching the edges of his words.

“I—”

My lips part.

I could kiss him.

So easily.

If I stood on my tiptoes and closed the gap between us, our lips would touch.

The tension is palpable, the air thick with electricity as it shoots between us.

Nico clenches his jaw and drops his hand away.

“Uh,” he mutters, blinking rapidly, his shoulders tensing.

I bite my lip, turning my face towards the floor so that I’m not caught like a deer in his gaze.

“You did an excellent job,” he says again, stepping away.

“Um. Is everything sorted out with the emergency?” I ask, changing the subject because my entire body is alive with desire and I’m about to do something stupid if I don’t get it together.

“Don’t worry about it,” he smiles tightly.

There are some meetings that I am not privy to, classified in some way. It’s just part of my job to know to mind my own business when it comes to those. I assume they’re with clients who would prefer to be silent partners in some way.

I nod. “I’ll pack up here, you can get back to your things.”

“Alright. I’ll talk to you later about how we’re going to get started on the Swan project.”

Watching him walk away, my heart tugs, tied to an invisible string, the other end attached to him. How silly of me to be such a cliché—a girl with a crush on her boss.

Nico disappears from sight, and I sigh loudly.

Somehow, I need to rein in these emotions. They will get me nowhere.

Nowhere good, anyway.

I'm here to build a career for myself, not to fall for a guy I can never have. Talk about making things complicated for no reason.

I shake my head and finish up in the boardroom, packing everything away and returning to my office.

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:36 pm

Yilian, Arkady, and Luka are staring at me with narrowed eyes and questioning expressions.

We're standing in the middle of the main warehouse, waiting.

My brothers glance at each other and then back towards me.

Luka gestures with his chin, lifting his face in my direction. "What's gotten into you today?" he asks, smirking.

"What do you mean?" I snap, getting annoyed that this is taking so long, not enjoying them dragging it out further with pointless questions. I don't like being away from the office like this.

Well. Not lately.

"You're never impatient. In fact, you're the most patient person I've ever met. Why are you fidgeting and annoyed? Do you have somewhere you need to be?" Yilian asks. "I'm sure we can deal with this—"

"I'm not being impatient," I argue, but I am. I just wasn't aware that they'd picked up on it. I want to get back to the office— to Serafina .

I can't stop thinking about her, wondering what she's doing.

Not a fucking chance in hell I'll be telling any of them that, though.

“You’ve looked at your watch fifty times in the last five minutes,” Arkady muses.

“Bullshit,” I snap at Ark. “Why are we so focused on me, anyway? Focus on the problem that needs solving.”

He laughs, shrugs, and lifts his hands in a defensive gesture.

“Don’t shoot the messenger, man,” he teases.

Rolling my eyes, I turn my back on them and pull my phone out of my pocket to see if she’s messaged me.

She hasn’t. I told her I had a meeting, one of the meetings she isn’t involved in. It sucks that I have to keep things from her, but I wouldn’t want to put her at risk by exposing her to this side of things, anyway.

We’ve been at the warehouse for almost two hours, and it’s taking a lot longer than I thought it would to sort out this issue.

One of our armored vehicles was supposed to collect the cash from our safe this morning, and it’s gone missing. How did we manage to lose a whole truck?

We can’t pick it up on the tracking systems, and the teams we’ve sent to drive the route have reported nothing.

The vehicle was empty, though, so it makes no sense for someone to hijack it on the way to the collection point, not after. Unless some fucking idiot got bad intel and just made a fool of himself.

“Anything?” Ark asks, noticing me checking my phone. He thinks I’m following up with the tracking team.

“Uh. Nothing yet. You guys got anything?”

Yilian’s phone starts ringing. His eyes go wide.

“It’s Maddy,” he shouts. Maddy’s our driver.

He answers the phone, immediately switching it to speaker.

“Maddy?” he asks tensely, and we all step closer, anxiously waiting for a response.

“Yil, fuck, I’m so sorry. Man, my alarm didn’t go off—“

“Are you fucking kidding me?” Arkady shouts angrily. “Your fucking alarm didn’t go off? We’ve had the entire fucking team out looking for you and you were at fucking home sleeping ?”

“Ah—am I on speaker?” Maddy stammers.

Yilian rolls his eyes and huffs loudly. He switches the speaker off and presses the phone to his ear. There is no need for all of us to be involved in this conversation anymore.

There is no emergency.

Just a stupid mistake.

Yilian walks away from us, lecturing Maddy intensely.

Maddy is an excellent employee, a hard worker and a reliable person. This is very out of character for him. But hey, everyone is human, and we all make mistakes sometimes. At least he’s safe, the truck is safe, and the problem has been solved.

“Okay, well, that was a waste of time,” Ark complains. He looks at his watch. I look at mine. That was a huge waste of time.

“I’m heading out,” I comment, shaking my head in disbelief.

Luka glances towards Yilian, who is still pacing and lecturing. “I’ll wait for him. I think he needs a lift back anyway.”

“I’ll catch up with you guys later. Shout if you need anything.” I turn towards the exit.

“Have fun,” Ark smirks.

“What?”

“With whatever you are so keen to get back to—or whom ever,” he teases.

“Fuck off,” I say, shooting him a smile.

He’s still laughing when I walk away.

The gravel outside the warehouse makes a loud crunching sound beneath my feet as I walk towards the car.

For a moment, I contemplate phoning her. I can just check in, ask if everything at the office is alright.

But I already contact her too much. I make too many excuses to be in her company. At some point, she’s going to start thinking I’ve lost my mind.

I have, though. I’ve definitely lost my mind.

Since when am I focused on anything other than work, my duties to my family, my brothers and what they need? I'm not a selfish person by any means, but today I hardly had the energy to care that the truck had gone missing. All I wanted to do was get back to Serafina.

That's not good.

What am I going to do about this? Because I'm realizing that it's interfering with my day-to-day functioning.

I grin, ducking into the car and pulling the door closed behind me. Maybe I should sleep with her—get it over and done with and get rid of this obsession.

Oddly, the idea of only sleeping with her once—oh, for sure, it entices me, but I immediately know it won't solve the problem. This isn't just about tasting her and moving on.

She's got a grip on me that's much deeper than that.

The engine growls as I pull out onto the road, pressing my foot hard against the accelerator and driving faster than I should, eager to get back to the office.

Serafina shines when she's in her element.

And it turns out that her element involves challenging situations where most people would crumble.

The more difficult it is, the better she seems to do, shining under pressure just like a diamond.

The presentation is a perfect example. She got thrown into the deep end with the

Swans, but, wow, she knocked that one out of the park.

I couldn't have done a better job myself.

There have been a number of other moments when I've seen her glowing and in her element.

The way she handles Penelope and Jason, and how she handles issues in the office, from minor to more complicated, she says calm and treats people with respect.

She's really good at dealing with people.

I think that's why she's excelling in this position. It makes me proud to watch her.

It also turns me on like crazy.

She's so fucking gorgeous. And when she's taking control of a difficult task and showing off her competence, she's even more gorgeous.

I pull into my allocated bay in the parking garage beneath the building.

A wide smile spreads across my face in anticipation of seeing her.

She's wearing the most beautiful red dress today. We had a presentation with a company whose corporate color is red, and she purposely dressed to complement it.

And fuck—she looks great in red. She looks great in every color she's worn so far. Especially that white dress. Every little curve was visible, and I wasn't able to look away.

The elevator is crowded, and I stand near the back listening to my employees chatter

about their day. They greet me, smiling, polite, some of them trying to start conversations on the short ride up, but I'm lost in thought.

The lunch hour rush has us stopping on every floor as someone gets on and someone gets off.

Finally, the doors slide open and I get out on the top floor.

I don't even go to my office; I head straight into hers to see what she's working on.

My chest tightens when I step in.

Drake Lexington is leaning over her desk, towering over her, standing way too close as he smirks down at her.

Sera has pushed her chair away from him to create space, but she's backed up against the wall.

"A girl like you shouldn't be working, anyway.

Your type makes pretty wives—a little arm candy.

Why don't you quit and save yourself the trouble of all this work?

While you're still young enough to impress a man like me," Drake says, his tone not exactly playful.

She stands up, keeping her cool, but obviously uncomfortable.

"What a misogynistic thing to say." She laughs lightheartedly to cover her annoyance, brushing his stupidity aside. I can hear the agitation in her voice, but she's

hiding it well. He probably wouldn't notice anyway.

I step into the office, ready to defend her. Drake has his back to me, but she's seen me. She shakes her head briefly, trying to tell me she can handle this.

It takes everything in me to stop myself from grabbing the back of his jacket and pulling him away from her.

"Misogynist? No, sweetheart. Those are the facts of life. Men do business. Women run the kitchen. Can you cook? I'd love for you to come and cook something for me. I've got a little pink apron you can wear."

He chuckles, and my blood boils.

"Drake, firstly, you couldn't afford me as a wife or a girlfriend.

I am convinced I'll be earning more than you could spend on me by the time I'm as old as you are.

"She speaks playfully, but the hint of steel in her voice makes him furrow his brows.

"On top of that, I prefer a man I can have an intellectual conversation with, and I don't see that happening with you. "

"Excuse me?" he stammers, stepping closer to her. "Girl, you better watch your mouth. How dare you speak to me like that?"

In a horrific flash, he has pinned her up against the window behind her desk, his hand wrapped around her arm. He leans close to her ear and snarls, "I always get what I want, little girl. And you'd better learn that now, before it costs you your job."

Sera pushes her hand against his chest, but it's no use. He's twice her size.

I'm already behind him, though. I grab him and tug him away from her. He stumbles against her desk in fright, almost falling over as he turns towards me.

I want to punch his face in.

"Serafina, is everything alright in here?" I ask, forcing myself to step away from him, not even looking at him. My anger is growing by the second, and the urge to protect her is becoming overwhelming.

Her eyes are wide and anxious. She nods briefly, but it looks as though she's fighting tears through her brave expression.

Drake turns towards me. "Your little secretary needs to learn her place," he snaps, enraged by the situation.

"She needs to learn her place?" I ask in disbelief.

"That bitch doesn't get to say no to me. She works for me."

"She works for me. And if you call her a bitch one more time, I'll cut your fucking tongue out, Drake. Now get the fuck out of my building."

I'm about to tear him to pieces. Murder wasn't on my list of things to do today.

"Are you fucking serious?" he snarls, turning his embarrassment into anger and directing it at me. "You and I are about to become business partners, and you're taking her side? A replaceable little girl over me?"

I laugh darkly. "I'm glad I saw this side of you, Drake. We won't be signing contracts

today.”

“What?”

“Get out. There is no partnership. The deal is not going to happen.”

“You can’t just—“

“I can. And I just did. Get the fuck out of my building while your life is still intact. If you know anything about me, you know I’m not a man it’s wise to push your luck with.”

His eyes flare for a second, then stare at me in complete disbelief.

Serafina is standing stiffly, her eyes locked onto me as well, her lips parted in shock.

I count in my head, forcing myself not to smash my fist into this asshole’s face. She is mine . She belongs to me, and he thinks I’m going to let him get away with treating her like that?

Drake snarls and turns to glare at Sera.

“Stupid fucking girl,” he snaps at her.

“It was a pleasure meeting you as well,” she smiles, and her ability to be so smart-mouthed with this idiot, even when she’s upset, is suddenly hilarious to me.

I start laughing.

Drake spins away from her in horror. His face is bright red.

He's beyond furious, the veins popping out in his temple.

I laugh harder, and in a rage, he storms out of her office, shoving past me aggressively as he marches towards the door.

We watch him leave.

For a moment, we're both staring at the door. My heart is beating heavily. My fists are clenched at my side. I'm waiting for him to come back in, but when it's obvious that he's hightailed it out of here, I turn towards her.

"Are you okay?" I ask, taking a deep breath and trying to push the anger down. That brief second of laughing helped ease some of it away, but I still want to wrap her in my arms and hold her, apologize to her for not being here sooner to stop him. I hold myself back. I need to stay professional.

"I'm completely fine, but you just lost a new business partner. He was going to invest a lot," she says, horrified. "You didn't have to do that, Nico." There's a quiver in her voice. When I look at her hands, I see they're shaking.

"I did. Why the hell would I want to work with someone like that?"

Sera shakes her head, confused. "But you lost that deal because of me." She takes a deep breath, and for the first time, I see her brave facade slipping away completely. Drake got to her a lot more than she let on.

When she looks up at me, her eyes are shining, bright green and gorgeous, but glittering as though she's fighting tears.

She fidgets with a pen on her desk and smiles tightly, trying to rein in her emotions.

“He’s such a dickhead,” she stammers.

“Fuck. He’s a complete asshole,” I agree, rushing over to her, because I can’t bear to see her so upset. “Are you okay?” I whisper, pulling her into my arms.

“He was really intense before you got here,” she sniffs.

“What did he do?” I growl, moving back a little, wrapping my hand beneath her chin, lifting her face up to mine so that I can look at her. “Did he hurt you?”

“He was—he just—“

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:36 pm

Nico is standing so close to me I can smell his cologne, and the way his hand is wrapped around my face makes me want to lean into him again. Oh my word. His body feels incredible against mine.

The situation with Drake was already intense enough to cause my adrenaline to spike, but now it's spiking even more.

"Serafina, if he hurt you..."

"No, he was just really pushy. Um. Touchy."

"Touchy?" Nico clearly does not like the sound of that. "I'll kill him. " He moves as though he's going to run after Drake and tear him to pieces, but I grab the side of his shirt, holding on to him tightly.

"No, let it go, Nico. He's not worth it," I say, because I don't want to cause issues. He's already lost a potential business deal.

"Sera, the thought of him hurting you in any way..." His eyes lock with mine, and the darkness in them is terrifying. My heart hammers in my chest, beating against my ribs as though it wants to smash its way free of the bone cage.

I shake my head. "He didn't hurt me. He would have if you hadn't arrived. But he didn't."

Nico growls, a deep, terrifying sound that vibrates against my chest.

I still haven't let go of his shirt, my fingers wrapped in the fabric, pulling him closer to me. Having him with me like this makes me feel safe—and it's turning me on in ways I didn't know were possible.

I've never had a man want to protect me like this.

And of all the men in the world to do it, Nico is the sexiest man I've ever met, so every cell in my body is screaming at me to basically throw myself at him.

My hero.

My protector.

My boss.

Nico brushes his hand up my side. His eyes soften and his voice becomes gentle. "Are you sure you're okay, Sera?" he asks, his tone low.

I nod, unable to speak, not trusting my voice to sound normal.

"Sera, you'd tell me if you weren't, right?" he asks sternly.

"I promise," I smile, wishing he would just kiss me, and I could drift off into the make-believe-fairytale that's playing out in my head.

Oh my word. This is crazy.

Nico empowers me. With him standing at my side, I'm stronger, more capable, and I think I could take on the world. I look up at him and realize it's because of how he looks at me.

Like he believes in me.

He sighs softly, a frustrated amusement flashing over his face, and he smiles. “I should let you get back to work.”

“Um, yes.” I step away from him, releasing my grip on his shirt. My office door is wide open. Imagine if someone had walked in and caught us standing like that. It would have been impossible to explain.

It’s so unprofessional.

I clear my throat softly.

Nico hesitates before moving away from me completely.

“I’m right next door,” he smiles.

“Thanks,” I smile back at him, my heart spinning.

Sitting at my desk, I’m losing my mind. It’s almost five, almost time to go home, and I haven’t been able to focus on work. It isn’t because of what happened with Drake. It’s because of what happened with Nico.

And on top of that, he keeps coming into my office to check on me; he’s hovering and worried about me, and I adore the fact that he cares so much.

But I’m also reading into it. My silly crush is getting out of hand, and the attraction I feel towards him is so intense I might need to jump into an ice bath to clear my thoughts.

At five o'clock, Nico comes back into my office—I've lost count of how many times now.

"How are you getting home? I was thinking you should leave your car here and I can drive you," he says, leaning against my desk.

I laugh. "Nico, I don't have a car. But I really don't need you to drive me."

"I'm not comfortable with you going home alone. Just in case. I don't know what Drake is capable of. He's embarrassed and pissed off, and men like that don't like to be made a fool of. His ego will want revenge," he says. "I'll drive you home."

Standing up, I start packing my things into my work bag.

"There really is no need. The drive would be pointless. I live two blocks away, across from Golden Acre Park. It takes five minutes for me to walk home. Honestly, Nico, I'll be completely fine.

I make that walk every morning and every evening.

The streets are busy. There are a lot of people around. "

His lip curls in annoyance; he doesn't like it when I say no to him. I grin, enjoying the fact that he so badly wants to take care of me.

"Fine. I'll walk with you then."

"Nico," I huff. "It's cold outside. You don't have to do this."

"Serafina, it's not negotiable. Besides, there's an excellent coffee stand in the park, and I'm dying for a good shot of caffeine. We can go the long way around, through

the park. The cold air will help clear my mind. It's been one hell of a day."

My heart flutters at the thought of strolling through a park with Nico. It's easy to romanticize it.

Nico is staring at me with one brow raised, and I realize he's waiting for my answer. "Coffee sounds amazing," I smile.

"Good. Let me grab my things. Don't move," he demands. I shrug my long coat onto my shoulders, tying the belt around my waist.

Outside Nico's office, I wait nervously for him to finish packing up. Is this really happening? Is Nico about to walk me home?

Outside on the streets, I glance at him, flashing a cheeky smirk. "I don't need your protection, you know," I tease him. "It's not that dangerous out here." I gesture around the busy street, and Nico rolls his eyes at me.

"It's not here that I'm worried about. It's him."

"He's back at home, sulking with his tail between his legs," I giggle.

"He better be." Nico is still pissed off about the Drake incident. I decide to change the subject.

"I haven't had a chance to try the coffee from the guy in the park. I keep meaning to."

"It's amazing. He makes it just the way I like it. You're in for a treat." As we cross the road and turn a corner, the park comes into view. Nico's hand brushes down my back, pushing me gently away from the edge of the walkway so that he can continue to walk on the outside of me.

I grin. Girls joke about this sort of thing, but having a man actually do this for me makes me realize why it ever became a topic of discussion in the first place. He's a gentleman. Protective and caring.

The further we get away from the office, the less professional this moment is, and the more my nerves taunt me.

I'm alone with Nico, and it has nothing to do with work.

My eyes constantly drift towards him, even though I try to keep my face forward to hide the fact that I'm watching him.

"The park is busier than I expected," he remarks as we step onto the wide stone pathway that leads through the park. The trees are mostly bare, their leaves dropped for the winter.

"I told you, there's nothing to worry about. I'm more likely to shiver to death than have problems with anyone out here."

"Are you cold?" he asks, instantly stepping closer to me and wrapping his arm around my shoulder. I tense up, my nervous energy rocketing higher. Nico has his arm around me. My heart pulses quickly, my body sparking with desire.

"I'm better now," I answer, leaning into him.

He looks down at me with a smile on his face, his amber eyes bright and unreadable.

If I tried to kiss him, would he push me away?

My stomach knots.

I've been rejected before—the sting of my ex's nasty words, his taunts, is still fresh in my mind even though it happened a while ago. I chew on the inside of my cheek. I never want to experience that again.

I might be confident and capable in my job, but when it comes to understanding guys or having confidence in approaching them, I'm completely useless.

I glance at Nico again; he's looking ahead. "I can smell the coffee from here," he says, excited.

He has a square, angular jaw, strong and solid, with a dark shadow of stubble across it. His black hair makes his eyes seem even brighter, especially outdoors in natural light instead of in the overhead lights of the office.

Every time I look at him, he gets more handsome.

I want him.

I wish I were confident enough to do something about that.

"You're staring," he grins, glancing at me. Our eyes meet, and my face ignites in instant flames of red.

"I, I, I—was thinking about something. Lost in thought. I—um—"

I'm tripping over my words, dying of embarrassment.

"I asked you if you want coffee or hot chocolate?" he grins, looking pleased with my reaction.

"Hot chocolate, please. I've had one too many doses of caffeine today, and at this

rate, I'll be up all night."

"There are ways to burn off excess energy—to help you sleep deeper than you've ever slept before." He raises one brow, and the mischievous grin on his face sends my mind right off the edge of a cliff and into the naughtiest flood of thoughts I've ever had in my life.

I press my lips together tightly.

Nico turns towards the guy behind the coffee stand.

"One cappuccino and one hot chocolate, please."

"Coming right up."

A cold wind whips past us, and in the most casual, natural gesture, Nico pulls me up against his chest and holds me there.

I'm stiff as I lean against him, worried he'll feel how fast my heart is beating against his chest. "The wind has a bite to it," he remarks, not letting me go.

The longer he holds me, the more I relax, until I have my cheek pressed into his jacket and a soft smile on my face.

I could get used to this.

I shouldn't. But I could.

The hot chocolate is creamy and sweet. Absolutely divine. We walk slowly through the last half of the park towards my apartment at a slow pace, enjoying the fresh late afternoon air and watching people move around us.

Neither of us talks much, but it's a comfortable, peaceful silence.

I'm sad when we arrive at my front door. I really wasn't ready for this to end yet. I wanted to live in my little dream world for a little while longer. The one where my boss sees me as more than just his assistant.

The small steps leading up to the door are slippery with a very thin layer of ice, and Niko insists on walking me up to make sure I get there safely.

We're standing right at the door. My anxiety has crippled my thoughts; imagine if I was brave enough to cook dinner for him, or to tell him to come in for a drink.

I could say something like, I have an incredible single malt.

It's sure to warm you up, if you want to come in?

But then, I image a man like Nico has the fancy whiskey. The one that pours thick and looks like gold.

I open my mouth, wanting to invite him in. Just say the words. What could go wrong?

He's standing, quietly watching me, his head tilted to the side, waiting. He's waiting for you to invite him inside, Serafina.

No, he isn't, he's just looking at you weirdly because you're standing here with your mouth open, saying nothing.

I press my lips together and huff a breath out of my nose. Ugh. Why is this so difficult?

"Thank you for walking me home—and for the hot chocolate," I smile nervously. I'm

so anxious that my throat is dry.

“It was my pleasure,” he smiles back. “I mean that.” He reaches up and brushes a loose curl away from my eyes, tucking it behind my ear, letting his hand linger against my cheek.

Why is everything he says so easy to misread? Of course, I’m going to start making up fantasies about how he’s falling madly in love with me when he’s so charming.

I’d rather let this fantasy continue a little longer than invite him in and risk rejection.

At least for now, I can pretend.

I look up at him with a smile.

“I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Looking forward to it.” He nods, stepping away from me, the cold taking his place and instantly filling me with longing.

He waits until I’ve unlocked my door, and I get so shy I fumble with my keys, almost dropping them. I push it open and step inside.

He turns away, shoving his hands into his pockets as he walks down the steps and onto the street. He glances over his shoulder once, his eyes piercing into mine and making my heart spin.

I close the door and lean against it, taking a deep breath and telling myself to stop being so pathetic.

This isn’t love at first sight.

This is real life.

Girls like me don't get guys like him.

Oh my word.

He's so gorgeous.

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:36 pm

It's eight, and the venue I hired is packed with business associates, friends, my family, and investors, both *bratva* and not.

It's a celebration for the launch of our new office.

Finally, we have it up and running. All of the issues have been ironed out, and we can start pushing some of the workload over to them.

It took weeks to get the computers, media equipment, and printing machines delivered and set up, and power to the building kept shorting, so we called in several electricians to fix it—but luckily it wasn't a huge expense.

Now everyone is equipped and ready to work.

Things should start getting easier, less chaotic, over the next few weeks.

Serafina and I are probably going to have to micromanage it all for a while longer before everyone learns their role.

She's brilliant, though.

With her at my side, I am confident I won't have to double-check or question anything. She's the perfect person to have on my team, and I wouldn't change it for the world.

I look around the crowded space, searching for her, but she isn't here yet. I'm excited to see her outside of the office again, in a more personal environment. Not that this is

personal.

The evening I walked her home still plays over and over in my thoughts.

I wanted to kiss her.

Standing on her front step, the cold biting against my skin. I wanted to taste the warmth of her lips against mine.

A voice breaks through my thoughts. “Nico, congrats on the new space. I stopped by this morning. It looks fantastic.”

I smile as I turn towards him. “Thanks, Roger. We’re pleased with it. How are things with your wife after her surgery?”

Roger and I have been working together since the beginning. He’s a trusted friend and colleague. His wife was diagnosed with cancer a year ago and has had numerous surgeries since. He’s been taking a lot of personal time to take care of her, and I know it’s been difficult for both of them.

“She’s here,” he says, to my surprise, his face lighting up. “The doc gave her all clear last week. I meant to message you, but things have been—we’ve been celebrating. We’ve hardly told anyone except family. I think we’re scared we’ll jinx it.” He smiles broadly.

The love this man has for his wife is something special. He glances around and waves his hand in the air when he spots her.

“Jenny,” he calls out, and she walks over to us.

“Jen.” I pull her into a hug. “I heard the good news. That’s fantastic. How are you

feeling?”

“Still exhausted. Head to toe exhausted, as though the tiredness lives inside my bones. I want to sleep for a week. But we’re so excited. We had to pop in and celebrate with you, even if it was just for one or two drinks.”

“Have three. Go wild,” I laugh.

“Nico.”

I turn towards the familiar voice.

“Ark. Hey, man. Give me a sec.” I turn back to the smiling couple. “I’m so happy for you guys. Let’s do dinner soon. A proper celebration of your news.”

“Enjoy your party, Nico. We’ll chat later,” Roger says, slipping his arm around his wife.

Ark hands me a glass of whiskey. “Just what I needed,” I say, taking it from him.

“Are you doing your dutiful rounds? Checking in with the clients and investors, making sure everyone is having a great time?” Ark asks.

“I am. What are you doing here? Luka said you couldn’t make it.”

“Ugh, I finished up sooner than I thought, so I swung by. Looks like a good turnout.”

My eyes run over the crowd, taking in the smiling faces. “It is a good turnout. Gets bigger every year. Next year we’ll need—” My heart stops when I see her. I forget whatever it was I was saying.

She's laughing with one of the ladies from HR. Her face lights up the room, and suddenly all I can see is her.

"Who's the hottie in the black dress?" Ark says, his brows raised as he stares at Serafina, taking a sip of his drink.

"My assistant. Don't even think about it," I say, unamused.

"No wonder you wanted to get back to work so badly the other day. She's fucking gorgeous. Is she single?"

"Arkady. I swear. One more word. Don't even think about it. I'm serious. If I catch you near her..." I shoot him a warning glance.

He laughs, amused by my reaction.

"Fine. Keep her to yourself," he smirks.

"It's not like that. I just don't need your reckless, impulsive decisions causing chaos in my workplace," I snap.

But he's not sold.

He nods, his eyes filled with amusement. "Don't worry, Nico. She's all yours. But if you take too long to make a move, don't be crying when she's got her arms around me."

"Remember when we were kids, and I used the pillow to suffocate you when you pissed me off...?"

"Dude, that still freaks me out. You're the reason I'm claustrophobic."

“Well,” I raise my brows at him. “Don’t tempt me.”

Arkady shakes his head, grinning, even more amused than before.

“Okay, okay, I got it. I’m going to find Yilian. Have fun with your assistant,” he says, turning away from me and disappearing into the crowd.

Sera is moving between people, stopping and chatting as she goes along. She’s so confident and full of life. People are drawn to her magnetism, her beauty, and her charm shining brighter tonight than I’ve ever seen before. She’s magnificent.

Arkady’s words linger in my thoughts.

She’ll have her arms around me...

He was joking, but it won’t be long before she is interested in someone. The thought, the image of her being with someone—it’s painful. I won’t be able to handle that. But what right do I have to tell her who she can and can’t date?

Serafina is wearing a low-cut black dress, covered in glittering sequins that catch the light and accentuate her perfect curves.

When she turns her back to me I see how low it dips, revealing the delicate details of her spine, all the way down to the curve of her back just above her ass.

She has a butterfly tattoo on the left side of her back, the wings just peeking out from the edge of the dress.

My cock stirs, warning me to get control of myself or I’ll have to leave the room.

What other tattoos is she hiding on that gorgeous body?

I'd love to explore every inch of her and—

Dammit.

I clench my jaw, turning away and trying to distract myself with conversation, talking to clients, catching up with people, but the entire time, I'm thinking about her, and my eyes are constantly wandering back towards her.

She is my obsession.

Looking towards Sera, I see she's been cornered by someone I don't want near her.

Of all the people at this party, Lucas has the biggest reputation for being a playboy.

He is clearly moving in on her, and while she doesn't look bothered, I am fully aware of what his intentions are.

I get agitated, and I'm not able to focus on anything else.

Lucas is known for the way he picks women up with ease and ditches them as soon as he's gotten what he wants out of it. What if he does what Drake did?

I excuse myself from the conversation I was having and walk towards the bar, watching closely as he lifts his hand, and his fingers brush over her arm.

My blood boils hotter, and I clench my jaw.

I should go over there and help her. Except she doesn't look like she needs to be rescued. She's smiling and happy. She doesn't know his reputation.

Okay, Nico, but she's not going to run off and jump into bed with some stranger she's

just met.

You don't know that.

I down a glass of whiskey that I had intended to sip.

Ordering another one, I convince myself that I have to protect her in case it's another incident like the one we had in the office last week.

The shit that Drake pulled still makes me furious.

I would hate for anything like that to happen to Serafina again, so, for that reason, I make my way through the crowd towards them.

To protect her.

"You're the prettiest girl in the room." I walk up and hear Lucas throwing lines at her. "Maybe we can get out of here a little early and go for a drink somewhere more private?"

"Thanks, but I just got here. I won't be leaving anytime soon." She smiles sweetly, her nose scrunching as she grins at him, and it's so fucking cute it makes me even more determined to protect her from this asshole.

"Fine, then. I'll wait, and we can go for a drink later. It's Saturday night, after all."

He steps closer to her, his hand brushing over her waist, and in that moment, realization slams into me.

I don't want to protect her—not exactly. She's doing a perfectly fine job of turning this idiot down. I just don't want anyone else near her.

I'm possessive. Dangerously possessive, as though she belongs to me.

"Sera, you look gorgeous," I say, purposefully positioning myself next to her so that he's forced to step back.

He smiles at me. "Nico. Hey. What's up? This is—oh, do you know her?" he asks, knitting his brows.

"Serafina is my assistant."

"Lucky you," he smirks, and it grates against my nerves.

"Indeed. I suggest you find another target tonight."

Lucas pulls his mouth tight in annoyance. "Right. I see," he says, dry and disappointed.

I turn towards the most beautiful girl in the room. I want to get her far away from this guy, make a clear point to him that she's off-limits. "Would you like to dance?" I ask, holding my hand towards her.

"That sounds like fun," she grins, placing her hand in mine. Without even glancing towards Lucas, she lets me lead her towards the dancefloor.

My heart races as I realize that, yes, I have gotten rid of the guy, but now—shit—I have to control myself while she is pressed right up against me.

On the dancefloor, I pull her into my arms, and the music pulses through us as we move together.

This was the biggest fucking mistake ever.

Holy fuck. She can move. It's like she's trying to seduce me with her body at this point, each sway of her hips, each flick of her long, loose hair—my breath is caught tight in my chest, and I can't take my eyes off her.

She spins and turns her back to me, laughing as she wiggles her hips, and her ass rubs over my cock. This is not going to end well.

I spin her away from me and as I pull her back again, the music changes. It becomes slower, more intimate.

Shit.

Fuck.

Okay.

She steps close to me and rests her hand against my chest, those bright green eyes of hers turned up towards me, a playful smile on her lips.

Her nails are painted black, too. Perfectly beautiful. Every inch of her is perfectly beautiful.

“You look incredible,” I lean close and whisper against her ear.

“You don't look so bad yourself,” she sasses back at me. “A girl could almost think you were a gentleman.”

I chuckle.

“Cheeky little rabbit, aren't you. You know, girls with smart mouths usually get spanked to teach them not to have such an attitude,” I warn her as a current of desire

pulses through me.

“Mm. Well, no one has ever given me that lesson before, so my attitude is very much intact.”

My cock is twitching, and I’m convinced that in the next minute she’ll be able to feel it against her.

I lean away from her, looking down at her and searching my mind for a reason to walk away. Anything . I have to create distance between us. Maybe I should tell her I forgot I had to catch up with a client. Or say I’m going to get us another drink. I just need to get away.

But as soon as our eyes lock, those green pools of enticement—so beautiful, so captivating, I’m sinking into her like quicksand—I can’t think of anything except kissing her.

I lean a little closer.

My eyes are on her lips now. She’s painted them with a caramel tint, and they look luscious and soft.

My lips part, and I feel her breath against my skin.

“Nico, can I cut in and steal a dance with the boss, too?”

Someone’s hand brushes over my arm. My heart spins in panic when I realize what’s happening.

I was about to kiss Serafina, in front of everyone , in public .

In front of almost every employee who works for me.

I step away from her towards the voice.

“Olivia. Of course,” I say, my heart still racing as I throw Serafina a tight, awkward smile. She smiles back at me.

“I’m going to grab a drink. Enjoy the music,” she says quickly, and then turns to hurry away, her cheeks flushing pink.

Olivia steps into my arms, and immediately, it’s uncomfortable. She’s a beautiful girl. Probably my type. But she’s not Serafina and never will be.

We dance stiffly, professional and boring—exactly how I should have been dancing with Serafina. Who am I fucking kidding? I shouldn’t have been dancing with Serafina at all.

I glance in her direction every chance I get as I maneuver over the dance floor with Olivia.

She’s talking to some people over at the bar. Men and women. But her eyes keep drifting towards me as well.

This is a dangerous game I’m playing.

What if I had lost control and kissed her?

What if Olivia hadn’t interrupted me?

My brothers might have seen it, but worse, it would have sparked rumors and whispers throughout the entire office. Shit I don’t have time to deal with.

My professional, controlled nature would be put into question.

The last person the boss wants to be caught kissing is his much younger assistant.

I don't do things like this.

Arkady is the reckless one who makes stupid, last-minute decisions and doesn't bother calculating the consequences.

Not me. I don't do that.

So why have I found myself in so many situations lately where I have been doing that, every single one of those moments being with Serafina?

She's doing things to me that make me lose control.

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:36 pm

The tall, elegant blonde, with legs that appear to be endless, a slender waist, gorgeous, plump breasts, red, luscious lips, perfectly curled lashes, curvy hips, and a perfect smile, is still dancing with Nico.

I'm trying so hard not to watch them, but my heart is aching with jealousy as they move around the dancefloor together.

She's gorgeous. Like, proper, crazy beautiful. She's exactly the type of girl who would attract a man like Nico because of her sophistication and confidence. She didn't hesitate to ask him to dance. I wouldn't have had the guts to do that. I was thrilled when he asked me.

And—I could be wrong, but I am sure he was about to kiss me on the dance floor.

I huff out an annoyed breath.

If he were about to kiss me, that would be insane.

I guess it's more insane that I was going to let him.

I didn't even try and stop it when I thought it was going to happen.

That is not the image I want my work colleagues to have of me, messing around with the boss—they'll all be talking about how that's the only reason I got the job I the first place.

Ugh. I don't need this kind of drama in my life.

If Miss Perfect over there hadn't interrupted us, things could have gotten really bad, really fast.

Maybe Nico's had a few drinks?

He doesn't look tipsy. Not in the slightest.

But that would explain his forwardness.

He was very quick to get me away from Lucas.

Lucas was creepy, though. I'm happy he stepped in to put an abrupt end to that.

I would have lost the guy, but it would have taken time, because I don't know his business relationship with Nico, and I would have had to keep it diplomatic and polite, when really, I wanted to tell him to jump off a cliff.

My eyes drift back to Nico.

Oliva is pressed against his chest, looking up at him with a radiant smile on her face. He's smiling too, his eyes turned down to her.

If he kissed her now, I'd die.

I'd crumble to the floor and curl into a ball, and cry.

I'm so pathetic.

Still crushing on my boss because I haven't figured out a way to control myself around him.

I roll my eyes.

Justin chuckles next to me. “Why the face?” he asks.

Oh, shit. I didn’t realize he was here. He is our team manager—my other boss.

I giggle nervously. “I was just thinking about something silly,” I say, brushing it off as best I can.

“Can I get you a drink? That one looks finished.”

I glance down at my vodka and orange juice, which is basically just melted ice at this point. All of my attention has been on the dancefloor—not where it should be.

“Yes, thanks,” I smile.

“You’ve been doing really well at work. I know Nico is impressed with you,” he remarks, waving the bartender down to get his attention.

“Vodka orange, and a beer for me,” he says.

“Yes, sir, right away,” the barman smiles.

Justin leans against the bar and tilts his head to the side as he looks at me. “Are you happy with the company?”

My eyes drift again towards the dance floor while I answer.

“I love it. Seriously. Not a day goes by when I don’t wake up excited to come to work.

My job is incredible. There are new challenges every day, and I get to push my own limits, learn new things, and enjoy the process.

” I smile, a genuine, happy smile. I mean every word of it.

I wouldn’t want any other job. And I love working with Nico.

Nico is laughing with Olivia. I look back at Justin. Why is it bothering me so much to see him happy with another woman?

“And Nico?” he asks, his brows rising.

“What do you mean?” My eyes turn back to the dancefloor again. Why am I putting myself through this? Maybe I need to leave? Watching them move together, his hand on her lower back, I wonder if they have a history together? Maybe he dated her. Maybe he’s still involved with her.

“Serafina?”

“Mm?”

Justin is looking at me expectantly, and I realize he’s asked me something.

“I said, you and Nico are very close,” he repeats.

My thoughts race in panic. What does he mean by that?

“We work well together,” I say, straightening my back.

“But I think it’s more than just professional—you two get on very well. You’re closer than most of the people in the office...”

His words trail off as he studies my face. I'm not sure what exactly he's getting at, but I don't like it.

If he's thinking this, then other people are, too, and that means that rumors are already starting.

I giggle and wave my hand in the air. "I've just learned how to communicate with Nico in the best way to get work done faster."

"Mm. Is that what it is?" Justin laughs, not convinced.

Shit.

Will something like this get Niko in trouble? Or me? Would they move me to another part of the company, or fire me completely?

I'm really playing with fire here. I have to refocus.

I move my body so that my back is facing the dance floor. I will not watch him anymore. He can do whatever he wants. I've got to be strict about this now before I sink my own ship.

I can't be involved with my boss. I can't be attracted to him and cause other people to notice.

I definitely don't want to be standing by the bar with one of my bosses questioning why I'm so close to my other boss.

Biting my lip with worry, I try to focus all of my attention on the conversation with Justin. He chats about the projects we're doing and the new offices. I listen, sip my drink, and wait for the moment when I can escape. I want to go home.

It's almost midnight when I step out of the extravagant venue and into the cold night air. It's actually a beautiful evening. It's not as cold as it has been these last few weeks.

I glance down at my high heels. Thank goodness it's not far to walk. The party was right by the office, so I'm right around the corner from home.

I got cornered by Justin tonight, but at least it was an eye-opening moment for me. I can't keep risking my career over a silly crush. It's time to put walls up, block out whatever I'm feeling, and focus on my work. Nothing else.

My heels click as I walk along the sidewalk. The shoes are starting to hurt, but it's not far.

The road is still busy with people coming and going, wrapped warmly in long coats.

I shove my hands into my long gray coat and smile as a couple walks past me with their dog. The little furry ball of happiness pauses to sniff the corner of my coat, and I lean down to tickle his soft fur.

"Hey, cutie," I smile.

The couple moves on, wishing me a lovely evening.

"You can't walk in those heels."

His voice sends a delightful shiver down my spine as the car comes to a stop on the road next to where I'm walking.

“I can, actually,” I grin at him as he leans out of the window.

“Get in. I’ll drive you.”

“Nico, we’ve been through this.” I shake my head, still smiling. Stop smiling. Be professional.

“Serafina, get in the car and stop being so difficult. It’ll take me two minutes to drive you home.”

I glance down at my feet.

They hurt. I don’t want to admit it, but I would love a lift.

“Serafina, get in,” he says more sternly.

I give up.

Inside Nico’s car, the heat is on, and my entire body relaxes into the warm seat. It’s cozy and comfortable.

“It was a good party tonight,” Nico remarks, a little stiff.

“It was great. Successful,” I say, just as stiff.

Why is this so difficult?

“The music was nice.”

Is he serious? Are we really talking about the music?

“And the catering,” I agree.

Oh my word, this is hell.

I glance across the car towards him. He looks at me, briefly, a tense smile on his face. Then he quickly looks forward again.

I chew the inside of my cheek.

It doesn't matter whether I am attracted to him or not, and my silly little crush is pointless. I know how this goes. I know because I've been there, done that, and got the T-shirt. Whether I wanted it or not.

Brandon Plume. My boyfriend at the beginning of college. I was so in love, head over heels for this complete douchebag. Of course, at the time I had no idea he was a douchebag.

He was my first boyfriend, and I thought I was the luckiest girl on the planet, because all the girls thought he was amazing—the hottest guy in our year, and friends with everyone.

He was fun, charismatic, and outgoing, and he loved to party. I was shy and quiet, but he took me everywhere with him, and I started making so many friends. It was the first time in my life that I had that many people want to get to know me.

Brandon didn't know that I was a virgin, and I was nervous to tell him. There were a number of times he was pushing for sex, and I got really nervous, but managed to get out of it without confessing my secret.

But as we got closer and we were dating for longer, I got to a point where I wanted to lose my virginity to him.

I was actually excited about it.

I started flirting with him, making naughty, suggestive comments, getting more confident, trying to let him know I was ready.

The night came, and we arrived back at my dorm room after a really amazing dinner together, and I invited him inside, knowing my roommate was staying over at her boyfriend's. Brandon didn't hesitate.

And as soon as the door closed behind us, he was all over me.

Yes, I wanted it, but I was nervous and wanted to go slower, savor the moment and understand what was happening. But he was kissing me and pushing me onto the bed, practically ripping my clothes off.

It got to the point where he was about to push his cock into me, and I froze up and very quickly scooted away from him.

“What now?” he huffed in annoyance. I remember the tone of his voice, cold and agitated. It made my anxiety ten times worse.

I sat with my back against the headboard and my knees curled against my chest. “I want to do this—I really do—but I want to go a little slower, because I’m nervous,” I confessed.

He glared at me before his mouth dropped open in shock. “Wait—are you a virgin?” he blurted out. And before I could answer, he was laughing.

Proper, cold, nasty laughter.

“You’re a fucking virgin?” he continued to laugh, and I pulled my knees tighter

against my body.

“So?” I mumbled.

“So, you have no idea what you’re doing? You wouldn’t even know what to do with my cock if I waved it in front of your face.” His laughter got louder and louder until I couldn’t take it anymore.

With tears running down my face, I kicked him out of my room.

He wasn’t even upset. He told me he didn’t need an inexperienced girl. I broke up with him. I never spoke to him again.

But he told everyone.

And the rest of my college experience included my ‘friends’ constantly teasing me about how I’d never had sex before. They never missed an opportunity to bring it up, and despite asking them to stop, telling them that it hurt me, they continued to do it.

So I stopped hanging around with them. I hunkered down, focused on my studies, and longed for the day I graduated.

And of course, I left college a virgin.

And I started this job a virgin.

And now I am a virgin with a crush on Nico, a man who would never want a girl without any experience.

I can’t go through that again. It was so painful, and I’m still scared and hurt from what happened.

I'm still chewing on the inside of my cheek when Nico pulls the car to a stop outside my house. But now I'm also fighting tears; flooded with those memories, I've come to realize that my crush is even more pathetic than I thought.

I look towards Nico and smile tightly.

"Hey, Sera—what's going on?" he asks.

I'm clearly not doing a great job of hiding my emotions.

"Nothing. Thanks for the ride," I blurt out, hurrying to push the door open. I stumble out of the car in a rush.

"Serafina," he calls my name.

"Good night, Nico. I'll see you on Monday," I say as cheerfully as I can.

I shove the key into the lock and fumble with opening the front door. In relief, I push the door open and step inside. When I turn to wave to Nico to let him know he can go, he's standing next to the car, his hand resting on the open door. His brows are furrowed.

"Bye," I say loudly, waving and plastering the biggest smile on my face.

Then I close the door, not daring to wait another second in case he starts walking towards me.

I lean my back against the door, and the tears flow over my cheeks.

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:36 pm

Two weeks since the party, and two weeks of having Serafina make an obvious effort not to be alone with me. Which is difficult, because we work together. That's what has made it so obvious.

Her attitude towards me has changed, too. She's distant and overly polite, and it's bothering me to no end.

I can't figure out what I did wrong.

I've obviously done something to offend her badly. But what is it?

I keep running over that night in my mind, and while there were moments that might have caused issues—me almost kissing her, me dancing with Oliva after practically pushing Serafina away...

She was really upset when she got out of my car that night. Almost crying.

She didn't say anything then and she hasn't said anything about it since.

It's driving me crazy not to know.

How can I fix it if I don't know what's wrong?

I miss her.

I miss laughing with her, flirting with her, and the tense but beautiful moments we used to share.

I'm still utterly obsessed with her, so having her withdraw from me has made her even more prominent in my thoughts.

But I've found a solution.

Arkady is sitting opposite me in the office chair on the other side of my desk. He's sunk low, swiping through his phone, looking totally relaxed.

"I don't know if it's a good lead," he says without looking up from his phone.

"The only thing we can do is go check it out," I comment.

"Yeah, but that means someone has to go to New York," he grumbles.

"I'll go. I have a few clients up there, so I can go under the pretense of business. It'll be a good way to look around without making it obvious."

"Oh, that's a good idea. Excellent. I really didn't want to go—there's a party this weekend, and Blacksmith and I don't want to miss it."

I shake my head. Typical Arkady. His priorities aren't always straight, but he has a good heart.

"I'll make the arrangements and head out tomorrow morning."

Arkady pushes himself to his feet with a grunt. "Cool man, keep me in the loop."

"Will do."

He leaves the office, and I immediately get on the phone, booking hotels and making a few reservations—things that Serafina could do for me, but my plan is to surprise

her with this instead.

Just after lunch, I've got the entire trip planned and arranged.

I walk into her office with a mischievous grin on my face.

She looks up from her laptop and smiles tightly at me. "Nico, is there something I can help with?"

"Actually, yes," I say, sitting on the edge of her desk.

"Alright, I'm just finishing this e-mail, then I can—"

"You can pack a bag for a few nights in New York."

I grin, watching the confusion flash over her face.

"New York?" she murmurs.

"I have some clients in New York that I want to check in with, and I prefer to do it in person. It would be valuable to have you join me. You can meet them. You can learn about their business."

"Oh, wow," she says, her brows raising and her eyes glittering with excitement. "I've never been to New York."

She's so beautiful when she's smiling.

"I'll come by your apartment tomorrow morning at six to fetch you. We can go to the airport together."

New York is busy, colorful, and exciting, and Sera is loving every moment of it.

I've taken her to the fanciest restaurants, the most elegant boutiques, and spoiled her with designer clothing that she tried hard to say no to—but I insisted.

We've had cocktails with views of the Statue of Liberty and eaten exotic foods made by the world's best chefs.

And through all of this, the moment when I saw her really, truly light up was when we walked into one of the biggest tech companies in the world.

They have a display in the lobby of their building showing off their advanced inventions.

She was enthralled. Her fascination peaked as she moved from one display to the next, asking questions and letting her curious mind run wild.

The expensive dresses and fancy restaurants didn't impress her even half as much as this.

I chuckle as I watch her corner one of their staff and blast him with questions. Luckily, the guy is efficient and knows what he's talking about, so he's able to make her experience more enjoyable.

I follow just behind them, listening to her and loving the way she shines in situations like this.

"If you like this sort of thing, you should go to the Museum of Technology in the old city," the employee remarks.

She looks at me with wide, excited eyes. “Can we?”

I laugh again. “Of course, we can. I’ve got to stop somewhere first, but I’m free this afternoon.” I’ve never known a girl who is so competitive.

She does a little happy dance, wiggling her hips in the cutest way.

I shake my head.

This girl will be the death of me.

I can’t get enough of her.

I need to look into the lead for Andrei, but I don’t want Sera involved in any of that, so I drop her off at the mall. She doesn’t look impressed as we pull up outside.

“I’m not going to be long. But I need you to please do this for me,” I say, handing her my credit card. I don’t need the new laptop I’ve ordered, but I do need to keep her busy for a bit while I follow the lead.

She scrunches her nose. “Is there no way to order it online? I don’t like malls. I’d rather come to the meeting with you.”

I grin and shake my head. “There will be plenty of meetings for you to join in the future. I don’t have time to attend the meeting and fetch the laptop.”

She nods. “Alright,” she sighs, a little sulky. What makes this funny to me is how efficient she is at being my assistant—normally, she wouldn’t question any work-related requests—but the idea of missing a meeting has made her very upset.

“You can walk around a bit if you finish before me. If you see anything you like, get

it—just use my card.”

Unfortunately, the lead is a complete waste of time. A total dead end.

The guy whose name I was given clearly has no idea who Andrei is. He’s thick as a plank, and I don’t think he could put together decent mac and cheese, never mind orchestrate an escape plan for someone running from the mafia.

I’m frustrated, disappointed, and tired when I fetch Serafina from the mall. She packs the laptop into the trunk of the car and climbs into the passenger seat, smiling. “How was the meeting?” she asks, eager to find out.

“It was alright,” I say tightly, lost in thought about why the intel was so bad. I wonder who Arkady’s source was. Did they send us out here on purpose, some distraction technique?

“Nico?”

“Mm?”

“Did it not go well? You look upset,” she says, frowning.

“It was okay,” I say, shaking my head. “Uh, let’s go through to the museum place. Where was it again?” I’m distracted and worried. I don’t like being played like that.

“No, let’s skip the museum today. It looks like you need a drink instead,” she says, reaching out and touching my leg. “You win some, you lose some, right?”

She smiles, trying to reassure me that even though the meeting I didn’t actually have

went badly, it's not the end of the world.

My heart melts a little, looking at the warmth in her eyes.

"I would love to have a drink with you," I nod, pulling out onto the road and heading towards a cocktail bar at the waterfront next to our hotel. It's a gorgeous place with great music and great views.

As soon as we sit down at the bar, Serafina orders two shots of tequila.

"It's a bit early for tequila, isn't it?" I muse, watching her lean against the bar.

"It's never too early for tequila when you're in New York," she says with a serious expression.

She slides one of the shots over to me and winks, teasing me with her beauty.

Three shots of tequila and two cocktails later, we're both laughing, sitting out on the deck. The early evening air is growing darker around us and my heart is happier and more relaxed than it has been in a very, very long time.

"But what made you choose this career?" she asks, her eyes glittering in the fading light.

"Mm. I don't know if I chose it, not directly. It's more accurate to say that it is the role I was destined to take in my family."

"Why?"

Her curiosity has been the driving force of our conversation all afternoon.

“My siblings and I—we wanted to build something together. Each of us had a role to play, and this was mine.” I shrug.

I don’t want to accidentally steer the conversation towards my family's ties to the mafia. I specifically chose to work in a part of the business that didn’t include dealing with the mafia as much as possible.

My brothers deal with that side of things. I run the legitimate businesses.

“Do you have any brothers and sisters?” I ask, leaning back in my chair.

“Nope. I’m an only child. And I lost my parents in a car accident when I was pretty young.” She presses her lips together.

“I’m sorry. I never knew.”

“It was long ago. I still think about them often. I miss them all the time. But it’s okay.

I wish I had siblings so that I still had family, but growing up an only child wasn’t as bad as most people make it out to be.

Sure, I would love to know what it’s like to have a massive family, but being an only child had its perks, too. ”

I can tell she doesn’t want to focus on the loss of her parents, so I take her lead and leave that conversation for another time, if she ever wants to talk about it.

“Is that so? What kind of perks?” I ask.

“I never had to share my chocolates on Easter,” she laughs.

I laugh, shaking my head.

“Ark used to eat all of his chocolates right away and then sneak around the house stealing everyone else’s. He was a nightmare.”

The hours roll by, and I find myself moving closer and closer to her. The longer we sit here and talk, the more intimate our interaction becomes, until our chairs are right next to each other and she’s sitting with her legs between mine, my hand on her thigh.

She’s a little tipsy, not drunk, but glowing and relaxed.

All I want to do is kiss her.

It’s all I’ve wanted to do for the past hour as the tension between us builds.

“I think we should get going before they start putting away the chairs and kick us out,” I joke.

“I am a little sleepy. Thank you for a fun night, Nico. I haven’t laughed that much in—goodness, I don’t even know how long.”

I leave my car parked where it is, and we walk across the street to our hotel.

Our rooms are on the same floor.

Standing in the foyer, waiting for the elevator, I’m staring at her. She’s wearing a beautiful short blue dress that floats around her hips beneath her navy coat.

Her leather boots are long, reaching up over her knees, looking sexy as fuck as she leans forward and punches the elevator button again. She’s impatient, and it’s making me smile.

The doors slide open, and she giggles, stepping inside and leaning against the far wall.

I step in after her, press the button to take us to the top floor, and then turn towards her.

She looks up at me, her eyes are seductive and inviting.

All reason melts away as I wrap my hand around her waist and pin her against the mirrored wall.

She gasps against my lips when I press my mouth over hers.

Finally, after fighting the desire for far too long, I kiss her.

Her hands run up my back, flooding me with electric spikes of heated lust. I thread my fingers around the back of her neck and deepen the kiss as my cock throbs, rock-hard against her.

She's making the most beautiful sounds, little moans that escape her mouth and touch my lips.

Lifting her, I wrap her legs around my waist and grab her ass, letting my fingers slip between her legs and brush over her panties, delighted by the soft warmth of her.

She moans again, a little louder, pushing me closer over the edge.

I tug her panties aside, my fingers brushing over her pussy, warm and wet and ready for me. I slide my finger into her, and she gasps for air, rocking her hips forward to encourage me.

The elevator doors chime and slide open.

I don't put her down. I keep her in my arms, my fingers inside her as I walk down the hallway towards my hotel room.

She is moving against my hand, holding on to me with her arms locked around my neck while she kisses me with urgent, feverish lust.

I practically kick the door down trying to open it, savagely desperate to get her inside where I can do things to her that I have been dreaming about since the first day I set eyes on her.

The door closes behind us, and my hands tug her coat off, letting it fall to the floor before I drop her onto the bed, immediately lying over her and pinning her gorgeous body beneath mine.

Leaning back, I look down at her. She takes my breath away and leaves me speechless. I can't believe I finally have her.

Serafina's eyes flash with tension.

"Are you okay?" I ask, worried.

"I'm a virgin." She blurts out her confession in a panic, her eyes darkening as she shifts beneath me, trying to get away.

This is the last thing I expected her to say.

And the most divine words that could have fallen from her lips.

"You've never been with anyone?" I ask, my voice thick with a dark streak of

possessive desire that is consuming me. She's untouched? A virgin? I can't believe this. Just when I thought I couldn't possibly be more turned on than I am. My cock aches to take her, to be the first man inside her.

"I've never—I'm just—" she stammers nervously.

I wrap my hand around her jaw and kiss her again. How is it possible for her to be any more perfect?

She melts against my mouth, letting out a soft breath of air.

But then she tenses again.

She's nervous, hesitating.

And the last thing I want to do is force anything on her that she's not ready for.

I stop, rolling to the side, but keeping my arm around her. I'm so reluctant to let her go, even if we aren't going to have sex; I want her near me. I want her all to myself.

She has nothing to be embarrassed about.

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“I’m really sorry,” I whisper, dying inside. All I want to do is bolt out of here and go and hide in my hotel room and never speak of this moment again.

But my body is on fire.

Every cell, every inch of my skin, every thought is wildly inappropriate. I want him to devour every piece of me. To thrust into me and possess me in ways I have never felt before.

I shift awkwardly in his arms. He hasn’t let me go, so I haven’t been able to move away from him.

Nico is lying on his side; I’m lying on my back. He reaches over and brushes hair from my face.

“Serafina, there is nothing to be embarrassed about,” he says gently.

I bite my bottom lip, the heat on my cheeks growing uncomfortable.

He smiles. It’s not the same mocking smile I saw on my ex’s face. This smile is warm and genuine, soothing my anxiety as he looks down at me.

“I promise you, there is nothing to be embarrassed about. If you aren’t ready, that’s perfectly fine.” His amber eyes look gold in this light.

My body is tingling, wanting him to kiss me again.

“It’s not—it’s not about not being ready,” I sigh, not able to look into his eyes anymore.

“What is it?” he asks patiently.

“It’s just that...something happened, with my ex—”

“What?” his voice becomes a little harder, and when his eyes grow dark, I realize he already wants to tear my ex apart and he doesn’t even know what happened.

I smile nervously. “He embarrassed me,” I say quickly, to ease his worry.

“He didn’t hurt me—not physically, anyway.

Just emotionally. We were going to—you know—and when I told him I’d never done anything like that before, he laughed about it.

He was horrified that I had no experience, and he taunted me, and then, when I broke up with him, he told everyone my secret, and they taunted me, too.

It was horrible,” I sigh heavily, the embarrassment I felt then resurfacing now as I wait for Nico’s reaction.

He’s quiet for a moment as he leans over me, his eyes studying my face.

I wish I could melt into the blankets and disappear.

Nico looks angry. It’s making my heart race with tension.

I should never have said anything. I should have kept my mouth sealed until it was over.

Then, at least, I wouldn't be a virgin anymore, and I would never have to have this conversation again.

"That guy is a fucking asshole, and if I ever met him, I'd kill him," he growls.

"Oh." I thought he was angry at me for leading him on, or disappointing him.

"What do you mean, 'oh?'" He knits his brows. "That guy deserves to learn a very painful lesson for doing that to you, Sera. He's an asshole. No one should be made to feel embarrassed about choosing to wait."

He smiles, shaking his head. "There is nothing to be embarrassed about. You are in full control over what you're ready to experience. Not your ex. Not me. Only you."

His hand is gentle as it brushes over my shoulder. The touch sends shivers running through me again.

"We can just lie here and talk if you want," he says.

"You're not upset that I'm a virgin?" I ask, my brows furrowed.

He chuckles. "No. If you want me to be entirely honest with you..." He grins.

"I do," I say, watching his expression as his eyes drift over me.

"The thought of being the first man to ever thrust into you is driving me fucking insane. I've never been more turned on in my life.

Before you told me, you were already driving me wild.

I was already losing control. But this—this takes it to an entirely different level.

I want to do things to you that would make you scream in pleasure, Serafina.

I want to possess you in the darkest, most beautiful ways. I want to teach you everything.”

My heart is beating so fast it’s thundering in my ears. My lips part in shock as I listen to his words. His hand is drifting over my side, dangerously possessive, his fingers pressing into me as he speaks in seductive tones.

The fact that he is so turned on, yet completely willing to set it aside if I’m not ready—it’s making me wild with desire.

I am ready. I’ve been ready for far too long, but I wasn’t willing to just give myself to anyone.

From the moment I met Nico, I wanted it to be him; I just didn’t think it was possible. And now I’m here, with his golden eyes locked with mine, his attention on my body, his desire flooding through me.

My pussy is heated, pleading—

“I want this,” I whisper.

His eyes flare.

“You want this?” he asks, making sure there is no misunderstanding as he pushes his hand between my legs.

I nod, biting my lip. “I don’t want to be a virgin anymore.”

Nico lets out a low growl as he spreads my legs apart and cups my pussy in his hand.

He leans over me and locks his lips over mine, letting his finger slide inside me as he kisses me.

I reach up and wrap my arms around his neck, pulling him against me, encouraging him to do whatever he wants to me.

He kisses me until my lips are swollen, his finger sliding slowly in and out of me, building pleasure with each stroke.

When he shifts his body and moves lower on the bed, my heart starts racing.

He tugs my panties off, pulling them over my boots, smiling as his hands touch the leather. “These are fucking sexy,” he grins. “Can we leave them on?”

I nod, enjoying his lust—it makes me feel sexier than I’ve ever felt in my life.

“But this has to go,” he says, pulling himself forward so that I’m sitting with him between my legs. He slowly lifts my dress up over my head. I’m completely naked, completely exposed to his eyes, and his gaze is taking in every inch of me with growing feverish desire.

He gently pushes me back against the mattress.

“Lie down, spread your legs open for me, my angel,” he whispers, his voice running through me like molten gold. “Tell me if you want me to stop,” he says sternly. I shake my head.

“No, please don’t stop.”

His mouth his hot as he presses his lips against the inside of my thigh.

He moves slowly, tracing kisses over my skin, moving towards the pulsing heat of my pussy.

When his tongue licks over my clit, I cry out, my fingers digging into the blankets.

He looks up at me. "Are you alright?" he asks.

"Don't stop," I gasp in desperation.

He grins before pressing his face between my legs again.

My body is so confused by the pleasure. One moment it's tense, the muscles twitching and spasming, the next I'm melting into the mattress and drifting in a state of such intense pleasure that I have no idea what is real and what is not.

He moves his tongue as though he's writing love letters against my skin, the soft warmth of his mouth pushing me to the edge and then pulling me back again. His pushes his tongue inside me, fucking me with his mouth, then moves up over my clit again to lick and tease.

When he dips his fingers inside me as his tongue plays small circles over my clit, I can't keep it together anymore.

My legs are shaking, but my hips are lifted, pushing against his face.

He stops and looks up, his eyes on me.

"Do you want me to make you come, Serafina?"

"I-I don't know," I gasp.

“I can make you come now—and then again with my cock. We have all night for me to play with you.” His smile is darkly tempting.

“Oh,” I gasp again, biting my lip.

“I’ll take that as a yes.”

Nico wraps his lips around my pussy again, and I lose my mind.

The orgasm completely steals my breath away. I fall out of this world and into another one as my entire body gives up control to him.

When the convulsing pleasure stops, I’m fighting for air.

Nico sits up, leaning over me.

“Did you enjoy that, my angel?” he asks.

I nod, unable to speak while I watch him unbutton his shirt, tugging it off and tossing it onto the floor where our coats are lying.

My eyes graze over his muscular body, carved to perfection.

I sit up, running my hand over his chest and he pulls me onto his lap, kissing me and letting me taste myself on his lips.

The thrill of it pulses fresh desire inside me.

He lifts me in his arms, standing next to the bed, as he tugs his pants off and steps out of them.

Completely naked, he looks even more incredible than I could ever have imagined.

His mouth presses over mine and he whispers, “Are you sure you want this?”, his cock pressing against my pussy.

“I’m sure,” I say, nodding.

He moves us back onto the bed, pushing my legs apart with his hips, the weight of his body pinning me down, and my heart racing wildly.

He stares right into my eyes.

“Tell me if I must stop,” he says, his gaze locked with mine.

He pushes forward, the tip of his cock pushing inside me.

For a second, all I feel is pain.

I cry out, worried that there is something wrong with me.

He pauses, gently kissing me.

“It’s okay, it’s normal for it to hurt at first,” he says, reassuring me.

Only when he feels my body relax beneath him does he push deeper into me.

My body is flooded with confusion this time. The pain is still there, but it’s entwined with pleasure, the two mixing together as he spreads my pussy wide open and stretches me to fit his massive, throbbing cock. I can feel it pulsing inside me, twitching as he fights to control himself.

“Does it hurt?” he asks, tension in his voice.

I take several deep breaths. “It feels—incredible,” I murmur.

His low chuckle vibrates against my chest. When he starts moving his hips slowly back and forth, the pleasure outweighs the pain.

His cock slides in and out of me.

Sensations I can’t describe bolt through my body like lightning.

In this moment, I belong to him.

We are joined, connected, one person experiencing one pleasure.

He pushes deeper into me, his movements becoming more aggressive, and I cry out with surprise and delight.

He lifts himself, pressing his hands into the bed on either side of my head as he fights for control. Each thrust shoots through me and builds me up, lifting me to that same place his tongue took me.

He buries his cock deep inside me and moves his hips in small circles.

I can’t take it.

It’s too much.

Digging my nails into his back, my breathing is heavy and strained.

“Fuck—my angel—I can feel your pussy tightening over me,” he growls as he

continues to move in circles. “Is this what you want?” he whispers.

“Yes.” I gasp, my grip tightening just as the word escapes my lips

My pussy explodes around him. It pulses and locks on to his cock, wave after wave of another orgasm chasing through me. To my shock, his cock gets even harder inside me, and I feel it pulsing, too, his own pleasure shooting from him as he moans deeply.

I don't return to my room that night. And we don't go to sleep for a few more hours. He shows me more ways that he can steal my breath away, and by the time the sun rises, shining against my closed eyes, I am willing to push the pillow over my face and sleep the entire day away.

I've never felt so relaxed and so exhausted in my life. My body is a little bruised, a little sore—and still I want to feel him push into me again.

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:36 pm

The day after we return to Boston, shit is already stirring up, and I'm called into a meeting with the Kuznetsovs and my brothers.

All they told me is that it's regarding Andrei, and I have to be there.

I'm agitated the moment I walk into the Kuznetsov's building. This is the last place I want to be. I hate dealing with the mafia side of business, but right now, I don't have a choice.

Serafina is on my mind as the elevator carries me up to the top floor of the building. The thought of her makes me smile.

Things have changed between us since that night we shared in New York. I can't pinpoint what it is, but I'm closer to her now. She gave me something that no one else can have. Her virginity. Herself.

While we haven't spoken about it or made any move towards spending intimate time together again, I am constantly thinking about her...and that night...and her smile...and her laughter.

She's so beautiful.

She's funny and kind and sweet and so fucking smart.

She's incredible in every single way.

The elevator doors slide open.

Luka is standing just outside, next to Arkady.

“Hey man, you’re late,” Luka complains.

“I know, I’m sorry. I didn’t factor in the traffic on this side of town,” I reply. I hate being late. But I couldn’t even find parking. “Where’s Yil?”

“He’s inside, chatting to Rodion and Radmir already.”

“We better not leave him alone there,” I say, turning towards the boardroom.

I walk in behind Luka and Arkady.

All of the Kuznetsov brothers are here, sitting around the long glass table.

“Hi, sorry, it’s my fault we were late,” I apologize as soon as I step inside.

“No problem, man. There was an accident on Third Street. Traffic isn’t usually this bad,” Rodion says, gesturing for us to take a seat.

“Let’s get started,” Radmir says, standing up and setting his palms against the table. “We called you guys in today because shit has hit the fan. It’s about Andrei, as I said, but it’s more about the Enzos' involvement in the situation,” Radmir huffs, pulling his mouth to the side.

“We’re still looking for him,” Rigor comments.

“We are. We’re definitely still looking.

But the Enzos are now assuming that we are the ones hiding him.

Us, or you guys. So they've started sending spies out to investigate the Andreevs and us Kuznetsovs.

Two days ago, we found out that a new worker we hired at one of our warehouses was a spy. He works for the Enzos."

"Fuck," Arkady mutters.

"Exactly," Rodion agrees.

"How did you catch him?" I ask.

"We got intel from our man inside with the Enzos. He managed to get word out before any damage was done, and we pulled the infiltrator aside and questioned him."

"The problem is that we don't know where else they might have spies, and we need to triple security while also increasing our search efforts to find Andrei. If we find him, it might solve everything."

While I'm listening to them, I'm thinking about Serafina.

This world, whether I like it or not, is my world. I keep one foot in and one foot out. I've done everything in my power to be more out than in. But it's in my blood, no matter how much I want to deny it.

There are murmurs around the table as smaller conversations break out about how we should be proceeding.

Rodion holds his hand up and waits for everyone to be quiet.

"There is another problem."

“Of course there is,” Luka muses with annoyance.

How can I keep her safe from all of this?

How can I keep her close to me while still keeping her safe from this?

“There is another rival group that has been messing with our operations. So far it isn’t anything massive, just here and there—causing shit, making life harder—but obviously they are just getting started.”

“Who is it?” Yilian asks.

“We think it’s the Orlov family.”

“Think? So you don’t know?” Arkady remarks.

“We need someone to go check it out.”

“I’ll do it,” I say, almost immediately.

My brothers shoot me confused looks, their brows knitted tightly.

“You sure?” Rodion asks.

“I’m sure. I’ll check it out this week and have some intel for you by the weekend.”

“Great,” he nods. “Then we can meet again on Monday. In the meantime, please re-vet any new employees. We can’t have Enzo rats running around in our houses.”

“Done, we’ll get right on that,” Luka says, standing up.

“Thanks for coming through, guys,” Rodion says.

The Kuznetsov brothers stay to discuss other business while my brothers and I catch the elevator down to the ground floor.

We’re quiet, lost in thought, trying to figure out what is going on and the best way to deal with all of it.

We all step out of the elevator and walk through the lobby, out onto the street without speaking. It isn’t until we’re outside in the cold winter wind that Luka turns to me and says, “I’m really surprised you volunteered.”

“Why?” I ask.

“You tend to avoid the mafia business at all costs. I’ve only ever seen you get involved if you’re forced or paid to do it. What happened to you wanting to stay under the radar?”

Everyone is obviously wondering the same thing, because all of them turn to look at me, their brows raised in expectation as they curiously wait for my answer.

For a long time, I stay quiet, weighing my options.

Do I tell them the truth, or do I keep her entirely out of this?

“Dude, what’s going on?” Arkady punches me in the arm.

Tilting my head to the side, I sigh and close my eyes for a moment.

I have to tell them. They're my family.

"There is someone that's come into my life who I would like to protect—from all this shit, you know. Someone that means a lot to me, whom I would like to shield."

"Okay, but then why are you volunteering to deal with it?"

"Because if I can anticipate and work out the problems before they happen, then they will never affect her," I admit.

My brother's eyes are tight on me. Luka, Yilian and Arkady stare at me for a while before Luka says, "Nico, if this girl means that much to you, don't you think we should meet her?" He starts laughing. "I would really like to meet her."

"Me too," Arkady agrees.

I clench my jaw.

Serafina means a lot to me. It's not until this exact moment that I realized just how much she means. I want her to meet my family. I want her to be a part of my life.

My stomach flips with excitement and nervousness.

I can't believe it.

"Is this—oh, my words—it's the pretty little thing in the black dress, isn't it?" Arkady teases me.

"Calm down," I say, as his excitement begins to rise.

"I knew it," he shouts.

“How come Arkady has met her? That’s not fair,” Luka complains.

“He hasn’t really met her, he’s just seen her,” I argue.

“Nico—we need a family dinner. You know that Jade and Aliya will kill you if you have a girlfriend and they don’t know about it.”

Shit . I didn’t consider that. My sisters are very protective of us.

“Okay. Okay, fine. I’ll invite her to dinner. But you guys have to promise to behave.”

“You know we can’t do that,” Arkady laughs.

Shaking my head, I’m laughing too as I walk away from them. “I’ll ask her and call you idiots later to set a date,” I say, tugging my car door open. At least the traffic looks like it’s calmed down, and it’s not going to take me several hours to get back to the other side of town.

A quick glance at my watch tells me it’s past four. Just about time for the home commuter traffic to start. Damn. I’d better get going now. I won’t get back to the office in time to ask Serafina in person.

My stomach flips with nervous tension.

Asking her to a family dinner is a big deal.

It’s not something I take lightly.

I reach for my phone, sitting in the holder on my dash.

But hesitation causes me to draw my hand back.

Meeting my family might freak her out. It's freaking me out, so why wouldn't it freak her out?

The other thing is that as soon as I open that door and she steps onto a much more personal side of my life, it's going to be a lot more challenging to keep her separated from the mafia entanglement my family has.

Is it fair of me to do this to her?

Probably not.

I clench my jaw, turning at the traffic lights, my fingers drumming anxiously against the steering wheel.

Somewhere in the back of my mind, I'm fully aware that I'm going to ask her, regardless of the risks. My moral battle is raging, but she's too important to me, too special, too much of an obsession for me to walk away from her at this point.

But I do decide that calling her while she's at the office isn't the best choice.

So I'll wait till I get home, and I know she's home as well.

It's eight o'clock when I pick up my phone, having dragged it out long enough and unable to muster up one more minute of patience. I dial her number.

Serafina answers the call after three rings and sounds out of breath.

"Hello?" she mutters into the phone. Her heavy breathing has me thinking about the cute sounds she makes when I lick her.

“Did I catch you at a bad time?” I muse.

“Oh my goodness. Nico. Um. No. I didn’t realize it was you.” She’s flustered.

“You’re trying to tell me you don’t have my name saved in contacts?”

“No, I do.” She laughs. “But I was in the shower and I ran—and then I almost slipped, but I grabbed the phone and answered it all in one movement, and honestly, I was just trying not to laugh when I answered. It felt like the perfect moment—you know, in the cartoons when—um. Never mind. I didn’t look to see who was calling.

That’s what I’m trying to tell you.” She giggles quietly.

“So, you’re standing with the phone in your hand, dripping wet—naked?” My voice sounds deeper as the images of her body drift into my thoughts.

“Maybe,” she replies seductively.

“Mm. You’re making me forget why I called you.”

She starts laughing, and the beautiful sound snaps me out of my lustful dream.

“Maybe it was about the meeting tomorrow? Or an e-mail? Or that file?” she starts rattling off work lists.

“Does your brain ever switch off from work mode?” I ask, amused.

“Sometimes. Rarely. I like my job,” she says defensively.

“I know. It shows, because you’re so good at it. But I do know why I called you.”

“Well, don’t leave me in suspense.”

“Are you free for an early dinner on Saturday evening...?”

“I’d love to,” she answers too quickly. I can’t help laughing because she has no idea what she’s getting herself into. “Wait. Serafina. You should withhold your answer until you hear the full invite.”

“Oh. Okay,” she says, sounding nervous now.

“You might want to change your mind,” I say.

“Tell me,” she huffs.

“Are you free for dinner on Saturday? I would like you to meet my family.”

The moment of silence that follows my invite is heavy, and my heart begins to pulse loudly in my ears.

“Sera—“

“Are you serious?” she asks, but I can hear the smile in her voice.

“I am. I would love for you to meet my brothers and my sisters.”

“That sounds—that’s really—yes, I would love to come to dinner on Saturday.”

“Great.”

“Yes.”

I feel like a teenager having just asked out his first-ever date.

“I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Alright.” She’s still smiling. “I hope you sleep well.”

I don’t want to say goodbye yet. “What did you have for dinner tonight?”

She laughs. “I had leftover spaghetti. What did you have?”

I sit down on the sofa, getting comfortable. “I had a steak and some salad.”

“Really? I didn’t know guys ate salad,” she teases me.

“I’ll have you know that I make a killer salad. It’s made up entirely of avocado, rocket leaves, and balsamic vinegar.”

“I’m not sure that counts as an actual salad.”

“It does. It’s an avowed salad.”

She’s laughing, and I can’t stop grinning.

“Sera, I should let you go—I just remembered how naked you are. You’re probably freezing cold, and I’m taking up your time.”

“No. I wrapped my big, fluffy robe around myself.”

“What color is it?”

“Pink, and there is a hood with bunny ears,” she giggles.

“Imagine that—little Ms. Perfect Assistant, who dresses to kill at the office, wears a pink fluffy bunny robe at home. I think I’d like to see this...”

We talk for an hour, teasing back and forth, laughing, enjoying each other’s stories. By the time we end the call, my cheeks are aching from smiling so much, and I’m a thousand percent excited to introduce her to my family.

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:36 pm

Nico is going to be here in half an hour to fetch me, and I've changed my outfit seven times already.

I can't figure out whether I should be smart casual or full professional.

I mean, this is a family of businesspeople.

Successful, serious, professional people.

I've been practicing answering imaginary questions about my studies and what I majored in, and the articles my professor said were my best. I want them to know I'm capable and smart without sounding like I'm bragging.

I just want to fit in with everyone and have Nico feel proud of me.

I'm so nervous.

I don't know what to expect from his family dinner, but I've heard stories about how rich and successful his family is and how powerful they are in the business world. His family name was one of the main reasons I applied for the job at his company. I wanted to work for the best.

Well, I got what I wanted, and now I am about to have dinner with all of them, and I'm kind of freaking out.

I have to impress them.

This means a lot to me. I assume it would mean a lot to him to be able to introduce me as a competent and professional assistant. My stomach knots tighter. Am I there as his assistant, or something else ?

I want it to be something else, despite knowing it can't be. He's my boss. I'm only there to meet his family. People I might at some point need to interact with at work—that's all.

But we have been getting on so well.

Things have changed drastically since our trip to New York. Since he took my virginity.

Is the black dress the right dress? Should I rather wear the blue one? Or maybe the pink one is professional but also has a hint of weekend style, relaxed vibes.

Dammit, I don't know.

I stand in front of the mirror, turning left and right to try and see myself from all angles. My hair is pinned up in a cute, messy bun that actually took me an hour to create, and while it looks like I did it completely by accident, it was hard to make that casual mess of curls look right.

I kept my make-up light and clean, choosing a fresh look, mostly focusing on dramatic thick lashes and the soft touch of caramel gloss on my lips.

The black dress is tight and short with long sleeves; it's elegant and understated. I spin again, getting another look at myself.

"Mm," I say in surprise. "I actually look really good. I think this is the one." Thank goodness, because the thought of changing again was going to make me crazy.

I choose to wear my over-the-knee boots because they make me smile when I remember how much Nico liked them. Flashes of that night tease my memory, and my body begins to tingle with desire.

No, I need to focus. It's a big deal to meet his family. This is an important night, and I can't be off daydreaming about that type of thing.

I decide to break up the monotony of the black dress with a small blue clutch, and to accent the touch of color, I slip tiny blue diamanté earrings into my ears so that they dangle and catch the light when I move. It is the weekend, after all. A little sparkle goes a long way.

This is perfect.

Yes.

I'm finally ready. Oh my word. What a relief.

Again, my stomach churns with nerves. It's okay. I'm good with people. I'll treat it like a business meeting, and as long as I keep my professional nature up, I'll ace this dinner.

"Wow," Nico says when I open the front door. "You look incredible. As always." His eyes wander up and down my body with desire.

He looks so damn sexy in his dark jeans, thick sweater and black coat. His dark hair is a little wilder than usual, ruffled on top as though he's run his hand through it one too many times. And he didn't shave for the last two days. I find his shadowed beard so sexy.

“The blue really suits you,” he smiles, reaching out to brush his hand over my blue coat that perfectly matches my purse and earrings. His touch causes a ripple of excitement to run through me.

“Will you be warm enough?” he asks with care.

“I’m sure I will,” I say, looking down at my outfit.

“Luka likes the colder weather, so he never turns the heating up high even when it’s snowing outside.” Nico rolls his eyes. “But I think with my sisters being there tonight, he’ll be forced to.” He laughs. “They don’t let him get away with anything.”

I lock my front door, and Nico slips his arm around my waist as we walk towards his car. He holds the door open for me while I climb inside.

Arriving at Nico’s brother’s house, I quickly realize that they are not the intimidating businesspeople that I had envisioned.

I thought they were going to look at me and judge me based on my success, or lack thereof. My wealth, my status, what I’m wearing, that sort of thing. But in actuality, they are warm, welcoming, and incredibly friendly.

When I step into the house, the first person to greet me is Arkady. He’s tall with dark hair like Nico, sharp eyes, and a cheeky smile.

“This is Arkady, my youngest brother,” Nico says.

“Hey, girl in the black dress,” he grins.

“Uh,” I stammer. I mean, I am wearing a black dress—it’s just a weird way to greet someone.

I hold out my hand to shake his. “I’m Serafina,” I say confident and bold. Ark throws a look towards Nico as though he’s about to stir up some trouble.

He pulls me into a hug and laughs. “It’s good to meet you. I’ve already warned Nico that if he doesn’t keep an eye on you, I’m going to steal you. I’m more fun than he, anyway. It would be an upgrade.”

His eyes are shining with mischief when he releases me from the hug.

My cheeks are heated with surprise, but I can’t help smiling at his playfulness.

Nico punches his brother in the arm. “I told you to behave.” He shakes his head, pushing Arkady out of the way and wrapping his arm around my waist as he moves me protectively against his side.

For a second, I’m worried he’s genuinely angry, but he throws his brother a massive smile, and Arkady winks at me.

Luka is the next brother I meet, and he’s less playful, but very welcoming.

Everyone else is wearing long sleeves, but he only has a thin t-shirt on.

He also pulls me straight into a hug. The last thing I expected was for this to be a family of huggers.

But then again, Nico is very affectionate and likes to reach out and touch me often, so why wouldn’t his family be a bunch of huggers?

When Luka steps away from me, he smiles and says, “I hope you aren’t a vegetarian, because we made lamb shanks for dinner.” He pulls a face, suddenly worried.

Nico sighs. “You don’t think that’s something you should have checked a day or two before?” he laughs.

“Well,” Luka says tensely.

“I eat almost everything. Except snails. Just the idea of it freaks me out.”

“In that case, you’ll fit in just fine. Let me take your coat.” Luka steps behind me and shrugs the heavy blue coat off my shoulders while he talks to Nico. “That crate of red wine you ordered arrived this morning. Jade just opened a bottle now. It’s freaking good.”

“I knew you’d like it,” Nico nods.

“Thanks, man. I appreciate it,” Luka smiles. He throws my jacket over his arm, then disappears to hang it up somewhere.

Jade and Aliyah rush over to me, bubbling with excitement.

“These are my sisters,” Nico gestures towards them.

“Oh my goodness, Nico said you were gorgeous—but wow,” Aliyah says, and my cheeks are red again.

They both hug me, and before I know it, they’ve pulled me away from Nico to introduce me to everyone else, including Radmir Kuztnetsov, who is married to Jade. When he reaches out to shake my hand, I notice that he has a gun strapped to his hip. He’s not the only one.

Luka and Arkady are also carrying guns. I wonder if everyone is?

By the time I get to the dining table and sit down next to Nico, I'm doing my best to remember who is who, and I'm feeling a little overwhelmed.

Beneath the table, Nico brushes his hand over my leg.

"Are you doing okay?" he whispers, leaning close to me.

"They're all so friendly," I whisper back.

"Mm. They are. They're also all a pain in the ass sometimes," he chuckles.

"I heard that," Aliyah says, catching her brother out. "Don't pretend like you aren't the biggest pain in the ass out of all of us."

"Hey," Arkady says, sounding hurt and disappointed.

Nico shakes his head at his sister. "Don't do that to Arkady. You know he works hard to be the most annoying and unpredictable out of everyone in this family."

Jade throws her hands in the air in defeat. "Sorry, Ark. I didn't mean it," she giggles.

The banter continues all through dinner, with everyone taking a turn to tease someone else and then everyone joining in on the laughter.

It's strange that in my mind, I spent two days preparing to be questioned about work and business and my qualifications, and no one here has mentioned the office, not once.

They've asked me about what I enjoy doing, my favorite foods, and whether or not I like a particular artist. They've asked me about my travels, or lack thereof at this point, and where I would go if I could go anywhere.

They've asked me if I've ever been diving before, and hiking, and which beach I like the best.

But they haven't asked me about work.

"What was Nico like when he was young?" I ask, cutting a very sharp knife through my lamb shank. It's so soft and tender that I hardly need a knife at all.

Yilian is the one who answers by chuckling first. "When we were all much, much younger, my parents had to go out one night—some kind of event, I can't remember—and they lined us up to give us a very stern talking to. And what they said that day—I think it set the tone for the rest of our lives."

"I don't remember this. What are you talking about?" Arkady says.

"I remember," Nico smiles, only one side of his mouth curling upwards.

"We were lined up oldest to youngest, so Nico was there on their end, and my dad said to him, 'You are the man of this house whenever we are gone. Your brothers and sisters are your responsibility. No excuses. You take care of them.'"

Nico pulls his mouth tight, carrying the weight of those words in his memory.

I look between him and Yilian.

Luka nods his head towards Nico. "He's been looking out for us ever since. I think he was ten at the time. But damn, he took our father seriously that day and every day after."

Jade is walking past the table with a fresh bottle of wine. She hugs Nico from behind. "He's the best big brother you could ever ask for," she smiles. She leans over and

tops up our glasses with a dark red pinot noir before moving away to make sure everyone has wine.

My smile spreads from cheek to cheek as I watch them. My heart is warm and happy. I lean close to Nico, who looks proud, but also a little embarrassed beneath all the praise and love.

“So, is this what it’s like to have brothers and sisters?” I whisper.

From across the table, half a potato comes flying and hits Nico on the chest. It bounces off him and rolls to the floor.

We look up to see Arkady smirking. “Don’t go getting a big head about it, bro, or we’re hauling out the baby photo albums. You know Mom loved to put the most embarrassing pics in there—“

Nico, look at me. “No. That is what it’s like to have brothers and sisters.”

Everyone at the table starts laughing.

It’s the perfect night. I couldn’t ever have guessed it would be so much fun, so relaxed. His family is incredible.

My eyes are constantly wandering over Nico’s beautiful features.

I’m imagining a life with him. It’s ridiculous to be thinking things like that, but I can’t help it.

He’s kind and generous and caring. He’s drop-dead fucking gorgeous, and confident and full of strength.

The way he acts possessive and protective over me—it drives me wild with desire.

But he's my boss.

He's also the first man I've ever been unable to stop thinking about, every moment of every day. He's always on my mind. No matter what I'm doing, I'm also wondering where he is and if he needs anything, and when I'll see him again.

After dinner, we say goodbye to everyone. Nico keeps me close, his arm around me, in front of all of his brothers and sisters. I wonder if it means anything. I shouldn't read into it, though. I'll end up getting hurt at the end of the day, because I want this more than I dare to admit out loud.

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:36 pm

Sera ducks into the car. She rubs her hands over her arms to fight off the cold air.

I'm about to close the door, but I hesitate, remembering something I have to do.

"Do you mind if we make a very quick stop at the office? I have a few things to deal with tomorrow morning, so I wanted to grab the files."

She shakes her head. "I don't mind at all." Her smile is radiant.

She's been perfect all night.

I close the door and walk around the car to the driver's side.

Serafina got on with everyone tonight. My family loves her, I can tell. In general, they are relaxed and comfortable, but they would never have been that playful around her if they didn't like her.

She's impossible not to like, so I wasn't worried about that.

And from the other perspective, I'm pretty sure she had a great time, too.

I smile to myself as I duck into the car.

"Wow, it got colder," she says as the engine purrs to life. I flick the heating on; it's dark outside, and the temperature is considerably colder than inside Luka's place. He kept the heating at a reasonable temperature. I think Jade lectured him before we all got there.

I look over at Sera. She's still rubbing her hands over her arms. "It'll warm up in a second," I say, reaching across and rubbing her leg.

Arkady gave her a lot of shit. He was causing mischief all night. But as soon as she realized what he was doing, she gave it right back.

And Aliyah and Serafina got on like a house on fire, which I loved.

"That was so much fun, Nico. Thank you for inviting me." She smiles across the car, her eyes shining in the night. Her cheeks are rosy from the wine.

"It was amazing having you there. I'm sorry they gave you so much shit," I chuckle.

"I loved it. I've never had a chance to see what it's like to have brothers and sisters—I've never even had friends who were that close. It was honestly a lot of fun."

Driving through town, I turn onto the road that leads towards our office building. "I'll be quick," I say, then frown. "I'd rather you didn't wait in the car, though. It's cold and late. It'll be safer to come upstairs with me."

"I don't mind. I'll come with you. Moving around will keep me warmer, anyway."

I nod, satisfied, as I pull into the parking bay at the front entrance.

The building is filled with light, but it's empty and quiet.

There are security guards on duty, but I still don't like the idea of her waiting outside alone. Besides, I want her with me. I'm not even ready to drop her at home yet. I want more time with her.

In the elevator, she is chatty and laughing, recalling things my brothers said and joking about it.

“They are really amazing. All of them. You’re so lucky, Nico,” she says, following me out of the elevator and into my office.

“And Aliyah is the sweetest. She was always checking on me to make sure I was okay,” she remarks, dropping her purse onto the side of my desk while she waits for me to gather what I need.

But I’m not gathering the files, I’m watching her.

Her face lit up and happy, her eyes bright and shining. Her lips, perfect and soft...

Before I know what I’m doing, I step towards her, wrap my arms around her back, and pull her against my chest. My heart races with anticipation, being this close to her. All night I’ve been thinking about kissing her, about holding her and letting my hands brush over her.

Our lips lock together, and the kiss sends a wild thrill of excitement through me.

I didn’t intend to kiss her right now.

I meant to keep my distance.

And when I kiss her, I don’t intend for it to go further than that. I just wanted to feel her in my arms, to hold her. To taste the soft warmth of her mouth.

But now that I have her, things are slipping.

My mind is slipping. My control is slipping.

I am the first man who ever slept with her. I am the first man who ever felt her come over his cock. I want to be her first for everything.

She threads her fingers up my neck and through my hair as her body pushes into mind. I sit on the edge of my desk and pull her into the space between my legs. She leans against me, and the kiss becomes more urgent.

I've had too much wine.

She isn't helping me rein this in—she's encouraging it, and I'm going to have to be the one to stop this.

Why stop it, though? Why shouldn't you have her?

Sera giggles against my lips, and I realize what she's doing. A low growl rumbles through me.

Her hand slides over my chest, across my stomach, crossing my belt, and the moment her fingers brush over my cock, pressing lightly against it, causing it to throb and pulse in erotic desire, my entire brain scrambles.

Any control I thought I had, any last scrap of my ability to keep myself in check—it's gone.

I lean against the desk to steady myself, tilting my head back and taking a deep breath.

“Serafina,” I warn her with darkness edged in my voice.

She giggles again, tugging at my belt, pulling it loose, and immediately unbuttoning my pants. My cock jumps free, already rock-hard, already begging to be touched by

her body.

“Serafina,” I growl again.

“I’ve never done this before, and I—I want to try,” she whispers, her eyes locked with mine as she lowers herself to her knees in front of me.

“Oh my fuck,” I mumble. Her eyes are wide and round as they stare up at me from the floor. My cock is thick, veins popping from it, hovering just above her face.

She reaches up and wraps her delicate fingers around it, and I’m about to lose my mind. She’s never done this before.

Those virgin lips, her virgin tongue, are about to taste my cock for the very first time.

Her mouth opens, and she slowly licks her warm tongue over the tip of my cock. I shudder, leaning even harder against the desk, because my legs have gone weak, and I don’t trust them to hold me up anymore. Her perfect little mouth. Her perfect little face.

I wrap my hand over her jaw. “You don’t have to do this if you’re not comfortable,” I say tightly, wondering what I would do if she stopped. Because at this point, I am so desperate in my desire for her, I don’t think she’d be safe around me.

“I want to,” she whispers.

She lowers her face beneath my cock and runs her tongue from my balls all the way up the base of my cock, over the thickest vein, licking hot warmth up to the tip.

The pleasure that floods me is indescribable. She’s a fucking goddess.

My eyes are locked on her.

“Open your mouth,” I tell her.

She opens her mouth as wide as she can, but I can see it’s not wide enough to handle all of me.

It doesn’t matter, though, because she takes the part of me that she can manage into her mouth, and I practically explode over her tongue right away.

Her innocent inexperience is wild.

The way she’s trying so hard to please me even though she has no idea what she’s doing—and she has no idea how fucking good she is at what she’s doing—it’s enough to send me over the edge.

I’m actually fighting not to come too easily.

I want to savor this.

Each little flick of her tongue.

The way she gags softly and looks shocked when my cock slips in too deep, her fingers gripping the base of my cock as her spit shines over my skin.

Her perfectly painted black nails.

It’s too much.

It’s everything.

I'm breathing heavily when I rest my hand on the top of her head.

I start rocking back and forth, being careful not to choke her by thrusting too deep, but the pleasure is so intense I'm trusting her to stop me if she needs to—I can't rely on myself.

I push in deep, testing my luck; she gags again, and her eyes are watering when she looks up at me. It's beautiful how she's suffering to please me.

"You're so fucking sexy," I growl, slowly pushing in again.

My cock is getting harder by the second, going rigid in her hands, the tip rubbing over her mouth.

My fingers knot tightly in her hair, and I'm pulling hard as I move faster.

"Tilt your head back. Open your mouth again, wide," I command.

She leans back and opens her mouth.

"Stick out your tongue for me, angel," I demand.

She slips her tongue from her mouth, and the moment my cock brushes over it I explode.

My come splashes over her lips and her tongue, decorating her face with my desire.

She sits obediently still with her lips parted until every last drop is finished.

The level of satisfaction and release running through me in this moment is so incredible that I start to laugh. A low, deep sound that rumbles from my chest. Pure

pleasure. Pure happiness.

She gasps and stands up, wiping her fingers over her mouth.

“Did I do it wrong?” she asks, worried.

I grab her into my arms and kiss her. I kiss her with such force that she has no choice other than to read my words through my lips.

That was perfect.

She giggles against my mouth and pulls away from me, looking into my eyes. “Don’t forget your files. The real reason we came here.”

I grin. “Thanks. I just about forgot that the rest of the world existed.”

After neatening my clothes and making sure I’m looking decent again, I grab the files and take Serafina’s hand.

“That was incredible, Sera. But just so you know, you can practice as many times as you want. Just in case you want to—I really don’t mind.”

She cracks up laughing and punches me in the chest.

“Don’t think I can’t see straight through you, Nico Andreev.”

I tug the car door open for her again. My heart is weighted down with the knowledge that I need to drop her at home. I was reluctant to say goodbye before, and now it’s ten times worse.

I want to spend every moment with her.

The thought of not being with her is horrible.

Sighing, I start the engine and we drive in comfortable silence for the short trip to her home.

I park outside and turn the engine off.

Shifting, I face her and reach out to take her hand.

“I—“

The words get stuck in my throat.

“Do you want to come inside?” she asks, her eyes flashing with hope.

“I would love that,” I nod. In fact, the truth is that I want nothing more. That is all I want. That is everything I want.

We climb out of the car, and while she’s unlocking the door, I’m standing behind her with my arms wrapped around her waist.

As soon as the front door closes behind us, I lift her off the ground, kissing her again. We have all night to play together, and I want to touch every inch of her beautiful body.

“Sera,” I say, just before I pull her coat off her shoulders.

“Mm?” She looks up at me with curiosity, noticing the change in my tone, a serious note to my voice.

“I would like to be exclusive with you.”

She knits her brows.

“Are you asking...do you want me to be your girlfriend?” she says in surprise.

I grin. “Sorry, it’s been a long, long time—I don’t know the correct way to ask. I want you to be mine. To belong to me. To let me spoil you and make you smile. I don’t want another man near you. I don’t want to share you.”

She giggles.

“Yes,” she says.

“So, you’re mine now?” I say, pushing the coat off her body and running my hands over her waist.

“I’m yours,” she whispers, then bites her lower lip and causes my brain to melt all over again.

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Two weeks.

Two weeks of absolute heaven.

It's been two weeks since he asked me to be his girlfriend, which I thought was the most romantic thing ever. The way he got a little nervous and didn't know how to word it properly—I haven't stopped smiling.

We're dating in secret, though, because we work together, and we both know it will cause a lot of drama in the office; we discussed it and decided it's going to make our lives a lot easier if we just keep it between ourselves.

And I don't care if anyone knows or not, anyway—the bottom line is that I am happier than I have ever been in my entire life.

The last two weeks of my life have been by far the best.

Nico treats me like a queen. He makes me feel like I'm the most beautiful, special girl in the universe.

And the things he does to my body—things I didn't know were a thing until he showed me.

I'd let that man do anything he wanted to me.

I trust him without limits, and he's proven over and over again that he will take care of me and be gentle, even when we're playing a little rough.

I grin, pressing my finger against the elevator on the ground floor.

It's very early, and the office is still empty and quiet. I came in before everyone else, hoping to get a head start on everything.

I had planned to make dinner with Nico tonight, but as I was leaving the office yesterday, I realized that with the amount of work I have to get through, we'd both be working late instead.

So, I'm here before the world wakes up so that I can tackle all of it and we can still leave at a normal time and have the evening free.

The elevator slides open on the top floor, and I go straight into my office to put my things down. Nico doesn't know I'm here. I giggle to myself. It's a good thing. He would have come in early, too, and then we wouldn't have managed to get any work done. He's so distracting.

Gathering the files I want to complete, I find my thoughts lost on him again. Always lost on him.

I can't believe how lucky I am.

He could have chosen any girl in the entire world. He could have snapped his fingers, and without question, whoever he was interested in would have fallen instantly in love with him.

He's impossible not to love. And impossibly sexy.

And impossibly perfect.

I laugh again.

Gosh, I have to stop daydreaming about him and focus. Otherwise, coming in early is going to be a pointless mission.

The silver on my watch flashes as I tilt it towards me.

Five-thirty. Still dark outside.

I can get so much done if I lock down and focus.

It's nearing the financial year's end, and the work I need to do is heavy and draining because it requires my full attention. But I love a good spreadsheet, so that makes it more fun.

I carry all of the folders I gathered into the boardroom next to our offices. Once they are spread out, I head back and grab the rest. I need the extra table space to organize things nicely.

I open my laptop, log on, and dive in.

An hour rolls by and I'm keeping a steady pace.

At seven, I see some movement outside the boardroom because other people are starting to arrive early, but not as early as I was.

At exactly forty-three minutes past seven, my heart stutters.

"What is that?" I whisper, pressing my finger against the document and squinting at the transaction. "That doesn't make sense."

I look at my laptop, scrolling down the spreadsheet.

“Okay, that’s definitely not right.”

Dragging the laptop right in front of me, I push the paperwork aside to run a more intensive search through the program.

The transaction I’ve stumbled across is small—insignificant, actually. I could easily ignore it, but it shouldn’t be there at all, and I don’t like that. I like things to line up perfectly at the end.

I type in one keyword and nothing comes up. I type in another keyword, and nothing comes up.

“What are you for?” I say out loud.

It’s not my job to check the entire month of transactions. I only deal with a portion of this document, usually. But now my curiosity has spiked, and I can’t let it go.

I need to know what this is about.

I bolt out of the boardroom into the filing cabinet down the hall, one that I never have reason to get into.

I grab the last two months of paperwork and hurry back to the desk. Both of these months have been signed off and completed.

I stand up, leaning over the paperwork in the now folders, my eyes tracing over the endless lists of transactions, searching for anything that looks the same as the one I found.

And sure enough, there it is. A couple of minuscule amounts.

Money moved around. Shifted and then transferred out of the account.

“Where to?” I mumble.

Sighing, my brows knitted, I sit back down at the laptop.

I need to know what to search for to see if there are any more of these little amounts.

I grab the folder and look at the full reference number for one of the transactions.

“Seven, three, dash, three—” I type into the search bar, and suddenly my screen is flooded with transactions.

All small.

All with the same reference code at the end.

All insignificant on their own, and easy to skip over, but together, the amount is growing quickly. The longer the program runs, the longer the list gets—and the higher the total gets with it.

I sit back in my chair with my jaw dropping while I’m watching the program tally up the transactions over the past few months.

It comes to a stop.

Disbelief and panic surge inside me.

This is one hundred percent not right.

This is...

Someone is up to something.

I click on the date range and run the same search for six months, and the exact same thing happens, but the amount gets bigger.

I can't believe it.

Grabbing my phone, I dial Nico.

My heart is racing, and I stand up, pacing up and down the boardroom to try and ease my steadily building anxiety.

"Hey, gorgeous," he says with a smile in his voice.

"Nico, when are you coming in? I need to show you something," I blurt out.

"Are you okay? Did something happen?" he asks, immediately worried about me.

"I'm fine. I just need to show you something. I'm in boardroom one. I was working early. I was doing..." I'm talking too fast and I'm rambling.

"Wait. I'm just getting into the elevator to come upstairs. I'll be right there. Don't move," he says.

"Okay," I say, letting out a breath of relief.

I stand anxiously, knotting my fingers in front of me while I wait for him. My eyes drift from the door to the laptop.

Millions .

Millions of dollars were squirreled away bit by bit over the past year. I don't know when it started. I haven't looked properly yet.

How far does this go back? It might have started this year—or worse, the year before. Nico and I can look through it together.

Nico bursts through the boardroom door in a hurry.

He walks straight to me and pulls me into his arms, brushing his hands over my waist, checking to see if I'm okay.

I shake my head. "I promise, I'm fine. This—look. It's easier to show you."

I take his hand and drag him to the table, pointing at the screen.

"Do you see these little transactions? Tiny. I have no idea what each one is for—but Nico, there are thousands of them."

I scroll down the screen and point at the total.

"That's the total for the last six months. I haven't had a chance to look further back than this year. I don't know when it started."

I stand back and hold my breath as he pulls the laptop to face him and scrolls up and down. My heart is racing while I wait for him to process what is going on.

He needs a minute, just like I did, to realize just how bad this is.

I wait, getting tenser and tenser.

Finally, I can't take it anymore, and I mutter his name. "Nico?"

“What the hell were you doing looking at these files? This has nothing to do with your work,” he snarls, turning towards me.

I gasp in shock, taking a step back. “I thought—“

“If it isn’t your job, you need to leave it alone. You had no right to go through company documents.”

“Nico, someone is stealing from you,” I shout, defensive and hurt by his reaction. Doesn’t he understand what I’ve uncovered?

“I can fucking see that,” he growls, turning his back on me.

So he can see. He does understand.

Why the hell is he so angry at me then?

“Nico,” I say, stepping towards him with my hand reaching out to touch him, but I stop when he turns. The look in his eyes is dark and terrifying.

“Put these files away and close that search. This is not your job, and you should leave it alone. Focus on what you are paid to do,” he snaps, glaring at me.

His eyes are cold. He’s flooded with rage, and I don’t know why he’s angry with me ; I’m the one who found it, I’m the one who can help him look deeper into what’s happened and help him solve it, but instead, he’s telling me to back off.

“I can help you,” I say quietly, embarrassed and self-conscious of the way he’s looking at me as though I’ve betrayed him.

“I said, leave it alone ,” he snaps again. Then he turns on his heel and storms out of

the boardroom, leaving me in shock and confusion.

My chest is so tight I can't breathe.

That is a side of Nico I never wanted to see.

Tears spring to my eyes, and I fight hard to keep them away.

Crying at work is the last thing I need now.

I'm embarrassed enough as it is from how he reacted to me; I don't need to add being caught crying in the boardroom like a child to the list.

I hurriedly brush my hand over my face and take a deep breath.

Fine.

None of it makes sense, but he asked me to leave it alone, so I will.

At least he knows. That's what matters more than anything.

I'm sure he'll do his own investigation either way.

I'm chewing the inside of my cheek while I put the files away, broken down and unmotivated. My heart is aching in my chest. Perhaps it's better to leave dinner for another night.

I can't imagine he'd want to come over tonight after this.

Once the boardroom is cleared and the files back where they belong, I pick up my laptop and carry it to my office, closing the door behind me because I want to work in

privacy.

My emotions are all over the place, and I don't feel like dealing with any of my co-workers.

I'll finish the files that are my responsibility and leave the rest to whoever.

The day drags on.

I'm distracted and miserable.

Every time I hear someone walking past my office door, I hold my breath, hoping it's Nico coming to talk to me.

Every day, he's in and out of my office.

But not today.

At lunch, I decide to escape the claustrophobia that's growing heavier by the minute. Tugging my office door open, I glance left and right. He's not around, so I bolt towards the elevator, in a hurry to leave without being spotted.

Nicole's eyes are on me, though. "I'm heading out for a coffee," I say, to avoid any curiosity.

"We have coffee in the office," she says blandly.

I ignore her. She is the last person I'm in the mood for now.

Downstairs, I walk briskly through the lobby and only really take a deep breath once I'm outside in the crisp, fresh air.

“What a horrible morning,” I mutter to myself as I turn in the direction of the coffee shop down the road.

Tugging my jacket tighter around my neck, I shove my hands into my pockets and keep my head down, still lost in thought about why he would have been so angry with me.

“I’ll wait it out,” I sigh.

He’ll talk to me sooner or later.

I hope.

The coffee shop is warm and welcoming, and a huge relief for my mind compared to the office.

I sit at a table by the window where I can watch the freshly falling, tiny little snowflakes drift quietly through the air and settle on the sidewalk and road. The tops of the tree branches are turning white with it.

It’s beautiful, and it calms me down.

“Hi sweetie, what can I get you?” the cheerful waitress asks.

“A hot chocolate, please. And do you have those chocolate croissants today?”

“Oh, you’re in luck. They just came out of the oven.”

She hurries away to grab me one before they all sell out. Those things disappear almost as soon as they’re put into the glass display case of the bakery section. I think people from all over the city come to this coffee shop instead of the ones closest to

them, just for those croissants.

It's a chocolate croissant, but it has salted caramel drizzled inside and little marshmallows melted into the pastry. Basically heaven for your mouth.

"Excuse me," his voice makes me jump as he calls out to the waiter.

Nico waves his hand in the air, smiling at her. "I'll have the same as what she's having."

The waitress gushes. She always gushes over Nico. I can't blame her. He's worthy of gushing over.

Her pink cheeks radiate as she grins at him. "I'll make sure you get the biggest croissant," she giggles.

I turn my face down to hide my laughter.

"Hi," he says, sitting down in the chair opposite me. "What's so funny?" he knows his brow.

"I didn't get offered the biggest croissant. Why are you the favorite?"

"Pff." He shrugs his jacket off, shaking his head. "She's just being nice."

"Mm. Nice . Yes. That's what it is." I grin, teasing him.

But then the smile fades from my face, and the anxiety returns to twist in my stomach. I sigh heavily.

Nico notices the change in me.

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I've spent the entire morning trying to figure out what the hell is going on with those transactions—how the fuck did it even happen? Who the fuck is doing this?

At first, when she showed it to me, I panicked.

I thought she'd found something related to the bratva side of the business that I was trying to keep her separate from. I thought it was the underground records, documents we keep apart from the rest of the office.

I freaked out at her, I'm ashamed to say, but it was because I was worried about her. Just knowing puts her at risk.

Knowing anything about the mafia ties we have puts her in danger. That's the last thing I want for her. I would never forgive myself if something happened to her because of my mafia background.

But it wasn't that.

The transactions have absolutely nothing to do with bratva.

The discrepancies are blatant. Someone is stealing from me. I have no idea how they've managed to do it for so long, right under my nose.

The fact that I didn't see it made me angrier and more determined to figure out who it was.

I still don't know.

I've hired an investigator to deep dive into the accounts quietly. The fewer people who know about this for now, the better.

So far, he has discovered that the money is being transferred to an unnamed account. It's anonymous. He's going to keep digging.

I was focused on trying to figure it all out, but the weight of my guilt over how I treated Serafina has been too much.

I was a fucking asshole to her. She did not deserve that. Not at all.

If not for her, this person might have carried on for who knows how long.

I should have been the one to see it—but I wasn't.

She was.

And I treated her like shit because of it. I'm ashamed of myself.

I was shocked when I found her office empty.

I even panicked a bit, a flash of fear that she'd left for good, angry with me because I was so rude

But she's too level-headed for that. Sera is not the type of girl to throw a tantrum or hold grudges. I hope .

Nicole was the one who told me Sera had gone for coffee. The moment she said it, I knew where to find her—the only coffee shop she insists that we go to whenever we need a quick break from the office.

And I came straight here, walking through the streets with tiny snowflakes falling around me.

The walk helped clear my mind. I'm angry, frustrated, ready to tear someone apart for stealing from me—but first, I need to fix things with Sera.

She is my priority. Money comes second. Business comes second.

I never thought I would say that about anyone other than my family, but she's stolen such a massive piece of my heart in such a short time.

I stop outside the coffee shop and peek inside.

My heart staggers to a stop because I am so relieved when I see her through the window. Her beautiful face is lit up, smiling as the waitress walks away from her.

Being apart from her creates a deep ache inside me. I miss her the moment she walks away from me.

Sitting down at her seat by the window, I glance across the table at her.

Just a second ago, she was smiling, teasing me about the waitress and how she thinks she was flirting with me.

But in a flash, her entire face changes as her smile fades away.

Her brows knit, and she starts biting at her lower lip like she does when she's anxious. The things that happened this morning obviously snuck back into her memory.

I feel terrible.

My hands are warm from being inside my coat pocket on the walk here. I reach across the table and take her hand in mine, rubbing my thumb over the back of her hand, feeling the soft warmth of her skin.

“Sera, I am so, so sorry. I am such an asshole. I should never have spoken to you like that, and you have every right to be angry with me. But I need you to know how sorry I am for how I treated you,” I say, looking into her eyes.

I wait tensely for her reaction. I’m expecting her to give me an earful, to lecture me about respect and never speaking to her like that—and she would be fully within her rights to do so.

I deserve to feel all of her anger, all of the hurt I gave her.

She shouldn’t hold on to that; she should throw it back at me.

She bites her lip and sighs, looking down at my hand holding hers.

I wait, wondering if I should try and explain more, or tell her again that I’m sorry.

She threads her fingers through mine and looks up at me. Her eyes are warm and kind.

“You,” she grins, tilting her head to the side, “owe me a foot massage.”

She’s looking proud of herself.

“A foot massage?” I ask in confusion.

“Yes. Not a quick one. Not five minutes and then you stop when you’re bored. No. I want a proper one. With lotion that smells like roses.”

I start laughing, the low rumble building from my belly and spilling from my lips. “Is this my punishment ?” I ask, realizing what she’s doing.

“It’s how you are going to make it up to me,” she nods, still smiling, her eyes glittering with relief that our fight is already over before it began.

“What else?” I ask, reaching beneath the table to pull her chair closer to mine. “Because at this point, you could ask me for a new Mercedes, and I’d say yes.”

“Mm.” She presses her finger over her lips, thinking.

“Name the color. Custom pink? Blue? Blue really suits you. Or emerald green to match your eyes,” I grin.

Eventually, she shakes her head. “I think the foot massage is sufficient.”

My heart aches. How is she so sweet, so perfect?

Threading my arm around her back, I pull her tight against my side and kiss the top of her head when she snuggles into me.

“Sera, I really am so sorry. I hate that I spoke to you like that. The stuff you showed me—it caught me off guard, and I reacted in anger about that , it was never meant to be directed at you.”

She stays snuggled against me and whispers, “It’s okay, Nico. I forgive you. I know it was a lot to take in.”

“But I hurt you.” I lift her chin with my hand beneath it and her eyes pierce into mine. “Something I never want to do.”

“I’m tougher than you think,” she smiles, leaning closer to kiss me.

She suddenly remembers where we are and sits up. A lot of people from the office come to this coffee shop, and our relationship is supposed to be a secret.

I glance to my left and right—no one we know is here.

Taking her face in my hands, I press my lips to hers and kiss her deeply.

My heart is slamming wildly against my ribs.

“Ehem,” the waitress politely draws our attention.

She sets coffee and croissants down in front of us, then grins at me before turning to Sera and saying, “You are the luckiest girl on the planet.”

She laughs and walks away with a skip in her step.

“See,” Sera smirks at me. “I told you she has a little crush on you.”

“Well, she’s too late. I met the girl of my dreams just a month or so ago,” I reply, scooping some sugar into Sera’s coffee for her.

“Oh, really. That’s so disappointing. I was just starting to like you.” Sera pouts her lower lip out. “Who is she?” she asks, feigning heartache.

I pull her into another kiss, not caring who sees. “You are the cheekiest angel I’ve ever met,” I whisper against her mouth. “Let me take you to dinner tonight. I’ll make it extra special.”

“We were going to cook tonight.”

“We can do that tomorrow. I want to take you out. I want to spoil you.”

She leans into me as she pulls her coffee closer to pick it up. “I’ll wear the white dress you like so much.”

“Mm. And those boots. I’m thinking we have to get you a few more pairs of those boots. One in each color.”

At seven o'clock, I’m just about to leave the house to fetch Sera for our dinner date when my phone buzzes.

The sound agitates me because all I want to do is get back to her.

I don’t want any delays or distractions.

I’m really looking forward to the night I’ve planned out.

I can’t wait to spoil her and let her know what she means to me.

But one quick glance at the screen tells me it’s the investigator I hired, and this is a call I want to take. He works with us on many different levels and he was the only one I could trust with the sensitive information he has to sift through to get to the truth.

“Henderson,” I say, pressing the phone against my ear. “What can you tell me?”

“Hi Niko, we managed to get the name on the account. Fuck, it was hidden beneath several layers of security. These guys were deep, deep undercover on this one. They did not want to be found. But we got through it, and I have a name for you.”

“Don’t keep me in suspense. Who is it?” I ask tightly.

The heavy pause causes tension to spike inside me.

“Ivan Orlov,” he says, and my entire body goes cold.

“Orlov. Are you kidding me?” Of all the names that I did not want to hear, that one might have been at the top of the list.

“I kid you not. Unfortunately. It seems he hasn’t only been messing with your operations at the warehouses. He’s inside your office, too.”

“But would he need to have someone literally inside the office to pull this off? Or is it something he could have done remotely?”

Henderson huffs out a breath. “This is an inside job. It would have been nearly impossible to pull this off without information from your financial files. Whoever is doing this works in your office, Nico. You know the person. You probably speak to them every day.”

A low growl of rage runs through me. The faces of my employees flash through my mind. Who the fuck is it? Which one of them has been looking into my eyes every day and stabbing me in the back?

I want to kill someone.

Suddenly, a shocking truth slams into me, hitting my chest and knocking the air from my lungs.

If whoever it is knows that Sera discovered their secret, she is in serious danger. They will kill her.

They wouldn't even hesitate to get rid of her if it meant hiding their identity and anything they've been up to.

Fuck.

"Henderson. Thanks. I've got to go."

"Sure thing—"

I hang up the phone before I hear anything else.

With singular focus, I run to grab my keys and bolt out of the penthouse to the elevators. While I'm rushing, I call her. The phone rings, it rings again. The longer it rings, the sicker I feel. My stomach twists and knots with fear.

She doesn't answer, so I dial again.

The third time I dial—the third time she doesn't answer—I'm on the verge of kicking a wall down, I'm so worried.

I drive much faster than I should be driving, screaming around corners, my tires skidding on the icy roads, my mind racing with everything that might be happening to her.

If they fucking took her, if they lay one fucking hand on her, I will kill them all. Every last one of those fucking Orlovs. Their children's children will die before they've taken their first breath into the world. I will kill them and their entire bloodline.

My car skids to a halt outside her apartment. I climb out, almost slipping on the road. I run to her front door and try the handle. It's locked. I knock, loud and aggressive,

banging against her door until I hear her voice from inside.

“Stop that, I’m coming. There’s no need to break the door down—“ Her mouth drops open when she sees me standing there.

She’s wrapped in a towel, water dripping from her body. Her eyes wide in shock. “Nico?” she stammers. “Am I late? I thought—“

I’m so relieved to find her unharmed that I’ve frozen in place, just staring at her.

She grabs my wrist to check the time on my watch.

“I’m not late,” she huffs.

I grab her into my arms, pulling her out onto the front step as I lift her off the ground and hug her tightly.

“Nico, it’s freezing out here,” she squeals, wiggling in fright.

I step into her house, still holding her.

“What’s going on?” she asks, her brows knitted and her eyes glaring at me when I put her down again.

Shit. What can I say to explain this?

“I need you to get ready and come with me,” I say. Just because someone hasn’t taken her yet doesn’t mean she’s safe.

“Where?” she snaps.

“I’ll explain later. But right now we need to go.”

She shakes her head. Folding her arms across her chest, she says, “I’m not going anywhere until you explain what is going on.”

“Sera, get dressed. Right now. We don’t have time for this,” I snarl.

Her eyes go wide, and she realizes she’s going to get nowhere arguing with me.

I follow her into her bedroom and see the white dress spread across her bed, ready for her to get into for our date.

Guilt aches deep in my chest again.

She tugs her closet open in a huff and steps into a pair of jeans. She grabs a crop top and pulls it on, then a very cozy grey hoodie.

“I assume we aren’t going somewhere fancy?” she sasses at me.

I shake my head.

When she has her sneakers on her feet and her purse over her shoulder, I lead her out to the car, opening her door for her while my eyes scan up and down the street, searching for danger.

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:36 pm

So much for our romantic date.

He's acting so weird.

He came bursting into my apartment like it was on fire and he had to rescue me from the flames. Then he was rude to me again, and now we're driving to...Actually, I have no idea where we're going, and he hasn't said a word.

"Where are we going?" I huff, folding my arms across my chest as I glare at him across the car. His jaw muscles twitch as he clenches his teeth.

This afternoon, I let it slide when he tried to brush away his reason for snapping at me when I told him about the discrepancies.

I know he wasn't just taking out his anger on me accidentally; there was more to the story than he let on.

I dismissed the fact that he wanted to keep it private and figured that he would speak to me when he was ready, but now, he's acting so weird, and if he tries to give me some lame excuse about this, too, I am going to go straight home and not speak to him for a week.

Okay. Fine. I won't do that.

I can't be away from him for a week.

But he has to be honest with me. Secrets are only going to create a wall between us,

and they will tear us apart.

“Nico, where are we going?” I demand.

But as I ask, I see him turning down a familiar street. We’re going to his penthouse.

“You’re taking me home? I don’t understand,” I say.

“I’ll explain everything when we get there, okay. Just let me focus for now,” he says. There is no sass in his tone, no anger or attitude. He speaks gently and reaches out to touch my leg, but his eyes stay glued to the road ahead. He’s hyper-focused, more alert than I’ve ever seen him before.

My eyes trace over him, examining his face, his clothes, his hand on my leg.

That’s when I notice the bulge of his handgun, tucked under his jacket.

My stomach churns.

I really hope he doesn’t try and tell me some made-up story to cover up whatever is going on.

I take a deep breath and hold it in for a moment, letting the air push against my lungs while I prepare for the fact that I’m probably going to have to fight with him to get the truth.

But I’ll wait until we’re at his place.

For now, I’ll be alert, too, looking for whatever it is that has him so tense.

Nico doesn’t let his guard down until the front door of his penthouse apartment closes

behind him and the lock snaps into place.

I watch as he takes a deep breath, pushing the air out as though he's trying to push his worry away.

I sit on the sofa in the living room and wait. When he opens his eyes and they lock with mine, I tilt my head to the side and say, "I think you need to tell me what's going on. And I want the truth."

He nods, walking towards me. He drops his car keys on the coffee table and sits down too.

"Serafina, my angel, I wanted to protect you from this, but after today, I realized that not knowing will put you in more danger than knowing."

He rubs his hands over his face. He looks exhausted and worried.

"Danger?" I ask, frowning as I watch him.

"It's about the issues you discovered in the statements this morning."

"Okay," I say carefully. My hands are twisting in my lap, fidgeting and tense.

"The real reason I got so defensive and angry when you pointed them out to me was because I thought they were related to a side of the business I was keeping hidden from you. And they were—just not in the way I expected."

He moves so that he's facing me fully.

"I am in the Bratva." The words hang in the air between us. For a moment, they just ring in my ears, as though they aren't real sounds, but the longer the silence that

follows, the clearer they become.

I am a part of the Russian Mafia.

I haven't said anything because the shock has closed my throat up. I don't believe him. It can't be true.

He sighs and carries on.

“At first, I thought the money you stumbled across might have been the laundering processes put in place by our accountant to flush money through the company, because that is the main purpose of our business. It's a cloak, covering the true nature of where our money comes from.

But it wasn't that. Someone was actually stealing from us.

And because of that, it's so much worse that you're the one who found it. ”

He's explaining things to me, and I feel like I'm underwater. Sometimes my mind goes numb, and the words echo around; sometimes they are distorted, and I have to squint my eyes to try and focus on his mouth to hear what he's saying.

“So that means that someone inside the business is a rat. A very dangerous rat who might know that you know his secret, and that type of person—they wouldn't hesitate to hurt you, Sera. I'm so sorry.” He sighs.

“You're sorry?” I murmur.

He clenches his jaw, reaching his hand out to take mine. I snatch my hand away from his touch.

“This is a joke, right?” I laugh nervously. “It has to be a joke.”

He shakes his head.

“Of course it is,” I shout.

Please let this be a really bad joke.

Tears are stinging my eyes. I don’t move to wipe them away when they spill down my cheeks. Nico clenches his jaw tighter, and I can see he wants to reach out and hold me.

I throw him a look that says if he dares to touch me now, I’m going to scream bloody murder.

“Sera, just think about the size of my business. It’s my family business, right? Now think about the extravagant lifestyle I live, and the lifestyles my brothers and sisters live. Private jets and penthouses, the latest, best cars—anything we want whenever we want it—“

I narrow my eyes at him, listening intently. “So?” I murmur.

“Do you really think that the income from my business is in the league of being able to fund that lifestyle for my entire family?” he asks, and the weight of understanding hits me like a ton of bricks.

I sink into the sofa with a small welp as reality smacks me.

I can’t speak, even though I open my mouth to say something, nothing comes out.

Nico shifts closer to me.

“Sera, are you ok?”

His question is stupid. It’s a stupid, pathetic, stupid, bad question. Why the fuck would he ask me such a stupid question?

I glare at him, my eyes shooting lasers.

“Am I ok? Are you kidding me right now? You’ve been lying to me,” I shout as I scoot away from him on the sofa.

“You’ve been lying to me from the moment I met you.

You’ve been fake. Pretending to be a good, normal person with a normal job, living a normal life.

I thought you were a good person, Nico .

But you’re not. You’re a criminal. You’re literally a criminal.

” My voice breaks as the understanding sinks deeper and deeper into my heart.

The man I’ve fallen in love with isn’t even real.

Nico, the Nico that I know—he isn’t the real Nico, which means he doesn’t exist, and I’ve been hanging out with an impostor. Someone who tricked me. Lied to me. Kept dark and dangerous secrets from me.

“I fell in love with you, but you aren’t even you,” I stammer, the tears streaming like a flood now.

“You—fell in love with me?” he asks, shock widening his eyes. He tries to move

closer to me again, and I practically fall over the back of the sofa, scrambling away from him.

“I fell in love with someone who wasn’t real,” I cry out.

“Sera, I—“

“Don’t you dare say it,” I snap. “Don’t you dare tell me you love me, too. ”

I hold my hand up and take a deep breath. The penthouse, despite its massive size, suddenly feels claustrophobic. The walls are closing in at an alarming rate, and I have to get out of here.

I glance at Nico, then at the door.

Grabbing my purse from the sofa where I was sitting, I sling it over my shoulder and rush towards the door.

I’ll get an Uber downstairs.

My thoughts are mayhem, and I need space to think.

The door handle wiggles in my hand, but it’s locked. Dammit.

Of course, it’s locked.

“Let me out,” I snap.

“I can’t do that,” he sighs, standing up and shoving his hands into his pockets.

His mouth is tight.

“Nico, let me out. You can’t keep me in here. I need time to process this. I need time to think. I need space away from you to figure out if I want you in my life. ”

“I can’t let you out, Serafina. It’s not safe. I don’t know if Ivan Orlov knows about you or not, and I’m not willing to take the risk.”

I shake my head in disbelief. “So, it was fine to risk involving me in your life in the first place, keeping those secrets from me, and what, hoping for the best or something? But now suddenly the risk is too big? Let. Me. Out .” I stomp my foot like a child, frustration running so deep that I’m crying again.

Nico’s face is pained as he shakes his head again.

“You’ll be staying here until I can solve this issue.

You need to be patient. I’ll sort it out as quickly as I can, Sera.

But until I’ve figure out who the rat is in the office—and make sure they aren’t coming after you—you’ll be my guest here at the penthouse. ”

I’m getting nowhere with this, and for tonight, at least, I can see he isn’t letting me go. But that doesn’t mean that I have to sit here with him and be pleasant.

In a frustrated huff, I spin away from him, angry tears spilling over my cheeks. I march to the spare room upstairs and slam the door closed behind me. He better not dare come in here and try to talk to me again tonight. I want nothing to do with him right now.

I want to be angry. That’s what I want, because anger is easier than acknowledging that my heart is busy shattering into a thousand tiny little pieces.

I sit on the edge of the bed, gasping for breath between sobs as they begin to overwhelm me.

No matter how hard I try to stay angry, the hurt creeps in.

My heart splinters.

Broken glass spreads inside my rib cage, cutting my insides, tearing me apart.

I clutch my chest as I fall on the bed, rolling onto my side and pressing my face into the pillow to hide my agonized cries.

The man I love doesn't exist.

And I never even told him how I felt about him.

The person left is a stranger to me.

A criminal.

Mafia.

Underworld darkness creeps into his blood like a virus.

I have no idea who he is or what he's capable of.

I cry myself to sleep.

I wake up shivering and cold with a dark shadow standing over me.

I cry out in fright, then realize it's Nico. He's holding a blanket that he's trying to

wrap over me.

“Sorry, my angel, I didn’t mean to wake you. I just wanted to make sure you were warm,” he whispers.

I say nothing in response.

“Are you okay, Sera?” he asks, the pain in his voice is clear.

I don’t answer.

He sighs and tucks the blanket around me.

No matter how angry I am with him, it still touches my heart that he cares. Whoever he is.

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:36 pm

The most difficult part was leaving her locked up in the penthouse when I left this morning.

She was still sleeping, exhausted from the overwhelming surge of emotion she had to suffer last night.

I'm furious with myself.

The worst part is that I finally have to admit that no matter what I did, regardless of her finding this discrepancy or not, eventually I would have had to let her go, or tell her who I really am.

There was no escaping the truth. It would have come out in the end.

I would've preferred to tell her a different way. Though on my own terms.

Traffic this morning is thicker than usual, and I'm agitated to the point of lashing out at someone for no reason. My usually calm demeanor is buried beneath the anger I have towards myself.

Anger because I might have lost her forever.

She's furious at me.

Will she ever forgive me?

Can she love me for who I am?

I fell in love with you, but you aren't even you.

Her words have played over and over again in my mind, like a record stuck, looping, repeating. I fell in love with you , but you aren't even you

She loves me.

Perhaps not anymore.

After sitting in traffic for too long, I pull up outside the warehouse, where I've called everyone to meet this morning. My brothers are all here, along with the Kuznetsov brothers.

Everyone knows what happened—now we are going to try and find a way to solve this, as quickly and effectively as possible.

I'm the last one to walk in, but the guys are still busy getting their coffee and settling down, so at least I didn't hold the entire meeting up.

I take a seat and wait for everyone to fall silent.

“Did everyone read the report?” I ask, looking around the table.

They nod, some saying yes, some staying silent.

“That is the entire amount that has been transferred to the Orlov account. The first transaction took place on the seventeenth of July last year, so just over six months ago—that means that someone has been inside my building, working with my staff, for over six months.”

“Have you pulled employee records to see who was hired during that time, give or

take a few months?” Rodion asks.

I nod. “We have. There are five suspects and they have been pulled from the building and taken to a more private location for questioning. Two of them I’m sure are not involved, but I don’t want to take any risks, so they are all being treated as suspects.”

“You’re keeping the process clean for now, though, right?” Luka asks.

“Completely. It’s being treated as an interview for a new position in the company.

The guy conducting the interview is high profile—he used to work undercover for some major government organization.

Anyway, he will be able to quickly suss out who to focus on.

The pressure to get answers will only increase once we’ve narrowed down the target.
”

“Okay, so that solves the issue of finding out who the rat is—how do we deal with the family? Ivan has literally stolen millions from us at this point. Our response should be severe. It should send a message, loud and clear,” Rigor says sternly.

The Kuznetsovs are a brutal family, powerful and dangerous. My family can be vicious when needed, but our reputation does not match the Kuznetsov brothers. Perhaps it’s time for us to change that.

I can certainly understand the need to tear the world apart when someone you love with your entire being is under threat.

My throat tightens when I imagine them finding Sera.

I can't think like that. She's safe. She's in my penthouse. They can't get to her.

"The girl who found it—where is she?" Roman asks, his hand resting on the table.

"She's safe," I say. "Why?"

"She might be a target."

"I know. But I will make sure nothing happens to her."

"She can be moved to one of the safehouses until this is over."

"No. She stays with me," I snap, not willing to budge on this.

Radmir's eyes narrow towards me. "Are you involved with her on a personal level?" he asks, tilting his head to the side.

"That's irrelevant," I answer.

"It's not. You being involved with her puts her in more danger—you have to know that, right?" He's not attacking me in any way, but I don't like what he's saying.

I huff out a deep breath. "We are not here to discuss my relationship status. We are here to find a solution for the rival family that is fucking with us."

A moment of tense silence washes over the meeting before Rodion says.

"Okay, I think the best way forward is to wait for the interviews to finish so that we have the mole. Once that's done, we can start questioning him properly on location and contact points for the Orlov family.

With that information, we'll be able to plot out a safe attack plan. ”

“What if none of them is the rat?” Yilian asks.

“Then we keep looking.”

By the end of the meeting, we have a rough plan for how we want to move against Ivan once we have his location and any inside information.

Everyone begins to filter away from the warehouse, leaving one by one. I want to rush home to her, but I'm fully aware she wants nothing to do with me right now. It fucking hurts to know that.

“Hey man, you doing okay?” Radmir asks, noticing my tension.

“Yeah, just a lot going on.”

“That girl—she obviously means a lot to you.”

“She does,” I nod.

“I know it's not what you want to hear, but maybe you should consider letting her go. Breaking up with her, I mean, for her own safety.”

My entire body goes rigid, as though someone has pierced ice into my heart.

“No,” I snap instantly.

“Look, I was just saying—“ Radmir raises his hands defensively.

“No,” I say again, this time with less aggression. “I can’t let her go, man. I care about her too much.”

Radmir nods, pulling his mouth tight, and when I look into his eyes, I can see that he understands.

“We’ll help you keep her safe, then. We’ll figure this out, okay? And if anything happens—if you need backup at any point—call.”

“I will. Thanks, man,” I say, filled with relief.

He walks away, and I follow him out to my car. Even if she doesn’t want to talk to me, I can at least be around for her.

Maybe she’s calmed down enough to have a conversation.

The drive home is long and slow. I think I’m making it that way on purpose because my mind is so busy, and I want it to clear before I get to her. But it won’t be clear until the danger is gone.

The conversation with Radmir has left me with a very alarming understanding of where my heart is.

I never want to let her go.

I never want to lose Serafina.

She belongs at my side, in my life, with me.

Losing her will tear me apart.

I push the front door open and step inside, my ears attuned to every sound, but there are none. The quiet hum of the fridge, the heating, the wind against the windows—but other than that, I hear nothing.

“Sera?” I call out, closing the door behind me.

I hear her sigh.

Then her footsteps as she walks through the penthouse towards me.

“Did you have a good day?” I ask, and as soon as the question is out of my mouth, I regret it.

She rolls her eyes and tightens her mouth. “Oh, it was amazing. Stunning. Lovely. Thanks for asking.”

“Sorry,” I mutter, feeling like a fool. “Can we talk?”

“About what? Shall we go over everything that happened? How did you trick me into working for your company, which is actually a money laundering business for the mafia? Do you want to talk about that? Or maybe you want to talk about how you’ve been taking me to these lovely places, spoiling me and treating me like a queen, but it’s all with money made through criminal activities?

Blood money? Have you murdered people, Nico?

Are you a killer? Who are you? What are you capable of?

Is anything that you told me real?” She’s so angry she’s got his fists clenched into tight balls at her sides.

Her neck is tense and the muscles across her jaw are pulling tightly.

Her eyes are flooded with dark rage, and if she could, she'd be shooting daggers from her eyes, straight into my heart.

I've hurt her.

I've hurt her so badly that I'm not sure it's repairable.

"Sera, we can talk about all of it. You can ask me anything. I don't want to hide anything from you anymore."

"Anymore." She snorts with laughter and tilts her head back. "What a relief. Except how can I trust a single word that comes out of your mouth, Nico?"

"I care about you more than you could understand. I was trying to protect you."

She shakes her head.

"I don't know how it works in your world, Nico, but in the world I live in, people don't lie to the people they care about."

The tears that are shining on her cheeks sparkle like shards of glass. It's painful to watch, and I'm fighting every muscle in my body.

I want to pull her into my arms and hold her.

I want to bury my words inside her head until she understands what she means to me. How can I force her to know how I feel?

I want to tell her that I love her.

But after last night, I believe it will do nothing other than make things worse. Much worse.

We stand in painful silence for a long time. She doesn't take her eyes off me.

Finally, I give in, unable to control myself—I step forward and grab her into a tight embrace.

She squirms and hits my chest with her fist, so I hold tighter.

She shouts at me, demanding that I let her go, but I don't.

She swears and shouts and hits at me until she goes limp in my arms, her energy drained, her sobbing tears all that's left.

I thread my fingers through her hair, cupping her head in my hand as I hold her against me. I kiss the top of her head and tell her over and over again, “I will make this right, Serafina. I'm not giving up on us. I'm going to prove to you that it wasn't fake. You know me. You know who I am .”

She cries harder; her heart is shattered, and it's my fault.

I made her fall in love with me. And then I told her the truth.

I'm a monster, and I probably don't deserve her love. But I had it, and I want it again.

“I will fix everything,” I whisper, making her a promise.

When I finally let her go, she steps away from me without a word, without a heated glare of anger, and without hate in her eyes.

She looks numb.

I take her hand and lead her to the kitchen, sitting her down in the high chair beneath the counter.

“I’ll make us an early dinner. Do you want hot chocolate?”

She pushes away from the chair, standing up and sighing softly.

“I ate while you were out today,” she says calmly. “I’ll be in the room if you need me.”

I read straight through her words to the truth of what she’s saying.

She doesn’t want to be around me.

She can’t look at me.

She would leave the moment I opened that door and not look back.

I watch her walk away from me while I stand there fighting my own emotions, fighting my own heartache. But at the same time, I make that promise again, silent, weighing it into my soul.

I will fix this, and I will win her back, no matter what it takes.

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:36 pm

I kick the base of the door hard enough to hurt my own foot. Then, in a dramatic tantrum, I shout at it and slam my fists into it.

I'm wasting energy.

Hours have been wasted over the past three days since Nico locked me up in here—hours spent trying to find a way out.

It turns out that his penthouse is ridiculously secure, and unless I want to jump off the balcony of this thirty-two-story high building, I don't think there is a way out of here.

With nothing else to do, though, I keep looking. Boredom seems worse than giving up. At least this is something to do—something to keep my mind busy. The moment I stop looking, I get the sense that it will feel like I'm betraying myself by simply giving up the fight.

Niko is still going to work every day. He leaves me here alone while he heads out into the world to pretend that everything is normal.

I guess, for him anyway, this is normal. He's kidnapped me and he's keeping me prisoner in his home, and I think it's totally normal for him.

I've heard crazy, scary, dark stories about the mafia. But in the world I lived in, my little, peaceful, normal world—those stories were so absurd that I brushed them off as unbelievable, most of them.

A normal person doesn't process things like a criminal. There are so many lines I

would never cross. So many lines that create my moral compass that aren't negotiable in my decision-making.

Does Nico have those lines? The morals?

I huff and walk past another door. This one isn't even locked, I know because I tested it earlier, but I kick it anyway.

Frustration is getting the best of me. The worst part is that a big part of my frustration is something I'm deeply in denial about, but basically, I'm failing to be in denial about.

No matter how hard I try to hate him, I can't.

I'm angry with him.

I have a hate towards him.

I want to throw things at him the moment he walks into the house.

But I can't hate him.

My heart won't let me.

He's taken away from freedom. He's taken away my entire life at this point; I can't go back there and work for that company.

It's not even a real company. I wasn't adding value to the world.

I wasn't working towards good things. My entire life, without my parents to support me, I worked my ass off to get everything that I had.

I worked real jobs, I studied hard, I was a good person.

My heart sinks as my understanding of the situation deepens.

This is a horrible, terrifying mess.

I don't have a job anymore.

And I'm trapped inside this penthouse with no way to get out.

And I should hate the man who put me in this situation.

But I don't.

My stupid, pathetic, annoying heart is still in love with him.

Monday turns into Tuesday. Tuesday turns into Wednesday.

I do my best to keep my distance from Nico. Whenever he's home, I stay in the guestroom with the door closed. When he tries to talk to me, I keep my answers short.

But I'm going crazy.

I want to know when I'm being set free.

He can't keep me here forever, can he?

It's just after lunchtime on Wednesday, and I'm sitting in the living room flicking through Netflix, not paying attention to the screen, just desperate for something to do.

A knock at the door makes me jump out of my skin, and it also makes me realize how

tense I am.

I run up to the door and stand up on my tiptoes to peek through the spy hole.

“It’s Jade,” she says loudly through the door, making me jump again.

“And Aliyah,” Aly calls out.

“I don’t have a key,” I shout through the door.

“It’s okay, we have one.”

The door is pushed open, and my heart jumps with excitement.

But then I stiffen, hesitating. “Did Nico send you?” I ask, frowning, worried that maybe I’ve made a rushed decision to be happy to see them.

“Actually,” Aly raises her brows high, “he would probably be furious if he found out we were here, so please don’t say anything to him.”

Jade dumps her purse on the sofa. “I just found out that he was keeping you a freaking prisoner in here. I overheard Rad talking on the phone. So, I snuck out, fetched Aly on the way, and we came straight over.”

“Are you ok?” Aly says, pulling me into a hug. She holds me for longer than I expect, and when she doesn’t let go, but instead wraps her arms tighter around me, I sink against her, trying not to cry.

“Not really,” I manage to stammer.

Jade shakes her head, angry. The red tips of her long black hair move like fire over

her shoulders. “He’s such an asshat,” she huffs. “I’m sorry you’re going through this, honey. But we’ve come to take you out.”

“Out?” I say in surprise. “Nico says it’s really dangerous—“

“Ugh, he’s being dramatic,” Jade laughs. “There is always something going on in this family. He’s just doing it because he cares about you. Let’s go.”

I glance down at my jeans and sweatshirt. Nico fetched my clothes from my apartment, so I have most of them here—

“I should change. “

“Well, hurry up, but don’t get too fancy. It’s just dinner,” Aly says, waving me away.

I hurry and choose a dress, a different pair of boots, and a pretty sweater. I splash mascara on and give my hair a quick brush, pulling it into a bun on top of my head.

Aly and Jade are both dressed similarly, so that should be good enough.

“Ready,” I say, stepping back into the living room with my purse over my shoulder.

Following them out of the penthouse, my heart flip-flops with tension. Even though I’m angry about being locked up in there, the moment I step over the threshold, I know I’ve broken Nico’s commands. It sends a nervous thrill through me.

I tilt my chin up.

I’m free to do whatever the hell I want.

He doesn’t get to command me.

That is not how the world works.

Jade drives, stopping outside a quiet restaurant near a side of town I don't often visit.

"I don't think I've ever been here," I comment as we climb out of the car.

"No one ever comes here. That's why I chose it. It will at least be secluded. Even though I think Nico is overreacting, there's no harm in being a little careful," she says, gesturing for me to walk ahead of her into the cozy restaurant.

It's a small pizza and pasta restaurant with a warm orange glow flooding from the lights, and a delicious, rich smell of creamy garlic sauce and melted cheese.

We find a table tucked away in the corner, and Jade orders a bottle of wine.

Aly turns towards me with a sour expression on her face.

"What have you been doing all day, locked up in there—aren't you going crazy?"

"I am. It's so boring. To be honest, I've spent most of the time looking for ways to escape," I giggle, covering my mouth with my hand, trying to stuff the confession back into my throat. It sounds so stupid when I say it out loud.

"I would have been doing the same thing," Jade grins.

"He's a barbarian. Honestly . Who the hell does something like that?" Aly huffs. "You can't just go around kidnapping people and keeping them prisoner. I'm so mad at him." She drums her perfectly manicured, long pink nails on the tabletop as agitation surges through her.

Jade shakes her head. She brushes her hand over her shoulder to push the red flames

of her hair behind her shoulder. When she looks at me, her eyes are soft. “You know, he didn’t do this out of malice. He had good intentions, he just carried it out the wrong way.”

“Don’t defend him,” Aly snaps.

“I’m not defending him, Aly. But this is Nico we’re talking about. He’s the most logical, kind, soft-hearted person I know. His intention would never have been to hurt her. You know that.”

Aly rolls her eyes, and I take a deep breath, pushing away the stinging tears in my eyes. I want to believe her. I want to believe he is kind and gentle and soft.

Jade turns back to me and notices the tears springing to my eyes.

She hands me a napkin. “Oh, honey, I really mean it. He went about it the wrong way, but all he wanted to do was protect you. He feels responsible for you being in this situation because you work for him. He’s doing whatever he can, in whatever way he can, good or bad, to make sure that nothing happens to you. ”

Aly picks up her wine and takes a big sip.

“I’m still angry with him,” she says, rolling her eyes.

Jade laughs. “That’s fine. I’m sure Sera is, too.” She turns to look at me, reaching out across the table, she squeezes my hand gently. “He did it because he cares about you.”

“I want to believe that,” I say, sipping my own wine. “But he lied to me about who he really is.”

“What do you mean?” Aly asks.

“He lied to me about being part of the mafia. I thought I knew him, but I don’t.

When he stands in front of me, I have no idea who that man is.

The man I know—he’s—he’s not mafia,” I say tightly, knowing that I might be touching on sensitive ground because both Aly and Jade are part of a mafia family.

Jade laughs, lighthearted, not offended at all.

“Honey, being part of a mafia doesn’t mean you are the mafia, ” she says. “Sure, there are ties, there are things you do that aren’t the same things normal people would do. But he’s still Nico. He’s still the man you met and got to know. He’s just Nico with mafia ties.”

I bite my lip. What she says is trickling into my mind and making sense.

She tries again. “Okay, so look at it this way. If you study accounting and become an accountant. You, as a person, are not accounting. It’s just something you do to make a living. You have your own dreams and hopes and fears and ability to laugh and be happy and—fall in love.”

She raises her brows at me.

“Do you really think he’s just being overprotective?”

“Completely. Because he cares,” she nods.

“It’s not really fair of me to hate him for caring,” I sigh.

“Do you hate him?” Aly asks, her brows knitting together and her eyes tight with worry. She doesn’t want me to hate her brother. I don’t want to hate her brother.

“No,” I sigh again heavily. “I tried to, though.”

Both Aly and Jade start laughing, and I can’t help but join in.

“I tried really hard, actually, but it’s really difficult.”

We’re still laughing when Nico bursts through the restaurant door in a blind rage.

He storms over to the table and turns his full anger onto Jade.

“Was this your idea? Are trying to fucking get her killed? What were you going to do if someone tried to take her while you were running around town, out in the open? You don’t even have protection on you,” he snarls, his voice deep and savage.

Jade shifts and lifts the corner of her dress to reveal a small gun strapped to her ankle. “I have protection, Nico, you need to calm down.”

“Right. So when eight men ambush you, shoot you to get to Sera, kill Aly—or take all three of you—you think that’s going to help?”

He yanks her out of her chair and pushes her towards two bodyguards standing behind him. “Make sure my sisters get home. Do not let them go anywhere else. And explain to Radmir what she did.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Oh, please,” Jade huffs.

This spikes Nico's anger even more as he spins towards his sister.

He stands over her, his body tense, his voice low.

"It's fine if you want to put your own life at risk by making stupid decisions, but leave Sera out of it.

If anything happens to her—" His throat closes, and he takes in a sharp breath.

Jade looks down at the floor and swallows hard. "I'm sorry, Nico," she mumbles.

"Go home."

She reaches out and takes Aly's hand. "Bye, Sera. Sorry."

I smile tightly at both of his sisters.

"You have nothing to apologize for," I say.

Nico turns to glare at me.

"Don't you dare look at me like that. You're the one in the wrong here," I snap.

Nico grabs my arm, his fingers digging into me as he storms out of the restaurant to leave the final bodyguard to sort out the bill.

He pushes me into the car and slams the door behind me. Immediately, I try to open the door again, but it's locked, and I can't get it open from inside.

Nico climbs in, and all the way home, he lectures me about how I've taken a dangerous risk, and how stupid it was, and blah blah blah—

All the way up to the penthouse, he doesn't release my arm until we are inside, and the door is locked behind us.

I've been biting my tongue for the whole drive home, but I'm so angry at this point that I can't hold it back anymore.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:36 pm

Sera spins towards me with intense anger in her eyes. Her breathing is heavy, and her cheeks are flushed.

“You can’t just treat people however you want to and think it’s okay. You aren’t in charge of my life, or your sisters' lives,” she shouts at me, spitting her words out in anger, her fists clenched tightly at her sides. She’s standing strong and confident and ready to take me on.

“My sisters had no right to get involved,” I snap back at her.

“So, you had them dragged away by a bodyguard. Who are you? Who put you in charge?” she hisses.

My heart is pounding as adrenaline courses through me.

I shake my head, trying to shove down the burning rage, made so much more intense by the fear I felt when I got home and found her missing. It took me an hour to track her down. That hour was the worst hour of my life.

I thought they had her. I thought she was being tortured. I was even wondering if she was still alive at that point.

After making some calls, I realized that my sisters had her and I tracked Jade’s car to find out where they were, but it was an hour of pure hell. I was terrified the rivals had taken her. I had the worst thoughts flooding my mind.

“Don’t you fucking get that all I’m trying to do is stop you from getting hurt?” My

words flame from my mouth in fear and frustration. The fear of losing her pushes me to become someone I don't want to be.

“By keeping me a prisoner? By dragging me from a restaurant like I'm a child being punished for breaking some stupid rule? I'm an adult woman, Nico. I'm my own person. I make my own choices for my own life. I don't belong to you.”

I press my lips together, fighting with her is not making anything better. I'm only getting angrier, more heated, more frustrated. You should belong to me. You do belong to me.

“Why can't you just do as you're told, Sera?” I ask tightly.

Sera storms over to me and hits me hard in the chest. It doesn't hurt me at all, but her expression tells me she might have hurt her own hand.

“Let me go!” she shouts in a rage.

I shake my head. “No,” I snap. “I can't do that. And if you don't understand why, then that's on you. Not me.”

She swings her arm to hit me again and I grab her wrist. As soon as I lock her down, she starts kicking and fighting and shouting louder.

“You're not the one in control here, Sera,” I say, lifting her off her feet and dropping her onto the sofa on her back so that I can use my entire body to pin her down and stop her from doing this.

She's going to hurt herself if she doesn't stop.

Why can't she see that everything I'm doing is for her own good?

I grab both of her wrists and pin them above her head by wrapping one hand around them. She kicks out and I push her leg to the side, using my weight to hold her down.

She cries in anger, frustrated with me to no end. Her hair has fallen loose around her shoulders. Her eyes are wild and dark. She's fighting hard, and she's so fucking sexy my cock has gone rigid against her.

My breath is tight as I stare down at her.

I want to fuck her so badly.

I want to take her, make her see that I own her.

The moment she feels my cock her eyes flare.

We stare at each other, our breathing heavy, my mind racing. Don't do this, Nico. Control yourself—

Until I kiss her.

My lips crash against hers and I rock my body, thrusting my hips forward to push my cock against her.

The moment I kiss her, my mind goes completely silent. The racing thoughts disappear. It's only her. There is nothing else.

She spreads her legs wider and returns the kiss with the same urgency I give it. She tilts her hips forward, moaning against my mouth, the anger turning to a wild and burning lust that is consuming both of us.

Without letting go of her wrists, one hand still locked tightly around them, I reach

down and tug my pants open, freeing my cock.

My body is screaming in desperation. Every nerve ending is on fire.

She pushes her tongue into my mouth, and I taste the wine, her passion, her rage and her frustration.

I hook my finger in her panties and rip them from her body in one sharp tear. She cries out in fright, but the moment I press my cock against her soaking wet pussy she falls silent, holding her breath, anticipating the pleasure she is about to feel.

I thrust forward and my cock slides into her tight, perfect little pussy. She bucks up against me, tilting her head back. I bury my face in her neck and start pounding into her. There is no slow romance, there is no savoring the moment or the sensation—there is only raw, savage, urgent need.

Each time I slam my cock inside her she cries out with pleasure, and each time I push deeper I forget that there was ever anything to worry about.

I forget about it all. All that matters is her lying beneath me, her body against mine, my cock inside her.

Those beautiful little sounds that are slipping from her lips.

I move, rocking back and forth, the pleasure flooding us both, intensifying. I am overwhelmed with emotion, drowning in love for this girl who came into my life so unexpectedly.

This girl that I want to save.

I can't lose her.

The world cannot be so cruel to give me someone so perfect and then take her away from me.

My cock pushes deeper, stretching her open as she wraps her legs around my waist.

Her body is shaking, her moans louder and faster.

“Are you going to come, my angel?” I whisper against her hair.

She nods, her eyes squeezed shut, her lips parted. I grab her face with my free hand and pull her lips against mine as I fuck her even faster.

Frustration, fear, love—it all comes pouring out of me until she screams my name.

The sound of my name on her lips, as the orgasm steals her away, is the most beautiful thing I’ve ever heard. Her body pulses and throbs beneath me, her pussy locked on to me, her muscles tight and flickering with pleasure.

I explode inside her, letting go. Letting go of everything that has been weighing on me. She takes away all my worries, all of that stress and fear.

When it’s over, I wrap her in my arms and hold her, stretched out on the sofa.

I don’t know what to say. I’m scared that any words will steal from this moment, so I stay quiet.

I hold her until she drifts off to sleep.

I wait for her breathing to be deep and peaceful, then pick her up and carry her to bed.

Wrapping the blankets around her body, I think about how delicate and beautiful she

is, even though she's strong and capable, too.

I am supposed to keep her safe. It's my job to do that.

I won't let her down.

It's three in the morning and I can't sleep.

The penthouse is quiet; there is no sound other than my pacing footsteps, barefoot on the heated floors.

Sera is fast asleep, and all I can think about is that I should be doing something. Instead of just being here, waiting, I should be solving the problem.

I pick up my phone and dial Luka, keeping my voice low so I don't disturb her. I've thought about closing her bedroom door, but I want her close to me, not behind closed doors. Not locked away.

"Hey man, what's up?" he says.

"You don't sound like you were sleeping?" I ask.

"I wasn't. Just working a bit. You? What's the time?"

"It's three. Can I ask you a favor?"

"Sure," he says, sighing as though he's standing up and stretching.

"I need to go to the office. I have some ideas about this whole mess, but I don't want

to leave Sera alone here. You heard about what Jade and Aly did?”

“I heard. Those two never listen. I’m glad you sent them home with a lecture. I also heard that none of the employees were viable suspects—”

“Yes, that’s why I want to get to the office.

And while I’m gone, I don’t want those two sisters of ours coming over again and trying to break her out.

They clearly don’t understand the danger.

Can you come sit with her until I’m back, from now until midday?

” I wait for his response, wondering if I’m overreacting or being too cautious.

But is it possible to be too cautious when the thing I’m protecting is her life?

“Yeah, I’ll bring my laptop and work from there. It’s no problem at all. I’ll see you in thirty minutes.”

I breathe a sigh of relief and hang up the phone to go get ready.

Luka arrives just before four, and I’m ready to leave right away. I’m anxious to get to work and sort everything out.

“She’s asleep in the guest room,” I say, keeping my voice low.

“Cool man, I’ll set up in here. I might take a nap on the sofa. But I’ll be here. If Jade

and they come back, they'll have to get through me either way."

I smile at him, grateful for my family. Even Jade and Aly meant well when they came to 'rescue' her. It shows they care, too. But they put her in danger, and I can't allow that. So, for the time being, I'm pissed off at them. But I still love them. I'll always love those idiots.

"I'll have my phone on me. If you need anything, shout. It's just a precaution, man. But I feel a lot better having you here. There's a cold beer in the fridge. I think there's leftover pizza, too."

"Aah. That sounds like exactly what I need. Pizza." Luka says, pressing his hand over his stomach. "Please tell me it's that bacon, pine nut one with the dark sauce."

I grin. "It is."

"Fuck yeah," he says, happily.

I say goodbye and head down to the car. Every time I leave her, I'm anxious about it. But I have no choice. I can't just sit at home and wait for this mess to fix itself.

I work for hours, focused and dedicated.

The tiredness hits me around eleven in the morning. I guess I'm not superhuman after all. Being awake since two or three in the morning eventually catches up with you. Apparently, three hours' sleep isn't enough.

I pick up my phone, trying to decide if I should grab something to eat and try to push through till midday or head home and get some rest.

I've gotten a lot done, and I definitely have the sense that I'm getting somewhere. I'm

closer to getting to the bottom of all of it. I can feel it.

Sighing, I decide I should eat something and try to get a bit more work done. As much as I want to get back to Sera, I need to use my time to the fullest.

My phone rings just as I'm walking towards the elevators.

"Luka. Hey man, how's it going there?" I ask.

"Nico—she's gone. She got out. I'm so fucking sorry."

"What the fuck?" I shout in panic. "How? What the hell happened?"

"I was—she—she snuck out. I fell asleep, but—" he stammers.

"I'm coming home. Don't fucking move," I snap, running towards the elevator and slamming my finger against the button.

I close my eyes and take three deep, slow breathes. I can't freak out. It's not Luka's fault. I can't keep taking my anger out on my siblings. I need them with me.

All the way home, driving back to my apartment, I keep telling myself she's okay. I need to stay calm—she'll be fine. I'll talk to Luka. We can get the guys together and get out there to look for her.

It's going to be okay.

Upstairs, Luka is in a state.

"Fuck, man," he says, his brows knitted together and his eyes dark as I walk into the penthouse. "I'm so sorry."

I sigh, holding up my hands. “It’s okay. Just tell me what happened.”

“I had your house key clipped to my belt. I fell asleep for maybe an hour, around nine-thirty maybe. When I woke up, it was ten-thirty. At first, I didn’t realize she was gone.

I went to warm up the rest of the pizza and realized the keys weren’t there—that’s when I noticed she was gone.

The keys were unclipped from my belt, and she had snuck out.

She’s been so quiet, just sitting in her room all morning—“

“It’s okay, man. It’s not your fault. Seriously. But we have to find her.”

Luka nods. “I called the guys. They’re already heading out with their eyes open. I’m going to check her apartment—Yilian is on his way here to look around the building and ask on the streets if anyone has seen her. We’re going to find her.”

“Okay, go, call me if you hear or see anything.”

Luka nods and runs towards the door. He tugs it open and disappears through it, leaving his laptop, notebook, and a half-finished beer on the coffee table.

I take a deep breath. Another one.

Where would she go?

Images flash through my mind, her body beneath mine, her lips parted, sweet little sounds in my ears, her skin, smooth and beautiful.

I shake the picture away.

Where would she go?

She's on foot. I don't know of any friends that she has in town. She doesn't have family. She has to go home, even if only for a short while. I think Luka is right. She has to go home before she can plot out her next move.

I run from my apartment, wanting to catch up with Luka.

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:36 pm

I escaped about forty minutes ago and managed to hide in the laundry room downstairs in Nico's building.

I've been crouched and hidden, peeking through a window that looks out onto the street, to make sure Luka didn't follow me and that Nico wasn't right there lurking in the shadows.

I can only just make out what is going on at street level because the laundry room is beneath the building.

The windows are small, but it's okay; it's helping me feel safer.

But the longer I wait, the more anxious I get, because the only thought spinning in my head is that I have no idea where to go.

I can't sit here, hiding in the laundry room, forever.

When I see Nico's car pulling into the underground parking lot, I feel ill.

He's home now. Does he know I'm gone yet? Is Luka awake?

Guilt pushes through me, thinking about how I stole the keys from Luka and how angry Nico will be with him. It's not Luka's fault, though; it's Nico's for trapping me in there. Even his sisters could see how wrong it was.

My anxiety thickens.

It's now or never, Serafina. You have to make a choice. And once it's made, you have to stick to it. I've already been hiding for too long. I should have run straight out of the building and just kept going. Somewhere, anywhere—just move.

I've never done this before, though. I've never had to escape from anything or anyone before. I've never been kidnapped and held prisoner before.

This is crazy and wild, and I have no idea what I'm doing.

I climb out from behind the machines and run up the stairs to the foyer, my eyes darting in all directions, waiting for someone to leap out at me.

I jog through the wide glass doors and out into bright daylight, squinting against it.

My mind is racing a million miles an hour as I stand on the street outside Nico's apartment block.

Left? Right? Straight?

Where the hell am I going?

I have nowhere to go except home. That's the first place he will think to look for me, but I have things that I need there if I'm going on the run.

Should I go back inside and hide? Should I call the police? Should I try and find Jade? Would she help me?

Tears spring to my eyes and I turn left, change my mind and turn right again.

My throat tightens and I can't breathe.

The air is too thick. The sunlight is too bright. It's too cold. My head is spinning.

I turn back towards the building, wanting to shout for help, but there isn't anyone to call.

Panic surges again and I clutch at my chest, which is spiking with pain.

Dropping to my knees, I hit the pavement, and agony shoots through my legs.

A dark figure comes running towards me, but I don't know if it's good or bad. I don't know if I'm going to be okay. I don't know if this person is with me or against me.

I try to fight the black weight of fear and pain, but the world spins around me and pulls me down, down into darkness. My thoughts fade and I fall to the ground, unconscious.

I blink, trying to stop the bright lights from stabbing at my eyes. Am I still outside? No. I'm in a bed. I'm warm. I'm comfortable. My body aches, though. It's like my muscles are bruised and my limbs are heavy.

I blink again and groan, lifting my hand to shield my face from that piercing light.

"Serafina, hi there, welcome back. How are you feeling, young lady?"

A man is talking to me. I don't recognize his voice or the smells around me. Chemicals. Detergent.

"Where am I?" My throat is dry, and my words crackle when I speak.

“You’re at St. Mary’s Hospital. You’re doing great, though. Everything is going to be fine. And don’t worry, they are fine, too. You’re healthy, everyone is healthy—I think you just had a moment of stress? Do you remember what happened? Have you eaten anything today?”

The doctor leans over me, holding a stethoscope against my chest and tilting his head as he listens to my heartbeat.

Everyone is fine? Who? What are you talking about?

“Your heart is nice and healthy. Your blood pressure has returned to normal. Feeling faint in the first trimester is actually really common, but you were gasping like you couldn’t breathe.

Have you ever had a panic attack? Do you know what those are?

” he chatters on, and what he’s saying slaps into me in a wave of shock. Trimester. What?

“A baby?” I mutter in disbelief.

“Yes,” he says, his brow furrowed. “Did you not know you're pregnant?”

“I didn’t,” I whisper in shock. “Who brought me here?”

“Luka, is he the father...?” The doctor is looking at me with his face comically empathetic. I want to shake him and demand that he just tell me the important stuff and stop talking so much about everything else.

“And—the baby, it’s healthy?” I ask nervously.

“Yes, very healthy. You have nothing to worry about,” he smiles broadly.

“Please don’t tell anyone. I would like to be the one to tell the father.”

“Do you want me to get him?” His brows rise so high he looks like a character from a comedy.

“No, I just need to think for a second. I’m so tired,” I sigh.

“You rest for as long as you need. Ring that bell at your side there if you want to call for a nurse.” The doctor marks something down on my chart and then clips it to the base of my bed before he leaves.

My head is spinning, not like I’m going to pass out again, but from absolute shock. I’m pregnant ? This is unbelievable.

What am I going to do?

Gently, I rest my hand over my stomach. An intense fear washes through me. I realize it's a fear of losing my baby. Of this tiny creature being in danger.

“I’ll never let anyone hurt you,” I whisper, fighting tears.

Someone walks into the room, and I quickly pull my hand away from my stomach as I look up.

Luka smiles tensely at me. His face is taut with stress.

“Hey, Serafina. Are you ok?” he asks.

He shifts nervously from one foot to the other, staring down at me from the side of

the bed. His hair is a mess. He looks tired.

I push myself up a little, resting against the back of the hospital bed. “I’m okay. The doctor said that you were the one who brought me in?”

“I was. I came out of the building, and you were right by the doors.

You looked pretty bad. When you passed out, I just picked you up and brought you straight here.

What happened—what did the doctor say? Fuck, I got such a fright, I thought someone had done something to you—like um, poison, or something—“

“No, no one did anything. The doctor said I, um—he said I had a panic attack.” I decide it’s the story I should stick to for now.

“Fuck. That’s horrible. I’m so sorry,” he says quietly.

I press my lips together. I’m angry about everything.

I’m scared and unsure about what to do; I don’t know where to go or what is going to happen after this.

But I know that shouting at Luka isn’t going to solve anything.

I’m too tired to fight, anyway. It’s like the exhaustion is swimming in my bloodstream, and I need to sleep for a week to recover from it.

Luka pulls out his phone and glances at the screen, reading a message.

“Nico will be here in fifteen minutes. He was looking for you at your apartment.

Actually, I was on my way to look there, too, but luckily, I parked out front, so I found you there,” he says tightly, waiting for me to be angry or shout or react.

I nod. “Thanks again for helping me. And for letting me know about Nico being on his way.”

Nico can come. This is a public hospital. It’s not like he can drag me out of here without attracting a lot of attention. The only way I’m leaving is of my own free will, going where I want to go. It’s my choice now, and he’s going to have to accept that.

“I’m going to wait outside. Unless you want company?” Luka gestures towards the door and then towards the chair in the back of the room.

“I’m okay alone,” I say without looking at him.

I need to think.

I suddenly have a little life growing inside me—a life that I am responsible for. My choices are no longer just my own.

What happens from now on affects them, too.

Luka disappears through the doors. I hear a chair squeak as he sets the bulk of his weight into it. One of those plastic hospital chairs, no doubt.

I close my eyes, and without realizing it, I fall asleep.

When I wake up, Nico is standing over me, his face etched with worry. Half of his shirt is untucked, and his hair is a mess. Dark shadows under his eyes tell me he hasn’t slept.

“You look like shit,” I remark, letting my tired eyes drift over him.

Sighing, I close them again. Any second now, he’s going to start lecturing me about escaping. He’s going to be furious about how stupid I was for trying to get away, and he’s going to go on and on about how he knows what’s best—I’m too tired. I don’t care.

“Sera, Luka said you had a panic attack. And when I spoke to the doctor, he kept saying you have to rest for a few days. He said you are exhausted—“

I bite my lip, opening my eyes again to look at him.

Where is the angry Nico I was expecting?

When my eyes meet his, though, I don’t see even an ounce of anger.

All I see is fear. What’s going on? Did something else happen? Why is he behaving like this?

“What happened?” I ask, instinctively reaching up to touch his cheek. “Why do you look so bad?” The tiredness in me is momentarily pushed aside as worry for him rushes through me; he looks like he’s been in a war.

“Are you kidding? I couldn’t find you. I thought they took you. I was terrified,” he blurts out, a little angry, but he bites it back, and I realize the fear was over losing me.

My heart aches to be in his arms, but I push it away.

I have to worry about my baby now.

“Sera, I get it—you’re going to keep trying to get out.

I can't force you to stay with me. But if you stay in your own apartment, it won't be safe.

Can you come back to the penthouse with me, just for tonight?

I'll leave you with a set of keys to prove I'm not locking you in there.

By tomorrow, I will have arranged a safe house for you.

You can stay there until this is over, and after that you can go wherever you want.

"The last few words are dry and quiet when he says them, as though it's painful for him to tell me that.

His eyes are locked with mine, waiting, desperate.

I chew the inside of my cheek, watching his expression, searching for any trace of a lie.

All I see is worry.

"Just tonight," he pleads again. "In fact, if it makes you feel better, Jade can come and stay with you, and I won't even be there."

He takes my hand and pushes a set of keys into it. I recognize them. They are the keys to his penthouse. He's being serious. He wouldn't give me the thing I need to escape if he wanted me to stay a prisoner—surely?

"I'll come and stay tonight. You don't have to arrange for Jade to be there. I don't mind you being there, Nico."

I close my hands around the keys. I want to trust him, but I'll feel safer if he leaves me with these.

I'm so tired right now, and I'm fully aware that my apartment is not the right place for me to be, especially after what the doctor told me.

I'll take tonight, get some decent rest, and tomorrow my mind will be clearer.

I can decide what I want to do in the morning.

Nico is smiling, his entire face lifting with the relief of my words.

"Thank you," He says, leaning down to kiss my cheek.

I should turn away from his kiss, but the moment his lips touch my skin I want him. I want him to hold me and make me feel safe again. I want to be wrapped up in him, laughing and joking and talking about the future. I want to go back to the moments before I knew everything I don't want to know.

I need to tell him what the doctor told me.

It wouldn't be fair to keep it a secret from him. He has a right to know, because this is his as much as it is mine.

But now isn't the right time.

Maybe later, when we get home. Maybe tomorrow.

Nico helps me check out of the hospital and wraps his arm around my waist as we walk to the car.

I lean against him because it comforts me and because I'm too tired to do anything else. In brief moments of connection and intimacy, it's easy to forget what he's done. And who he is.

On the drive home, though, I'm lost in thought.

I'm so scared about the future and the new responsibilities I have.

Looking over at his face, my body is filled with tension.

How will he take the news?

Will he be happy?

Does he even want children?

I look forward again.

I'll figure it out.

No matter what he says, I know I will love my little baby with all my heart. I'll keep them safe.

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:36 pm

Serafina is very quiet.

The weight of her silence sits heavily on my shoulders as we drive towards the penthouse. She's not fidgeting, she's not sighing loudly—she's just sitting there. It's like she's gone numb to me. That terrifies me in ways I can't process.

It's taking every ounce of my self-control not to reach out and hold her, to rest my hand on her leg. I want to tell her everything is going to be okay, but how can I? I don't even know what she's thinking or feeling or planning.

I really fucked up.

I fucked it all up.

The amount of stress I gave her caused her to have a panic attack and land in a hospital. What kind of monster am I?

The ache that drifts inside my heart is haunting and contagious as it spreads through the rest of my body.

I keep my eyes forward, on the road ahead, so that I don't have to look at her and hate what I've done to her.

It doesn't help, though. I can still sense the pain in that deep silence between us.

Serafina walks ahead of me into the penthouse.

“Give me a moment to run you a hot bath. Just relax on the sofa for a second.”

She nods, sitting down and closing her eyes with a soft sigh.

I clench my jaw. Don't sit next to her. She needs her space, and you promised it. I head through to the bathroom and run a hot bubble bath with Epsom salts, and gentle lavender scents waft through the air as the bath fills up. When I turn to call her, she's already standing there.

“Can I help you with anything?” I ask.

“No, thank you,” she says.

“I'll make a hot chocolate, then. You get comfortable. I'll be right back.

When I leave, I glance back over my shoulder to see her pulling her shirt up over her head. My heart stalls for a second, but I force myself to drag my eyes off her. This is not the time to be uncontrolled and drawing in desire. I have to focus and take care of her.

While she's in the bath, I quickly put fresh blankets on her bed, puffing out her pillows and turning on the soft lighting. I put a glass of water next to her bed and a small chocolate in case she wants something sweet.

I don't want her to be sleeping so far away from me, but what can I do? She is free to make her own choices.

I should never have taken that away from her.

My whole life I have grown up watching mafia men control their women. They strongarm and demand things of them. They claim it's for protection, but at the end

of the day, it's just control.

I vowed never to be that man.

Yet, the moment I fell in love—the moment I became obsessively fueled by the urgent need to protect her—that is exactly who I became.

I turned out to be just like them.

I guess I can admit that I understand where the need stems from—the need to keep her safe.

But in pursuing that need, I disregarded her own.

I was selfish; I only thought about myself in the sense that I wanted her to be safe so that I didn't have to worry about losing her.

What about what she wanted?

Tossing three heaping spoons of creamy hot chocolate powder into her mug, I stir it in and then add two marshmallows and a dash of cream on top.

Walking upstairs, I talk to myself.

She needs space.

You promised to give her space.

Just put the hot chocolate down on the edge of the bath and walk away.

Don't hover.

Don't sit there with the expectation of a conversation.

Give her what you promised.

You aren't going to be that man anymore.

"Sera—" I push open the half-closed bathroom door and walk inside. She opens her eyes. She's completely covered in bubbles, lying low in the bath, being caressed by the warm, scented water.

"Thank you." She sits up enough to take the hot chocolate from me. "Oh. That's nice." She smiles when she sees the marshmallows.

The bubbles run down her breasts, revealing her dark nipples and silky-smooth skin.

I clench my jaw and step away.

"Just shout if you need anything else," I murmur, trying not to be that man.

Turning towards the door, my heart leaps into my throat when she calls my name.

"Yes?" I say, not turning back.

"We need to talk, if you have a moment?"

"I have infinity for you, Serafina. Every moment of every day is yours," I reply, stepping back towards her.

"Sit down."

Once I'm settled, watching her, waiting quietly, I can see she's anxious, and my

stomach begins to knot tighter and tighter.

She sips the hot chocolate and takes a deep breath, setting it aside.

“When I was at the hospital, I wasn’t entirely honest with you.”

“Oh?” My body goes rigid with stress.

“I did have a panic attack—but there was more to it.”

I bite my tongue.

“I’m pregnant, Nico.”

My ears are ringing. The words repeating, echoing, and distorted.

Did I hear that right?

Emotions surge inside me.

She’s pregnant?

I’m going to be a father?

“Nico?” she says my name quietly.

“This is—“ I stammer, my heart initially exploding with joy, but then darkness slams it down as I realize how much stress I’ve caused her while she’s been carrying my baby.

“Yes?” she asks, her voice tighter, strained.

“This is incredible, Sera. This is so amazing.”

“You don’t sound happy.” She shifts, and the water splashes back and forth like a small wave rolling through the bathtub.

“I’m honestly—how could I not be happy. I’m happy,” I say, taking her hand. “I’m also really, really sorry.”

“You’re sorry that I’m pregnant?”

“No, I’m sorry that I put so much pressure on you. That I trapped you like I owned you. My intention was only ever to keep you safe, but I realize just how badly I went about it,” I sigh, shaking my head.

Serafina watches me with her eyes narrowed. Somewhere in her heart, I can see she wants to believe me, but she’s holding back.

I can’t blame her for protecting herself and the baby.

Sadness settles over me when I think about taking care of such a tiny little thing. My child. My baby.

It reminds me of the responsibility I have towards my younger siblings. The responsibility I have carried my own life. I’ve never regretted a moment of it—until the moment I lost Grigoriy.

I couldn’t keep him safe.

I failed him.

“What’s wrong?” she asks nervously. “Did you not want children? Because if you

don't, it's—"

"No, no, it's not that at all. I was just..." I sigh. "I was thinking about my brother."

"Don't be angry at Luka. I'm the one who took the keys. It's not his fault," she says quickly.

I smile, shaking my head. "Not Luka."

"Who, then?"

"I had another brother, the youngest of all of us. His name was Grig. Grigoriy."

"Had?" she asks cautiously. "Did he leave the country?"

"Last year, he was murdered by one of our rivals. He was making bad choices and getting into business with the wrong people. It didn't pay off—in fact, it cost him his life."

She takes in a sharp breath, then leans forward to take my hand. "I'm so sorry, Nico. I didn't know."

For a moment, I stay quiet, fighting tears of regret and sorrow. Fuck. I miss him so much.

"Every day, I think about him. He was my baby brother, you know. I was supposed to take care of him, and I failed." My voice breaks.

"You can't take that responsibility on, Nico. You aren't the one who hurt him. You aren't the one who got him involved with the wrong people."

“I am a part of the mafia world, but I avoid that side of it. I try to avoid all of it as much as I can, and I think that is why I didn’t see what was happening with Grig.

I can’t tell you how much it broke us—all of us—when we lost him.

We’re still dealing with the pain of that.

But as a family, one day, we will get justice for what they did to him. ”

She chews on her lip as she watches me.

I shouldn’t be burdening her with this. I don’t know how or why I started talking about this.

Taking a deep breath, I clear my throat.

“Sera, I love taking care of my family. I love being there for them and making them happy. I will be there for you and our baby. I will take care of you and keep you happy. But I won’t hold you prisoner.

You are free to come and go as you please.

But you must understand that things are dangerous right now.

If you can do it, please stay in the penthouse with me until the danger has passed. ”

“I’ll think about it, Nico. I’m so tired at the moment, though, that I don’t want to make decisions that are wrong for the baby. That is the most important thing right now.”

“I understand,” I nod. “Are you hungry? It’s been a really long day. I’m going to

make some toasted bacon and avocado on that fresh bread. Do you want one?"

"Yes, please." She smiles gently at me. "I'm getting out soon. Before I get all wrinkly and turn into a mermaid."

"I think you'd make a beautiful mermaid," I laugh, standing up and leaving her in peace while I head to the kitchen to sort out some food for us.

Over the next two days, I am sure to be patient, and no matter how hard it is for me, I keep my distance, sensing that she needs the space to think and make her own decisions. For the time being, I am just grateful that she's still here.

It's eight o'clock, and I settle down on the sofa to watch a movie after dinner. To my surprise, she sits close to me. I dare not move too much, in case I take this small gesture the wrong way. But as the night goes on, she shifts up against me, and in quiet comfort, she snuggles into my hoodie.

I wrap my arm around her shoulder and hold her.

Nothing more.

Nothing less.

But I'm smiling and my heart is swelling with hope.

When we discuss the baby and I make promises, I can still see her apprehension; she needs time to trust me again, and I have to keep proving to her that I deserve that second chance.

One night, after our usual evening movie, she stands up, yawning and stretching her arms above her head, and says, “I’m going to sleep so well tonight. I’m exhausted.”

“I’ll make you a tea and bring it to you. Go get comfy.”

While I’m in the kitchen, she heads up to the bedroom.

With hot tea in my hand, I walk in and find her bed empty. Her room is dark, and she’s not there.

“Sera?” I call out, my stomach twisting. I just heard her up here. Where could she be?

“In here,” her voice calls out, and I follow it through to find her in my bed, snuggled beneath the blankets.

I don’t dare say a word. Again, my heart is flooded with happiness.

“Here you go,” I smile, setting her tea next to her on the bedside table.

“Thanks. Um. You don’t mind, do you?” she asks, raising her brows in question.

“Not in the least,” I answer, trying not to sound as though I’m over the moon with excitement.

I must be winning her trust back. I must be making progress if she wants to be near me again.

Now all I have to do is not mess it up.

Even with her this close to me, I have to stay patient.

When I switch my bedside light off and set my book down with the pages open, facing down on the table, she sighs softly and shifts a little closer.

I roll onto my side and wrap my arm around her waist, pulling her back against my chest. “Are you warm enough?” I whisper.

“Mm,” she answers sleepily.

“Sleep well, my angel. I hope you have the sweetest dreams.”

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:36 pm

In the darkness of my dream, I walk along the edge of the ocean.

Warm water splashes my feet as the waves roll quietly over the sand.

There should be a gentle, soothing sound.

The sound of water. The sound of the wind.

Anything? But I can't hear a thing. I press my fingers against my ears and shake my head, scrunching my nose in confusing.

The silence is heavy. It's pressing into me like led.

As I take my next step, my foot begins to sink.

I gasp. My own panic is ringing in my ears. Tugging, trying to lift my leg and it sinks deeper. Looking down at the ground, I can't see it—because my belly is so swollen its blocking my view. A moment ago, it wasn't even a bump and now it's growing like a balloon.

But I can feel the sand sucking me into the cold depth of the earth.

I scream and fall backwards as I fight against it.

Pressing my hands into the ground, I try to push away from it—but now my hands are sinking too.

The sand rises around me, the ocean still silent and ignoring my pleas for help. No matter how loud I shout, the vast salty blue water is ignorant of my desperation. The sand is up around my waist, swallowing my belly and the baby growing inside me.

It's up around my breasts, and I can't move my arms.

It's higher still—my throat feeling the cold grains as they surround me.

I open my mouth to scream and sand pours in, flooding my lungs, dry and rough and scraping against my flesh.

My eyes shoot open as my body jolts awake. I cough, reaching up to touch my throat.

It was just a dream.

I reassure myself twice. Three times.

Nico is sleeping next to me. When I move, in his sleep, he just reaches out and pulls me a little closer to his body. Settling back down with his arms wrapped around me is reassuring and safe.

But in the back of my mind, I'm filled with worry as I press my hand over my belly. Can I really say that I'm safe? The mafia world is dangerous.

I lie in the dark, thinking about his little brother.

Thinking about the pain of losing someone you love.

How do you pick yourself up and carry on after that?

My dream is still in my head, the dry feeling of sand is scratching at my throat. I

wonder what it means?

I close my eyes to stop the tears from rolling onto the pillow. Worrying about my baby makes me wonder if I can stay with Nico. Suppose I'm making the right choice as a mother.

A blinking red light on the nightstand tells me it's three in the morning.

I snuggle closer to Nico, and he stirs awake.

"Hi, angel." He whispers, his voice deep and seductive. "Do you need anything?" he asks, worried about me even when he's only half awake.

"No, go back to sleep, I just had a bad dream," I whisper back.

He brushes his hand over my waist and then around my stomach again. I do feel safe. I shouldn't, but I do.

Did we meet at the wrong time?

Is there another universe out there where Nico and I can be together and fall deeper in love without worry for our future?

I close my eyes, thinking of that timeline.

I struggle to fall asleep, and I end up fidgeting and restless. His body pressed against mine is flooding me with need. Desire builds the longer I lie awake, and I tell myself to ignore it.

Nico's soothing voice drifts over me. I'm keeping him awake with all my wiggling.

“My angel, they are only bad dreams, nothing can reach you here.”

I want to believe him.

His hand moves over my body, distracting me.

He takes a deep breath and the heat of it against the back of my neck causes my skin to flare with goosebumps.

I shift my ass, pressing it against his groin. I can't fight the desire anymore.

His cock is already hard.

My heart races as I rock my ass against him, inviting him to take me.

His fingers tighten over my hip, gripping me as though he's pleading with me never to leave. I gasp, reaching back and running my hand through his hair as he buries his face in the curve of my shoulder and traces his lips over my skin.

His fingers thread in the waistband of my sweatpants, and he pulls them down my body. I wiggle, kicking them away from my legs.

Our quiet, gentle movements become more frantic as he tugs his own pants off. He's breathing heavily, his hands are grabbing at me, desperate and fighting for control. I don't want control anymore. I want to feel everything. I want him, I want his entire body against mine.

He rolls me over onto my stomach as he moves on top of me. Lifting my ass into the air he keeps my legs pressed together as he spreads his legs over mine, kneeling with his knees on either side of mine he brushes his hand over my back, down my spine, across the curve of my ass.

“Your perfection is my drug, Serafina.” He growls. “I will never get enough of you.”

He grabs my ass and spreads my cheeks apart, pressing his fingers into my pussy.

“So perfect. I love looking at you.” He murmurs, sliding his fingers in and out of my pussy.

I groan against the pillow, arching my ass higher towards him.

He growls in pleasure as he takes his cock in his hand and rubs it over me, letting the smooth, monstrous size of him tease me as he presses against me and then moves away.

“Please, Nico, please fuck me,” I whisper.

The guttural sound of desperation he makes when he hears those words is like an animal, wild with desire.

His cock plunges into me, pushing deep as it penetrates my body and I cry out with relief.

He wraps his hands around my hips to hold me steady and begins to pound into me, utterly lost in the pleasure of it.

My fingers dig into the sheets, ripping at them, clinging on to my sanity as though I were about to lose it.

I cry out, muffled sounds of feverish lust against the pillows.

“Angel, please, let me keep you.” He growls as he pushes into me. “Stay with me.” He thrusts forward again.

His arm slips around my waist, and he pulls me onto my knees as he presses my back against his chest. His body is solid, like a rock wall, wrapped around me and holding me safe.

He thrusts upward into me as his hand slides up my stomach, over my breasts, teasing my nipples and finally locking around my throat. I tilt my head back against his shoulder. My hair falls loose and wild over us.

He moves my head to the side with his hands on my neck and leans over me, letting the heat of his breath and the seductive whisper of his words tease me.

“You are everything I’ve ever dreamed of. You are my entire world, angel.” He murmurs between thrusts as his cock moves inside me.

I gasp and my lips part, my body starting to shake as I fight for control. I don’t want this to end yet. I want to hold onto this moment. This perfection. His cock inside me. His lips against me.

I want this to last forever.

His other hand slips over my stomach and pushes between my legs.

No.

Wait.

His finger brushes over my clit and I cry out.

My legs begin to shake uncontrollably as he pushes deeper.

My pussy tighten over him and he groans in pleasure. His cock is rigid now, so hard

it's almost too big for me.

He moves faster, desperate, chasing—

I fall forward on the bed, and he lies over me, each thrust pushing my face against the mattress. He fucks me so hard the bed jolts across the floor until ecstasy slams into both of us at the same time.

I scream, every muscle going taut and then pulsing, throbbing, releasing—

I can barely breathe.

Nico shifts off me, pulling me up against his chest again, the curve of my back fitting perfectly into him.

What if I just stayed here?

What if I never left, and I let him love me, and I was happy?

I close my eyes and wish—but no matter how hard I wish, the wish is tainted with reality, and that reality won't wash away, no matter how hard I cry.

My baby doesn't deserve this life.

If I make the choice to stay with him, I am making that same choice for my child, and that would not be fair of me to force them to grow up in a world I don't understand.

The mafia is no place for children.

What kind of a mother would I be?

What kind of person would I be?

The sob shakes me, and Nico pulls me closer. “Angel?” he whispers.

“Nico, I can’t do this.” I cry.

I feel the shaky breath he takes. His body tenses, and he can’t speak.

I’m fighting every cell in my mind, every synapse firing and arguing and telling me I can’t do this. I can’t leave him. I can’t because it will destroy my heart.

But the truth is that if I stay, it will destroy the life of my baby. I will live in constant fear of something happening.

“What do you want, Serafina? What do you need?” he asks with pain in his voice as though he already knows what I’ll say.

“I need you to let me go,” I whisper, barely a sound, too soft to hear.

“I can’t—“ he’s crying. It shatters my heart.

“You have to.”

We don’t speak again, but we stay wrapped in each other until the morning light filters into his bedroom. These last moments with him will be forever etched into my memory. Into my heart.

For the last hours of the night, I’m still fighting with myself, wondering if I’m making the right choice. But no matter how I argue against my choice, my logic always wins over my heart, and I know I have to do the right thing for my baby.

Neither of us sleeps.

Not wanting to waste one second.

When the room is too bright to ignore, Nico gently kisses my neck.

“I’ll make us some tea. Then you can come downstairs, and we can decide our way forward.”

I nod. If I speak now, I’ll cry. I’ll tell him I’ve changed my mind.

But I can’t change my mind.

In the shower, I take my time, letting the hot water clear my thoughts and prepare me for the things I have to do next. Regardless of my heart, I have to be strong now. Stronger than I’ve ever been in my life.

It would be easy for me to convince myself that staying with Nico is the right thing. But that’s my heart. Not my strength.

He is my weakness.

I have to accept that.

The only thing that matters now is my baby.

I walk into the kitchen with my head held high. I will force myself to go numb if that’s what it takes to get through this. I’m ready to argue with him, because I’m sure he will try and talk me out of my decision.

But as I enter, he hangs up a call he was on and smiles at me.

“I’ve arranged a safe house for you. They are going to prepare it this morning. You will have everything you need. And if you need anything else—anything at all—you can call me.” He steps towards me, hesitates, but then does it anyway.

Nico pulls me into his arms and holds me quietly.

I wrap my arms around his waist and lean my cheek against his chest.

“Thank you for understanding,” I whisper.

He sighs and replies. “I’ll do anything for you, Sera.”

We eat breakfast in miserable silence. My heart aches in ways I couldn’t imagine, and Nico keeps watching me with hope—I can see he is waiting for me to change my mind. The guilt of being the one who has to make this choice for our baby is heavy to carry.

At eleven, he drives me to the safe house.

Walking around it, I feel like I’m back in that dream. I’m so far away from the life I used to know. The one I recognize.

He hands me the key and a new phone with a new number that is untraceable.

“My number is already saved on there. So are my brothers and my sisters. You can call any one of us. We’ll be there for you.”

I press my lips together, fighting tears.

“Thanks,” I murmur.

“Maybe, if you don’t mind—just text me tonight to let me know you’re ok.”

“I will.” I nod.

“Every night?”

I nod, smiling.

Nico takes a deep breath and a step backwards.

“I’ll see you around, my angel.” He says as he turns his back and walks towards the door.

My feet are cemented to the floor as my eyes follow him.

He lets himself out, and the door swings closed behind him.

As soon as it clicks, the lock engages, and a sense of loneliness grabs my heart and rips it in two.

I sit down on the floor, exactly where I am, and pull my knees up to my chin. With tight sobbing breathes, I let the fear and pain pour out of me in a river of tears.

I cry until I’m too exhausted to be sad anymore.

My heart is numb, and my head is empty.

Then I walk into the bedroom and collapse onto the bed to sleep.

At least when I’m sleeping, I don’t have to hurt.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:36 pm

She's been gone for three days and apart from one message each night, just before she goes to sleep, I have not been in contact with her.

I never knew it would be this hard to honor her wish.

Every day is a battle between my heart and my head.

In my heart, I'm raging, furious, disgusted with myself that I let her leave so easily.

In my head, I'm aware that caging her would have torn us apart. This is the only way. Letting her go was my only chance of ever winning her back.

But the fear of never being that close to her again is crippling me.

"Alright, I think that's everything," Luka says, glancing down at the meeting notes.

Rodion nods and stands up. "Great. Let me know when that shipment is out."

"Will do."

Around me, the guys chat about things we have to do while I sit, silent and heavy, staring straight ahead.

My family has tried to be there for me, but what can they do to unbreak my heart? They can't help me.

I've been doing my best to focus on the bratva business and my offices, but no matter

what I do, she's on my mind.

Someone slaps their hand against my shoulder, squeezing tightly.

"You doing ok, man?" I look up into Radmir's eyes. His smile is genuine.

"I'm good." I lie.

"We're heading out to see the new range of SUVs we're ordering for the workforce. Do you want to tag along for the ride?"

"No, thanks, man. I've got some things I need to do." I lie again.

"No problem. Will you give me a call this evening once you've looked at the details of the new Andrei lead?"

"Of course. I'll do that."

Why does everything sound so robotic? So empty. Void of life. I guess it's because the one thing that will make me feel alive has left.

He squeezes my shoulder again and then lets go, leaving me to my thoughts and my pain.

A new lead about Andrei should excite me. A chance to find my little brother's best friend. A chance to do right by him.

But it doesn't.

There is no heart in anything anymore.

The days are empty, and I spend most of them wanting it to end so that I can go to sleep and stop my heartache.

I listen to people. I reply. I don't add anything valuable to conversations.

Often, I find myself staring into space without thinking at all.

Although I do think—I think about her while I try desperately not to think about her.

It's like my entire life is falling apart, and I'm not even trying to stop it. I'm just watching it happen.

“You keen to join us for a drink tonight?” Arkady asks. I look up and realize everyone else has left and we are the last two here.

Shit. I should get going.

Standing up, I gather my things, slipping my phone into my pocket, glancing at the screen with a flicker of hope that she might have messaged me. She hasn't though.

“Dude, did you hear me?” Arkady sighs.

“Mm?” I ask, looking up at him. “Sorry, what?”

“For fuck sake.” He chuckles. “You're losing your mind, man, over a girl. Come for a drink tonight. It'll be good for you.”

I shake my head. “No, thanks. I'm going over the new lead and then—“

“Fuck off. You are coming for a drink tonight. Eight o'clock, at the Lava Lounge. If you're not there at eight, I will come to your place and drag you out myself.”

“Fuck sakes.” I huff.

“You know I’ll do it.” He chuckles.

“I’ll be there.” I snap, annoyed that he’s putting me in this position. But in the back of my mind, my logic tells me to appreciate my family. To appreciate the effort they are all putting in to try and help me through this.

It’s not working.

But the fact that they are there for me is what counts.

I’ll go for a drink.

I’ll sit there in silence.

I’ll go home.

It will ease their worry to see me out and about and doing normal things. They are worried about me. My sisters have been calling every day, three times a day, to check up on me. My brothers are constantly asking me if I need anything.

If I could find a way to make them believe that I was fine, just so that they’d leave me alone, I would do it. But I can’t fake happiness.

I’m numb, empty, and hollow inside without Sera.

Arkady glares at me one last time. It’s a warning and I nod in response. “I’ll be there, man. I promise.”

“Good.” He says.

I watch him walk away, and when he's far enough ahead, I leave as well. This way, I can walk down to my car alone.

Another day is dragging by with my eyes on the clock. Time drags when she's not with me. I wish she were waiting at home for me.

Working on the lead for Andrei doesn't bring me any satisfaction, and in the end, it's another dead end. Radmir answers the phone with hope in his voice when I call him.

"Hey, Nico, what can you tell me?" He asks cheerfully. It's funny how people try and sound more upbeat when they know you're down as though they're trying to be happy enough for both of you.

"Hey, man. I spoke to Pollock and Denver. They both took a tour of that underground club. It was completely empty."

"Well, ye. It would only open around one, maybe two in the morning?"

"No, I mean it wasn't operating. There were homeless guys sleeping in the DJ booth and behind the bar.

Broken bottles coated in dust. It's been closed for months.

It's not even like we could make the assumption that they saw us coming and made a run for it in the last couple of days.

That club hasn't had people or music in it for ages.

Never mind Adrian. Just in case though, they did a full sweep of the whole place, thinking maybe they'd find evidence that he was hiding there at one point. But we came up with nothing."

“Shit.” He sighs, frustrated. “I really thought this was a good lead. Alright. I’ll go back to the guys and get them to change direction. This fucking guy has to be somewhere. He can’t have vanished into thin air.”

“Alright. Let me know.” I say.

After the call, I look down at my phone and groan loudly.

“Seven-thirty.” I sigh.

I’d better get going. Ark will definitely rock up here, and he wouldn’t be quiet about it. I’m too tired to deal with his chaos.

It’s early enough in the evening to find a decent parking spot outside the bar. My feet crunch against the cold ground as I walk towards the entrance of Lava Lounge. A bouncer nods in greeting and steps aside, pulling the door open for me.

“Evening, Mr. Andreev.” He says, his voice gruff.

“Evening, Killian,” I reply as I step past him.

Inside the warmth of the club, I shrug my coat off and hand it to the smiling young woman standing near the coat racks. Her long, bleached blonde hair is glowing pink in the red lights.

“Mr. Andreev. Your brothers are here, in booth three.” She says, tilting her head towards the booths.

I nod.

As I step past her, she blocks my path. She lifts her dark brown eyes towards me and

smiles shyly. “You never called me.” She says.

Shit. I forgot she gave me her number. It was a few months ago already. I never had any intention of calling her, but I could at least have sent a message to let her down easy.

“Sorry, Melissa, I’ve been busy,” I say with disinterest, hoping she’ll catch the hint. The last thing I want to deal with now is this.

“Will you call me tonight?” She asks, brushing her hand over my chest.

I catch her wrist and stop her, shaking my head. “No, I won’t be calling you,” I say sternly.

She knots her brows and scrunches her nose, a sour expression tainting her otherwise pretty face.

“No problem. I have other options.” She snaps, her entire mood shifting.

“Lucky them.” I muse.

She huffs and turns her back on me, so I step around her and head towards my brothers. There is laughter coming from the booth as I approach.

Stepping inside, they turn towards me, and Arkady jumps up, wrapping his arm around my shoulder, his beer almost spilling.

“Yes. I knew you’d come.” He cheers.

Luka and Yilian shift up, making space for me.

Luka hands me a shot of tequila.

“No, man, not tonight,” I say, refusing it.

“Just fucking do it.” He snaps.

I clench my jaw. Whatever. What difference does it make anyway? Maybe the alcohol will numb the pain.

I throw the shot back and Arkady instantly hands me another.

“What the hell—“ I murmur.

“You need to catch up.”

I toss it back as well.

My eyes close as I feel the alcohol burn down my throat. When I open them, Yilian is handing me a beer.

I take a long sip to wash away the tequila.

“How are you doing, man?” Luka asks.

“He’s fucking fine.” Arkady answers on my behalf. “She’s just a girl.”

Luka clears his throat loudly and throws Ark a severe glare.

He’s clueless. He always has been. Wild, unpredictable, and clueless.

He thinks life is this joyous rollercoaster of mayhem and luck.

I'm not even offended by his comment, because it's Ark.

He doesn't know better. He has girls falling at his feet, but he's never experienced love.

Not like that. Family, sure. But not the haunting love of a woman.

Neither had I, though, until I met Serafina.

Serafina.

At nine, she messages me to say goodnight.

These evening messages have been something I really look forward to, but also something that makes me feel worse because I can't just reply and start a conversation and ask her questions.

This one simple message emphasizes the fact that we are so far apart from each other.

I'm a little drunk, so I don't reply with my usual 'sleep well, because worried I might say something stupid.

The night drags on and the shots flow freely. I drink more and more, waiting for it to numb me. Waiting impatiently for that blissful moment where I don't care anymore.

But instead of relief, I get heavier and heavier with thoughts of her.

Around eleven, Ark leans over and punches me in the shoulder.

"You're a miserable son of a bitch." He laughs.

Luka punches Ark. “That’s our mother you’re talking about, idiot.”

“Right.” He laughs. “But seriously, Nico, you need to explain this to me because I don’t get it—“

“Get what?” I huff, regretting coming tonight.

“Why do guys get so hung up on girls? There are literally hundreds of them. You can have a new one tomorrow—hell, you can have a new one tonight if you want. Why are you sulking over just one of them?”

Luka shakes his head and throws a look at Yilian, who shrugs.

“Dude—“ I sigh. “If you don’t get it, then you don’t get it. It doesn’t matter.”

I’m way too drunk to answer him. How can I explain love anyway? It’s too big for words. There is too much of it—it’s too heavy. It’s killing me.

Standing up, I sway a bit, my legs are like jelly. It’s been a long time since I drank that amount, especially in such a short time.

“You might want to sit down before you face plant.” Luka muses.

“Nah, man, I need to get home.” I sigh, holding the wall of the booth for stability.

“Did you Uber here?”

“No, my car’s out front.”

“That’s not going to happen.” He stands up too. “I’ll get an Uber for you. Leave me with your keys and I’ll get one of the guys to drop your car off later.”

“Ye,” I mutter. “Thanks.”

Not long after that, I’m in the back of an Uber wondering how I got there.

Fuck.

I’m drunk.

Too drunk.

I don’t like being out of control like this.

The driver pulls up outside my building, and I stagger out of the car towards the entrance, digging in my pocket for the keys.

It takes all of my concentration to get inside, into the elevator.

I press the wrong button twice, eventually needing to close one eye to focus enough to hit the right button.

Because of that stupidity, I’m forced to take a long trip up to the top floor, with the elevator stopping on two floors that I really didn’t need to go to.

The movement of the elevator makes my head spin, so I close my eyes and lean against the mirrored wall. Fucking Arkady.

He’s incredible—in so many ways—and then in others he’s just a fucking moron.

I wonder if he’ll ever grow up and stop being this wild, out-of-control version of himself.

Maybe not. Maybe I don't want him to.

Maybe, just maybe, we all need an Arkady in our lives to keep us on our toes.

I stagger towards my front door and fumble with the lock until it swings open.

Home.

It's not a home without her.

It's just a space.

Unable to walk anymore, I collapse onto the sofa and dig my phone out of my pocket. This is the last thing I should be doing—but I dial her number and click the phone to loudspeaker, letting it rest on my chest while it rings.

“Nico?” Her sleepy voice comes drifting through the phone, and immediately, I smile.

“He,y beautiful.” I stammer.

“Are you ok?” She asks.

“Yeah, I just wanted to hear your voice. I miss you. Are you doing alright there?”

“Have you been drinking? You sound different.”

I pull my mouth to the side. “Mm. I had a few drinks with the guys.” I admit.

“A few?”

“ A lot.”

Silence fills the seconds that tick by.

When I speak again, my voice is tight with pain. “I miss you so much, Sera.” I hate sounding this week.

“I’m sorry, I know, I just—“

“No. I’m the one who’s sorry. I shouldn’t have called you.” I clear my throat and desperately try to focus on something—anything.

“Nico, you don’t sound ok at all. Should I call Luka? Maybe he should come over and check on you?”

“No, no. I just left him at the club. I’m tired. I’m going straight to bed. I’m really sorry I disturbed you. I just wanted to—I wanted—it doesn’t matter what I wanted. Good night, my angel. Uh—Serafina. Um. Good night, Serafina.”

Fuck. Stop talking.

“Nico, I’m worried about you.” She says again.

“It’s ok. I promise I’m fine.” I laugh, but it comes out sounding dark and ominous. “Do you want to go for coffee tomorrow?” Why would I ask that? Of course, she doesn’t want to go for coffee.

“I do—it’s just—maybe it’s too soon—“

“You’re right. It is too soon. But listen, I want you to know that I’ll wait for you, no matter how long it takes, I’m waiting for you. I won’t push. When you’re ready, I’m

here. Ok?”

“Ok.” She replies, barely a whisper. “Good night, Nico. Please go to bed. And drink some water.”

“Good night, my angel.”

The line goes silent, and I’m alone again.

Alone in my space. Alone in my mind.

Utterly alone.

Her words are like a dagger in my heart. It’s too soon.

What if she ’ s never ready?

What if she never lets me back into her heart, and she moves on? I’ll be left behind. I’ll never be able to get over her. I’ll never be able to move past this.

But if that’s what she decides she needs, I have to honor it. What choice do I have?

But how can I let her and my baby go?

It’s impossible.

It’s terrifying.

I pick up one of the thrown pillows and press it over my face.

Sleep.

Escape this pain and sleep.

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:36 pm

At least with the bodyguard that Niko has assigned to me, I can go out and almost feel normal. Wandering around the mall, he stays close to me, silent, but present.

I'm fine with the bodyguard. It's a sweet gesture and a step towards me regaining my independence. I was going crazy, stuck in the safe house alone.

I thought that coming to the mall would be a nice way to clear my head and just get out—be around people—but now that I'm here, I am more lonely than I was inside the house.

I'm utterly miserable.

I'm heavy with thoughts about Nico and the mall is making it worse.

I glance behind me and the bodyguard smiles. It's one of those polite smiles that doesn't touch his eyes. I smile back. It doesn't touch my eyes either.

"I think I'm done here," I tell him.

"Oh—we just got here."

I laugh. "I know, but it turns out I never wanted to be here in the first place." He nods, even though his expression tells me he has no idea what I meant.

Nico's call two nights ago has made me miss him a hundred times more. It made me feel so much more lonely.

Then, when he told me he was assigning a bodyguard, I was happy because I'd have someone around, just company—but this isn't what I want. I want someone I love near me. Someone genuine and real, and comfortable.

What's even worse is that it's not only Nico I'm missing—it's his entire family. Jade, Aly—

I'd even be happy if Luka rocked up for dinner.

I could talk to Yilian or Ark for an hour, and it would lift my mood. His brothers—his family—they were so warm and friendly. It was surprising how quickly they accepted me and made me feel like one of them.

I miss all of them.

I walk back to the car with the bodyguard, and he pulls open the back door for me so that I can climb in.

I settle down on the seat and pull my phone out, wondering if I should call him.

It's risky.

I flick through old messages he's sent me, the weight of his absence growing worse.

When my phone rings, I drop it in my lap in fright. The scramble to pick it up again.

Jade.

It's like she was inside my head, knowing I was missing everyone.

"Hi," I say into the phone, pressing it against my ear.

“Hey girl.” The chorus of two voices sings into the phone.

“Aly, Jade—“ I laugh.

“What are you doing? We miss you.” Aly says.

“We asked Nico the other night if we could take you to dinner, and he just said soon . What does that even mean?” Jade huffs.

“He gave me a bodyguard,” I tell them. “So, maybe he’ll be ok with me meeting you guys if the bodyguard tags along.”

“Oh my word, we are so used to having bodyguards around. Eventually, you don’t even notice them.” Aly giggles. “I’m going to call Nico tonight and get him to book us somewhere fancy for a girls' dinner.”

“I can’t wait.” I’m smiling from ear to ear as we chat about what they’ve been doing, and the new coat Aly got, and how Jade got annoyed with Rad, but he got home with a massive bunch of flowers and said sorry, so they made up.

Listening to them is like having someone flood hope into my heart.

My body is getting lighter by the second, and the weight of my pain is less intense.

I cup my hand over my tummy and smile. I want this little baby to grow up in a family filled with love. Love like the love I can feel pouring through the phone while I talk to Aly and Jade.

The phone call lasts the entire drive home, and we are laughing the whole way.

By the time I climb out of the car, my entire mood has shifted.

I'm smiling for the first time in what seems like forever.

Early the next morning, the bodyguard walks me to the door of the doctor's office. "I'll be right outside, waiting in the car." He reassures me.

"Thanks," I say, grateful that he didn't try and come into the appointment with me.

It's the first scan I'm having. At the hospital, the doctor did a blood test to find out I was pregnant, but this morning I am apparently going to be able to see the little peanut growing inside me.

I'm way more excited than I expected to be. I thought I'd be nervous.

The only thing bothering me about this appointment is that Nico isn't here with me.

I didn't invite him—he left it up to me to decide, and I couldn't make up my mind. Now that I'm inside the doctor's office, I wish I had made a different choice.

"Miss. Andreev. The doctor is a beautiful woman, around forty years old. She has a kind face, framed by gold glasses and pale pink lipstick.

"It's Miss. Brown." I smile.

"Oh. Ok. No, problem. I'll just update that on the system for you—is Mr. Andreev—" She doesn't finish the sentence but just raises her brows at me and waits.

"He is the father, yes." I nod. He made the appointment for me. This is apparently the best obstetrician in the city.

"Are we waiting for him?" She asks.

“No, not today.” I swallow away my regret.

“Alright, then let’s get started. Will you hop up onto the bed for me?”

She checks my blood pressure, my heart rate, and asks me a million questions. Finally, she asks me to lie down.

“You can lift your shirt up—yes—that’s great.”

Excitement tickles over me as I lift my t-shirt out of the way, and she chats while she rubs a cold gel over my stomach.

“Sorry, I should have warmed this up. You’re my first patient of the day, and this morning was a mad rush.”

“It’s ok,” I say, staring at the screen, waiting for my first glimpse of the little peanut.

She points at a white blur on the monitor and then gasps, her hand hovering above the screen.

“Is something wrong?” I ask, tense with worry.

The doctor giggles and shakes her head. “No, not at all, sorry—I didn’t mean to give you a fright—but I do have some pretty big news for you.”

“What?” I ask, my stomach knotting. “What is it?”

She moves the device over my tummy. “Let me just get a better view—“

My head is spinning with impatience. Why can’t she just tell me what she’s seen?

“Is my baby ok?” I squeal when I can’t take it anymore.

She points at the screen again. At two white blobs, the pulsing sound of heartbeats thrum through the room. “Twins.” She says happily.

“What?” I blurt out.

“Here. You can’t see much when they are this little, but there are definitely two of them. And you can hear their little hearts beating like drums.” She zooms in on the monitor and the images become clearer.

Two .

Two tiny babies.

All curled up like little beans.

“I’m having twins,” I whisper to myself.

Without any warning at all, I burst into tears.

Instead of being shocked, the doctor stands up and laughs lightheartedly.

She hands me a few tissues and reaches out to squeeze my arm. “It’s big news.” She smiles, comforting me. “Let it all out.”

While I dab at my eyes, she wipes the gel from my belly.

I sit up on the edge of her bed and pull myself together.

“Were those happy tears?” She asks, resting her hands in her lap as she looks at me.

“Yes. And—a lot of emotions. It’s just a lot—I wish—“ I stammer. “I wish Nico had been here to see it, too.” I blurt out as I start crying again.

“Oh, honey, let me print you a picture of the little nuggets so that you can take it with you and show him. I’m sure he’s going to be thrilled.”

I nod, wiping my face again, taking another deep breath.

“Alright, before you go, we need to discuss your health. With twins, your body is going to be doing twice the work. Twice the nutrients. You’ll get tired, grumpy, emotional, hungry—these are all perfectly normal things.

I have a wellness package prepared for you—it has all the multivitamins and things you need for the first trimester.

We’ll keep adding and adjusting your health routine as we move through this together.

I’m a phone call away for any questions.

If you can’t get hold of me, my assistant, Penelope, is amazing. ”

She chats on and I’m listening as best I can, but my heart, mind and soul are lost in thoughts of Nico.

He would have been so happy to be here. To see that screen, to experience this with me.

Knowing that makes me realize how much he cares. That he does love me and that everything he did—even the stupid things—was all out of love for me.

He was overprotective and controlling. But when he realized what he was doing, he stopped and apologized. He changed—he has given me all the space and freedom I wanted. He respected me in every way.

But now all I want is him.

I can raise these twins alone. Of course, I can. It's doable. But the idea of never being with Nico again—that terrifies me.

In this moment, in this emotionally overloaded, charged moment, he is the only person in the entire world that I want.

I can't live my life without him.

Why should I when he wants to be with me, and he has been so incredibly patient in waiting for me?

The doctor goes through the final bits and pieces of information, and I thank her when she hands me a pink and blue packet filled with my vitamins and a booklet and some pampering things.

The moment it's over, I rush out of her office, into the waiting room, already pulling my phone from my pocket because I'm desperately excited to call Nico.

I want to tell him about the twins, and I want to tell him about my heart and what I realized.

I want to be with him.

Smiling, I flick through my phone, pushing the door open with my hip and walking out into the parking lot.

I'm about to press the dial button when I notice something strange.

The SUV is parked in the same spot.

But the driver's door is open and there is a thick puddle of what looks like blood beneath it. Bright red, dripping from the door frame onto the tar.

Without thinking, I run to the car and yank the door all the way open.

My guard's lifeless body tumbles out of the seat and I scream as I leap aside, dodging it and hearing a dull thud as it smacks into the floor. There is a long, wide gouge on his throat. Blood is bubbling from it in a slow river.

I scream again, panic engulfing every cell in my body as I stagger backwards, tripping, expecting to fall hard onto the tarred parking lot—but instead I fall into someone's arms and immediately a gloved hand wraps around my mouth, cutting off the next scream that wanted to spill from my lips.

They drag me, kicking, fighting, and punching, backwards towards a van that's pulled up behind us. The person lifts me easily off the ground and into the van. It's dark inside, and more hands grab at me, tugging me away from the door—the door slams closed, and darkness blinds me.

"Go, drive dammit. Get out of here." Someone shouts.

Tires squeal and the van jerks forward.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:36 pm

“Here you go,” Justin says, putting a takeaway cup down on my desk. “You getting anywhere?” he asks. The air quickly fills with a scent of fresh coffee, and my dopamine spikes excitedly. Reaching out, I pick it up and sigh, happy that he thought to bring the caffeine.

“I’ve just finished up with the team—I’ve sent them to follow another lead and ask around on the streets. We just have to keep pushing, or we’ll always be a step behind in finding Andrei.”

“That’s good, man.”

“Thanks for the coffee.” I take a deep breath and lean back in the office chair, stretching my legs out in front of me.

Work has been a great escape for me these past few days.

After that night, in my stupid drunken moment, when I called Sera and made a fucking idiot of myself—I promised myself to take a massive step backwards. To really give her the space she needs without any pressure at all.

It is a lot harder than it sounds, though.

I struggle with it constantly. I have to keep telling myself that I’m doing the right thing.

Most of me wants to fight for her—to call her every minute of every day and smother her with my love.

But it would push her away from me and that would be devastating.

So, I've focused on work and it's going pretty well.

In private, I've been working on trying to figure out who is responsible for the discrepancies—who the rat is inside my office.

But with my team, the team that knows my real business, we've been working on finding more leads to locate Andrei.

Justin is part of that team.

He's been pulling late nights and overtime to support me in this and I'm grateful to have him with me.

He flops down onto the sofa and leans over the documents that I've spread across the coffee table in the corner of my office.

It's a map of the city and notes on key points of interest that we're focusing on in our search for Andrei.

He traces his finger over the routes and red marks.

“What happened with that club—the one on Spencer Street?”

“Nothing. We questioned the guy. He actually spilled a ton of information, but not about Andrei.” I shrug.

This morning, Sera is at a doctor's appointment and I hate the fact that I'm not there with her. I have my phone volume turned up full to make sure I don't miss her call.

But the more I glance at my phone, waiting, the more annoyed I get with myself. She will call when she's ready.

Patience, Nico. Patience.

I stand up and wander over to Justin, sitting on the sofa opposite him I spin the map to face me. I tap against the markings. "This is the next point of interest," I say, then lean back against the sofa and sip my coffee.

"This coffee is great. Is it from the place on the corner?" I ask.

"The one with the chocolate croissants." He nods.

I smile, thinking about how much Sera loves those things.

"Hey, I was wondering—did you ever catch the asshole syphoning funds. You haven't updated me on that." Justin says.

I haven't updated anyone except my brothers and the Kuznetsovs.

We all decided it was better that the fewer people who knew about what was happening, and the little details, the better it would be.

It's the most logical way to keep everyone safe and to keep the information from getting into the wrong hands.

"Yes, we're still busy with that," I comment, brushing the topic aside without giving anything away.

"You must be pretty pissed off though. Finding out that Orlov got someone that close to you." He says, picking up his own coffee.

Except I never told him that we found out it was Orlov.

“Orlov?” I ask, knotting my brows.

“Yeah, man, what a blow.” He looks up at me, and instantly his eyes are filled with panic as he realizes he’s slipped up.

“Shit. I just remembered that I have to—“ he stands up, knocking his coffee over. Swearing, he bends down to grab the paper cup, but it’s already spreading, dark, hot fluid over the floor.

“Justin,” I say with malice, rising to my feet.

“Fuck.” He mutters, stepping backwards and falling back into the sofa. His eyes are wide with fear. If his slipping up with that information wasn’t enough, his reaction now is all the confirmation I need.

I leap over the coffee table and grab his collar, shaking him. “It was you?” I snarl into his face. “You’re the rat? This entire fucking time? We’ve been working together for years—what the fuck—“

“I didn’t have a choice.” He shouts.

“You always have a fucking choice.” I snarl.

“The money—“ he stammers.

“What about the fucking money—what about your fucking loyalty.”

“They said I could get a cut of everything I stole.” He whimpers.

My mind is racing. I can't believe this. What am I supposed to do now? Someone this close has been working with the enemy—someone I trusted. Someone I would have called a friend.

My phone rings and I pull it from my pocket, answering with anger in my voice. "Nico speaking."

Luka is on the other line. "Nico, where are you?"

"The office. I've got—"

"They found her bodyguard dead. She's gone. They took her."

"What?" My mind snaps in two.

"Outside the doctor's office. The cops tipped us off because they traced the plates to us after some poor guy stumbled over the scene. She's gone, Nico. They took her. We're pulling up the surveillance footage now to find the plates of the van that took her."

I can't breathe and my anger is so intense that my vision turns white with blind rage. "I'm going to call you back in a moment," I say to Luka before hanging up on him.

Beneath me, Justin's eyes flash with fear. He heard the conversation.

"Where is she?" I growl, savage and dangerous.

"Nico, man, I never knew they were going to take her, they just said she—"

"You're the one who gave her to them?" I ask, not realizing that his betrayal went deeper than money and all the way to the pits of hell.

“I found out you two were together—they pay me for information. She had an insane price on her head, so I told them you two were dating—“

My fingers lock around his throat and I squeeze, blocking off his air and snapping the words from his lips.

He gags and chokes and tries to squirm out from beneath me.

“I’m going to ask you once. Just once. And if you don’t answer me, I won’t show an ounce of mercy. Do I make myself clear?”

His lips are turning blue and his eyes are beginning to bulge from his head.

“Where is Serafina?” I say, my voice void of even an ounce of emotion. The lethal delivery of my tone has him shaking beneath me.

I release my fingers just enough and he sucks in a staggered, desperate breath of air.

“She’s—she’s—she’s in the warehouse—by—by the docks. The red building. With the blue—the blue—shutters.” He gasps and sobs and tries to tug my hand away from his neck.

“Thank you. I’ll make this quick.”

“No—“ his words cut off again, and this time I press harder. My fingers digging into his flesh as images of what might be happening to her flood my mind. He gave her to them. He betrayed me and he will pay for it with his life.

The blood vessels in his eyes burst as I increase pressure. The whites of his eyes turn red and his lips go from blue to purple.

Veins pulse along his temple and slowly his kicking stops. His fingers fall slack, his arm falls limp at his side.

His tongue, swollen and grotesque, protrudes out of his mouth.

I stand up, looking down at his lifeless body. Not a flicker of remorse touches me.

Turning from him, I dial Luka as I rush downstairs to my car.

“I know where she is,” I say, running him through everything that just happened. “Meet me at the pin I’ve just sent you. Bring everyone.”

My brothers and all of the Kuznetsov brothers have the red building surrounded. We close in around the building, moving in stealth until I burst forward and kick the door down.

All at once, we flood into the warehouse.

One by one, their men fall.

The scene is brutal as we move through the space. They never stood a chance. They never expected us. In their arrogance, they actually believed they had the upper hand.

“She’s here.” Rigor shouts over the gunfire.

I bolt towards him, pushing past him into the small room where Sera is being held. She’s tied to a chair, her eyes covered, her mouth gagged.

I drop my gun and hurriedly pull the blindfold from her face.

“It’s me, angel. It’s me.” I say, pulling the gag from her lips, I wipe her tears away.

She is sobbing as she falls into my arms, leaning into me, clutching her fingers around my shirt and holding on with fear and desperation.

“I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry.” I repeat as I lift her and carry her out of the hell she’s been trapped in. I can’t believe she had to go through this because of me. I can never let this happen again.

Outside the building, I pause, seeing Yilian run towards me. “Get her out of here. We’re going to knock these fuckers off the face of the planet.”

I nod. She doesn’t need to see any of this.

Setting her into the passenger seat of my car, I climb in as well and turn towards her.

“Sera?” She hasn’t said a word. “Are you hurt?”

She shakes her head. She lifts her hand towards me, but it’s shaking so badly she pauses, staring at it. I pull her into another hug, and she climbs onto my lap, crying into my shoulder. “I knew you’d come.” She says. “I knew everything would be ok.”

At home, in the penthouse, Sera has spent the last forty minutes soaking in the tub and I’ve prepared some food for her, anxious to speak to her, but reluctant to say what needs to be said.

I’ve never felt more disgusting in my entire life. Disgusted with myself for doing this to her. Angry that I was so selfish. Angry that I didn’t let her go before it got to this point. Everything that happened is my fault.

She walks into the living room, rubbing a towel over her damp hair. The pink sweatpants and hoodie look cute on her. If I look at her now, I would never guess what she’s been through.

The scars and trauma of what has happened will be in her heart.

She sits down next to me and I take a heavy breath.

“I’ve been wrong, Serafina.”

“How so?” She asks, reaching out and taking my hand.

I shake my head and pull it away from her and pain shoots through her eyes.

I bite my lip. “I was wrong to try and keep you. I’ve booked a ticket for you to fly out tomorrow morning.

You will get a new passport. A new identity.

You have to leave here and never look back.

You and the baby will be safe. It’s all been arranged, and it’s something I should have done right in the beginning.

I’m a fucking asshole for doing this to you—it’s my fault and I can never forgive myself—“ I choke on my words, turning away from her to hide the tears of anger and regret.

Serafina pulls at my shirt, then takes my arm and forces me to look at her. She stares into my eyes, and I feel my entire world being ripped out from beneath me.

“Nico.” She whispers my name.

“You don’t have to say anything.” I breathe.

She smiles, her eyes narrowing as tears begin to spill from them, but she smiles—then she crawls over the sofa and onto my lap, straddling her legs over me as she wraps her arms around my neck. I wrap my arms around her waist, burying my face in her hair and breathing in the scent of her.

“I’m in love with you.” She says, laughing and crying at the same time. “I’m not going anywhere. I’m staying with you. There is nowhere else I want to be, and I know you’ll keep me and our babies safe.”

“You—“ I stammer, not believing her words.

“I love you.” She leans back, looking into my eyes and smiling.

“Sera—everything you went through—“

“I don’t care, Nico. Listen to me—I love you and I’m staying right here.”

I shake my head. Then I nod. “You’re staying?” I say in disbelief.

“Yes.” She’s laughing as she grabs my face and kisses me.

The joy that hits me is like a tidal wave, knocking me out of myself and then pulling me right back in.

My head is spinning, and I’ve never been more overwhelmed in my life.

I pull her away from me because I need to look at her when I say this.

“Sera, you are everything I’ve ever wanted, and I love you more than words can describe. I want you. I want you forever—but if you have any doubt—at all—even the smallest, tiniest sliver—you need to tell me now because once you give yourself

to me I'm never going to be able to let go."

She bites her lip, and her eyes glitter with happiness.

"I don't want you to let go." She grins. "I love you forever."

Sera tilts her head to the side. "Also—we're having twins."

She scrunches her nose, waiting for my response.

"Two? Two babies?" I laugh. "I didn't think it could get any better."

I grab her against me again and her body melts against mine. We mold into one, sitting on the sofa, filled with relief, love, hope, excitement—every emotion spinning inside me as I sit in disbelief at how lucky I am.

The impossible—the most amazing thing that could ever happen to me—she is mine. And I mean it when I tell her that I am never going to let her go. She's locked in my heart now, and my life is with her.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:36 pm

“Ugh.” I groan, holding my hand over my belly. “How is it possible that I got this round this fast,” I complain.

Nico laughs as he steps behind me and wraps his arms around me. He holds me beneath my oversized belly and lifts it slightly, holding the weight of the twins in his hands.

“Oh my word.” I moan in relief. “Please stay there forever.” I lean my head against him and close my eyes.

He nuzzles his face into my neck. “Are you ready?” he asks.

“I am. You?”

He nods. Slowly, he drops his hands, and the weight of our babies is mine again.

“When we get home, I’ll give you a peppermint foot massage.”

“I love you more already.” I grin, turning around and standing on my tiptoes to kiss him.

“Jade gave me such a lecture about not being late for this lunch,” I mutter. “Since when are we ever late for the family lunches. I don’t know what has gotten into her.”

“She gave me the same lecture.” He shrugs. “Maybe she had it out with everyone. The only person she really needs to moan at is Ark.”

“I know. It’s so weird. But she made me anxious about it. I’m terrified we’re going to be late now. “I laugh at myself.

Nico chuckles and leans over the kitchen counter to grab the car keys.

I brush my hands over my dress. It’s tight, hugging the roundness of my belly.

“Do I look ridiculous? Should I wear the floaty dress instead?”

“Are you kidding. You looking fucking incredible. That belly of yours is fucking hot.”

“Shame on you—talking about your pregnant wife like that,” I say, my brows raised.

“Hey, hang on a second. For now, you’re just my baby mama. You’re the one who wanted to wait till after the twins were born before we got married.”

He reaches out and takes my hand, resting it on his and admiring the engagement ring he gave me five months ago. “I wanted to get married the same day I asked you.” He huffs. Still sulking that I said—but I’m also making him wait.

“Ok, but you’re not the one who has to get married looking like an air balloon. These boys— both of them— weigh a ton, and I’m tired and I want to eat everything, and I want—“

“I know, my love, you want to look perfect on your wedding day. I understand. I just think you already look perfect.” He grins, kissing me, my body sparking with lust as he grabs my ass and squeezes.

“Oh my goodness. Don’t do that.” I laugh, pushing his hand away. “If you do that, I’m going to pounce on you and then we will be late. And Jade is terrifying. I’m not willing to risk that.”

Nico laughs again, stealing one more kiss before he pushes me towards the front door.

“Let’s go.” He says, following me out.

We arrive at Jade and Rad’s place for the family lunch that she is, for some reason, very panicked about. I’ve had lunches at her place before, but this time she seems obsessively determined to make sure it’s perfect.

“It’s so quiet,” I say, walking up the steps. “Where is everyone?”

Nico pushes the front door open, and I step inside.

The moment I walk through the door way everyone leaps out and shouts. “Surprise. Happy baby shower.”

I scream and almost fall over, but Nico has his arm around me as I laugh in relief and tears of joy sting my eyes. I’ve never had any kind of surprise party in my entire life.

The entire family of Andreevs, and our close friends, surrounds us and one by one they hug me and excitedly congratulate us both.

Jade and Radmir are the last ones to welcome us in and she grins at me with the naughtiest smile on her face. “Did you really not know?” She asks, giggling like a kid on Christmas day.

“Girl, I almost peed my pants.” I pack up laughing.

She pulls Nico and me into one big group hug. “I cannot wait to be an aunt. Can you hurry up and give me my nephews already? You look like you should have given birth two months ago.”

“I know, how much bigger am I going to get?” I whine.

She takes my hand and leads me into the party.

The decor is beautiful. Blue balloons, streamers, flowers, cakes, cocktails, glitter, music—everything has been set up with love and care, and looking around, I start crying again.

Freaking hormones have been ruling my life. The past month has been particularly bad, and I cry over absolutely everything.

Jade laughs when she notices and hands me a blue napkin with a little blue bunny on it. This makes me cry even more.

Nico pulls me into his arms and he’s laughing too.

“I’m glad you love it, my angel.”

The past five months have been the happiest of my entire life, and I have a feeling that it is only going to get better from here. With each passing moment, Nico and I grow closer, our love becoming stronger.

I tried to go back to work after everything blew over. The enemy was completely eliminated that day that Nico rescued me—there is no longer a threat from them and the rat, Justin, is no longer a concern—

At first, I was loving being back in the office with Nico, but within two months, I was so tired I couldn’t even think straight.

The doctor told me that with my body being as petite as it is and trying to grow two pretty hefty little twin boys, larger than normal for babies in this trimester, I had no choice but to pause my career and take it easy.

Nico has made sure that I've been busy enough to stay out of trouble, though.

He brings a file home here and there and lets me keep in the loop with things.

I've joined the team that is searching for leads on Andrei and I help him with follow-ups—it's so frustrating that we haven't found him yet.

I want to help Nico with that because I think it will help him with the pain he has after losing his little brother.

Nico keeps me sane by taking me on little adventures to beautiful restaurants, peaceful weekends away, trips to the beach now that the weather is warmer, and of course, shopping for baby things, which is my new favorite hobby.

It is the perfect afternoon in warm sunshine, surrounded by love and family while we celebrate the coming birth of our twins.

They shower us in gifts, and I feel like I've truly found my place in this world.

Late in the day, I let out a sneaky little yawn, which I try to hide behind my hand.

Nico leans over and whispers in my ear. "Say the secret words and I'll have you whisked away and tucked in bed within seconds."

I giggle, loving that he prepared me for this. I clear my throat and in a serious tone, I say. "Bananas really should come in other colors."

A few of the people sitting around us turn to look at me with alarm and confusion in their eyes. "What?" Jade says, scutching her nose. "Have you gone mad?"

Nico and I are laughing at our private joke as he pulls me to my feet. "She's gone mad. I have no choice but to rush her out of here before the madness infects you all."

He says dramatically.

“You two are idiots.” Jade laughs. “Get out of here, I’ll have my driver bring all of the gifts to your place tomorrow.” She waves us away with a smile, but before we leave, I grab her into the biggest hug ever. “Love you,” I say, holding her tight. “Love you too. I’m so happy my brother met you.”

At home, Nico insists on carrying me. All the way from the car, in the elevator, to the door, and to the bedroom.

“I can walk, you know,” I say, snuggled against him, loving every moment of it.

“Mm. But I don’t want to let you go.” He replies.

“What else don’t you want?” I whisper as he lets my feet slide to the ground.

“I don’t want you in this dress anymore.”

“I thought you liked this dress?” I say in horror.

“Oh, but what’s underneath it is so much more divine, my love.” He growls darkly.

I bite my lip and turn my back towards him, letting him slowly unzip the back of my dress. My heart beats faster and my skin begins to tingle with desire.

His hands brush over my body as he pushes the dress off my shoulders, over my hips and onto the floor. His touch sends shockwaves through me.

I turn to face him again, and my fingers pull open his belt, tugging his pants off. His eyes are locked onto me, his mouth set in a stern line as he stares at me with intensity.

“What?” I mutter, feeling self-conscious.

“Did I ever tell you that you are the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen?” he asks, reaching up to touch my face.

“You did.” I grin, my heart fluttering wildly.

I reach out and touch his rock hard cock.

It stands rigid, and I lick my lips before dropping to my knees in front of him.

He groans with pleasure as I lick him and suck him, letting my tongue dance over him as I taste his desire. His hand brushes over the back of my head, his fingers threading through my hair.

I let my him fuck my mouth, sliding in and out of it until he starts to get too hard and too big for me to handle.

“Stand up, angel. Bend over the bed for me.” He demands, holding out his hand and pulling me to my feet.

I walk to the bed and lean over it, setting my hands on the edge as I arch my back and lift my ass towards him.

“Fuck, you are too fucking perfect.” His eyes trace over my body as he takes his cock in his hand and rubs himself, back and forth, savoring the sight of me.

I feel like a goddess in his eyes.

There hasn’t been a single moment with him where I haven’t felt beautiful. Even though I joke about my belly being too big, the way he looks at me and the things he says make me want to get pregnant again as soon as this is over.

He steps behind me with his feet on either side of mine.

“Lean forward.” He demands, pressing my face against the bed. “That’s right, gorgeous, show me my pussy.” He runs his finger over my wetness and when he slaps me lightly over my clit I gasp with pleasure.

He chuckles, rubbing his cock over me.

“You’re lucky you’re tired, so I’ll be gentle with you—this time.” He whispers, and as he says the words, he thrusts into me.

I cry out as his cock pushes deep inside me.

Sex when you're pregnant feels different. It’s an entirely new sensation. As though my body has changed shape in more ways than I can see.

He groans at wraps his hands around my hips, holding me in place while he fucks me with steady, rhythmic, pounding thrusts.

His animalistic grunts of pleasure are always my undoing. To hear him lost in the moment, fighting for control, enjoying it as much as I am—it drives me wild with desire.

He runs his hand over my spine, and I shudder beneath his touch.

He slaps my ass and I moan loudly, digging my hands into the blankets, twisting and pulling as the pleasure builds.

My legs start shaking and Nico holds my hips tighter.

My breathing hitches and becomes deeper and Nico pushes harder into me.

He reaches around my front and presses his finger against my clit.

All at once the orgasm hits me, over and over again, multiplying as he rubs my clit and thrusts deep inside me.

I can barely breathe when it ends, and Nico explodes inside my body.

I fall forward onto the bed, giggling in delight. I roll over and grin at him and he lies over me to kiss me.

“I love you, my angel. More and more every day.”

“I love you too, Nico. You are my entire world.”

THE END