



Kidnapped Bratva Virgin (Utkin Bratva #3)

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Category: Urban

Description: The Bratva took me, forced me to marry him, and now I'm carrying his heir.

Dimitri is twice my age, ruthless, and completely unyielding.

When he wanted my family's land, he didn't ask—he kidnapped me.

Now I'm his prisoner, locked in his mansion, and he's made one thing clear:

I belong to him, and he'll do whatever it takes to keep me.

I try to resist, to fight the cold fire in his gaze.

But he watches my every move, and his hands punish and claim with possessive force.

My innocence was his to take, my body bending to his will.

And when I finally surrender, I wake up carrying his child—a reminder that I can never escape him.

Now I'm trapped, bound to a Bratva monster who's stolen my freedom and my heart.

When he learns I'm carrying his heir, will he keep me safe... or destroy me?

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Page 1

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“And that’s where Moore and Klein went wrong, letting one of the biggest cases in US history gurggle down the drain.” Standing with authority, I finish delivering my analysis of one of the biggest torts cases against a major airline carrier to my class peers and my professor.

I’m a little bleary-eyed, but the cases’ major oversights, even if they were from early 2000s, always fascinated me. I wish with every bone in my body I could have been on the case. I would have gotten to the bottom of it, because how the hell do you lose a case of a passenger suffering stroke only to wind up dead due to no doctor being on board the plane?

Professor Jacob O’ Leary is my hero. In professor form that is, and he pushes me, which I appreciate, because if there’s one thing I love, it’s a “Sudoku puzzle of a law case” on my hands.

Jacob paces behind his lectern, his salt and pepper hair highlighted under the auditorium down lights. “The lack of evidence, and the distortion of the airline footage, along with the varied reports from witnesses, and the lengthy time frame before filing were all contributing factors, I would say.” Professor O’ Leary stops, a smirk landing on his mouth. “Do you think you’re being a little harsh? I mean the Green family did receive over eight million dollars.”

Twisting my mouth, I shake my hair with a hard gaze in the professor’s direction. “No. I don’t think I am. By the time they diverted the flight from Borneo, it took them another hour to land the plane and by that time, Bill Green was brain dead. If it were my case, I would have gotten them twenty million,” I declare confidently as I hear the low rumbles and light chuckles in the background.

But I'm deadly serious. I would have been like a pit bull for my client, wearing the enemy down until I was satisfied I won. That's what I like to do. Win and win big.

A glint as sharp as a knife's blade shines in Professor O' Leary's eyes. "I like your ambition, Ava. If I didn't retire from law, I would have hired you." He chuckles.

That's because I'm the shit and one of your top students, and you know it.

Smiling triumphantly, I keep standing wanting to say more. "You know how I would have gotten them that extra twelve?" I put forward, not wanting my copious hours of extensive and methodical research to go to waste.

"No. I'm curious. Tell the class." Professor O'Leary gestures, and I'm glad to indulge him. The other presentations for the morning dulled the light in his eyes, and it was clearly obvious I'd brought his heart back online.

"I would have highlighted the fact employee satisfaction was down for the last three years, and particularly with the airline staff. They weren't able to find a qualified physician and only had a student on board. The passengers paid business class for premium airline service, and on that day, they were understaffed on board, and staff had complained for months prior about the lackadaisical training received. I would have honed in on that. Not to mention the fact baggage claim and theft through this carrier was rampant for over eighteen months over ten different routes. I know because I tracked it," I spill out, failing to take a breath.

"Then it's worthy of the twenty million. An expensive lesson for the airline. Impressive digging, Ava."

"Thank you."

I wish my sleepless nights were only due to my studies, but Charlie's Diner aptly

named—and located in St. Charles a little over an hour away from the University of Chicago Law is on my mind. I've got a small window of just over three minutes to hightail it to the bus stop, only to arrive five minutes early, whip on my apron and take orders from my shitty boss, Gunther. Not that the customers overall are that much better. Good tips are hard to come by too. Passing law school with flying colors is what I'm hanging on to.

It's what I want for my future. I've never wanted something so bad in my life, and as soon as I pass, I can quit the crappy job and do what I love—solve cases. I'm not like my friend, Sophia. Her personal motive for wanting to be in law began with her parents' car crash and avenging their untimely death.

Nope. Not me. I understood it—but personally, I'm not interested in glory days and fighting for freedom. I like to prove my point and solve the puzzles of the cases. Give me the ones I can sink my teeth into. There's a reason I was the captain of the debate team in high school, honing my argumentative skills. Sophia wanted to lock up criminals, and I prefer the commercial side and seeing corporations pay out big for clients.

My own father, Logan Knight is my hero, even if he did end up working in the not-for-profit sector barely making ends meet as legal counsel. After Mom passed away, he lost his drive to go after his own dream at a larger firm. A soft ache of regret hits my chest as I think about how badly my father struggled after my mother's death, and how many financial hardships he'd battled since then. We had to downsize to renting, but it made me more determined than ever to secure myself financially. And when he passed away with nothing to show for it, it broke my heart.

Class finishes up with the usual loiterers getting in my way. I jostle past, apologizing profusely while waving goodbye to the professor. "Excuse me, 'cuse me. Places to go, places to go."

“Ava, you are one brutal chick. I’m going to make sure I come and see you for a slip-and-fall so I can rake in the big bucks!” one of my clown classmates shouts out as I bust through the door. There are a few in the class, and my money is on the fact they’re probably not going to graduate. They’re not taking their futures seriously, but that has nothing to do with me.

“Yep! Where’s my money?” I volley back, feeling the sweat building underneath my armpits for fear of being late. I briskly walk down the hall, out of the administration building and arrive at the bus stop, my heart pounding as the noisy behemoth lurches to a stop—right on time, and I tap on with my card.

Looking down at my watch, I bite my bottom lip. “Shit, I’m going to be late,” I groan underneath my breath, willing the bus to barrel through the Chicago traffic so I can avoid being chastised by my hypocritical boss, and thankfully, I arrive at the dingy diner with just enough time to spare.

“Is this the time you’re rolling in here, Ava?” Gunther yells from behind the counter as I fly in the door. His apron is stained with streaks of mustard and what looks to be grill grease, but I can’t be sure. Rebecca, one of the other part-time waitresses is behind the counter, and she’s in school like me. She rolls her eyes as I cut mine at Gunther.

“I’m on time. I’ve still got ten minutes,” I puff out, the heat from the grill exacerbating my anxiety. There’s only a handful of customers seated this afternoon, but I know there’s due to be an afternoon rush in the next hour, and that’s what Gunther’s harping on about.

“And now it’s eight because you’re yapping. Come on, I need you in here,” he grumbles as I run to the back and change quickly, tying up my royal blue apron with the faded embroidery of “Charlie’s Diner” on it.

Rubbing my Chapstick over my dry lips, I tie my hair up and greet Rebecca. “How is he this afternoon?” I whisper. She sighs, sliding the laminated menus back in their slots.

“Grumpy as usual, but extra today because the cook was late for shift. I don’t see why he has to take it out on us, though.” Grabbing a cloth, I shove my waitress pad down my front apron pocket.

“Me neither.”

“Enough with the ladies’ convention. Ava, table six. Rodney’s waiting for you to take his order.” My stomach bunches up into a tight coil of knots. Rodney. A regular customer we could do without. A trucker who’s a lousy tipper with an even worse attitude.

“Hey, Rodney,” I greet dispassionately. I don’t need my pad. Off the top of my head, I know what he’s going to order. I might only be twenty-one, but I feel I’ve aged as much as the blue-and-white checkered curtains on the windows.

“Hey, Ava. I’ll take the burger and soda special. Add a slice of peach cobbler pie as well.”

“Sure. Anything else?”

“No.” Rodney doesn’t look up, shaking out the paper, mumbling his last sentence as I’m about to walk. “Make sure the coffee’s hot, otherwise no tip.”

Fuck me. I need to get out of here as quick as I can. Could I get another part-time job? Maybe, but the one thing Gunther does give me is extra shifts, and lots of them. That’s the problem, and the only way he’s been able to hang on to me.

As I take orders from equally ungrateful customers, I let my mind drift to working at the top commercial litigation firms and leaving Chicago. I could work at Hamson & Clark. God, they are good. They've won so many class action suits it puts other litigation offices to shame. Maybe I could get an internship to Thompson—"

"Ava!" Gunther barks, his round, stubbled face red like a beetroot. "Table eight is up! Let's go."

Scurrying around to the counter to pick up the meal, I grimace, hating that customers can hear him yelling at me.

Screw you, Gunther. I can't wait to walk in and tell him I quit. That's going to be one of the most satisfying moments of my life.

I get through the shift by nightfall, my shoulders aching, and longing for an extra hot shower to wash away the grime, complaints, and negativity of the job. Plopping on my small couch, I rub my throbbing feet, only for my cell phone to ring.

"Please. I can't handle much more," I whine, my energy depleted and hoping the person will hang up, but after the third ring, I decide I better pick it up. The caller ID is blocked, but I still answer. "Hello, Ava Knight. Who is this?" I snap.

"Ah, hello, Ms. Knight. I'm sorry for the late call. My name is Aiden Smith and I'm calling from Barker Associates law firm where I represent Jackson Knight as his legal attorney."

My jaw slackens, my curiosity piqued, but still unsure as to why I'm receiving a call. "Uh, are you sure you have the right number? I don't know a Jackson Knight. Maybe you've got it wrong."

Aiden chuckles down the line. "Is this Ms. Ava Knight, daughter of Sully Knight?"

“Yes.” Shivers roll down my spine. “Okay, you’re scaring me now,” I tell him slowly, my ear growing hot.

“Oh, I’m sorry. I know this call might come as a shock. Your response is completely normal. Jackson Knight was your father’s uncle. Does that help jog your memory?”

In a lightbulb moment, I do remember my father mentioning Jackson once or twice, but I never laid eyes on the man. As far as I was concerned, they were simply tall tales. “Ah yeah... he’s not someone my dad spoke about much. There was a falling out, and I never met the guy. Why is your office calling me?” I reply, sinking back into the couch.

“Good question, Ava. Jackson Knight unfortunately passed away last week, but he had his will and affairs in good order before he did. He has no direct blood relatives, but he was very fond of your father and at one time they were close. There’s ah—a property, on the outer limits of Wisconsin, and it’s been requested to be transferred to you.”

Confusion racks my brain. “What? A property?”

“Yes. A property.”

“Is it a house or barn or something?” Surely the man couldn’t have left me much. He didn’t even know me.

“Ms. Knight, it’s more than that. It’s approximately ten thousand acres of land and it’s known as Raven’s Peak.”

I take the phone away from my ear, staring at it, but a grin rises on my face. “Oh, I get it. This is a prank call. Hardy har, har. Who put you up to this? One of my classmates? Which one was it?” I rattle off, amused by the voice on the other end of

the line.

Silence rests between us for a beat. “Umm. No. Ms. Knight. This is not a joke. You have rightfully inherited Raven’s Peak and it’s a four-thousand-hectare property.” Feeling woozy, I feel the phone slipping from my fingers. From Charlie’s shithole diner to a four-thousand-hectare property in Wisconsin. How is this even possible? “Ms. Knight, are you still there?”

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:11 pm

I watch from my lavish glass tower on the fortieth floor as a tourist boat cruises slowly on the Chicago River in front of me. Every day there are new passengers on the cruise learning about the ins and outs of Chicago. Smirking, I scratch at my beard wondering if the host tells them about the Chicago of old and all the bloodshed on its streets. Yes, Chicago might have cleaned up its act from the outside looking in, but underneath lies the ongoing seedy underbelly of corruption, power, money, and greed, and I'm grateful to be leading the charge from my new digs.

A gradual transition from running operations in New York to Chicago has been in the works for some time, but finally I've resettled in the city. I never wanted to leave in the first place, but the undoing's of my father led me into the Big Apple and proving myself in one of the toughest cities in America. I made it work, carving out a niche for myself in security operations, networking, cutting deals one by one via blackmail, and placing high-ranking police, military leaders, lawyers, criminals, and other useful people on the Bratva payroll.

Sighing, I soak it all in, waiting for Viktor to return. Apparently, he has news. From the tone of his voice, I anticipate the news to be favorable to the Bratva. The slight smirk on my face sours as I rake a hand through my dirty-blond hair. I've had to claw my way to the top and earn every ounce of respect from not only my peers but the Bratva organization as a whole. It's taken me over six years to prove myself worthy to run my own branch of it, and yet some of my motives remain under fire.

With a steely resolve, I've managed to pick up every broken piece of my bloodline's reputation due to my father shattering it years ago. A muscle twitches in my cheek when I think about the long hours and sheer grit it's taken for me to bring us back from the dead. Today has been a long day of meetings and negotiations, each of them

chess moves to the bigger goals I hold. An abrupt knock on my frosted-glass door catapults me out of my deep thinking.

“Boss.”

My eyebrow shoots up as Viktor enters with a huge grin on his face. He’s been my right-hand man for over a decade, never faltering when shit hits the proverbial fan. He, too, has had to fight to prove himself in the Bratva. That’s something we have in common and probably why he’s in the position he’s in with me. Rounding the cherrywood mini bar, I grab a crystal tumbler, pouring myself a whisky neat. I might be Russian, but whisky is my dirty drink of choice. Swirling the caramel contents, I answer back.

“Yes?”

“I think I just got the best news of the year for us,” he issues with a thick accent and a deep chuckle, easing all six foot five of himself into the chair in front of my desk. Nothing is out of order. I’m a strategic man of order right down from my Parker pens to my envelopes. I’ve had to be, and it’s these methods that have put me in good stead, bringing in millions of cash reserves for the brotherhood.

Sipping the elixir of fire, I let the smooth bite hit my throat as I smile back in amusement at Viktor. “Do I need to pour up another?”

“I think you’re going to want to.” He grins, standing up and joining me at the bar as I pour him one. “Finally, that old bastard Jackson Knight has passed away. He’s been sick for years, holding on for too long, in my opinion.”

I’m not ready to celebrate yet, but it seems one of my chess pieces has already been slotted into place. “How did you find out?”

“I have a connection at the hospice hospital. A sweet little nurse. Catch my drift?” Viktor winks and I nod. In other words, he’s been fucking her for information. Why not? It’s hurting no one and helps us. Viktor’s not a complete eyesore, and his height, coupled with a rugged physique and square shoulders normally hits the mark. We are opposites in many ways. He has dark hair and olive eyes with pale Russian skin. Zero tattoos, and very clean cut to the outside. It’s a good camouflage if need be in one regard. At six foot three, I’m no slouch, but more compact, covered in tattoos from the neck down, inheriting the dirty-blond hair and ice-blue eyes of my father.

“Yes. I catch it. How long have you been doing her?”

Viktor knocks back his drink. “You know this. Long enough to get her to pillow talk about Jackson. She said he was an exemplary patient, but his heart was giving out. Shame it gave out last night.”

“Good, good.” A spark of electricity whips through my system when I think about what it means for us.

“It sure is. We can go after it now with a clear run.”

Sipping my whisky carefully, I nod. “Yes. Raven’s Peak is ours. He doesn’t have any children either. This is our chance.” The thought of owning Raven’s Peak makes my dick hard, and it’s as good a chance at redemption as any from the botched heist my father put us through. The more distance I can put between “that untimely incident” and me, the better. I’m nothing like my father, and nor do I want to be.

“Nope. None and I’ve triple-checked. This means there’s going to be an auction, and all we have to do is wait to buy it.”

“No. There’s not going to be any waiting.”

“Are you going to rig the auction?”

Tilting my head, I pour myself another whisky, desperate to get my hands on the lucrative goldmine. “Rig? No... I’m going to find out when it is. We have money, there’s no need for the rigging. Who will outbid us? They won’t be able to keep up!” I snicker as Viktor nods, raising his glass.

“No. They won’t. Wisconsin, here we come. I hear it’s a cold bitch up there.”

“No colder than Chicago in winter.”

“Bullshit, Boss.”

“Okay, maybe a little,” I banter, in a feel-good mood from the news. “Do you know what this means?”

“More money. And plenty of it. That place is a lithium gold mine. That’s why Jackson was holding on to it so tightly.” Viktor rubs his fingers together, his white teeth gleaming.

“Right, and with our networks from the acquisition of the Omerta Files we can quadruple our income over the next thirty years, bringing me and the Bratva more leverage and power. We will be the go-to for energy storage, powering electric vehicles, batteries, and managing the global reserves for lithium. Given that Raven’s Peak is a hub, we can ask for more. Every country will want to come through us, and we can charge a hefty premium.”

And I can redeem my family name. Not even Ruslan or Andrei can rival this deal. I never miss. “No. Correction, Boss. We will make them come through us.”

“It will be a no-brainer. The door to partnerships in the tech world will put us on top.

Whenever people speak about lithium, my name will be the one they say. Tesla comes to mind.”

Viktor crosses his arms over his chest, a satisfied smirk popping up. “Tesla. Aerospace—we’re talking rockets to the moon. Military defense, you name it; we will have our names on it.”

Viktor’s got the same glint in his eye that I’ve had for the last five years waiting for the old man to croak. “Aren’t you glad you stuck it out with me?” A cocky sneer rides over my face, but I know the job isn’t done yet.

“I’ve always known.”

“Smart man. Everyone will forget about that dumb bank heist.”

“They will. It’s already a thing of the past. You never miss, Dimitri.”

“I don’t, but we can’t celebrate fully until we have that deed in my hot hands. I want it,” I grit out, my heart riding on its own powerful beat inside my chest.

“Of course. It’s not just about making us money either. By extracting the lithium ourselves we cut out middlemen. Don’t forget about the border either,” Viktor replies, his eyes narrowing.

“We can smuggle contraband out on that back corner of the property’s border. It will be a lot easier to remain concealed from a Wisconsin base. Law enforcement is weak there.”

“You’re right about that. I’m surprised we haven’t run contraband through there previously.” I can hear Viktor’s mind ticking over with the promise of increasing our power, but we have to sew up the deal first.

“We haven’t been able to test it. Now it’s wide open for us to do it. It will be of great benefit,” I tell him, invigoration seeping back into my bones. Back at my desk, I sift through my phone numbers until I find the county treasurer’s number for Raven’s Peak. We’ve had prior conversations over the last couple of years about property. Now, after holding my breath for so long, I can come to the surface for air.

“We’re going to own everyone’s ass. Who are you calling—William?”

“You bet I am. He’s the county treasurer, and it’s going to be him who auctions off the property. He’ll make sure we get a good price.” I snicker, knowing it’s only a formality at this point. Since the Omerta Files, we’ve been able to make friends throughout government across the country.

“That’s right. He is.”

Dialing his number, William picks up after the second ring. “Ah, William. I’m glad I caught you. Business doing well?” I ask him, ticking off the initial pleasantries.

“Very well. Steady. And for you?” Viktor and I exchange glances.

“Good as always, but about that....”

“Yes?”

Pausing, I stand on the ledge of redemption, squeezing the cordless phone in my hand. “I wanted to check in with you about Raven’s Peak being auctioned off.”

A fractional pause hangs in the balance before William answers. Immediately the beat in my heart escalates. “I’m afraid Raven’s Peak won’t be auctioned off.”

“Why not?” I quip, my stomach clenching.

“Because Jackson has a distant relative, Ava. From the documents I can see, she’s a grandniece. Her name is Ava Knight. Give me a second. I’ve just finished reviewing the paperwork.”

The sound of rustling papers filters down the line, leaving me fuming. Too good to be true. Ava Knight. Who the fuck is she? “Ava Knight,” I whisper harshly under my breath.

“Ah, here it is. Yes. Ava Knight. She’s going to inherit the land, and as it stands, she’s probably been informed that it’s hers.”

“Fuck!” I mouth out loud, but don’t let William hear. “Right. Thanks William. That’s good to know.”

Cutting the call, I massage my temples, my brow knitting together. “Viktor we’ve got a thorn that needs to be pulled. I’m not about to let some grandniece stand in the way of my victory. Oh no. We’re going to buy Ava Knight out and send her on her way. She probably doesn’t even understand what all the lithium on her property is worth.

“What, Boss? What happened?”

“There’s a grandniece named Ava Knight who’s due to inherit Raven’s Peak, and we need her gone,” I answer with authority. “I need you to find out all you can about her and get back to me.”

Because Raven’s Peak is fucking mine, goddamit!

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:11 pm

Wisconsin is nothing like the bustling kaleidoscope of Chicago's streetscapes. I've never seen so many spruce trees clumped together, or birds for that matter. This is what it feels like to be amongst clean, unpolluted air. The sky is clearer, less dense smog from the pollution of cars, trains, buses, and taxis. I feel my heart rate slow down, and it's stayed the same ever since I arrived on the plane. It's a new feeling to be at ease, and Wisconsin is showing me just how stressed out I've been in Chicago.

The air is fresh as I wrap my black shawl tighter around my body. It's an outdoor funeral, and I watch Jackson's casket being buried in the ground; it feels surreal. Most people wear black to a funeral, so I assume it's safe enough that I've worn a plain black dress, stockings and a shawl. And as I look out into the sea of mournful faces who knew Jackson Knight, I stand awkwardly as the priest pours out his blessing for his afterlife.

"Jackson Knight was a beloved member of the Raven's Peak community, and at times of great peril, he helped keep this tight-knit community afloat." The priest's words fade out as I look around staring at all the people, searching for any sense of security, but there is none. Most of them look to be on the downside of sixty. Some are weeping, others' expressions are deadpan, but overall, the mood is somber. There are men in suits, who appear out of place with the rest of the gathering. Many of them are staring in my direction, and I wish they weren't.

A gust of unruly wind whips my hair around my face, and it's about now I wish I had a friend who came with me, so I didn't feel so strange. I've inherited a vast amount of land, and I have no idea what I'm going to do with it. I still can't believe the call I received only days ago. I took off from work and school, only for Gunther to give me hell about it. Given what I've inherited, I don't think the diner's going to be in my

immediate future soon.

As the funeral draws to a close, people I don't know approach me, offering their condolences, and waves of feeling overwhelmed wash over me as the sharks begin to circle.

"Hi, I'm Nathan Close. I'm a property developer from New York, and sweetheart you've just inherited a massive fortune. I want to help you quadruple your money. How's that sound?" A man in cheap gray suit fast talks, his teeth dripping with greed. He flashes me a business card, not giving me enough space to breathe.

Blinking rapidly, I step back, reluctantly taking the card, hoping he moves on, but he lingers like a bad smell. "Umm, thanks for the card, but I just got to Wisconsin, and I don't know what I'm doing with the property yet," I tell him truthfully.

"That's exactly why you need to stay in contact with me. Raven's Peak isn't a place for you to keep. It's basically wilderness so you should probably think about selling it off pretty quickly if you ask me."

Stepping back to give myself space, I swipe tendrils of stray hairs from my face. "Umm, thanks for the card, I'll get to you about it."

"Great. Or I can call you. Give me your number."

I swallow hard, coaxing the lump to go down in my throat. "No. Thanks. If I need to get in touch I will," I reply assertively, and thankfully I'm saved by a white-haired woman offering her condolences.

But the prospecting doesn't end there as I'm sequestered by a lady with a sharp nose, dressed in black. I thought she was part of the family and friends of Jackson, but I soon find out that's not the case. "Hi, I'm Cheryl Braithwaite and I'm a Raven's Peak

native. I used to be a great friend of Jackson's when he was alive. It's nice to see you hear."

"Er... okay, nice to meet you I guess." Not that a funeral is the ideal place to meet somebody, but I'm left with no choice.

"Yeah, yeah it is," the pushy woman says hurriedly. "What do you think about a spa and retreat on Raven's Peak. It would be the perfect getaway for city dwellers. Don't you think? I've got so many great ideas for the place."

"I don't—I don't know about that," I say quietly, surprised by the blatant disregard for Jackson's death.

The lady's eyes sparkle with greed, nudging me in the side. "We women have to stick together. This venture could really put you on the map. Do you know how much money you would be set to make?" she rasps, the whites of her eyes popping out, scaring me.

Who are these freaking people? Friends of Jackson's? Because from where I'm standing, it's almost as if they were waiting for him to keel over.

"Listen, I just arrived. This is all new to me, and I'm sure I'll find my feet."

"You can't possibly think you're going to handle this property yourself." she scoffs, wriggling her arms over her chest, her judgmental eyes carving a hole in mine.

"I'm sure I will figure out how to manage," I state, all of the attention foreign to me.

She shoves a card in my face as I'm bombarded by more men and women wanting to share their personal thoughts and endeavors they have for Raven's Peak with me.

“Ah, I think you should give Ms. Knight some breathing room to grieve. That’s enough.” A charming voice sinks through the loud voices giving me an anchor and a way out. Frowning, I study the man who is dressed casually in black slacks and a khaki shirt. His voice sounds oddly familiar.

“Who are you to say?” one of the men chimes in, and before I can say anything, the dark-haired man intercepts.

“She’s in a state of grieving and being overwhelmed. She can’t possibly make a decision about the property right now.”

Begrudgingly the piranhas peter off, scattering back to the funeral and some of them leave.

“Thanks. I appreciate that.”

The handsome man offers me his hand with a sympathetic smile, and I accept his warm firm handshake. “Hi, I’m Aiden Smith. I’m the one that rang you about all of this.” He circles his finger referring to the madness that is the funeral.

“Ah, I thought I recognized your voice. Thanks for that. I was drowning,” I mumble, slowly taking Aiden in. He’s around six feet tall and gives off the vibe that he’s been a native to Raven’s Peak his whole life.

He chuckles. “Yep. I’m the lawyer that rang you. This place is a part of your family. Your father used to love coming here growing up.”

“He did? He never mentioned it to me,” I remark, a flock of birds finding comfort in the branches of a nearby tree. There’s something soothing about the place I can’t put my finger on. It’s as if I can think and breathe again here.

“Oh, he didn’t? I’m surprised, but when you take a gander at the property, you’ll find all the photos on the shelves.”

“Wow,” I reply, mystified as to why my father never told me about his best kept secret. “It feels good here. Something....” I look around, the chill of the air cutting through my shawl. Next time I’ll remember to wear warmer clothes. Chicago is chilly, but this is a different type of chill to the bones—fresher.

“It’s the wild of it all. Nothing like the big smoke of Chicago huh?”

“No. It’s like being in a different world.”

“You know you can visit the family home anytime you want.” My eyes widen, thrilled with the prospect of seeing the place where my late father grew up. Dad passed when I was eighteen, and the wound of grief might have closed a little, but in my heart remains an ache that I don’t think I’ll ever be able to get rid of. First my mother from a rare illness when I was under ten, then him. Vaguely, I recall our memories together, and they were sweet, but it was my father who instilled in me the drive, responsibility, and determination to see things through.

“Wow. That’s amazing. And I would love to. He didn’t speak about Jackson so much.” Whenever I asked my father about his family, he always subtly changed the subject, telling me it wasn’t important who they were.

“All you need to know is I’m the black sheep of the family and they’re religious zealots. There’s no point you going to see them. You won’t learn anything of good use from them.”

I didn’t question my father at the time, and now I wish I would have. All I knew is that they were religious, and he wasn’t. I know he didn’t keep in contact with them, and they drifted away from each other. My father was all I had, and I took mostly

what he said at face value.

“That’s interesting, but maybe not that unusual. Jackson’s been a long-time client of mine, and he was a real character, I guess you could say. I can take you there now if you don’t have any plans after the funeral. Sorry about all the crazy people propositioning you. It’s quite the place Jackson owned.”

“Right.” I take a quick look around the open field and the fresh plot of Jackson Knight. A few older people are lingering and sobbing, which I find strange given I don’t know of him at all. “I can’t wait to see it.”

“Alright, then, it’s settled. I’m ready when you are, Ava. I’m local, born and bred, so I can point out some of the highlights of Raven’s Peak while you’re here.”

“Okay.” Stealing a deep breath, I follow Aiden to his navy-blue BMW and sink into the passenger side, glad to be out of the cold. As we pull off, we travel down a gravel road back to the main highway, if you could call it that. It’s more of a sealed back road, lined either side by wild forest and a low foggy mist giving it a Twilight appeal.

“We are just outside the city limits of Raven’s Peak. The Peak cemetery is the only one in town. The nearest one is located in Mont Cleary, which is about twenty minutes over the hill.”

I find Aiden’s commentary fascinating and want to know as much about Raven’s Peak as I can. Ravens fly above the car and I point to one breaking into a smile. “Is that the reason it’s called Raven’s Peak. I think I’ve seen at least twenty of them already.”

Aiden chuckles, tapping the wheel as the forest gives way to open, green and gold fields. I take in the sporadic sightings of lodge style cabins along the way, wondering what it would be like to live such a life. “You would be right. There’s no big legend

behind it. I'm sorry, but if you ask, it's named that because there's a magic here—namely by way of natural resources.”

“Hmm, interesting. You said Mont Cleary is over the hill? Mountains?”

Aiden ducks his head, pointing forward to a large, ominous peak causing me to gasp seeing the mountain ridge that doesn't seem to end in front of us. This place is straight out of a postcard, and for a moment I'm speechless in admiration.

“Wow. That's Raven's Peak?”

Aiden nods. “Yep, that's Raven's Peak. Welcome.”

“This is so amazing. Wild like you say,” I respond in quiet admiration of the place.

“Sure is, but what's funny about Raven's Peak, even with a population of under three thousand, is it has a world of natural resources right there in those mountains. Look out on the right, we're coming up to the family estate now.”

The sealed back road winds to a T-junction where Aiden turns right to a large, locked timber gate with a keypad. Craning my neck out the window through the fog, I marvel at the huge expanse of open land, floored by the sight of the property I've inherited. I watch as he punches in a number and the gate swings inward, giving me a closer look at the house.

The house is cozy, and the brick is a mixture of colorful stone and timber with a wraparound porch, including land as far as the eye can see. All around the border of the home is an evergreen forest and a sense of peace and tranquility that instantly gives me an understanding of why my father enjoyed his childhood here. “This is majestic. I can't believe it.”

“Uh-huh. That’s a word for it. All ten thousand acres,” Aiden remarks, his eyes shimmering with pride as we park out front of the oval driveway.

Slowly, I ascend the porch stairs, studying every nook and cranny of the place as I go. I touch the railing and the exterior, loving the huge timber bay windows, wondering how much sunlight bathes the lounge in the morning. “The place might be over a hundred years old, but it’s been kept in good condition by Jackson. If there were ever any repairs to be done to the fencing or for security purposes Jackson would see to it,” Aiden explains.

He steps ahead, opening the door to an immediate open space. There’s no long corridor, just two open spaces left and right. One seems to be set up as a sunroom and the other has a set of stairs dipping into another entertaining area. Automatically, I feel at home, and from the outside the place looks like a small thimble compared to the rest of the land, but inside it’s deceptively large and long.

“Right. Is it two story?”

“Yes, but the second set of stairs to the upstairs level is behind the kitchen, which is ahead of you,” Aiden points out.

“Did Jackson live here?” I ask, noticing the lack of presence in the house.

“Hmm, he wasn’t here all that much. It was more of his holiday base, but he always made sure everything was kept in pristine condition.”

I finger the childhood photos on the shelf, miffed at my father standing by the side of a stern-looking man and a blonde woman with kind eyes. “Wow. It’s so big on the inside. Is this Jackson in his younger years?” I ask, holding up the picture.

“Yes. He was quite the looker in his day.” Aiden smirks as I regard him.

“Who is the lady?”

“Your grandmother. Her and Jackson were married for forty-two years until she divorced him and ran away with a musician to Portugal. Quite the story, but it was at that point Jackson vowed to never get married again.”

“Wow! She’s pretty. Doesn’t really seem like his type.”

Aiden chuckles scrutinizing the photo and placing it back on the shelf. “No. She seems too carefree for Jackson, maybe that’s why he married her.”

As we sail through each room, my heart swells feeling some affinity for the property and finding myself wanting to stay awhile longer and enjoy it. “Aiden,” I say, turning around with a smile, “do you think I can stay a night or two here?”

Aiden stops near the kitchen counter regarding me for a moment. “I don’t see why not. This all belongs to you now, Ava.”

My heart beats loudly in my chest as I shake my head looking around and out of the large kitchen window drinking in the sprawl of expansive land. “It’s impossible to dream this up. I’m still in shock.”

“I would be too. Raven’s Peak is a gold mine for lithium and mountain freshwater reserves. There’s a lot of potential here.”

Can I make money out of the place? If I can, why didn’t Jackson take advantage of it? That’s why so many people are interested in this place.

Keeping my thoughts to myself, I want to give myself time to explore and mull over my options, but Aiden’s probing eyes lead me to reveal what I’m thinking.

“Do you think any of the natural resources here could be turned into a business, Aiden?”

Aiden nods his head, tapping the marble kitchen bench top. “Yes. Of course they can, and that’s exactly what Jackson wanted. He was just waiting for the right timing. He was a busy man with many ventures on the go at the same time.

“Okay.” Smiling, I feel uplifted for the first time in a long time. No more shitty diner guests for me. “I’m going to stay.”

“Good. Enjoy yourself. I only live not too far in town, so give me a call if you need anything. The fridge is fully stocked, and all the amenities are here as well.”

“Okay. Thanks Aiden.” I wait until he leaves, still getting my bearings. After a glass of water, I set up my laptop, wanting to catch up on the law classes I missed. I try the kitchen first, but then remember the open study at the front of the house deciding to park myself there instead.

Just as I imagined the sun streams in through the bay window as I engross myself in my studies, the sun keeping me warm. As I type every keystroke, I start to feel more at home than ever—more so than Chicago—and I’m dumbfounded that Jackson only spent a limited amount of time at the house.

I don’t know what makes me look up, but I do, and that’s when I notice a black SUV idling beyond the gate of the house. Prickles of heat rise on the back of my neck as I wait to see if it’s going to move, but to my surprise, it doesn’t. The vehicle idles in one spot for a long minute. I don’t want to be paranoid, but all the attention earlier was bad enough.

He said I could call him. I think about Aiden’s help, but decide against it, opting to close the curtains instead. That SUV is giving me the creeps.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:11 pm

He better have the answer I want to hear. I sent Viktor because that's all I felt was necessary. Why should I need to go there myself? She's twenty-one for fuck's sake, and if the offer for money was big enough, then she should have gone for it.

I stop at Benny's grabbing an egg and bacon muffin and a coffee to start the day. The gym barely took the edge off my shattered nerves. It's been years of waiting for the old stubborn man to keel over, and now Raven's Peak is a hair's breadth from my greedy hands.

Sipping my coffee, I tap the back of the steel elevator wall as I travel up to the fortieth floor, the heat from my beverage burning my top lip. "Fuck!" I take it down from my mouth, realizing I'm too invested emotionally over the property as the doors open to my office floor.

This is the comeback that separates me from my father. More money and more power. Yes. More money, more power, and definitely a helluva a lot more pussy. Everywhere.

Walking into my office, I notice Viktor's already on the inside with his back to me. When I open the door, he swivels quickly on his feet, the concerned expression on his face, not the one I want to witness.

"Morning. Did you get it done?" I bark out, tearing a bite off my egg and bacon wrap.

"No." Swallowing it down, I glare at Viktor, wanting answers.

"Why the fuck not?" Viktor hands over still photographs I had him take while in

Wisconsin. Poring over them, I stare back at the multicolored stone house and the sheer vastness of the property with misty mountains overlooking the background. Despite all these features, I can only focus on the close-up photos of a long-haired beauty sitting in the front window, the sun shining directly on her face while on her laptop. My cock rouses in my pants as I ogle the next few frames of photos.

They're even more stunning, revealing a cute little frown of concentration on the girl's face and parted berry-colored lips. "This. That's the one we're up against. Ava Knight." Viktor taps on the glossy images as I slide each photo one by one onto my desktop.

Her beauty is impressive and has left me stalling for a second. But only for a second. I'm not about to let a twenty-one-year-old law student get in the way of me and my fortune.

"Interesting," I murmur, not letting on to Viktor how captivating I find her. I study the last two photos he gave me in silence where I can make out the outline of her black dress. She must have just come from the funeral. "What happened when you presented the offer?"

"She barely blinked and said she would think about it," Viktor replies, shrugging his heavy-set shoulders, his deadpan eyes giving me no clues as to why she would.

"Did she give you a reason?"

"Only that she would think about it and that she needed time to think it through. I gave her our card. There were many others there as well, and she seemed overwhelmed by them."

Annoyed, but mildly curious, I crick my neck, thinking my plan through. "She was dumb enough to turn down millions of dollars? Did you spell it out for her? Viktor.

As in really spell it out?” I push, rounding my desk and sipping my coffee, my lip still throbbing from burning it a minute ago.

“Yah. I did. I swear, but she was preoccupied for the entire funeral, and I repeated it to her, but it was as if she checked out from what I was saying. I wanted to speak to her again and drag her away, but some other guy told everyone else to back off her.”

A surge of anger shoots through my body. “Who was it? Did you get rid of him?”

“You told me specifically not to put hands on anybody. Remember?”

Sighing, I rub at my temples again. Mad at myself for thinking it would be so easy to shore up Raven’s Peak. “Yes. I told you that. Thanks, Viktor.”

“How do you want to handle it from here?” Viktor sits in the chair in front of me as I slowly pick up the photo and stare at the soft beauty of the girl, finding myself wanting to know her more than I already do. The background information on her intrigues me enough already.

Her father, Dominic Knight, was one of those do-gooder types working as legal counsel in the trenches of Chicago, fighting bullshit cases that nobody cared to take.

She needs the money. I know she does. Is she like her father? Wanting to be a no-hoper stuck being paid below her pay grade? Flicking the photo through my fingers, I think about her motives. She should want money.

How will I appeal to her? “She should want the money. She has to pay for law school. Her apartment isn’t the best. She should have jumped at the opportunity, and she didn’t. Either she is super smart or super dumb. No in between,” I conclude, my eyes boring into Viktor’s, a slight smirk forming on my mouth. I wouldn’t mind finding out which one.

“Right. Want me to handle it? It won’t take long,” Viktor offers, and he’s right. Jackson Knight wasn’t stupid, and when he was alive, he had enough of a fortress of personal assistants and other handlers to stop us from gaining access. I was prepared to wait, not wanting to waste valuable resources, but not now. Ava’s a vulnerable student with no safeguards, and she’s wide open to sharks.

Me being one of them. She’s going to be scared easily. “No. But since she so stupidly declined our offer, we’re going to have to deal with her the old-school way.”

Viktor chuckles, understanding my language. “That shouldn’t be a problem. When she realized the car was out front, she shut the blinds. She’s stayed in the house.”

This interests me greatly. “She’s staying in the house by herself? Did you see anybody else with her?”

“No. She was alone in the place.”

Poor little law student, stranded in the Wisconsin wilderness by herself, there’s no telling what type of monsters lurk in the nearby woods. “This is almost too easy,” I mutter, my annoyance dying down, replaced by amusement.

“Yes. When do you want me to head back and how badly do you want me to scare her into a deal, Boss?”

Shaking my head, my eyes glaze over staring at the wall behind Viktor. “No. This one is mine. I’m going to take care of her.”

Ava Knight, you’re about to learn about a new law unto itself called the Bratva law, and it’s a lose-lose situation for you.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:11 pm

Day two is a little more settling than the first in the family home, and even with that lurking car sitting out front, for some reason I feel safe and tucked in. The beauty of the rugged wilderness has stolen a piece of my heart, and I don't know why. Maybe it's because both my parents are dead, and knowing my father enjoyed his childhood at least is bringing me solace and peace of mind.

I've been able to study without the traffic outside distracting me, and Gunther constantly calling me to fill in graveyard shifts. Aiden wasn't lying when he said the fridge was stocked with food. Everything and anything I could want to eat is inside it. I pick out the eggs, studying the label on the side. Raven's Peak eggs. Local chickens. Smiling, I turn on the vintage radio near the kitchen sink, the sentimental touch making me think differently about my grandparents.

The smooth voice of the breakfast host sets me at ease as I wash the tomatoes to go with the omelet, sink toast into the toaster, and put the coffee pot on. Wow. I'm never going to get over this view. In Chicago, it would likely be some nighttime reveler recovering and pissing in the alleyway to look at. That way I would have to step out and bask in the smell of stale piss. No, not here. There's wildlife I would never see back home here. Wild deer munching on grass, and blue jays sitting on the windowsill.

This place can't be mine. I can hardly believe it. There's a trail map on the side of the kitchen wall and it looks easy enough to follow for myself. I'm pumped up a little by the upcoming adventure. Grinning from ear to ear, I whip up the eggs, dropping them into the hot sizzling pan, thinking this might be a great change for my life.

Would I be too lonely out here or would I be okay and find community in Raven's

Peak? From the sneak peek I saw at the funeral, there wouldn't be anybody my age to connect with, but that's not exactly what I'm doing here. I slide my omelet onto my plate along with my tomatoes and spinach.

This house is holding long-buried memories from my family tree that are giving me what I need right now, and that's fine by me. Recalling Aiden's conversation, I think about how prosperous Raven's Peak could be for me. Maybe I can pull myself out of this poverty cycle and set my future up the right way. A warm feeling spreads through my chest as I stare out at the thick clouds in the sky.

Rain's coming, and I can smell its crispness in the clean country air. Inhaling, I close my eyes maybe thinking I won't have enough time to explore the lush grounds like I want to. Setting up, I head out to the back decking that faces out to the sprawling expanse of my new property. Putting my plate down, I hold on to my coffee as I look out over the majestic expanse, blown away by its lushness and all the nature sounds.

I find my phone and text my friend Donna.

ME: Dreams do come true. Holding my phone up, I take a quick video of the place. She's the only one I've told so far.

Immediately my phone rings. "Where are you? I've been looking for you in class everywhere!"

"If I tell you, I don't think you'll believe it," I gush, spotting a deer and a fox on the property.

"Try me. I need some gossip. Class has been boring without you."

"Okay." I can't stop grinning. "I've inherited this property in Wisconsin."

“No way! You have? It looks freaking huge! What are you going to do with all that? Are you going to sell it?”

“I don’t know what I’m going to do yet.” I don’t tell her about the lucrative nature of the property, not wanting to reveal too much until I fully understand what I’m in for myself.

“Wow. That’s insane. How? What? You gotta give me something go on here.”

“Alright. Apparently, my father’s uncle left it to me. Dad never spoke much about his dad. All he said was they didn’t get along and stuff. But get this,” I bumble out, “he didn’t have any other offspring, so I’m next in line to inherit Raven’s Peak.”

“Wow. Just wow. This is like something out of a movie. He gave it to you? Just like here you go? How big is the place?”

“It’s about ten thousand acres.”

“Shit. That’s big, isn’t it? Wow. I can’t stop saying wow,” Donna repeats mirroring back some of what I’m feeling inside.

“Me neither. Right now, I’m taking it all in. I love it here. It’s been a great escape from Gunther.”

“Ugh. That guy.”

“Yep. Him.”

We talk a little more, and it’s nice to hear her voice amongst the solitude, where I thought I might feel alone, but I don’t. After milling about and studying the house and all its nooks and crannies, I decide the billowing clouds probably aren’t going to

produce any rain and head out to check out the property.

There's a path marked around the property that Jackson left on the map. I leave the back-porch light on so I can see where to return to as a starting point. I was told to wear boots and bring a waterproof jacket before I came, and now I'm glad I did. I head out, not seeing a soul, letting the marked dirt trail guide me. I come to a stop, discovering a ramshackle shack near a small dam on the far north of the property. I turn the knob on the door, not knowing what to expect.

"Maybe they have bears out here," I tell myself, but when the rusty door swings back all I see is an outhouse toilet. Spooked, I quickly shut the door, moving on quickly. That's not a toilet I'm going to be using. Giggling, I keep going as an eagle flies overhead circling the property. Next, I find another small hut-like structure in better condition, and it looks as if somebody has actually made good use of it. There's a tiny kitchen with a small porch and a sink and table with a kerosene lamp on it. I can barely see, and there's no light, so I use my phone, shocked to see there's a single bed and a mattress.

Somebody could live in it if they got desperate. Maybe Jackson used it, but why would he? According to Aiden, the man was highly influential and practically a trillionaire. I've stumbled onto a mystery of Raven's Peak. Dusting off the dirt I've picked up from the table, I back out of the small hut, and keep walking, but the dark clouds are turning charcoal, and I know they're brimming with rain.

Shit. A whipping crackle of thunder sounds off preceding the rain as I take note of the forest shortcut to my left. I haven't lost my sense of direction, and I'm confident I'll be able to find my way back through the woods and avoid the half-hour trek from where I've come, plus there's still enough daylight.

It should only take me ten minutes if I go through here. It's not as if there's not a trail marked out. There's enough of a clearing, but as soon as I walk in, the dappled light

from the trees quickly changes color, the sky deepening to a dull gray. “Shit!” I’m going to get caught out if I don’t hurry.

There’s no more sun and the rain is pouring enough for the wetness to seep in under the tongue of my shoe. Picking up the pace, shards of rain pelt down, but a pure shot of adrenaline shoots through my heart as the sound of a tree branch breaking speeds me up. No. Can’t be. Who would be out here? Without the light it’s tougher to see, and the rain’s plastered my hair to my head before I had a chance to tuck my hair under my waterproof hoodie.

Whipping around, I let my eyes cut through the gaps in the trees checking directly behind me, but I almost wish I didn’t because it’s my worst nightmare . Fuck. There’s the shadowy outline of a large, looming figure in the far distance that I can only just make out. Squinting through the sheets of pelting rain, I pick up the pace searching for the gap between the two tallest spruce trees to make a run back to the property, and call for help.

Maybe I’m dreaming it up. Checking again, my first instinct was right; the shady figure is gaining speed. I turn back in front of me, wheezing as the cold rain slams against my face. I’m more determined than ever to get out of the wet woods to safety. Chills of cold run down my spine with the realization I’m not alone. Is it really a person?

Or is it that bear I was worried about earlier?

Maybe I’m being delusional. “It’s not a person,” I huff, starting to run, branches reaching out to scratch up my jacket, tearing at its sleeves. I can’t risk figuring out if it’s someone dangerous or a predatory animal. At the end of the day, both are going to be a problem.

The footsteps behind me start to get louder, and I run faster, not thinking about the

trees piercing through to my flesh, cutting me up. No. I have to get out here. Alive. Pounding sounds off in my head as I take a wrong turn, tripping over an inconvenient log in front of me. My knee hits the branch cracking against it. The sharp ache in my kneecap slows me down as I stumble on the rain-slicked log. Freefall spans a matter of seconds as I brace myself, putting my arms straight out in front of me, my wrists taking the brunt of the strain. The rain continues to pelt down, but I can't stay here. He's going to get ahold of me if I do. Grunting, I crawl forward dragging my back foot off the log, but my knee is killing me.

"Leave me alone!" I scream out, sobbing in terror as I scramble, wet leaves stuck to my palms. I crawl forward, but every time I do a shooting pain pierces through my knee. I do the unthinkable glancing backwards at the man to see what I'm dealing with.

He's wearing a puffer jacket, he's big, but I can't see his face because of the baseball cap hanging low over his eyes. There's too much rainfall for me to see. I suck in as much oxygen as I can as the man comes closer baring his teeth like a wild wolf. They're white, and a stark contrast to the darkness of the woods.

"You should give up now, don't you think?" A raspy-coated voice offers through the rain as I scratch around through the mud, dirt caking up under my nails. Desperate, my hand lands over the cold solid surface of a rock, and I find whatever strength I have left to dislodge it from the soil, picking it up and launching at him, but there's not enough power behind my throw, so it becomes a pitiful pitch in the predator's direction. He opens his hand like a Venus flytrap, catching it with ease and throwing it behind him.

Horried, I kick out my foot, doing my best to keep him at bay, but it doesn't deter the man. I'm no match for him. He's towering over me, and my hair's plastered to my face. "No! Fuck off!" I yell out, but the words are muffled by the hallowed echoes of the wind through the pine trees.

“You are a stubborn one,” he comments as he straddles me, bending down to my height. I can’t feel my face it’s so numb from the icy rain pelting down on it, but I can feel the thumping beat of my heart.

Shit. I’m done for. I’m going to die out here, all alone in the Wisconsin woods. Nobody’s going to know.

Kicking out again with my bad leg, I wince as the man pulls a blue rag out of his pocket, the lightning flashing providing me a glimpse of his face. The edges of his hair hanging out from under his cap are blond, and his eyes are the ice-cold blue of glaciers. There’s no soul in him, and before I have time to scream out for help, a chemical is placed under my nose smothering my face.

God his hands are so strong. So strong. I can’t get away from him even if I try. Why can’t I see? Why is everything so blurry? Oh no... I’m fading. It’s over....

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:11 pm

Another day in paradise, but unlike most other days, I won't be retiring to my house alone. No, I've got a new houseguest, and I'm sure by now she's likely to be awake and kicking. Smirking, I drive my silver Mercedes into the garage and stepping inside.

I've done well for myself, and my five-bedroom mansion complete with expansive study and full-scale theater and recreation room is enough for me. If plans change and I need more space, then I'll move, but I like it here. Everything is monochrome designed in black and white with splashes of red for extra violence. As I arrive, walking down the short hallway and turning left into the kitchen, my chef, Henry, smiles.

"Ah, you've made it back. I'm done for today. The plates are warm and dinner is ready. Will you and your guest be dining in the main living room tonight?" he asks as I sigh. It's been an extremely long day of paperwork chasing for Raven's Peak and further investigation into closing other deals for the month.

"No. We'll be dining separately." I offer no explanation, but my chef knows the drill. He sees nothing and he's only here to prepare my meals.

"Okay. If there's nothing else you want me to prepare, I'll check out and be back tomorrow."

"Thanks, Henry. Nothing else. You're free to go." As Henry walks out of the kitchen, I stand in the hall for a second, a loud thumping sound drawing my attention to the upstairs bedroom. Grinning, my frazzled housekeeper descends, her feet flying down the stairs.

“Ah, Glenda. How’s our houseguest settling in? Is she awake?” Judging by the thudding coming from behind the door, I presume she is more than awake.

“Yes. But, Dimitri, you can’t keep her in there! She’s been yelling the house down all afternoon,” Glenda remarks, her soft brown eyes widening. She’s my cousin’s niece and wanted a job to do to make extra cash while studying. I personally wanted to keep it all in the family and find someone I could trust. It’s going to be a shame to let her go when her interior design degree is over.

“Let me fuck out of here!” Ava shouts at the top of her lungs, enough for me to grimace.

Chuckling, I stare at the door. “I think I have my answer. You can go for the day,” I tell her, not wanting her involved.

“Are you sure? I’ve got two of the downstairs rooms to clean, and there’s still the games room as well—”

Dropping my hands in my pockets, I glare at Glenda. “Leave. I’ve got it from here.” I hate it when my staff defies me. What I say goes and there’s no negotiation. Glenda’s eyes avert from mine as she stares down at her shoes.

“Okay. See you in the morning.”

“Good. You can finish those rooms then, since you’re so keen.” Without a word she scampers past me. Yes. It’s good that she’s scared of me. That’s how I want it to be. One, so she doesn’t go running her mouth to the rest of the Bratva, and also so she knows where the family line is drawn.

Two of my men emerge from other ends of the house as I stare at the door from the bottom of the stairs wondering how long before Ava’s lungs give out. She keeps

going, repeating her sentence. “Let me out. Let me out. Let me out,” but that’s not going to help her. Only her signing over her deed and title will, and even then, I’m tempted to trade in on other ideas of what I can do with her.

Returning to the living room, I find a snack, deciding to leave my dinner for a little later and flicking on the TV as Petrov and Kosta enter. “Dimitri, you’re back,” Petrov remarks.

“No shit.” I slide my feet up on my ottoman, unbothered by their presence. I tilt my head up to Petrov. “You can open the door. Bring Ava to me, but given how feisty she is, I’m sure she’s going to walk herself in here.”

And I’m right. A couple of minutes later, a red-faced and frustrated Ava with her big, hauntingly beautiful eyes arrives in my living room. Or should I say—limps in. Amused, my eyebrow arches as I reach for my cigar box, selecting a Cuban and cutting off the end of it for lighting.

She stands sturdily, her berry lips begging me into temptation, her thick brunette hair messy and complicated. She’s fucking gorgeous, and there’s plenty of her to hold on to, her voluptuous curves fitting splendidly in her well-fitting jeans. She’s thick, and probably can take some pounding if that’s what I want from her. Small, but enough fire in her veins to bring my cock out of its slumber. All of this is going on my head, though she’s not to know, but this is why I wanted to hunt the girl and not one part of my manhood is disappointed. Her confidence falters just a little I notice, her slender fingers shaking as she threads a hand through her mane of mess, but oh what a fucking beautiful mess she is. Her breasts are full and round, unhidden in a stretchy T-shirt giving me enough ideas to jack off to later. Holding her gaze for a second, I let her stew in her puddle of discomfort in front of me.

There’s fear behind her soft sienna-colored eyes and that’s enough for me to work with. Just the emotion I’ve wanted to stir. “Would you like to sit down, Ava?” I ask

politely, after noticing the wince on her face. I did order the maid to keep an eye on her knee and provide her with an icepack. No doctor yet. I don't think it's that serious, but she shouldn't have run from me in the first place and she wouldn't be in this position. Shielding my hand over my cigar, I light the tip, letting out a long plume of smoke.

"Why the fuck am I here?" Ava rightfully asks.

Sighing, I regard her blandly. "Well. I think you fell into that. Excuse the pun. You ran." Silence follows as I watch her ease into the black leather armchair across from me. My men have given us some space, which I appreciate. This shouldn't take long anyway.

"Yes. You were chasing me. On my own property." She blinks rapidly, her cheeks blooming in embarrassment.

"Sorry about that. Speaking of Raven's Peak. I need that property. All you have to do is sign this document and you're free to go. I won't bother you again. And I think you'll find the amount I'm offering very pleasing."

Confident, she'll take my offer, I'm celebrating early as I take on the cigar again, when I'm surprised by Ava's prickly derision. "No. I don't want to accept your offer."

Chuckling, I side-eye her, a rush of adrenaline flooding my veins. I've got a live one here. Okay. Let's play. "That's a shame, since you haven't even read the document." I take the bookend stand off the paperwork, handing it to her, and pointing at the bold amount for multi-millions on the front page. I've been generous in my offer as well. She wouldn't have ever seen that type of money in her life. Ever. And she probably won't again, especially if she practices law like her daddy in the not-for-profit sector.

Sitting tight, I allow myself the privilege of checking out her legs. God, I want to bury my head between those thick thighs. I can tell there's a pussy gold mine inside them. I don't back down from letting my eyes undress her, but she catches me, forcing me into a grin.

Coughing uncomfortably, she averts her gaze, but the tiny flicker of her own version of sizing me up doesn't go unnoticed. So, she is checking me out. This is perfect, but it's only going to be brief. She's going to be out of my fucking mansion in a matter of minutes and on her way back to her shitty law school life.

Sign the fucking document. Read the amount. You're lucky, I'm willing to give you that.

She looks down at it, and then back at me with a stoic stare. "I don't need to read it. My answer is still no." She shakes out her hair as rage boils up in my system.

Letting my eyes do the talking, I give her a lengthy glare, holding on to my cigar, and rising to my full height, I close the few steps between us in a quick few seconds. Opening my light jacket, I remove my gun from my holster, and tip it under her full face forcing her to meet my eyes.

"Is it a hard no, Ava, like this gun?" I whisper staring down at her and running the steel along her round jaw.

She doesn't balk from the touch, instead replying in earnest. "There's no point killing me, because the property will just go to my second cousin. Jackson is keeping it all in the family," she taunts, her brown eyes holding court with mine as her sweet berry mouth curves into a provocative smile.

"Do you know what the fuck you're doing? Do you even fucking realize what I could do to you?"

Drawing my gun back in astonishment at her blind courage, I drop it back into my holster, but all she does is grin back at me as if she's won some hollow victory. Clicking my fingers, I invite my men back into the room as I glower at her, furious at her response.

"I do." She nods, then pauses before blurting out the rest of her sentence. "Know what I'm doing, that is. You can't bank on there only being a second cousin either. After that there's likely to be a third and then a fourth. The Knights have so many descendants in the family tree," she adds on, her brown eyes shining as her hands grip on to the armchair.

Renewed panic flashes in her eyes as I motion to Petrov. "Hold her down," I bark, done with the games.

"What are you doing?" she squeals, twisting in her chair as Petrov holds on to her arm and my other associate holds the other side of her. She's pinned in the chair and can't go anywhere.

"Since you think it's okay to be a little cunt, I'm going to show you how that's a problem." I take the end of my lit-up cigar, looking her in the eye, reveling in the terror as I grind the burning end into her flesh, torturing her and opening up a burn wound the size of a small penny.

Yelping, she flinches hard, jumping in the chair, but my men have a good grip on her. She can't get far. "Fuck! Stop!" Her vocal cords strain as my breathing picks up.

"No. I won't. You stop first. Sign the fucking papers for Raven's Peak and you can go. Simple as that."

I watch as her arms tense up and her steely gaze bores into mine. "No. I won't sign," she grits out, her teeth grinding together.

“You’re fucking dumb!” I shout, dropping the lit-up end on the spot next to the other one so they can twin. This time she takes it, pressing her eyes shut, leaving me in awe and anger. She’s impressive, and her hard outer shell is tough not to acknowledge.

“No. The answer is no,” she repeats, her voice wavering as I stand in front of her. And for the first time in a long time, I’m left speechless by a young woman. Fuck her bravery. I want Raven’s Peak, and she’s going to hand it over to me one way or another.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:11 pm

Now I've got two injuries to my name. I double over, pressed against the door as the men shove me in, staring down at the weeping shallow burns embedded on my forearm, willing myself not to sob. Why does this have to happen to me now? The gaping wounds are smoldering and stinging, governed by a tidal wave of fresh pain that I've got no time to indulge in. I need to get out of this fucking wealthy dungeon ASAP. My knee's not much better, aching from the woods, but it's not swollen like a balloon like it was yesterday.

Who is this fucking bastard? Why didn't I remember his face from the funeral? My head pounds as I think back to the whirl of activity at the funeral. The entire day remains a strange blur with so many people approaching me, but I can't remember him. He couldn't have been there. No. I would have remembered a tall, blond exterminator-looking guy with glacier eyes of death. So deathly cold it sends shivers down my spine when I think about him. The deep heat radiating from my arm distracts me, but involuntary tears roll down my cheeks, and I can't stop them from falling.

What a heartless fucking asshole, and I thought my boss Gunther was the horror story. Turns out he's a real cupcake compared to this subhuman terrorizer. A blaze of heat surges through my veins as I will myself to stand up straight again. The property is rightfully owned by me, and he's trying to steal what's mine! From my family! I know the law, and I can't let him get away with it. But first things first, I have to get out of here.

Shaking off the searing heat from my arm, I divert my gaze around the expansive suite, ignoring all its trimmings, the panic taking hold as I search for the nearest escape. I stop scanning, but my heart rate stays elevated. There's a medium-sized

window to the right of me, but I'm on the second floor, and I don't like my chances of getting safely to the ground. I've already slipped and fell once, and my confidence is broken. I don't particularly want to be bouncing around on the rooftop of this monster's mansion, but with his dangerous warning ringing in my ears, it spurs me on.

"I'm going to give you time to think about your decision. Maybe the fall affected your decision-making and I want you to be sure of what you're saying to me." His words linger in my head, but the warning only got worse after that. "And I tell you something Ms. Knight. You would want to make the right decision, because if you don't, this little cigar burn is only the preview of the torture I plan to inflict on you." He snickered, the spray of his spit touching the top of my earlobe, making me want to wipe it, but I was frozen on the spot, afraid he would do something worse to me, so all I could do was stand there shaking like a leaf.

"No," I'd said in the smallest, meekest voice possible, bracing myself for the onslaught of pain, but I swore I heard his jaw crack.

"Your stubbornness is going to be your downfall. You can cool off in the spare bedroom, Ms. Knight. I urge you to think again and don't try anything stupid." His rough handlers or this other weird gang of men, who looked similar with their cold, hard eyes had dragged back to the room, and as they did, I was smart enough to look around the corridor to see where I could run once, I broke free of the room.

I stare at the window, gulping down all kinds of irrational fears. If I want out of this place, I'm going to have to risk the fall and essentially my life. Assessing my chances of my not breaking my neck, I notice there's a small balcony held up by long smooth white pillars. Both the pillars are thick enough for me to climb down to the exit, but they're so smooth, it's going to be a slippery ride down, but it's the only chance I have of survival. I blank out the pain in my arm and hoist up the window, wincing as I do, then check around for noises and voices trying to stop me. Not hearing anything,

I step out onto the balcony. Assessing how far down I would have to shimmy in order to make it to the ground, I inhale a large breath. Fuck .

This is the worst idea ever, but I've got to do it. I only have a limited turning space, but I take the chance, spontaneously taking off my sweater and wrapping it around the smooth pillar for extra grip. I step up onto the balcony ledge, taking my chance and swinging my leg out, wrapping it around the pole and carefully shimmying the bulk of my body down as my top rides up. It's hard to do because the entire time down I'm thinking about being shot at. Gritting my teeth, I sob, my arm burning along with everything else inside of me as I descend.

I keep moving down, but as I look up at the balcony I've just come from, I see it. There's a huge CCTV in the corner of the balcony, and a red light is blinking rudely back at me.

Oh shit. I'm being recorded. Maybe it's for later, and I will have escaped soon enough. I pray that's the case, but by the time I'm halfway down and looking down at the ground, I can see near the mansion gates there are two guards, one on either side, and outside the door there's two guards. All of them are armed and there are more cameras.

Wanting to pee myself, I hold on, my arms shaking as I wait three-quarters of the way down, thinking about my options, my heart sinking. There's no chance of me escaping. I'm going to have to climb back up. If these men below see me, they might do worse than Dimitri can do.

Fuck! Thankfully before my arms are too exhausted and I'm down on the ground, one of them leaves their post and their phone behind. The other one isn't expecting anyone to be shimmying down from the balcony. He's not paying attention and has walked along the porch to the other side.

Thinking on my feet, I see the phone left behind from the guy who left his post. I snatch it up, pulling out Aiden's business card from my pocket. He's the only person who might be able to help me. With fast fingers, not knowing how long I have, I write him a quick message.

ME: Please help. I'm at this location. Dimitri. Chicago. Hostage. I hold up the phone, my fingers trembling trying to snap the shot, sending it to him. What did the guy say his name was?

Both the guards are still vacant from their posts, but I can't risk milling around, shimmying back up the pillar, my shoes having enough grip on them to climb I find. Puffing, exhausted, and terrified, I jump back onto the balcony and head back inside.

But I'm too late. Dimitri's already in front of me with his arms crossed. I stare back at his muscular arms, now sorry that I tried to escape. My eyes travel over his honed legs, which are so muscular I can make out the shape of them through his pants. The pants are sticking to him, and I understand why, but how can I be terrified and attracted at the same time? Maybe this is what it's like to experience Stockholm Syndrome. As my eyes quickly reach their destination, the predator is smiling, his teeth shining back at me.

"So is there a reason you were out on the balcony. Did you think you would make a decision outside, doll?" Dimitri asks, taking one step closer, invading my space. All my muscles clench up, but I don't want him to see my fear.

"No, but I went out for some fresh air. It's stuffy inside here," I reply stiffly, taking a step back in retreat. Dimitri snarls, the icy blue of his eyes increasing as he snatches me up around the throat, cutting off my air supply as my back slams up against the wall. Seeing stars, I suck in what strands of breath I can gather, my eyes watering.

"You're a shit liar, Ms. Knight. I fucking saw you on the camera. Surprise." He

cackles, his head coming closer to my face, his dirty blond locks dropping in my eyes. Lightheaded, and fearing for my life don't exactly go together.

"My throat," I squeeze out, tilting my head so I can get more air in.

"What about it?" he asks gruffly, his eyes blazing with intensity.

Tapping my throat, I demonstrate for him to let go of it so I can breathe again. Slowly he releases my throat, my feet dropping back to the floor as I inhale severely, gasping for air.

My nose is running, but as it drips, I notice the red blood droplet on the white carpet. Dimitri frowns deeply, tilting my chin up to meet his cutthroat gaze. "Your nose is bleeding," he says matter-of-factly, but I can't process anything the hulk of a man is saying as I feel myself slipping, slipping into another zone. Holding my eyes open is getting too hard, and my throat hurts.

Shit. I can't hold on anymore.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:11 pm

It was an impulse decision to stamp the lit end of my cigar into her arm, and now that she's fainted in my arms, there's a burdened part of me that feels apologetic about it. Slumped in my arms, I stare down at the dried blood under her nose.

What the fuck is she doing? Ever since Ava Knight has come into my life, she's thrown me off in ways I didn't expect. Dragging her towards the door of the suite, the guard looks down at me stumped by what he's looking at.

"Don't just fucking stand there, go get the doctor!" I bark, not planning on breaking a sweat. By now she has to know who I am. I told her my first name, but Ava's smarter than I've wanted her to be already. "You are inconvenient. Sexy, but inconvenient," I murmur under my breath, staring at the holes I left in her arm. It's nothing. I've done worse on many more occasions.

Dragging Ava back inside, I lay her on the bed, waiting for the doctor to come, dipping into the bathroom to clean up the blood around her nose. As I gently wipe it off, I can't stop taking in her stunning features. Her skin is a beautiful shade of olive, a direct contrast to my alabaster tones, and flawless. Her berry lips are slightly parted and if I stare at them any longer, I'm going to want to do things I regret. A knock at the door stops the dirty fantasy in its tracks as the doctor enters with her bag and a stethoscope around her neck.

"Is this her?" she asks, sliding her hands into blue plastic gloves.

"Yeah, it's her. What's wrong with her?" I ask gruffly as my associate steps back outside the door.

“I don’t know yet. When I take a closer look, I’ll be able to find out. Excuse me.” Possessively, I stand over Ava, realizing I’m hindering the doctor from doing her job. Stepping back, my jaw clenches, confusion clouding my judgment. I shouldn’t care about her. All I should care about is taking Raven’s Peak from her, but somehow, I don’t want her dead body on my hands. That’s not how I want to take the property from her. I want her to hand it to me herself.

“Sorry,” I mutter, eyeing the doctor briefly. “Make sure she’s okay.”

The doctor disregards my request, but I know for a fact she’s very good. She’s been able to fix bullet wounds in less than an hour and has traveled with my men when we’ve needed her on missions, and what’s even better is she’s never opened her mouth. Besides if she did, I would kill her and her family, which tends to stop any of my staff from talking or leaving. The way of the Bratva is similar to most mobs, there’s only a couple of ways out—jail or in a body bag. We are no exception.

After watching Ava come back to life, I listen carefully to the doctor asking her questions. “Have you fainted before?”

“No,” she explains groggily in a state of bafflement. “I’ve been pretty stressed with my work at the diner, but nothing out of the ordinary.

“I’m going to take some tests, and check what’s going on with you. They may take a couple of hours to conduct. Okay?”

“Sure. It’s not like I have a choice,” she remarks bitterly, placing the doctor in an awkward position as I tap my steepled fingers together, studying the young woman and wondering what it’s going to take to relieve her of Raven’s Peak. What principles have her holding out?

“No, you don’t,” I jump in, making it clear she’s right. Her eyes narrow in my

direction, adding the element of surprise. Not only is she stubborn, but she's also angry and not afraid to fight back. This is new for me. Most fear me, and I've seen the emotion in her eyes, but she's not budging.

I wait, watching as the doctor makes her drink a solution and takes her blood. After a few hours the results come back, and I find myself perched on the edge of my seat wanting to know the diagnosis just as much as Ava does.

"Well, after the tests I can see you have hypoglycemia, and you're severely dehydrated. Not to mention malnourished. I have a list of vitamins that I suggest you take."

"Okay. Thank you," she replies humbly as I flash her a look of annoyance. This could have been prevented much like this entire circumstance.

"Have you eaten since being here?" The doctor looks from me to Ava, a wave of guilt running through me.

"No. I haven't been fed."

Numbly, I stare at the doctor who stares at me. "What? See to it with the chef. Whatever she needs. Keep her safe," I add, wishing I didn't add the rest, but the words tumbled out before I could catch them. I take note of the bandage the doctor placed on Ava's arm from the burns I inflicted. She'll recover.

My eyes linger on her face, analyzing her weakened state, the concern I'm feeling is jarring for a hard man like me, but maybe, just maybe, it's a good thing she's weak. This is the perfect time to capitalize and get her to sign over Raven's Peak to me. I almost don't want to provide her with care, but suddenly I'm not feeling cruel enough to do it.

“Okay. I’ll organize the meals with the chef. I’m done here,” the doctor indicates, packing up her things.

“Good.”

It's you that's weakened Dimitri. If this were a man, you would break both his kneecaps so you could have him sign over the rights. Ava's cocoa-colored eyes narrow in suspicion, she's not as stupid as I'd like her to be. Her eyes are flickering in and out of consciousness, and she's low on energy. And I can see she's making eyes at the good doctor, pleading and begging for an escape, but she'll find no such thing.

It's not going to do you any good, Ms. Knight. The doctor works for me. Ushering in a vicious smirk, I wait for the doctor to leave. With the drip in her arm, Ava lays on the bed, considering me for a second while I stand, unmoving and taking a hard look at her bandaged arm.

As she watches me looking at it, she draws it in protectively, turning her head. I move towards her just as the strangled words come out of her mouth. “Why are you doing this?” Her voice crackles in pain, but as I shove my hands in my pockets, I explain the truth.

“This isn't personal towards you, Ms. Knight. Unfortunately, you happen to be standing in the way of what I want and need.”

Tears well in her eyes, her breaking point close. Ah. Her brave face mask is dropping. “It doesn't make sense why you're willing to go to such lengths for a piece of land.”

Scoffing, I shake my head, gathering a deep breath. There's no harm in sharing my story with her. At this point, I think I can. “Growing up I was nothing. Unwanted and unloved, and my father was a disappointment to the Bratva.” I let her digest this news first.

Her eyes shutter in mild surprise, but quickly the light in them dies. “You’re Bratva?”

Arching an eyebrow, I fist my hands in my pockets, resisting the urge to stroke her hair.

“Come on Ms. Knight. You strike me as being a very smart young lady. You must have known what I am,” I remark simply.

She turns her body from me, not wanting me to see the tears that have slipped down her face. Discreetly she wipes them away. “I thought you were something, but I didn’t know exactly. You’re a mobster,” she jerks out, and the way she says it invokes a warm chuckle from me.

“Yes and no. This isn’t like movies or anything. I am a businessman first and foremost. Again, this is business, but in many ways quite personal to me because as the Bratva are a brotherhood and my father failed, then surely I was destined to fall into his footsteps.”

“Why would you be? You’re not him.”

Nodding my head in agreement, I scoff. “Yes, but that’s not how the Bratva works. Prove yourself first and then some form of redemption might come your way.”

“Oh. Right.” Glumly Ava stays on her side, but I pause, collecting my thoughts. “I clawed my way to the top, Ava. Every step. Every decision. Every sacrifice. I’ve earned my place with every piece of dirt underneath my nails, and I won’t stop until I have it all.”

“Looks like you already have it, and what—you’re going to leave me with nothing? This is my family’s land. Not yours. And just like you’re fighting, so am I.”

Smirking, I nod again. “Your point is valid. But this is the way of the Bratva. It seems like we have more in common than we both might think.”

Ava wriggles arousing me, the outline of her voluptuous figure under the sheets enticing me. “Except the part of taking what’s not yours.”

“Then how should it be arranged?” I ask, humoring her.

“It’s just me now. I have to work at a fucking shitty dinner with an asshole boss, and my father worked his whole life having nothing to show for it. He was a lawyer like I want to be. But that’s not for me. I don’t want to end up like him.”

“And how did he end up?” Intrigued by her story and her passion, even though I already know her background, I listen intently, the subtle grip she has on me slowly increasing.

“He ended up with nothing. Just a stockpile of cases marred by bureaucracy and not being able to help the people he wanted to serve.”

“And let me guess, you’re different?”

Ava lifts her head, the fire blazing in her eyes. “Yes. I’m different. I’m not the same lawyer as him. I play to win,” she grits out, impressing me.

“Oh, we are alike, Ava. Maybe it’s fated we met,” I drawl out, stepping closer to her.

“Maybe.” Her temperature runs cold. “And since this is business. That’s what we should make it. I know how this works. We work out a deal that’s mutually beneficial for the land. It’s my land, and I rightfully own it. What are you going to do? Kill me for it?”

Taunting me with her words, I twist my mouth in consideration, my eyes boring into hers. “If I was going to kill you, I would have done it already, Ms. Knight. No. Tell me what your terms are, and I’m willing to hear you out.”

There’s no point being more callous than I need to be. “I know the land has lithium on it, and you already have plans for it. Admittedly, I don’t have the manpower or the resources to do anything on it, and the money you offered me, won’t help me do that either. But you know that, don’t you?”

Stunned by how smart she is, I hide my admiration responding flatly, “I’m aware of what the land has the capability to do with its natural resources.”

“It’s more than you’re saying. I can tell. I want land rights, and you can only carry out your operations on Raven’s Peak if I receive a percentage of the profits. I’m counteroffering your flimsy proposal for a long-term mutually beneficial contract. Understand?”

Grinning, I’m willing to concede, and quite frankly she’s making my dick hard with her intelligence. “Ms. Knight, you are a dark horse and that’s one of the reasons I like you. I’m not so unreasonable I can’t bend in this instance. I, too, have a long-term vision I can share with you for the property, and I guarantee it will be satisfactory for both of us. I want the land for the purpose of what it can bring to the Bratva and myself, so therefore I’m willing to agree to your terms.”

“Good. And don’t try anything because I know the law,” she warns, but her thinly veiled threat I liken to shooing away a mosquito. It’s quite cute.

“As you should, you’re studying it.” Chuckling, she regards me with contempt, but the tightly coiled tension that existed earlier between us has dissolved given I’ve agreed she can keep the title. What do I need with it? She’s getting what she wants and so am I.

“In the contract, you won’t be able to fall short on your promise. And you can’t kill me.”

“I will make good on all my promises. And the Bratva doesn’t kill people for no reason. Trust me,” I declare. “And if we are going to work together, then we need to start over. Renew the trust, wouldn’t you say?” I coax as Ava visibly relaxes.

“Yes. I agree. We should.” Her words are careful, almost as if she doesn’t quite believe me, but now that I know where we stand and I’m going to get what I want, I don’t care. Besides, if she wants to back out, she won’t be able to. I’ll be more inclined to execute my plan of torture.

“You need your strength, Ms. Knight. Especially as we cut through the finer details of the contractual arrangements,” I tease with a self-assured smirk. “I wouldn’t want you to miss any important details within it.”

She cuts her eyes on me. “I’m not going to miss anything,” she quips, stirring a long-held longing for a challenging woman from deep within me. Right on cue, a quick knock at the door presents itself, and I step away briefly, opening it and wheeling the food in.

“I trust that you won’t. Please eat, and if you need anything else, I’ll see that you get it.” The agreeable version of me glitches through, and judging from the startled expression clouding Ava’s face, she’s as stumped by my demeanor as I was about giving a damn about her well-being earlier.

She sits up, the color slowly returning to her face, and I can tell she’s hungry. The ice inside my veins is thawing because this version of the deal could give me the opportunity to capitalize on more than just Raven’s Peak.

“Thanks,” she responds begrudgingly, picking up her fork as I back off.

“I’m going to let you eat in peace and get some rest. Meanwhile, I’ll come back with a prospectus on what my plans are for Raven’s Peak.” Pausing, I nod once. “Congratulations, Ava, you can kiss poverty goodbye forever.”

Her wary glance in my direction thwarts any idea that she’s going to be easy to win over, but that only piques my curiosity more. It’s better this way, and Ms. Knight has earned my respect.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:11 pm

The meal has nourished me enough to start clarifying a plan. Now that I've agreed to be in business with the monster, he seems to have backed down. He's playing nice, but I don't trust it. Or him.

How did I let myself get so run-down? Beating myself up about my health probably isn't the best thing to do right now, but as I devour the best food I've ever had in my life, there's so many reasons why. I've been running on empty for the longest, and I guess my body's broken down and can't take it anymore. I've been barely making it from university to work, or making ends meet, only to face gross customers and a tyrant of a boss for shitty tips with nobody to help me.

The door opens and my automatic response is to jump, but it's more food and my phone is on the tray. "Hi, dessert, Ms. Knight. Have a good evening."

"Thank you." I check under the silver lid, my eyes boggling at how pretty the dessert is and how my mouth is watering.

It's a trap, Ava. Don't fall for it.

Picking up my phone, I look it over, while scanning the room. There must be hidden cameras somewhere within it, and I'm no dummy. It's likely Dimitri has bugged the phone and is tracking it. A burning sensation grows in my chest. I might have made the biggest deal with the devil ever, but I don't like the fact he's monitoring me, and he's probably already looked through my text messages and knows my friends.

He's Bratva. A fucking Russian mobster and doesn't trust you either. Shaking my head, I smooth my hands over the phone noticing the bottom of it is scuffed. Almost

as if someone has peeled the back off, or maybe I'm paranoid. Either way, I know this is a test. There's a lot riding on the situation for Dimitri. He made that part plain, and I despise the fact we have backstories in common. His father is nothing like mine. Mine loved me, he was just poor and didn't know how to handle money.

Prickles of heat ride up the back of my neck as I consider my friends and their well-being. I'm not completely without help, though. My friend married into Bratva, and Sophia would probably be the best person to help me navigate yet another shitty situation I find myself in.

My legs are cramped, and I don't want to sit around in bed any longer, so I get up and take a look around the rest of the suite, feeling safe enough to do so. The drapes are as dark as Dimitri, a rich tone of jet black. I stare at the paintings on the wall. It's clear the art is fairly expensive, the gold-gilded frames holding hauntingly beautiful pictures inside them. Frowning, I study one painting, which has skulls stacked on top of them and a knife plunged through the middle. Skimming my fingers over it, I ponder what it means. Dimitri has so many tattoos on his body, and it's hard not to notice them.

They're kind of darkly sexy, and the three-day shadow of his dirty blond beard invokes feelings I want to deeply repress. I touch the large black vases in their corners, admiring the red flowers inside them. Clearly, he has a theme, and I know the colors must mean something significant. Boldly, I look into the expansive bathroom with his and hers showers, everything immaculate and in its place. Wow. The entire suite is almost bigger than my tiny apartment. I'm involved with a man who's going to bring me riches, but he's on the wrong side of the law.

If my father is watching me from the heavens, I wonder what he thinks about it. How would he get out of this? I hope he can see I've made the best possible decision I can, and one that will keep me alive. Treading lightly, I open the door, trembling in anticipation of walking down the corridor. When I do, I take note of more art on the

walls. Not all of it is dark, and some of it is more of what you would expect to see in an art museum. What a life. Skimming my hands along the walls, I peer down the long hallway noticing all the different passageways, wanting to venture down them, but also scared of what I might discover. I pass a theater room with huge speakers, and a giant TV embedded into the wall, but an evocative scent invades my nostrils reminding me of him.

His room must be close.... It can't hurt to look. The temptation is too great for me not to look in. Pushing the cracked door back, my mouth drops open. The sultry seduction of the room blows me away, tingles sprinkling down the length of my spine. What kind of room is this? It's big enough to be its own department and on the wall is a large sword encased in glass and a thick black frame. His poster bed is black, but there's a strange element to it. My gaze is drawn to the ceiling because on it is a long rectangular mirror.

What the hell is a mirror doing on the ceiling? Especially above his bed? His dresser drawers are black too, but on them are exquisite mini sculptures and there's a painting of a phoenix and a tiger on the far side of the huge room. It's got the usual trimmings, like the room I was held in, with a large screen TV, a chair, and a study desk with potted plants in each corner. What I can't get over is the mirror. The carpet is a cream color, and the entire space screams seduction. I want to touch everything in the room, but I keep my hands to myself admiring from afar.

Shit! A light and a blanket of steam billows out from under the ensuite bathroom, and immediately I want to pivot, but I don't. If I'm here, I might as well ask to leave. We have an agreement now. Surely, we can go our separate ways and keep this silent agreement between us.

The door opens, Dimitri emerging from the smoke, only a towel slung haphazardly around his waist. Deep sensations of dirty lust fill me as his suffocating darkness fills the space. Fuck. Run. You should run. Gulping hard, I hold my ground, my palms

sweaty from nervousness plaguing me. Every inch of his body is chiseled and ready for war. His chest is covered with stars and skulls, and I can't drag my eyes away. The stars must mean something because there's another near his knee.

"Ah, you're roaming around now. You look much better. I see you've found my room," he replies in amusement, his slickened strands of dirty blond hair overhanging his icy blue eyes. The scruffy beard is still there, but I can't concentrate on one area because I'm busy staring at the river of veins popping down the middle of his biceps. There's the same tiger on the inside of his arm that's on the wall, and if I don't get my bearings quick, I'm going to faint again, and not from malnutrition.

"Er... yes. I've been finding my way around." I try to play it cool, but the searing heat in my cheeks gives me away. "I was looking for you, and um, it looks like I've found you."

"Yes." Dimitri nods, stepping forward, but I keep my eyes upward, not daring to look down any further than his waist. I'm sure he's ripped from head to toe. "What can I help you with?" he asks in a silken tone.

"Um, now that we've worked out an agreement, I want to leave. I've got a lot to get back to. School, finishing up at work. That type of stuff," I justify in a casual tone, to which Dimitri frowns, skimming a hand through his hair, slicking it back, leaving his icy blue eyes on full display.

Fuck. He must have women throwing themselves at him. He has to know how hot he is.

"Oh no. That's not going to happen. You can go where you want here, but you can't leave." Dimitri's cold eyes sink into mine, blood flow rushing to my feet.

"What?" I squawk. "Why not?" I blurt in outrage.

“I have good reason, and it’s for your protection. You can’t leave because I’m not the only one after Raven’s Peak. You met those people at the funeral. Didn’t you?” The observation hits more like an accusation as my eyes smart from anger.

“Sure, but they didn’t kidnap me like you did,” I point out, not wanting the argument to become heated and lead to Dimitri punishing and trapping me further.

“Kidnap?” Dimitri quips. “No, Ms. Knight, what I did was on the milder end of the scale, and as you’ve already established—we have a deal.”

“I think you should let me go,” I tell him with force, regaining my equilibrium.

“Uh-uh.” Dimitri shakes his head, propping himself up against his dresser drawers resembling a male model. “No. These people after you aren’t just investors or developers. They are rival mafia families and businesses with more power than you. They will eat you alive. With me, you’re protected.” Dimitri regards me with intense eye contact, the imminent threat sinking in.

“Right,” I whisper.

“They will do way worse things than I’ve done.” He stands, his well-cut physique intimidating. There’s enough tension in the room to draw a bowstring, and I fear if I don’t change the subject, trouble will come.

“What is the mirror for?” I ask, desperately wanting to escape the awkwardness of the situation.

Dimitri grins, his x-ray vision seeming to pierce right through my clothing in violation. Stop fucking undressing me. Instead of looking at him, I keep my eyes on the ceiling, hoping it will give me a break from his gaze, but the humiliation is just getting started it seems.

“What? Are you a virgin?” He grins, a forcefield of heat fanning over my cheeks.

“That’s none of your business.”

Dimitri pauses for a beat, the grin softening, but a quick reckoning flickering in his death-trap eyes. Great. Now he knows I’m a virgin. Somehow all the secrets I want to keep hidden from him are unveiled. “The mirror is to add more spice to sex. It’s an experience to watch yourself being pleased or vice versa. Do you want to try it, Ms. Knight?” And just like the tiger on his wall and inked into his skin, he flirts making me squirm, lighting up dormant parts of my anatomy that I don’t want him to.

My heart gallops in my chest, my mouth dry. What he would do to me. The man could break me in half, and God—maybe I would want him to. Fuck. “No,” I reply, flustered out of my mind, while Dimitri tucks his fingers into his towel. Please don’t take it off. I can’t handle that .

“Are you sure. It’s a lot of fun, especially when you’re coming,” he adds, adding in explicit details, his eyes roaming my body as a throbbing ache pounds between my legs.

“I said no. I thought it might be for something else.” I shrug, but keeping my cool isn’t working. Backing off, I turn towards the door, weak at the knees. No.

“Okay. Your choice, but let me know if you change your mind,” he sings out with a dirty chuckle.

“I won’t.” Quickly, I leave, heading back to my room silently reprimanding myself for seeking him out. I should have known better.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:11 pm

Dynasty Point Club has long been known as a private VIP location for the millionaires and billionaires of Chicago to connect, cut deals, find pussy, and drink in peace without the prying eyes of the paparazzi and the public. Too many times at the regular clubs my slumming Bratva cousins frequently used to attend, they would be sequestered with skanky women who weren't of their caliber. Not that any of these women aren't undercover or underhanded in their dealings, but for the most part, they're high-end, and understand their place.

New York is another animal altogether, and from time to time, you could find me in the VIP section of new clubs, but it was mainly because of business or to check out the scene, and if I happened to score pussy for the night, then I would partake... even better when the majority of it was handed to me on a platter.

Tonight, as the lounge music plays in the background, I'm surrounded by my associates and plenty of high-grade pussy on the hunt for sugar daddies or a man with money to fill their bank accounts and go shopping with. Some of the women in the club are business moguls in their own right but nothing comes close to the dollar signs many of the men in the room hold.

There's a fresh variety of women on deck circling like the opportunistic sharks they are, and normally I would indulge them, knowing I would never give them one red cent of my money. Mostly, I would provide them with a healthy amount of dick, orgasms, food, drink and a great time. If I was feeling overly generous, I would take them shopping. I wasn't a complete bastard, and nice to every one of them when they were in my company, but I draw the line when it comes to Bratva business. It comes first.

Mindy Lee, a beautiful Asian Instagram model is perched on my knee sipping on her mojito. She's petite with a blonde bob, perfect porcelain skin, and rosy cheeks. If I wanted to, I could take both her and her friend Darcy Andrews—a celebrity blogger—home for a threesome, but as their expensive perfume floods the air, their hair flipping and making eyes at me does nothing for my flaccid penis. My associates on the other hand seem to be salivating over the women, and so I push the women in their direction, willing Mindy to get off my lap of her own accord.

She pouts, her glitter-tinged lipstick annoying the fuck out of me. Part of its sticky residue is plastered to the side of my cheek. "What's the matter, Dimitri? Don't you want me? I can suck you off. Real good. We could have loads of fun together," she whispers with her mojito breath. Drawing back from her slurry offer, I keep her at a distance with a hand on the bare patch of her back.

"I bet you could. You have a pretty mouth, but I'm not interested tonight. Try Marat. You can have a good time with him. Okay?" I explain to her in a bored voice, bouncing my leg up so she gets off.

"Why him? You're hotter."

Smirking, I let it drop just as quick, tapping into the colder side of my nature, leaning into her ear as a hand caresses the back of my neck in the roped off area. "I said you should try my associate, and I mean it. Move." The serious warning of my tone shifts her quickly as the essence of fear is instilled in her.

"Alright," she mumbles. "I get the picture." She does as I say, relief coming over me as I pull the lapels of my suit jacket together. Sometimes these women are a little too thirsty for dick. Unfortunately, Ava's arrival has dulled my sex drive, and all I can think about is her, especially about how I made her run in the woods. By the time I reached her, she was soaked through, her white shirt clinging to her heavy breasts, her nipples standing to attention. Now when I think about it, my dick turns to wood.

I enjoyed hunting her through the woods, and that early memory is scored into the psyche of my brain, preventing me from entertaining random fucks.

I sit back briefly glancing over to Marat, whose hand is down the back of Mindy's dress, and she's grinning in his face, then offering him her glitter-tinged mouth . Fuck. How quickly these women turn. It's a good thing I didn't select her for the night.

Let them scrape over my leftovers. They can't have the main prize, the one I'd acquired myself and was sitting on like a hidden treasure. Lacing my fingers behind my head, I enjoy the music and being left to my own elicited thoughts as I absorb my surroundings, but my mind always circles back to Ms. Knight.

God, I loved her innocence when we discussed the mirror. She squirmed when I asked her to try it, the flush of red on her cheeks exciting me even more. I want to take that innocence and corrupt her—draw out the naughty side of her, because no woman with such raw sassiness and curvaceousness should remain unpleasured. I want her. And will have her. Crossing my legs, I think about the open trap Ava set for herself.

She doesn't know that she's under Bratva rule by getting involved with me on a long-term basis. It's Dimitri's rules, and I don't care about the title on Raven's Peak, my strategies always work.

A vibration in my suit pocket intercepts my strategic plan as I fish out my phone, answering bluntly, "Dimitri."

"Hey. It's Viktor. We've got an emergency situation." Immediately, my haunches go up, along with my alertness.

"What is it?"

“The cops are on the way to raid the place. Apparently, there’s been some sort of tip-off. Next move?”

I glance over at my associates, and they’re knee-deep in organizing their pussy for the night. Mindy’s tongue is down Marat’s throat and Vladimar is whispering bullshit nothings into a couple of other women’s ears. I’ll get them in a minute.

Standing up, I click my fingers in my associate’s direction, annoyed that I have to deal with the cops sniffing around. What the fuck do they want? It could be any number of reasons why they’re on my ass, but I don’t care to know what they are.

“Hide Ava in the basement. Got it?” I command Viktor, my associates tossing the mystified women to the side, both of them now up on their feet.

Ava. This little stunt has to be coming from her. That’s the only way the Chicago PD can be raiding the place. Just when I was thinking about the better days ahead of our partnership, she has to rattle the cage I’m determined to keep her in. Speeding home, my temper flares as Petrov chimes in.

“Is this about Raven’s Peak? Which family do you think did this?”

Grasping the wheel as I hit the straightaway, I push the accelerator with a scoff.

“The family, Marat? Try one woman.” He’s confused, and I don’t explain myself. He can work it out by himself. He’s a big boy. I’m not going to be hauled down to any police station for interrogation. Oh no. When I discover who the cops are, I’m going to call in a favor or two with my Chicago police connections. The Bratva has long had Chicago police on payroll.

From the glare of the police headlights and the officers peeling out of their vehicles, it appears I’m right on time. Grimacing, I make a note to remind my guards to stall the

cops for longer the next time this shit happens. I've got a good idea of why they did it—it's easier to let the authorities in. If it looks like I'm a man with something to hide, then more hassle might come by way of them mobilizing more pesky officers. Getting blood splatter all over my suit in a gunslinging match isn't what I'm up for tonight.

There is punishment to hand out. That's for certain, but it's something I can deal with later.

Stepping out of my car, I plaster a friendly smile on my face, loosening up and approaching my front door, jangling my keys casually. My men follow with the same nonchalant attitude so as not to raise any alarms, but every muscle in my body is primed and ready to fire should I need to. I keep the simmering rage within to a quiet blaze. This is my fucking property, and they're on it. I don't care if my men did let them through the gate.

"Good evening, Officer," I greet coldly, glaring at the lanky weed of a man. "Is there something I can help you with tonight?" The officer shuffles his feet, parking one hand on his gun. I observe his movements warily, keeping momentum towards my front door. Scanning his chest and below, I identify his badge number for future reference, taking note of the guy standing next to him. There's two other cars parked behind him and five other officers are out of their vehicles, their guns cocked, ready to fire.

"Are you Dimitri Utkin?" he asks, his eyes darting back and forth and that tells me all I need to know.

"Yes. That's me. Chilly out tonight, isn't it?" I turn up the collar of my suit jacket, and the officer's hand clamps down on his holster.

The officer doesn't respond in kind, keeping his deadpan mask on. "It's not that

chilly. Mr. Utkin, we have a serious allegation that we've come out here to investigate. We've received a tip-off from Mr. Aiden Smith that a lady by the name of Ava is being held hostage right here on your property, and as such I'm sure you wouldn't mind setting our minds at ease and allowing us to search the property." The cop coughs, clearing his throat as one of the officers behind shines the light on me.

My automatic porch light highlights the side of the cop's face, livid at the intrusion. Fucking Ava. The ink hasn't even dried on the contract pages and she's already betraying what little trust I had in her. The man standing next to him is a mouse compared to me. Who the fuck is this Aiden Smith?

Pointing my finger at the guy, I stand with my associates not far behind. "Under the fourth amendment you can't search my property without a court ordered warrant. So, I don't give a fuck what Aiden Smith told you, but the answer is no. You can't search my property."

Some twerp, who I could break in half in less than a few minutes, has the nerve to step forward. "Why wouldn't you let the cops just take a look around? If you're innocent, then you should have nothing to hide, Mr. Utkin."

Smugly, the guy smooths back his hair, and if there weren't trained cops with their hands on their guns and the possibility of my men being shot, I would relieve him of his life.

"Why would you think I would be keeping someone here?" I demand, the simmering rage morphing into a slow bubble as the cops continue to shuffle from foot to foot, but even through the haze of darkness, there are lives hanging in the balance. My men do the same, parking their hands on their guns as this little man and I stare each other down. I let the rage die.

Smiling, I open the door with a drained sigh. "You're right, Officer, and what was

your name again?”

“Aiden Smith. That’s my name,” the guy adds. I wanted it repeated so my team can pick it up and provide me with intel.

“Good. Come through and take a look for yourselves.” Confident Viktor handled my request, I let the cops in. My face contorts as the cops trample past, spreading out and turning over things throughout every room. I might be pissed off with Aiden, but I’m even more pissed off with Ava. How the fuck did she get a message off to the authorities?

I tapped her phone and when I checked in with my security team, there was nothing that indicated a message to the cops. I’m in for a rude awakening as Ava emerges traipsing into the living room with Viktor trailing behind her.

Glaring at Viktor, my teeth grind together. Why the hell did he let her out when I told him not to?

“See! See! There she is. That’s Ava. She’s being held hostage here just like I said she was!” Aiden shrieks like the little tattletale bitch he is. The officer with him stops dead in his tracks as Aiden rushes towards Ava, his eyes wide with fake concern.

“Alright. Wait a minute,” the officer says, confusion rocking his face.

Ava frowns as if she doesn’t know Aiden. “Held hostage? By whom?” Quickly she rakes a hand through her hair as I look on, thinking about how badly I want to make her suffer.

You don’t know what a mistake you’ve made, I tell her with my eyes.

“Ava, what are you talking about? I got a text that you were in trouble. You told me

to bring the cops here!” Aiden yells, the officer trying to decipher where the truth lies.

“No, no,” Ava replies sheepishly. “It was all just a big prank. Maybe you misunderstood the message or whatever. I’m here of my own free will. You don’t have to worry, Officer,” Ava adds, but the officer looks unconvinced questioning her for the next ten minutes.

Who the fuck does she think she’s playing with? Time passes, and the police reluctantly depart. I watch, disgruntled by the whole charade, from the porch with my men as each police vehicle reverses and clears the property.

My attention turns to Ava. “Want to explain to me what just happened?”

Page 11

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:11 pm

I can't stop the shakes running through my body and I wish I could erase the text. I didn't think Aiden would actually rescue me the way he did.

"Umm, I can explain," I reply, a fine sheen of sweat forming on my face.

"Oh, you're going to need to," he warns dryly. He's eerily calm, but I know better because that same icy glare he's giving me now is just like the one I experienced in the woods in Wisconsin.

"Sure," I reply meekly as he sends his men away. God, all those men, rifling through every room. Is that what a raid looks like?

"Drink?"

"As long as you don't poison it," I mumble as his tight muscles shift under his suit jacket. He shrugs out of it, revealing a crisp white linen shirt and a transparent view of his chiseled muscles. Every part of him screams with dark power, and I can't help but remember how low the towel sat on his hips earlier, begging to be ripped off.

Dimitri doesn't offer any solace, only a beseeching glance in my direction as I follow him silently to his games and theater room. I stand awkwardly clasping my hands in front of me, unsure of what impact what I've done will have on our agreement.

He pours himself a whisky as I bite my lip, wanting to run and hide. "Wine's fine," I offer since he hasn't asked. He complies pouring one for me and sliding it in front of me at the bar.

“Ready to talk?” he asks, taking up space next to me on the barstool. Curling my fingers around the drink, I wait to figure out the best way to tell him, but his penetrating gaze is too much to handle. Honesty’s going to be the best policy in this case.

“Yes,” I sigh, taking a gulp of wine for liquid courage. “I did contact Aiden before we cut the deal.”

“How?” Dimitri asks quietly, stirring his whisky.

“You really want to know?”

“Yes. I asked.” The glint of his watch gives me something else to focus on other than his face, because right now I can’t look him in the eye.

“One of your men stepped away from his post when I climbed down... I was able to text from his phone.”

To my surprise, Dimitri’s face lights up. “That’s interesting, but you’re not fooling me. You have had a chance to escape many times since then. Why stay, Ms. Knight? Even now, you could have gone with them. Pressed charges for kidnapping. You’re a lawyer in training. I’m sure you could have found some way to bring me to justice.” He’s playing with me, and I know it. There’s no way I’m stupid enough to think he doesn’t have inside connections with the Chicago police department.

Shrugging, I tap the side of my wine glass, mulling it over. “I went with my instincts. Aiden was too kind to me. It’s obvious he wants something from me. Isn’t it weird, don’t you think?”

“Yes. From your perspective I can see how it is. The thing is, you haven’t explained how you know Aiden. Who the fuck is the guy?” Dimitri questions, and I press my

eyes shut, realizing I'm only giving him piecemeal information.

"He's Jackson's lawyer and handling all his will and affairs of the Wisconsin estate. He's the one who contacted me about his death and told me about the property."

"I see." Dimitri's face doesn't hold much expression as he drains the rest of his whisky, and I'm thinking for now that's a good thing. Oddly, I thought I would be more terrified of him in this situation, but I'm not. The more I speak, the more at ease with him I feel.

"He sought me out at the funeral, even though all I had to do with him was sign the documents and the title over. He even stepped in when other developers and all these other local businesspeople started propositioning me about the property."

"Okay. And you thought he would be the safest person to call to leave here?"

"Yes. I did. At the time."

"And now?"

"And now, I think he was kind to me because he's trying to manipulate the situation to his benefit. Maybe he was waiting for Jackson to die just like you were, but the difference is, at least you're transparent about what you intend to do with Raven's Peak."

"Yes. I don't have any reason to lie to you. I want what I want, and I've made it clear," Dimitri adds plainly, which I can only respect.

"Right. There you go." Taking a small sip of my wine, I feel it going to my head, easing my nerves. "I chose to stay because...." I swallow, looking up at him, his blue eyes blazing. "There's people like you said. I know they're going to be after me and

what's mine.”

We stare, locking eyes for what feels like an eternity. I'm turning into liquid. Dimitri eases his powerful thigh between my legs, his hand rubbing back and forth on mine. My mouth parts as a charge so great short circuits through my body. I want to be with him in a way I've never wanted to be with someone. Those eyes could cut diamonds the way they slice through me.

“You made the right decision to stay, Ava. I'm going to have no problem keeping you safe.” His cool whisky-tainted breath whispers against my flushed cheek as his textured mouth pries my lips apart. The tenderness of his kiss spins me out because it's not what I imagined from him. Gently his tongue finds its place slowly tossing over and under with mine, the ice melting between us. Leaning in for more, I moan into his mouth, my breasts tingling, wanting him to touch me in every way possible. I might not have drunk the whisky, but I'm drunk from the power of his kiss and the swirl of his tongue. I'm barely able to breathe as he demonstrates his strength by picking up the chair and slamming it in front of him with a grin.

Giggling, I place a hand on the ridged outline of his chest to steady myself. “What are you doing?”

He nestles his mouth into the crook of my neck trailing delicious kisses down the underside of my throat, my body on fire with a desire I've never experienced before. “I need you closer to me, Ava. You're a beautiful woman, Ms. Knight. I'm not sorry about not keeping my mouth to myself.”

“I like how you call me Ms. Knight,” I admit, the alcohol helping with my courage. I wrap my hands around the base of his neck, letting my fingers spread out across his neck. The closer Dimitri is to me, the more I feel as if I'm being pulled into some hypnotic whirlpool I won't be able to escape. Overwhelmed by all the new sensations I'm experiencing, I pull back.

Blinking hard, I shallow breathe, wondering what's coming over me all of sudden. "Are you okay?" Dimitri's question floats in the air, his sapphire-blue eyes seeking answers.

"Umm yeah, I'm fine. Shit. I just kissed you. I—ah let you kiss me," I blubber, and Dimitri's grin grows wider as he holds eye contact withdrawing his knee from between my trembling thighs.

"Yes. I did kiss you. Did I take it too far? Felt right."

Smiling, I gather my breath quietly. "No. You didn't take it too far. I just think I need a little to eat, that's all."

"We can talk some more," he offers, but the thick bulge I notice in his pants hints that he's ready to do more than talk. "I'm glad you've decided to trust me. It's a smart decision. I like the way you handled yourself," he praises with a devastating smile, my body electrified. God, my mouth is tingling still from the illicit kiss.

"What part?" I watch as Dimitri rings in an order from the cordless phone. I don't care what it is, it's just more of a buying time to figure out what I'm feeling. He places the phone down, leaning forward over the counter, his sculpted shoulders covering up most of the marble bar.

"All of it. Calling the cops. The story you told them when they got here to send them away. You're almost as cunning as I used to be. By the way I've already gotten rid of your little friend, Aiden, so don't think of coming up with any more tricks." He winks and I think I might faint again, and this time it won't be from exhaustion.

Shit. He got rid of him that fast. Dimitri's a mouthwatering, hazardous mistake, and I can't do him—but then again.... God, maybe I could. It might help seal the deal. Flip-flopping through my feelings, a twinge niggles inside me as he rounds the bar,

pouring me another glass of wine and himself a whisky. He pulls a remote down from the side of the bar, and a moment later the room is filled with soft house music and finger food.

“Used to be?”

“Hmm, I’m more subdued these days. Strategic. As you know,” he adds softly, his eyebrow arching.

Nodding, I nibble on a little food, finding Dimitri to be good company, and after another wine my nerves have untangled themselves from the jumbled mess they were, but the hot bed of feelings intensify, especially when Dimitri looks at me as if he wants to devour every part of my body. God. I want him too. Aching from the inside out, Dimitri drives the wedge of his knee between my thighs again, kissing my mouth abruptly.

“Hmm,” I murmur.

“Have I fed and watered you enough, Ms. Knight?”

“Yes. I’m good,” I reply breathlessly, knowing what I want to do, but not knowing exactly what I’m in for.

“You’re too sexy for your own good,” Dimitri retorts, the gravel in his tone, rumbling through the base of my stomach.

“Well, there’s plenty of it.” I chuckle as Dimitri kisses my bare collarbone.

“And I like that about you too. More of you to hold, and that can only be a good thing, but fuck all this talking, Ava. I want to show you what we’re going to do in front of the mirror.” Dimitri’s forward request spirals the ache between my thighs

into overdrive.

“Yes,” I reply breathlessly. “I want in.”

Dimitri grins as we stand, and in a split second, he places a hand under my ass lifting me up and carrying me out into the corridor with ease. Giggling at his swift interception, he looks down at me with a smile. “I thought I would make things easier for you,” he says smoothly, and I’m impressed there’s no sign of strain or struggle. Feeling just the right amount of tipsy, Dimitri lays me on my back, and I let myself go. I choose to trust him. What do I have to lose? Staring up at the mirror, Dimitri smirks, unbuttoning his shirt and revealing an inked-up chest, making my heart race.

His pants come off too, his bulge thick and hard.... Shit. All I want is for him to touch me now, but it’s exciting to watch him strip. “Enjoying the show, Ms. Knight?”

“Yes. So much,” I say in a shivery whisper as Dimitri boldly discards his black slacks and underwear, a thick glistening hard-on, staring back at me.

“This is your dessert.” He chuckles as he grabs at my foot, taking off my shoe and my socks. This hot mobster is undressing me and it’s the best adventure I’ve ever had in my life. He hovers over me, popping the button of my jeans open, yanking them to the floor, and kissing into the folds of my belly, kneading and caressing his way up, doing away with my top. His hands mold to my breasts perfectly, as I watch his body in the mirror, unable to help it.

“Shit. My God,” I call out, seeing how sexy it is to watch his tight bare ass snake up my body.

He grins as he unclicks my bra, feasting on my right breast. Moaning, I watch in the mirror as he tongues one down, taking a second to glimpse up at me. “See. Now you can watch the show. We haven’t got started yet, Ava. I can’t wait to pop your cherry

and show you how good it can be.”

I’m already wet by the time Dimitri makes it to my mouth, pinning my arms to the sides as he works his way back down, and boy, do I watch. Every stroke. Every kiss and when he parts my legs burying that dirty blond head between them, I feel like a damn goddess.

It’s so good to watch him eating my pussy. Why didn’t I know about this earlier?

Because you’re a virgin, Ava. And you’ve been struggling to survive. Shutting off my brain, I immerse myself in the experience, letting Dimitri open me up like a flower, his tongue flicking into pleasure spots I didn’t know existed, all while I keep my eyes wide open and fixed on our reflection above us.

As my inhibitions tear loose layer by layer, Dimitri’s hard mouth plunges deeper into my slick tunnel, causing my internal walls to break down. Whimpering, I buck my hips up to meet his mouth, a pooling sensation of feelings gathering like a ball in the pit of my stomach.

I can’t help but watch. He’s so good down there, and I’m losing what’s left of my mind. His tongue doesn’t relent, taking a voyage over my clit and massaging, the swollen nub tingling.

I’ve masturbated before and brought myself to orgasm, but God this is better. Dimitri’s fingers dig into the flesh of my hips, his scratchy chin hairs adding to the sensation as he takes me to the stars, and in my head the mirror shatters from the intensity of my orgasm.

“Dimitri! Dimitri!” I hear the words fly amongst shallow panting as he comes up for air, quickly shoving himself in behind me and flipping me on my side.

“I can’t go slow with you this time, Ava. Not anymore. Think you can handle me?”

His arm firmly wraps around my breasts as I come down from the pulsing sensations running through my pussy. “Yes. I can handle it.” I don’t know what he’s about to do or what I can handle, but my brain’s already scattered throughout the cosmos, drunk on orgasm.

Dimitri slides his thick wet shaft inside me, spreading me, slowly pumping me from behind as he sucks on my earlobe. There’s sweat dripping from both of us as he grunts into my ear. “Look in the mirror, Ava. Do you like what you see? Like how I pound you like this?” he taunts, his cock thrusting in harder, my eyes watering as I feel something pop down there.

“I like it,” I reply in a hot whisper, watching as our bodies mesh together in the steamed-up mirror. His long, sleek body grinding into me is a sight to watch. It’s like watching a sex tape, only in real time.

“Good. Because I plan on making you come more. You deserve it.” Dimitri makes good on his promise as I feel him thickening inside me, the thrusting becoming fast and furious slapping against my flesh, and I love it. Every second of it, and when I hear him hiss in climax, it makes me feel powerful to know I’m the one who got him there.

He falls apart, sliding in behind, spooning me as I stare at us in the mirror with Dimitri watching back. “Wow.” There’s no words to describe my experience, but all I know is I want to do it again, and again. With the mirror.

“Now you know what the mirror’s for, Ms. Knight. Approve?” Dimitri kisses my shoulder as I rest happily in his arms.

“The mirror has my stamp of approval. Thank you for introducing me to it.” Dimitri

grins into my back, kissing it as I giggle, worn out, but euphoric and sweaty.

“Anytime you want.”

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:11 pm

My new business partner and I are getting along beautifully, and I got more than what I wanted with Ava a few days ago. She gave me that deliciously curvaceous body, and her virginity. Now I'm hooked on whatever drug she is, and I can't stop thinking and wanting her.

Staring down at her peacefully sleeping in my bed, I stroke her face with the back of my thumb. She's stunning to me, and waking up next to her warm, full body is what I want every morning. A sliver of morning light highlights her face and the bed diagonally as she stirs but doesn't wake. Under the covers, I splay my hand over her ample hip, running it down her thigh, loving the way she feels. Nuzzling into her neck, I contain the hard wood in my pants wanting her to get her beauty rest, not that she needs it.

Who knew Raven's Peak would come with an added bonus.

Briefly, I look upward at our reflection, gaining another vantage point of Ava sleeping, her dark hair spread barely covering the nipple sticking out from under the sheet. Fuck. I want her again, but she's sleeping. Later.... Together we look good, and whatever this is we're doing, I'm all for it. Maybe it doesn't last, but I don't have any intention of ending it from my side.

I smirk about the mirror, remembering her na?ve nature when she asked. I vow to introduce her to more of my kinks and what I want to give her in the bedroom, but all in good time. We're just getting started.

A light flashes on my cell phone, and I roll my eyes, picking it up. Squinting, I take note of the time on the clock. It's before seven, and it's my mother. Ava doesn't need

to hear her harping on, so reluctantly, I pull my arm out from its warm spot on her thigh, padding out to the kitchen and answering on the walk through.

“Mother. You’re calling so late,” I joke, knowing my control freak of a mother has probably already prepared a juice, taken her vitamins and been to the gym. She has a routine that’s worthy of Olympic athletes.

“Good morning, Dimitri. Your mother’s as well as can be. I’ve just finished up from my Pilates class.” Tired from her schedule already, I shake my head.

“Private session?”

“Yes.” In many ways I have my mother to thank as she’s been the silent power behind my comeback from disgrace to sit on my own version of the Bratva throne. It makes sense that a large part of my cunning and resourceful nature originates from her.

“Good. Keeping nimble?” I chuckle. Ekaterina would be the woman to keep herself in shape. She had to have a hobby after the disgrace of what my father put us through.

“I must. But you must know why I’m calling.”

Sighing, I hesitate, thinking about ways to end the call. “No. I don’t have any prospects for marriage, Mom. That’s not where my head’s at. I’ve got a big deal on the table that will solidify our place.”

She pauses, not caring about what I said. “Don’t you see? That’s why I’m calling, Dimitri. It’s not a good look for you to remain a bachelor all of your days. I want you to take Cara Antonov out to dinner. To that exclusive yacht party tonight. She’s the daughter of Russian billionaire, Marnet Antonov. I’m sure you’re familiar with him?” my mother suggests smugly as my jaw tightens. I don’t need this shit so early in the

morning.

“Yes. I know who he is.” I head to the fridge, already wanting the call to end.

“Then you must know that ties with the Antonov family would greatly strengthen our position among the Bratva and Chicago’s high society. Cara would be the perfect solution, easy on the eyes, highly intelligent, and well read. What more do you want, Dimitri?” my mother pushes as I roll my eyes.

“No. I won’t be taking Cara,” I reply flatly. “I have someone else I’m taking for the night.”

A pregnant pause rests between us, and I can hear my mother reserving her silent judgment. I could care less. I’m taking Ava. She’s the only woman I want in my bed and in my life.

“Oh? Who is she?” she probes in an accusatory tone.

“Ava Knight. Owner of Raven’s Peak.” Without knowing I’m doing it; I try to elevate Ava’s status to my mother who remains duly unimpressed.

“Dimitri,” she warns in a careful tone. “I advise you not to get attached to her. You can’t be serious about her just because you have an infatuation about the property.”

“Mother, it’s none of your business who I date.” Repelled by her constant marriage talk, I sour at the conversation. It’s been a bone of contention between us for far too long. The truth is I haven’t found a woman I would trust to stand beside me. Cara would be too cold, too conditioned to the social norms of the elite, but not Ava. No, she’s wide-eyed and isn’t in the Bratva business. That’s one of the reasons I want her badly; she’s unassuming and smart in her own way.

“Oh, but it is. I won’t let you take this family under like your father did,” she reminds me, acid on her tongue.

“I have no plans to take the family under. Now if you’re done for the morning, I’ve got a busy day ahead. Talk to you later.” Grunting from the grilling, I hang up the receiver, wanting to cleanse my palate, and return to spoon Ava for a few more minutes before heading to work. I don’t tell her about the luxury yacht dinner until I get to work, wanting to add the element of surprise.

ME: Want to have some fun?

AVA: Is that a trick question? I thought we had plenty of that this morning before you left.

Immediately, a huge smile curves my lips, my dick getting hard. I couldn’t help myself, and leaving Ava panting after multiple orgasms is my new specialty.

ME: And there will be plenty more of that type of fun. Anytime. I’ve been invited to a luxury yacht party tonight and I want you to come.

AVA: I don’t have anything to wear!

ME: That’s easy. I’m rich. I’ll have the boutiques come to you and you can choose a dress.

AVA: Can’t I go out and pick one?

My fingers stop typing as I consider the risks. If this is a matter of trust, then you have to give her a chance. She showed you already she’s loyal. Picking up the phone, I decide to stop the thumb war texting.

“Hi. How’s the studying going?”

“Ah badly,” she groans. “I’ve got a lot to catch up on.”

“Poor Ava,” I tease. “See, this is why you need a break. If you want to go out, you can but understand the consequences if you run from me.” I put extra emphasis on my warning, but deep down I need her to want to stay.

“Dimitri. I’m not going to run. I already showed you that I don’t want to.” The thrilled innocence in her voice temporarily settles my angst, reminding me that she’s got the entire world in front of her.

“Okay. Good. I’ll organize the driver to take you wherever you want to go.”

“Thanks for trusting me.” Pausing, I want to say ditto but can’t bring myself to do it. Instead, I’m thinking about how badly my mother’s hounding me to get married. Could Ava be a possible candidate? Probably it’s too early to make that type of call. I doodle on the pad in front of me, frowning at how far ahead I’m planning with her.

“Enjoy your shopping spree. The driver will have my card. Spend as much as you want.”

I’ve got no qualms spending money on a woman. I have the money to do it, but if they’re directly targeting me for money, then it drives me mad.

“Are you sure?” she questions, uncertain, making me find her cute. Smirking down the line, I reassure her.

“Yes. I think I’m good for it.”

“Okay. Then you won’t mind if I get the lobster for lunch,” she jokes. “It’s on you.”

Chuckling, I laugh lightheartedly with her. She's the fresh spark I never knew I needed or wanted in my life. "Then I will be mad, but mainly because you're having lobster without me. Don't worry about that. I can guarantee Arnez will have plenty of lobster and caviar on board the boat tonight."

She gasps in delight, and I grin in response. "Wow! Lobster and caviar. I've never had caviar."

"Mmm. Then it will be a new introduction. It's an acquired taste." Happy that I can see the world through her eyes.

"Ooo. Okay. I can't wait."

"Good. I've got a meeting to attend, but have a good day, Ava. Be ready by seven. I should be home by then."

"Alright." Clicking off the call, I realize I want someone to be home when I'm done at work. Not having Ava there even after only having her there for a few days feels like a strange phenomenon to me.

I lose myself in the work of the day, finding myself excited to see what Ava will look like. It's me that's going to have to get ready. Not her. And when I enter our bedroom as she clasps the back of her pearl earring, I'm not disappointed. Her double-shoe-stringed-strapped dress is stunning. She's a vision of beauty in royal blue, the silk dress hugging every ample curve in all the right places. I take my eyes down to the split on the side, wanting to run my fingers up her thick thigh. Fuck me. The black shawl with a fringe is a nice touch, her heaving cleavage shimmering in bronze, bringing out her sexy elegance all at once.

My eyes darken with lust thinking about how long I have, but Ava catches on to my intentions quickly enough.

“No! You have to shower and get ready,” she reprimands with girly giggles, pretending to move away from me, but I’m too quick at rounding her up, curving a hand around her waist possessively. “Dimitri,” she whines playfully as I nuzzle my nose into her neck.

“You smell like heaven.” Inhaling loudly, I trail kisses down her throat, her body shivering, ramping up the heat in the bedroom. “Mmm. Ava.”

Her pretty nails splay over the breadth of my chest as she pushes me back a little. “It’s taken me an hour to do my makeup.” Taking in her plump, bronzed lips and shimmery eyeshadow, my cock is tickled enough to rise.

“You look good enough to eat,” I murmur, kissing her behind the ear, close to her dangling pearl earring. “But don’t worry, I plan to do plenty of that later tonight,” I promise, amused by the light flush of pink shining under Ava’s rosy blush.

“Huh.”

I bend to tilt her head up to me, kissing her mouth lightly, not caring if some of the lipstick ends up on my mouth. The rest of her is going to be on my mouth later anyway. “Oh, don’t be shy now, Ms. Knight. Give me half an hour to shave and freshen up. I’ll be good enough to match you, I hope.” Taking a handful of her ass, I squeeze as she smiles back at me.

“You already are,” she mutters as I wink at her before going to get dressed and then meeting her in the living room. She whistles as I grin. I’m not the clean-cut model type, but I know my charm, and the magnetism I command, along with the body I’ve built from years of boxing and gym workouts.

“Good enough?”

“More than.” She scales me from head to toe, and I’ve kept my look casual, but high-end enough for a luxury yacht dinner in an Armani suit, my hand tattoos on full display. My hair is slicked back with a little gel, and my beard shaped up and tapered.

“Good. Come on, let’s go, before I change my mind and take you back to bed. You look too good, Ava.”

“Thank you.” I introduce Ava to more of my life as the driver takes out the private town car and we share a champagne along the way.

“This is a limited-edition champagne from the South of France. Try it and tell me what you think.” She sips, her eyes coming alight as we head past the downtown district of Chicago to the pier.

“This is amazing. Wow, and we’re in a limo.”

“Yes. It’s nothing. Wait until you see the yacht.”

“I can’t wait,” Ava says, starry eyed, and I’m starting to really enjoy showing her new things. We arrive along with the other guests as they exit their own version of luxury vehicles. Ava’s gobsmacked by all the luxurious people around her, but if she knew what most of the ruthless sharks were like behind closed doors, including the women, she probably wouldn’t be so impressed. The super yacht stands proudly at the dock as passersby look on in awe. The ship, donned with fairy lights on deck, is the size of a small house. It takes up most of the Chicago River.

“This is insane, Dimitri. I didn’t know yachts could be this big.”

“Yes. They can. My associate owns it, and my cousin Ruslan works in the luxury yacht market. He’s thinking about bringing them to Chicago for luxury and private parties. Do you think it’s a good idea?” I ask in a husky tone, wanting her input.

Ava nods as I help her up on a neon-lit deck, the hypnotic beat of house music vibrating through the boat. “This is so—so wow! I would want to be on this boat. Chicago people like to let their hair down, so I can’t see why not.”

Ava’s awestruck expression is what’s making me happiest right now. I don’t understand it, because years ago I thought my mother was right and that I would just have to be miserable and handpick one of the elite women from the high-society circles.

“We’re on the same page, Ms. Knight,” I say in approval, escorting her onto the boat, and as the stares come our way, a low burn of fire stirs as the men appreciatively glance in Ava’s direction. Slipping my hand into hers, I smile, letting all the sharks know she’s mine. “Come. Let me introduce to a few people I’d like you to meet.” I can’t help but think if I brought Cara, she would be too stuffy and stiff to be excited about the venture. It’s a stark contrast to Ava who sees the value in the experiences I’m opening her up to.

Firstly, I introduce her to the host, Arnez. The Middle Eastern man is one I was introduced to through Ruslan during his negotiations for his new vodka range, which is now producing a multimillion-dollar turnover for the Bratva.

I can see the dirty thoughts forming in his head, his snake eyes directing themselves to Ava’s chest. There’s a slight chill in the air, and her nipples are shining through.

He takes her hand, kissing it. “Hi, welcome to Arnez Premier Yacht events. Pleased to make your acquaintance.” Arnez offers me a polite gaze and I shoot him a death dagger of a glance, letting him know where the boundaries lie telepathically. “Sorry, here’s the man of the hour. Dimitri, how are you?”

“Excellent. This is Ava. Nice boat, Arnez,” I reply cordially, showing my teeth.

“Yes. I think a fifty-foot yacht is about the right size for the perfect luxury event. What do you think, Ava?”

Oblivious to the attention she’s receiving for all the right and wrong reasons, Ava smiles, nodding her head. “Yes. I think you’re right. It’s beautiful.” Ava turns slightly to take in the event. All the glamorous people of Chicago are on the boat mingling, drinking and enjoying champagne and appetizers as they come around. I stop one of the hostesses so Ava can try the food.

She selects a lobster appetizer with caviar included and I smile because it’s exactly what I told her would be on offer. Ruslan’s vodka is on offer at the bar, so I forgo the champagne to support his brand. If nothing else, I’m a loyal Bratva man.

“Are you enjoying yourself so far?” I ask, surprised that I care so much about her response.

“Yes. I can’t believe I’m here with these people. They’re all so accomplished. Is that where we’re having dinner?” Ava nods in the direction of the white tableclothed tables with place cards below deck. There’s a transparent floor that shines down the interior of the boat, which is just as lush as the outdoor section.

“Yes. It is. And I told you, don’t think for a minute that any of these people are better than you. Any one of them would want what you have. I can assure you.” Kissing her cheek, Ava blushes.

“Thank you.”

As I run through the introduction, giving Ava a sample of the high life, I find myself having a better time than most at these events as we laugh and flirt together. Mostly I attend for networking and business prospecting, but not tonight. Ava adds color to my tainted underworld. I leave her to speak with one of the wives of a well-known

Chicago billionaire as they bond over fashion and food.

Confident she's in safe hands, I break away to speak to one of my business partners involved in the mining sector, which is going to be key to my lithium operations in the future.

"Avery. Nice to see you out tonight."

"And you." We shake hands chatting for a moment, teeing up future meetings for our operations as Avery turns his attention to Ava.

"Are you a taken man now, Dimitri? I've been waiting for you to settle down."

"You mean my date?" I shift my attention to seeking out Ava, but my throat burns and not from the vodka as a seething fire cuts through me. She's speaking to a man who's taking a great interest in her.

"Yes. Your date."

I keep my eyes on her, but swallow down the last dregs of my vodka maintaining my rage. "I guess time will reveal all."

Avery smirks. "Yes, it will. She's quite popular tonight."

If Avery's trying to get under my skin, I'm not giving him the satisfaction. "Of course she is. She's with an Utkin. Excuse me. I don't want my date feeling neglected, so I better get back." I shake the man's hand, and he grins.

"Talk soon, Dimitri." With measured strides, I reach the far end of the boat where the man has Ava cornered. As soon as he sees me coming, he glides away before I can sink my teeth into him.

“What was that?” I hiss into Ava’s ear, a baffled expression on her face.

“I think his name is Frank—”

Quickly, my eyes dart around the boat as I place a hand on the small of her back. “I don’t care who that was,” I hiss through my teeth. “You belong to me, and I’m the man you’re going home with. You don’t entertain other men. Do you fucking understand, Ava?”

Unable to see straight, Ava adjusts, not backing down and sliding my hand away from her back as she finishes off her wine. “We have a mutually beneficial agreement, Dimitri. Don’t make me regret it.”

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:11 pm

A few days have passed, and Dimitri and I are becoming closer. Every night I'm spending in his bed, and it's almost amusing that I have to go back to my room and collect my things. The yacht party ended with a petty fight, and if there's one thing that frightens me about Dimitri, it's his open possessiveness, but I was proud of myself for not backing down to him.

It was on principle, because whilst Frank might have been trying to flirt with me, I'd sent him away, letting him know I was on the boat with Dimitri.

"See, you made all that fuss about nothing. The reason he went away isn't because you came over. It was because I sent him away," I'd told him.

I'd gladly watched the color flush to his cheeks in embarrassment. "Sorry. I wanted to be sure." That was his weak response.

"What happened to mutual trust?" I'd asked him, but my fingers had been trembling around the wine stem I was holding, afraid of what he would do.

"Yes. I'll give you that, but I do mean what I said."

"That's clear." But that very night, we'd shared such a tender night of lovemaking it was almost as if his outburst didn't happen.

Taking a breath, I look at myself in the full-length mirror, satisfied that what I'm wearing will be just the right amount of effort to impress his family. I step into my wedge heels, enhancing my five-foot four stature, enough to stand at a normal height. There. Good. Respectful. Cute. And not too much cleavage, but that's a hard thing to

cover with my ample bosom.

The maid enters to collect the sheets and towels in the room.

“You look so beautiful, Ava,” she praises.

“Thank you. Do you think the ruffles are too much?”

“No. I think they’re the perfect touch. Very feminine. Are you going today to meet Dimitri’s family?”

“Yes, I am,” I reply, anxiety getting the better of me.

The maid’s eyes sparkle as she dumps the linens into her trolley basket. “Ooo, this could be good news for you. I’ve been working here for over a decade, and I’ve never seen Dimitri take a woman home to meet his family. You’re very lucky.”

Unfortunately, this has the adverse effect of applying more pressure. What if his family hates me? I’m not stupid. I know this is a high-powered family I’m entering.

“Don’t worry, you’ll do fine. You can tell me all about it tomorrow.” The maid clasps my wrist in encouragement, her comfort endearing. I’ve become fast friends with all the housekeeping and hospitality staff taking a liking to them, and them to me. Despite Dimitri’s intimidating and hostile demeanor at times, the staff appear content enough to work for him.

As she leaves, I do enough to calm myself down, holding my stomach and staring at it. I’ve missed my period, and I never miss. Frowning, I stare at my belly. Am I pregnant?

It’s doubtful, Ava, but I touch my bloated stomach again. If I am, how do I tell

Dimitri? What would he want with a baby? We don't even have a title yet. Shit. This is too much. I blow out an exasperated breath. This train is moving too fast.

Dimitri's presence makes himself known, breaking me out of my spiral of thoughts. His bulk and powerful cologne cloaking the space, but it's as he's a different man. His face is softer, and he looks more casual in a tan jacket and sky-blue shirt with jeans.

"You look great. Are you ready to go?"

"Yeah I am." I smile, hiding my hesitation, and mostly keeping quiet on the ride over with him. We arrive at a sprawling family home on the outskirts of Chicago, where rose bushes line a garden path to the door. I take note of the guesthouse on the property and how immaculate everything is.

It's nothing like Dimitri's house, this feels like a place where you would want a family to grow up. The air is fresh, and there's many other cars parked in a separate section of the white pebbled driveway to the left.

"Is that a valet?" I ask in shock, but I shouldn't be. It's the Utkins and they're loaded.

Dimitri places a hand on my knee, stroking it. "Yes. Stop worrying. We're going to have a good time. I want my family to meet you." I open my mouth to confess my fears, but shut it, not wanting to jinx things.

"I just want them to like me, that's all."

"They will." Today Dimitri's blue eyes sparkle, and he's the most relaxed I've ever seen him. It melts my heart a little that he wants to show this vulnerable side of himself to me. Maybe we really are getting closer to having a label for our relationship.

As we approach the wraparound porch, I can hear the low hum of chatter from the inside. Dimitri holds my hand, his poise giving me strength. As the door opens, I'm taken into a new world. The elite world of the Utkins. From the outside the house might have resembled a sprawling country estate, but from the inside the shiny pearled marble tiles and antiques indicate otherwise.

This is more like a small palace. The interiors are majestic with large stone vases strategically placed in each corner filled with oversized ornamental flowers. The living room is open and lined with large plush rugs, and there's a huge table in the center of the room filled with food and drink. The high beam ceilings filter in streams of light, and I can smell the wealth in the room. It's palpable. Suddenly, I feel as if I'm underdressed, and Dimitri hasn't taken his eyes off me since we've stepped out of the car, and I wish he would.

"Okay?" he asks, and it's the first time I've seen him be uncertain about anything.

"I'm ah... fine, it's just a lot here. Is this your family home? You grew up in this place?" Finding it unbelievable, I try to act normally, but it's going to be hard surrounded by all this wealth.

"Yes," he answers warmly. "They're just people, Ava, and I promise you everything's going to be fine. If it's not, then you talk to me, and I will sort them out." He winks, his fingers intertwining with mine, his sweetness easing my nerves a little more.

The house is filled with a string of people in lively discussion, occupying different rooms, but Dimitri guides me into the main living room area, where most of them are. A tall friendly guy with a messy mop of brown hair and green eyes approaches gathering Dimitri in a brotherly hug.

"Ah! You're here. Is this the wonderful Ava you've been telling us about?"

Smiling, my stomach bubbles. He's been talking about me to his family? This is news to me. Dimitri sighs with a nod. "Yes, this is Ava. Ava, meet Ryurik, my younger, less handsome brother." Ryurik punches Dimitri in the shoulder playfully, scooping a handful of his hair back from his face, but all it does is flop back down again.

"Hey, don't listen to shit he says, Ava. I'm the most handsome brother. And I'm nicer than him." Maybe the day's going to go well after all.

Dimitri mentioned his family tree briefly and doesn't speak so much about his brother, so it's nice to see him in person. "Hi, Ryurik." I attempt to shake his hand as she shakes his head, giving me a quick hug instead.

"No need for formalities, Ava. You're with my bro. Can I get you some juice, water, food?"

Dimitri grins, slapping his brother on the back. They're nothing alike and it's astonishing to me. "Sure. A juice would be good."

"No problem," he replies bouncily, his green eyes shining affably. I like him already.

"Wow. He's nothing like you," I blurt out to which Dimitri laughs, his eyebrow cocking with intrigue. "How so?"

"He's down to earth. Friendly." Dimitri puts a hand to his heart, wincing as if he's hurt, but I grin back at him, knowing he's not.

"That hurt my soul," he jokes. "You might think so by appearances, but my brother is worse than me. Ryurik just hides it better." Frowning, I contemplate what he means as Ryurik returns with sandwiches and juice. I'm ravenous and enjoy the plate of food he's given me as we talk some more, getting to know each other. From what he shows me, I don't see what Dimitri means, but I take his word for it, just the same.

“Come on, let me introduce you to my aunts and uncles.” Though I’m feeling a little out of place, Dimitri introduces me to his aunts and uncles who welcome me openly but bombard me with several questions about my upbringing and life. I’m drowning in a sea of overwhelm, when I’m relieved to spot Sophia. It’s hard to miss her full head of ginger hair, but she’s not alone. She’s got a little girl with her, and she’s holding a plate of food, nibbling at the chicken on it. Wow. Sophia has a child now. So grown up.

“Oh my God! Ava! What—you’re here? This is incredible.” Her mouth opens as the little girl giggles.

“Mommy. Is this your friend?”

“What... um yes. We went to school together.” Flustered by my arrival, Sophia opens her arms to hug me. I hug her back tightly, glad to see my friend looking so well. Andrei is in the background talking to Dimitri and catching up. She’s wearing a long flowing peach dress and a very shiny necklace that I bet cost her a fortune.

Our lives have changed so much. I don’t recognize this version of Sophia.

“Is that lawyer school, Mommy?” the little girl asks interrupting; she has me wondering what I would be like as a mother.

“Yes, from lawyer school. Ava, this is my nosey daughter Anya.”

Anya sticks out her hand already familiar with the societal norms. “Pleased to meet you,” she says with a toothy grin. I find her adorable as I shake her hand back.

“Good girl, now go find your cousins and play out back. Okay?”

“Alright, Momma!” The little girl takes her plate away as I shake my head.

“Wow. How are you?”

Sophia beams. “I’m fantastic. I can’t complain, but... um, hello, are you here with Dimitri? Andrei didn’t tell me that,” she gushes in a whisper, her eyes opening at the juicy gossip. My cheeks redden as I nod.

“Yes. I’m here with him. It’s early days, but so far... it’s been interesting,” I tell her, leaving things open to interpretation. She nods with a knowing smile.

“Oh, it’s going to be interesting with the Utkin family, and that’s an understatement. I want you to call me later and tell me how this all started.”

“Phew, Sophia. It’s a story, but the short of it is it involves an inheritance.”

“Fuck!” She grabs my wrist in excitement and it’s almost like being back in law school with her again, and I realize how much I’ve missed her. “Let’s get together. We can’t talk here.” She rolls her eyes, looking to the left where the more sophisticated people seem to be gathered.

“Okay. I’m so glad to see you.”

“You too. I’m practicing at Goldblum’s now as a defense attorney. Loving it!”

“Whoa! That’s sensational. You really are living the dream.”

Sophia chuckles, distracted by noises from behind her. “Yeah, I am some days. Listen, I have to go check on Anya. Call me!” she shouts as I smile at my old friend, so proud of her.

Dimitri sweeps in from behind, kissing into my hair. “Hey, one more important person I want you to meet. Come.”

“Okay.” He takes my hand, leading me over to the group that seem to be in their own little bubble. He promptly introduces me to a stylish older woman with freshly blow-dried, whitish-blond hair, her makeup flawless. Around her neck is a delicate gold necklace. She’s dressed in all white and very chic, barely any wrinkles in sight. She’s above average height and holding a wine glass in her French-manicured fingers.

“Hi, Mother. I’d like you to meet Ava Knight.” Dimitri bends to kiss his mother on her upturned cheek, the same icy blue eyes sparkling back at me. “Ava, this is my mother Ekaterina.”

There’s a great deal of pride held in Dimitri’s voice, and I’m guessing his mother means a lot to him.

“Good afternoon, Ava. Thank you for coming to our little family gathering here. It’s nice to meet you. I’ve heard good things,” she remarks politely, but there’s a frigidness in her tone that sends shivers down my spine.

“I’m glad it’s good things. You have such a lovely home, and I adore your paintings. I see why Dimitri likes art so much and has such good taste,” I return, cringing as her curved eyebrow stretches upwards. I’m aware that I’m probably trying too hard.

“That’s probably because Mom gave me a few of them,” Dimitri chuckles, her mother showering him with a charming smile, tapping the side of his face.

“No, Dimitri. You do have good taste.” She looks at me directly, her eyes shiny with contempt. “Usually.”

Bitch! Uncomfortably, I place a hand over my throat as Dimitri wraps a protective hand around my waist.

“No. Always,” he insists.

Shit. Get me out here now. Or at least get me a drink. I'm saved from drowning as one is given to me by Dimitri. Almost as if he knows the scorpion pit he's hurled me into.

"Hey, Dimitri! Get over here," I hear some man call out from behind him as he parts from us, embracing what I'm assuming is another family member. For my trouble, I'm left, faced with the conservative, cold glare of his overbearing mother.

"You know you don't belong with him." Her honest words slice up an insecurity I already harbor, and I'm jarred by her words.

"What?"

Her eyes cut into me as she looks down her nose at me. "I believe you heard what I said. You don't belong with him. You're not cut out for this life. You don't have the social status or reputation to improve Dimitri's life."

Flabbergasted by her claims, I frown as I watch Dimitri talking to his cousin and another woman next to him. "I think it's up to Dimitri to decide who he chooses to be with." I can't let the woman bowl me over, but her words have sunk into my brain decaying my positive thoughts about our budding relationship.

She fingers the gold necklace around her slender neck with a tight smile. "That's very cute in that fanciful delusion you're living in, but my son is the head of a very powerful Bratva organization, and you should consider distancing yourself from my son," she warns, her bouquet of perfume burning my nostrils as she leans closer towards me. "Or I will do it myself."

Floored by her words, I shake my head. "Your son approached me, not the other way around," I correct, finding my center and remembering my law degree and how I like to win.

Ekaterina scoffs. “Yes. Darling. You have what he wants, but you don’t hold as much value as her.” Ekaterina holds up her wine glass gesturing it in the direction of the delicate blonde beauty next to Dimitri. Her bag is designer, and her snow-white hair is pinned back in a slicked ponytail, her pale glass skin perfect in every way. She’s skinny and could pass as a runway model.

“What?”

“You see Dimitri could get Raven’s Peak via other means. I hope you know that. He’s indulging you, Ava. Surely you can’t think....” She cackles as my ashen face drops, my stomach twisting into knots. This woman is pure evil.

“Think what?” I ask, willing her to spit it out.

“Well, you can’t think you and Dimitri will ever be anything. That woman is Cara Antonov, and her father is a billionaire and has deep-rooted connections across the globe. Now, she can help my son flourish.”

Fuck. Two blondes. Both tall, high-powered families. They do look good together. Like they belong. Maybe she’s got a point.

“I’m going to go now. I think I need some air,” I tell her, wanting to leave.

“Or maybe you want the exit?” Ekaterina smirks as I shoulder through the throng of people heading to the bathroom to gather myself. I think about telling Dimitri I want to leave, but by then I spend the next fifteen minutes being entertained by lovely family members.

Eventually Dimitri finds me, pulling me to the study and kissing me passionately. “Hi. I’ve been wanting to do that all day, but you’ve been such a hit with my family, I haven’t had a chance to.” He cups my face kissing me tenderly, as I cling on to him. I

don't want to ruin the moment, but there's an ache inside me that I might not be good enough for him or his family clouding my mind.

"You've found me," I whisper as Dimitri drags me into the antique chair and onto his lap.

"Good. And before I let you go; I have something for you."

"What? You didn't have to get me anything."

"Yes, I did." Dimitri brings out a long velvet black box opening it to the most beautiful gold necklace with a red heart encased inside it.

"It's a garnet, and this is real gold. I want you to have it. Wear it for me."

"Oh my God. I love it." But even if I do, I wonder if we're skipping all the steps to a real relationship. After all, we don't know each other. We're in this weird place between business and something else.

Is it real?

Page 14

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:11 pm

“I need a breather, Dimitri. Some normality in my life.” Peeling back the newspaper, I smirk at Ava as we share eggs benedict on my back porch.

“What part of eating breakfast together is not normal?” I tease, knowing what she means, but not exactly wanting to be without her. In the morning with no makeup and in her cute pajamas is how I like her best. I’ll never tire of looking at her, but there’s things I want her to learn before she heads back out into the world.

She rolls her eyes at me. “Dimitri.” She puffs out her cheeks, her warm golden-brown eyes pleading with me.

“You’ve been asking me for the last couple of weeks now, but you have to do something for me first.”

“What?” She chomps on her croissant as I lay down the ground rules.

“I want you to learn self-defense from me. You’ve gained more adversaries now that you’re with me. I need you to be able to handle anything coming your way.”

Ava gives me a quizzical glance as if assessing whether she wants to learn or not. “Do I have to. I don’t know if I want to.”

“If you want to hang out with this friend of yours. Cindy, is it?”

“You know her name is Cindy,” Ava rolls back spicily.

“Then I’m going to need you to do this for a week with me.”

“Alright. Jeez. One week and then I can go for the weekend. I need a break from all your high-society friends and associates. I swear they think their shit is golden.”

Smuggling a laugh, I can't resist leaning over to kiss Ava's sumptuous mouth. It comes up with many truths that I enjoy hearing. “You're not wrong, and I want you to go. I just don't want to be worried about you not being able to defend yourself.”

Ava grins. “Are you training me?” She bites the last of her croissant, the crumbs falling to land in the valley of her cleavage and making my dick rise. It doesn't take much with her. She could be brushing her teeth, and I would want to take all her clothes off.

“Yes. I'm training you, and don't expect an easy ride either,” I growl, eyeing her full breasts as the sun shines on her brown hair.

“Hmm, an easy ride.” I shut down the paper, looking at the time.

“Ava. I know what you're doing. I'll handle you later,” I warn, about to figure out how to rearrange my schedule for a quickie, but Viktor bursts my bubble.

“Hey, we've got an eight o' clock meeting and we need to be on the other side in less than half. We better head off now.”

Viktor knows I don't like being late. If I'm early, I feel as if I have the upper hand in meetings. “Ava. Meet me in the gym at six thirty. Don't be late.”

“Okay.” She winks and I know I'm going to be wound up for the rest of the day, and by the end of the day, I'm looking forward to training Ava. I find her in the gym stretching on the floor mats.

I'm changed in shorts and a tank top, and she's in Lycra leggings to show off her

fuller figure and a form-fitting top. Fuck. Who organized this? Smiling at her, I take a hardline approach, so as not to give in and take her on the mat. I have to ignore how sexy she looks in order to train her first.

“Get up,” I order with my hands on my hips.

“Good evening to you too,” she giggles, but I hold on to my authority.

“No time for that. We’ve got three laps around the mat as a warm-up. Come on, because I’m going to put you through your paces, and we can’t do that with cold muscles.”

Ava licks around her lips in a challenge to me, my staunch facade breaking as I smack her hard on the ass, starting off the run. That’s enough to get her to run after me and propel us into the warm-up.

“Hey! That’s not part of the training.”

“Oh yes, it is.” I grin, dropping back to run alongside her on the large mat. The gym’s state of the art and some of the Bratva come to train in it. Lined up along the walls are boxing gloves, sticks for hand-to-hand combat, knives, punching bags, and a section with treadmills, step machines, and weights.

By the end of the warm-up, Ava has a nice sheen of sweat on her skin. Again, I must ignore how good she looks, her hair sticking to the frame of her round face. We stretch out as I ask her to attack me.

“I want you to defend yourself as if I was an attacker down a dark alley. Let me see your natural defense mechanisms, and then I can train you on your weaknesses,” I tell her as she jumps to her feet, and I tackle her from behind. She does what so many do. She tries to wrestle my hands free from around her waist, but I squeeze tighter, my

biceps straining.

“Let go of me!” she yells.

“Come on, Ava. What are you going to do?” I taunt in her ear as she surprises me, lifting her arms, and stomping hard on my foot, then elbowing me in the lower gut. The punch isn’t enough to do any damage, but her series of powerful moves beforehand give me reason to believe Ava’s hiding more than I think she is.

“Oh. Not bad, Ava. So, you do have some moves.” I stretch out my toes, my foot throbbing slightly as she covers her hands over her face.

“Sorry. Did I hurt you?” Cutting my eyes at her, I shake my head.

“Never feel sorry for your attacker, that’s how you wind up getting hurt worse. I’m fine, but we need to refine that elbow jab. It needs to be to the face, then my stomach. Watch, I’ll take you through the steps. And how to twist the man’s arm and break it.”

For the next twenty minutes, we run the drill repeatedly until Ava can perform it in one smooth motion.

“No!” she screams in command, then the pointy end of her elbow aiming to connect with my cheekbone and then my stomach as she steps out twisting my arm in one lightning-fast motion.

“Good, Ava. Better. But this is a drill. You’re still a step too slow. What if they have a knife. Quicker next time,” I demand with authority. Ava looks at me as if she wants to wring my neck, but I need her to understand the gravity of the situation.

“Okay, shut up and stop yelling at me!” she fires back, a blaze lighting in her eyes.

“Good. Use that aggression. Show me, Ava. Because next I’m going to teach you the eye gouge.” She learns quickly, converting the knowledge I’ve taught her into gems she can use on the street, but by the end, we’re both sweaty and frustrated for two different reasons.

Her head is lowered as she pulls back her quads leaning against the wall for support, sweat dripping between the cavern of her breasts. Fuck. She looks good.

“I hate you,” she says quietly, breaking the thick air of tension between us.

Laughing hard, I sink my eyes into hers, her nipples showing through her sports bra, her brown locks sticking to her face as she pants from exertion. “I had to make sure you would work hard. I don’t want you getting hurt.” But Ava’s still not over it.

“How about I hurt you instead? You’re too bossy.”

“No, I’m not,” I quip, moving closer to her, her parted mouth wanting to smile.

“Yes. You are!” She glowers, her eyes glinting with desire.

One step from her face, I stand looking down at her. “Do you want to be the boss, Ava?” I ask, dipping a finger into the river of sweat between her breasts.

“Yes. I want to be the fucking boss.” She pushes me in the chest as I step back, off-kilter.

“Then show me your boss-lady moves. On the mat now.” She shoves me again. “If you can wrestle me to the ground, I’ll let you have your way with me.”

Of course, I want her to win the wrestle and put up a mild fight as our sweaty bodies mingle, and Ava pins my arm behind my back, slipping her leg behind my knee as I

fall to floor, dragging her on top of me. Panting, I cling on to her gaze sliding her down to my hard cock and grabbing her ass so she can feel it.

Ava closes her eyes, crushing her mouth over mine, a fervor coming over her as she takes charge, turning me all the way on. “I need you out of that top. It’s your turn to do what I say,” she commands, lifting my tank top off, and I grin as she straddles me.

“Whatever you say, Boss.” With my top off, Ava pulls the band out of her hair, letting her locks fly free. I’m a man in heaven. She grins down at me, peeling herself out of her sweaty apparel but getting stuck in her top, leaving me in tears of laughter.

“Help me! Don’t laugh. You’re in big trouble.”

“I can’t help it, you’re so cute and hot,” I tell her, laughing in between as I throw her top to the side and help her out of her sports bra, leaving her heavy round breasts hanging in front of me like fruit for my mouth. I knead them, groaning as I take one in my mouth and Ava sighs in relief.

“Mm, you’re nice and salty,” I growl, wanting to ravish her. I gobble up the other one as Ava starts to grind on my waiting cock. “Hold on, I’ve plenty for you. Hold on.” She rides over the top of my shorts as a prelude to the main event, standing up to strip down her Lycra leggings and soaked, sweaty underwear. “On my face now,” I command thickly. Ava straddles my face as I plunge my tongue into her salty, wet walls.

“I thought I was the one dishing out the commands,” she whimpers as I work furiously and she directs me, her pink flesh exciting me. In and out, I dive in, flipping my tongue into the crevices of her folds and digging into her fleshy hips.

She grinds on my face, directing her rhythm as I drive the pace up further. “Come for me, Ava. Pain before pleasure,” I call out as she squirms, holding the sides of my

face, demanding more. I give it to her, finding the nub of her clit and sucking on it. I feel her jerk, as she cries out, her legs shaking.

Satisfied, but not done, I slap her ass, enjoying her moments of bliss. “Slide down and ride for me, Ava. I need you now.” Silently, she surfboards her pussy down to my glistening cock, sitting on the throne I’ve got waiting for her as I watch myself sink inside her.

“Oh my God. You’re so hard,” she remarks as I grind up into her.

“That’s right. Hard for you, Ava. See what you make me do?” I croon, the sweat pouring from the both of us as I glide her hips over my swollen cock, gravity taking hold of her breasts as they bounce in rhythm.

“You’re still too bossy,” she pants in complaint.

“Trust me, that pussy of yours is in charge because I can’t get enough,” I pant back roughly as Ava plants her hands across my chest, squeezing and flexing her ass faster and faster, making my dick tighter and tighter like a drum, until the crescendo builds to such a peak I can’t stand it anymore.

Clenching my eyes shut, Ava fingers her clit as I explode inside her, feeling her slick tunnel clenching around me in its own orgasm, both of us overcome with the waves of climax.

Ava falls into hysterics, spent next to me on the mat. “That wasn’t supposed to be a double workout, but I think I enjoyed the second better.

Laughing with her, I have to agree. “Me too. You were a good student. We need to train more often.”

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:11 pm

Cindy greets me at the door with a huge hug, and I let the embrace linger, so happy to see a normal everyday human being. Not that I don't enjoy being with Dimitri, but all the other people around him seem so cold and aloof. If they're not, it's as if they don't know how to let their hair down and act like normal people, but I guess they're not. They're high society and have to engage in some stupid game in order to maintain the status quo, which to me—coming from where I come from—is a load of shit.

“Girl! I'm so happy you got let out. Woo-hoo!” I step into Cindy's house; the same one I've been in so many times before. We grew up together and have been best friends since primary school. There's been pockets of time where we haven't been as close, but we always end up falling back together again.

“Yes,” I reply, “I've been let out, but I get it. It's not really like that. It's just with all the changes and stuff, I guess....” Cindy knows some things, but she doesn't know everything, and I don't know if I can tell her. There are things I don't want to admit. I park the idea, not wanting to put pressure on myself, instead deciding to have a nice night with my friend for old times' sake.

It's after eight, and I've arrived later than I wanted to, Dimitri almost backing out on giving me a ride here, but he had no choice unless he wanted me to complain and pout about broken promises for the entire night. “How about some hot cocoa and you can tell me all about your sexy new lover!” she drawls, making sexy eyes at me.

Giggling, I offload my overnight bag on her small couch, remembering Cindy's like me, and trying to make ends meet by putting herself through college too. Except she has the lucky benefit of both her parents being alive.

“He is sexy. I can’t lie about that.”

Cindy’s eyes widen as she sweeps her black hair off her face. “What? You’re going to spill for sure. I want all the deets.”

I smile goofily as Cindy stirs in the hot cocoa, dropping white and milk chocolate duds into cream, her secret cocoa weapon. As she stirs, I start at the beginning of the story.

“You’re probably not going to believe me because it’s too crazy for words.”

Cindy scoffs, stirring with her wooden spoon, but stops to drag out two large mugs and a bag of marshmallows. “Then I want you to use all your words, including the adjectives. Please and thank you, because my life is snore bore.”

Laughing, I remember how funny Cindy is, and it makes me happy to be spending time with her. “Apparently Dad’s uncle was fond of me, and he left me Raven’s Peak.”

“Shut up! You got a land inheritance?” She flips around, her mouth open at the first tidbit of news.

“Yep, but that’s just the start. The land is about 10,000 acres.”

“Nooo! That’s huge. It’s got to be worth a fortune,” she squeaks forgetting to stir as I point to the smoking cocoa on the stove. She turns back, switching off the burner.

“Shit! My bad. Alright. So, you’re not poor anymore. Are you going to sell?”

Shaking my head, I frown as she pours the steaming hot liquid into the cup adding marshmallows that automatically melt into a sweet goo on top. Licking my lips, I

can't wait until it cools enough for me to drink it.

"No. Come on, let's sit on the couch. I told you this part on the phone. About the property."

"No. You didn't! You missed this part. I knew you were going to the funeral, and you inherited something, but I thought it was like something small or whatever."

"Probably right. Maybe I told Donna about it and not you." I sigh heavily, trying to shake off the confusion. "My life has been turned inside out since going to Wisconsin." Sighing, I hold on to the hot mug. "Yeah, so the property has natural resources which will gain me more in the long run if I hold on to it."

"Shit! That's cool. Does that mean you're a rich bitch now?"

Twisting my mouth, I grin, nodding my head, but shrugging humbly. "Kinda!" We huddle together and clink mugs. Ah, this feels so wholesome. Relaxing, I take a small sip enjoying the rich drink, glad she didn't offer me a gin and tonic like she normally would if we were going out together.

"That's too amazing for words."

"Yeah, well I've quit law school. Just for this semester until I figure out what to do?"

Cindy frowns. "Where does Dimitri come into all of this?"

"We met because of Raven's Peak and came to an agreement because he knows what to do with the resources on the property and I don't. And I guess we've been spending a lot of time together lately...." I smirk, not giving her all the sordid details. "And I thought it would just be business."

Cindy shakes her head before sipping her cocoa. “You did a lot more than spend time. I can tell. You’ve been bumping and grinding.”

“Cindy! You are so extra.”

“Yes, but that’s why you love and miss me. So, what’s the problem? Sounds like a good deal to me.”

“I don’t know, Cindy. I feel like it’s not the right thing to do. Things are moving so fast, and I can barely keep my feet on the ground. I’m going to all these social events, mingling with all these high-powered, filthy-rich people and I don’t really fit in their world. It’s crazy.”

“Are you sure you need to fit? Just enjoy it!”

Sighing, I stare at the floating marshmallow in the cocoa, ruminating on it. “Maybe I want to be accepted. I think Dimitri and I are headed in the right direction, but I don’t know where I stand with him.” Pausing for a second, I think about whether I should say it out loud. If I do tell her about what I suspect, that means I have to deal with it being out in the open.

“Hey. I get it,” Cindy soothes, tucking her legs in under her on the couch. “We all want to fit in some kind of way, but standing out amongst a bunch of fake rich people might be the reason Dimitri fancies you in the first place. And by the way, how come I don’t have pictures?” Cindy scolds playfully. “You know I need a visual.”

Smirking, I recall that Dimitri tapped my phone at the start, and the fact he might still be doing it, even though he told me he wasn’t. I don’t want to risk sending photos of him through in case he becomes suss about it. He already has jealous tendencies, so it wouldn’t take much to tip him off. “He’s picking me up in the morning, so you’ll be able to see him then if you want.”

“Okay good, but I’ve never seen you so worried about a guy. But hey, granted this isn’t just any guy, he’s a business partner and other things, but is there anything else?”

I crane my neck back wanting so badly to tell her about the test I took, but I’m not ready to admit the truth to myself, so I tell her a lie. “No. I think that’s enough. Anyway, how about you? What’s going on?”

Cindy scrunches up her nose sniffing, and it’s good to have the attention on her and not me for a while. “Umm, same old, same old for me. Nothing new. Just school and crap, trying to make ends meet. It’s a fucking jungle in Chicago.”

“I’m sorry. When the money starts coming from our ventures together, I can help you out if you need,” I tell her, not wanting Cindy to suffer, my sympathies going out to her, as it wasn’t that long ago, that I was on the same struggle bus with her.

“Naw, you’re sweet, bestie. Drink up.” She smiles at me as I hug the cup, sniffing the cocoa.

“Your cocoas have always been like a warm hug to me, tonight this one tastes extra special.”

Cindy laughs laying her head on my shoulder. “Probably because you’ve been missing it and haven’t had it in a while.”

“You’re right,” I yawn, feeling super drowsy and wanting to sleep. All the worrying over my potential pregnancy is running pointless circles around in my head. “I think I might be coming down with something or whatever. My head’s doing a funny spinning thing,” I tell her, my brain whooshing around.

“Hey, friend. It’s probably all the events and stuff. We should turn in for the night.

We can talk some more in the morning over breakfast.” Yawning, and seeing double, I blink, my eyes getting droopy.

“Shit. You’re right. Let’s turn in.”

We walk down the hall, and I head to the spare bedroom I’ve always stayed in bringing my duffel bag with me. I change into my pajamas and slide under the covers, and as soon as my head hits the pillow, I’m in dreamland.

Prying my eyes open, I notice my head still feels a little furry, and I could do with a few more hours rest, but I want to get up before Dimitri arrives, so I spend the maximum amount of time with Cindy. We’ve been disconnected for a bit, and once I head back to Dimitri’s mansion knowing the information I’m sitting on, I might not see her for a while. I shower first, feeling more human once I’m done and heading into the kitchen.

The smell of eggs and bacon waft through the air making my mouth water as I sit at the table. “Great! You’re up. Did you shower?” Cindy chirps. She’s always loved to cook, but normally we would take turns when we stayed at each other’s houses.

“Yes. I’m a little sleepy still, but much better than last night. I don’t get what came over me.”

Cindy smiles handing me my plate and it’s loaded up with everything I like. “It’s probably just all the stuff like I said.”

“Yep.” We small talk, and I mull over telling Cindy about the impending pregnancy, but a nagging voice tells me to keep it to myself until I’m sure of what Dimitri and I are.

A beep sounds outside right after we finish eating. “Shit! Is it nine already?”

Surprised at how quickly time has gone, I'm already missing my best friend in the world.

"Yeah, it is," she says slowly, pulling the curtain back to take a peek. Dimitri waves as Cindy swivels in her Ugg boots.

"What the hell? That guy—"

"What?" I chuckle at her floored reaction. "Close your mouth. You'll catch all sorts of bugs in it."

"Fuck the bugs. I'm jealous. That's him? He's so hot! I am burning up here. I just know you're having all kinds of sex with that man. I know I would be."

"Cindy! Be quiet." I shhh her as Dimitri gets out of the black SUV, waiting in front of it.

He's so impatient. Why didn't he give me more time with her?

Annoyed by him being on time, I hug my friend and profusely apologize for not seeing her sooner, then promise to keep in touch. "Bye. Take care of you. Love you, Cindy." Waving, she pokes out her bottom lip, still in her pajamas.

"Love you too. Have fun with your man." Her smile is sad as she says it, making me not want to leave. I should have told her. I need to tell somebody.

Once I reach Dimitri, he kisses me solidly on the lips. "Hi. Good morning."

"Good morning." Fuck. I have to tell him. Is now the right time? Maybe I should wait until we get home or whatever.

As the ignition starts and we pull off from the curb, Dimitri starts the conversation. “I missed you last night, but I’m glad you spent time with your friend. What did you chat about?” he asks out of curiosity, but I know he’s fishing to see if I spoke about him.

“You.”

“Me?”

“Dimitri, don’t act surprised. That’s what you wanted to hear, isn’t it?”

He grins, turning left onto the main road, waiting for a beat to rub my thigh. “Maybe.” He winks. “No, but really, what did you get up to?”

“We talked generally, nothing too special. It was just good to see her after so long. Cindy and I don’t need to talk so much; we can just be together and it’s nice to have her friendship. We’ve known each other for so long. She was telling me about school for her, and things in her life.”

“Oh. Well, that’s good. I always wondered what girls do at these slumber party things. I don’t stay over at my friend’s house unless we’ve been out drinking the night before. That’s all.”

Rolling my eyes, I chuckle, but my mind’s not completely in the conversation. “Typical, but no, just good conversation with a normal person. I’ve met so many of your abnormal associates lately that it was just nice to relax.”

Dimitri nods his head but doesn’t resist what I’m saying. “Glad to hear it, and good to see you this morning. I feel better.”

I can’t tell him now. What if I tell him and he wants to distance himself because he’s

about to be a father now? I'll keep it to myself for now.

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:11 pm

Our usual morning banter is lacking, and I've been worried about Ava. "Do you need to see the doctor again?" I ask gently as Ava pokes around her eggs, not eating much.

"No. I'm fine. Taking my time to eat, that's all." But she's a bad liar, I've discovered. Something's wrong, but she's not telling me. The last few nights she's tossed and turned in the bed next to me and gotten up in the night more than usual. When I ask her a question, sometimes her answers have been edgy. I let it be for a second, taking a quick call, wanting her to feel comfortable enough to tell me herself.

Coming back to the table, I watch as her fingers miss wrapping around her orange juice, the tumbler falling off the table to the floor. I step back in reaction avoiding the shards of glass.

"Shit! Sorry, sorry, I didn't mean it." Her brown eyes reach mine, and there's a barrier of fear in them. Silently, I smile at her, calling the housekeeper to sweep it up.

"Can you bring Ava a new glass of juice as well? Thank you." I wait until she leaves to speak to her, seeking out her hands and clasping mine into hers.

"Hey. It's not a big deal. I can get more glasses, but I can tell you one thing, Ms. Knight."

"What's that?" Anxiety rides the crest of her voice as my brow ripples into a frown.

"That you're lying to me about nothing being wrong," I say with as much tenderness as I can. "You can tell me anything, Ava. I hope you know that. No matter what it is. I guarantee you; it can't be as bad as anything I've ever done."

Ava smiles weakly as the housekeeper arrives back with a jug of fresh juice, Ava's half-eaten eggs on her plate. Ordinarily, she would devour them and ask for seconds, but not this morning, and I can't help but think her being at her girlfriend's place has something to do with it because ever since I picked her up, I've felt a distance from her that I didn't before.

Ava's hands slide back as she pours more juice, taking a sip, before staring hard at me, her unmade-up face the best thing for me to look at with my morning coffee.

"Can I ask you a serious question, Dimitri?"

I scoot my chair closer to hers, happy she's about to speak her mind. "Yes. What is it?"

Her eyes well with tears, confusing me. "What am I to you?"

Fuck. I didn't see this coming. Raking a hand through my hair, I don't want to back down from the question and tell her the truth. Even if it's not what she wants to hear. I take my time before I speak, because for once in my life, I don't want to hurt a woman's feelings, especially not Ava's. They're very important to me.

"We don't have a label, so that's a fair question...." I trail off but smile back at her. I've never wanted a woman more than I have Ava. From the time I chased her down in the woods on her own property to keeping her trapped here. I wanted to win her heart over, I guess, but now from the tears in her eyes, I might be unconsciously breaking it.

Taking her hands in mine, I kiss the back of her palm. "I'll tell you something. All I know is you're mine. In every way that counts."

Ava sniffs as I wipe the lone tear sliding down her cheek. "Are you mine, Dimitri, in

every way?”

For the first time in my life, there’s a warmth spreading in my chest, and it’s the best feeling, and one I don’t want to ever leave. It’s not the feeling of belonging to a certain place, like being displaced from Chicago and having to start over in New York but belonging to a person. Someone who wants to be with me as much as I want to be with them.

“Ava. I’m yours.” I stare at her fingers, pressing the pads of them, finding myself in foreign territory.

“You really mean that?” she asks with a choked-up sob, sniffing as I break into a grin.

“You can’t tell I’m smitten with you?”

Ava shrugs, but the anxiety coded on her face appears to be dissolving. “I wanted to hear you say it, that’s all. You are showing it, but I’m new to this world of yours. It’s so different, all of it, and you have so many beautiful women vying for your attention.”

Shaking my head, I throw her notions out the window, leaning in to kiss her lips.

“No. I don’t care if they want my attention or not. I want to be with you because you’re real, Ava. You’re not like them. You’re not jaded about life, and you’re smart, sexy, fun, all these things,” I compliment, wanting to make her happy. If I could give her the world I would. And if there’s ever a man who could, I’m probably as close to it as possible.

“Thank you for not laughing in my face about it. I was scared to ask,” she admits, folding her lip inside her mouth, sending sparks of desire lighting up inside me, but

this isn't the moment for those. I wish I could show her what I feel, so I do the next best thing, taking her hand and holding it to my chest so she can feel the beat of it.

"Feel that?" I whisper as she smiles for a second, then lays her head near my beating heart.

"Yes." Taking the opportunity, I kiss into her hair, closing my eyes as I inhale her shampoo.

"My heart's pounding that hard for you, Ms. Knight." I take a beat as she raises her head, calm returning to the table. "In the beginning I didn't give a damn. I wanted Raven's Peak so I could redeem myself. I thought of you as a nice bonus, but not anymore," I confess.

"What about how you feel now?" she asks softly.

"You're as important, if not more than Raven's Peak. I want you in my life for the long haul. I don't care what any of my associates say, and if you ever have anything you want to tell me, then don't be afraid. I won't listen to many, but I will to you." I'm probably revealing too much, but that's the magic of Ms. Knight. The young beauty has woven a spell on me, and I don't want it to be broken. Ever.

"I think I'm convinced." Her face transforms, back to its tranquil state.

"I'm glad you asked me. I'm not the best with the feeling stuff. I'm Bratva. We don't do feelings. We do business."

Ava caresses the back of my neck as I lean back into it. "I don't think so. You did well just then."

"Ava...." I trail off, letting my mouth reach hers and telling her what I want to say

without words, slipping my tongue in to greet hers, our mouths melding in harmony. God. I could sink into her and never want to come out. My hands tousle through her hair, our kiss deepening until we both have to part to take air.

She looks at me in earnest. “I have to tell you something.”

The rude awakening of a phone call captures my attention. “Hold that thought, Ava. I have to take this.”

I answer the call, Viktor, on the other end of the line. “Boss, you need to come down to the office ASAP. I’ve got information you’re going to want to deal with right away.”

Not questioning Viktor, my jaw tightens. There’s always something to deal with. This is my life, always.”

“Okay, give me twenty minutes to get there. Do I need to be there quicker than that?” I ask, wanting a gauge on how urgent the situation is.

“No, you get here when you get here, but it is urgent, and you’re going to want to nip it in the bud as soon as possible.” Sighing, but puzzled by Viktor’s cryptic message, I steady my resolve.

“Okay. I’ll meet you at the office shortly.”

“Good.” I hang up from him, but the one person I don’t want to leave hanging is Ava.

“Hey, something important has come up at the office, but when I get back, we can continue this conversation.” I read the disappointment on her face, but she smiles anyway.

“I know you have to go. I’ll wait for you to get back then. Be safe.”

Kissing the top of her head, I make tracks to the door, but what I’d rather do is spend the day making love to Ava and convincing her how much I care about her. Maybe it’s too early to call it love, but maybe I’m in so deep already that it’s beyond words for me.

Page 17

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:11 pm

Biting what's left of my nails, I pace the kitchen floor, and sometimes drive myself batty by walking in small semicircles. I'm going to tell him when he gets back. I have to, because it's eating me up inside, and that can't be good for the baby.

"He wants to be with me, he said so himself. I don't have to worry about it anymore," I convince myself out loud, but where is he? And what is taking so long for him to get back?

Already, it's been two hours too long. My phone pinging jump-starts my heart, which is already on a cliff's edge. Scraping up my phone from the expensive marble kitchen benchtop, the housekeeper stares at me with curious interest.

She probably thinks I'm crazy, and in this moment, that's what all this feels like.

An assortment of pictures flood in from an unknown number, via a link. Squinting, I hit the first link opening to a picture of me with my mouth slackened open, my eyes closed with a blanket up to the top of my body. My heart freezes up as I stare in horror at my phone, a strange man in bed under the covers with me, kissing the side of my face, and it's obvious I don't have a top on, because the blanket is low enough to show my bare skin. Dimitri has tattoos. It's not him. Deliriously, my brain caves in thinking back to the night and how it could have happened. This man doesn't have tattoos. I check the photo again, my eyes welling with water. Nausea swirls through me as I keep staring at the horror show. This time the guy's making a lewd face, his leg covered over mine.

And the reel keeps on going as another picture comes in. I hit the link again, unable to believe what I'm seeing. "No, no, no," I let out in hushed disgrace the next link

with the blanket a little lower, the outline of my areola on display. Dry heaving, I check one more time wanting it not to be real. Was it Photoshopped? Did they Photoshop my top half?

No . They couldn't have. It looked too real. The real size of my chest. No. She wouldn't do that to me. Not my best friend. Why would she? Fuck. How? There's too much to process. In a panic I run out of the room to the bedroom bathroom vomiting up my breakfast and sobbing into the mirror as I rinse out my mouth.

Please don't let it be true. Through dizziness and a dry mouth, I squint in the mirror attempting to make sense of the links. What's really going on right now? Washing the cool water over my face again, the panic stations inside me drive upwards as I race back out retrieving my phone and bullying myself to look at the photos once more. Yes. It's me . Somebody took my top off. I was fully clothed in silk pajamas when I went to bed. Sickened by the photos, I check again, taking note of the necklace around my neck. The expensive one Dimitri brought me.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

My eyes are red-rimmed and swollen, and now I can't wait for him to get home. I want to tell him myself before he sees the photos. To want to be the one to show him and let him know it wasn't me and I had nothing to do with it. I'd been drugged or something. I want to throw up again as I hold on to the porcelain sink. I'd been drugged. Fuck. The painful realization hits as I remember the funny taste of the cocoa thinking Cindy had tampered with the recipe.

My best friend of thirteen years. Shaking my head, I feel my throat close over. Why would she do this to me? I love her—loved her, past tense.

Rifling a hand through my hair, I touch my stomach glad enough I didn't tell her about the baby. My gut instincts had been right. The same beverage we happily

shared on bone-chilling Chicago nights as we talked about our hopes and dreams of making there.

Sick to my stomach, I stay hidden in Dimitri's room, not wanting the staff to see what a distraught mess I am. I draw up Dimitri's number wanting to call him, but I think better of it, just wanting to see his face, so I can explain everything. Even if I don't know what I'm explaining.

A painstaking half hour later, a dark shadow eclipses the door of the bedroom as Dimitri enters, his energy hostile and stormy. He throws his keys on the bedroom dresser, his icy blue eyes glaring at me in disgust. His collared shirt is rolled up at the sleeves, showing off the river of veins in his arms, his fists balled up, his mouth twisted in silent rage.

"Hi," I gush, standing up and rushing towards him. He forcibly shoves my hand down from his chest, the ice from his eyes cutting me.

"Don't. Touch. Me."

"Dimitri..." I trail off, thinking of the best way to explain everything. He's seen them. He must have, otherwise he wouldn't so be nasty towards me.

"Don't say my name out loud. I saw the fucking pictures, Ava."

"Dimitri," I shout, but my voice comes out all mixed up and garbled. "I can explain."

Dimitri scoffs, raking a hand through his hair, skimming his hand over the dresser drawer, shoving folded clothes off it onto the floor. He's so angry, and I hate to know what he's going to do next.

"I bet you can explain," he spits. "Go right ahead, explain to me how you slept with

some random. Is this what you do, Ava? Sweet, sweet wholesome Ava?"

"Dimitri?" I plead with him in anguish. "You can't believe those photos. I didn't do this ! All I did was drink cocoa on the couch. I felt funny. My head was fuzzy, but I thought it was the other thing," I say, touching my raging hot forehead, my upper lip beaded with sweat.

"What other thing? Oh, you mean the dick in your face? No wonder you wanted to get away so badly, huh?" Dimitri spits out, his attack stabbing me like a deep knife. How can he think I could do this to him?

"Dimitri. Please! " I shriek, but he won't look me in the eye.

"Come out of my room, Ava, because your little friend isn't willing to corroborate your bullshit story." Dimitri's shoulders slump as he freezes me out, swinging the door open as I walk behind him, shuffling along. It's only getting worse because she's here. In the fucking house.

" You stupid bitch !" I cry out as Cindy shifts the sleeves of her windbreaker down over her hands, a sheepish look on her face. Her black hair matches her soul, and I'm not angry, just sad—too sad that she would stoop so low.

"No, Ava. You should tell him the truth." She shrugs her shoulders blatantly putting on an Oscar-worthy performance in front of Dimitri. He must have cleared the kitchen because there's nobody else in it, but us.

"What truth? That you drugged me!" I yell as Cindy shakes her head in pity at me.

"Ava. That's such a lie and you know it. Your eyes were open. It's okay," she expresses, Dimitri buying her suitcase of lies a little too quickly, and it's hurting my heart.

If you only knew what I'm carrying. Us. Part of each of us . "What the fuck happened?" Dimitri blasts Cindy as her shoulders curve in.

"Ava invited a guy over. I don't know who the fuck he was, but he stayed the night, ya know, after they like— did it. In my bed . "

"No! You're lying," I hiss, barely able to breathe, Dimitri looking at me as if I'm worse than the scum on the bottom of his shoe.

"That's all I know," Cindy protests, pretending to be scared, backing off with her hands up. "I told you everything I witnessed, please don't hurt the messenger. Sometimes Ava and I do drugs together, and maybe things go a little out of hand, ya know?" Cindy launches deeper into the made-up story, justifying drugging me, and now it's her word against mine, but in reality, mine should stand up.

But Dimitri's feet are frozen in place, his jaw wound so tight, he's scaring me. We just went from confessing our feelings to this. Like everything else, it's happening too fast, and the room's moving too fast as well. The stress is going to do me in. Hanging on to the chair, Dimitri speaks to me as if I'm a stranger.

"I knew you were too good to be true. Petrov, fucking get her slut friend out of here." Petrov swoops in from the other room nearby, surprising me by his close proximity.

He grabs Cindy around the elbow, shoveling her out the door just as memory flashes of Dimitri's mother come back to me.

"Leave him alone or I will do it myself." Ekaterina. This was all her doing. She wanted me out, and she got me out. Emotions are running sky high, but I don't have nearly enough strength to be able to defend myself, but I do my best anyway as a stony-faced Dimitri stands propped up next to the kitchen island.

“Dimitri, don’t you trust me?” Opening my palms, I beg him as he crosses his arms over his chest.

“Trust you?” His eyes glower, bitterness riding on the crest of his voice. “There’s nothing to trust, Ava. The pictures are all the evidence I need, and they speak for themselves. What’s fucking left to say?”

Choking up in sobs, I shake my head, begging with him, too caught up in emotion to get my words to come out straight. “No, you can’t—can’t believe her. I wouldn’t sleep with someone else. Only you!”

“Ava. You’re naked under the covers and it’s not digitally altered. I had the photo cleared and checked. It’s fucking time stamped. You must think I’m fucking stupid.” His face changes, and it’s so frightening I move back a couple of steps. “At the same time, you were there at Cindy’s house. I brought her here, so you had a chance to clear your name.” He thrusts a nearby chair over in rage, the resounding thud making me jump.

“But it’s not true! The cocoa! She—she....” As I choke on my own words, Dimitri leaves the room, returning with a thick stack of documents and colored tabs, dropping it on the table.

“I need you to sign these documents. Do it now, Ava. No stalling.”

I’m done in, a dark haze of sadness covering me. I don’t want to contest anything, but I’ve already read over it with a fine-toothed comb anyway. I know what I’m agreeing to, but now I can’t have the rest.

Shakily, I sniffle, a tear plopping onto the document. I sign it, but as I do, I can’t help but think I’m signing away any hope of ever being with Dimitri ever again right along with it.

“Good.” Dimitri signs as I sign a second copy with him handing it to me. Alarmed by what he does next, he reins me in, his anger palpable. “Now, I suggest you go someplace far fucking away. If I see your face again, I won’t show mercy. Do you understand, Ms. Knight?” he grits out, my heart broken.

“Yeah, I understand,” I tell him sadly.

“Now. I want you to get the fuck out of my house. For fucking ever.” He points to the door, my world cracking apart as I walk out with just my cell phone. There’s no point trying to collect my stuff, and I don’t want to.

Ironically, I was the one who wanted to escape at first, and now I’ve been kicked out, pregnant, betrayed, emotionally wrecked.

Raven’s Peak has officially ruined my life. Go me.

Four years on...

A light melodic tone filters through the ballroom speakers, as I survey the room. It's packed with Chicago's high-society types, darkness covered in fancy suits, and women playing dress-up, concealing and buying into their secrets. And per every square inch of table, there's the bare minimum of a millionaire sitting at it. Another glitzy charity event to increase my profile and power. There's enough media personnel to have me on the socialite pages, and I'm in the right room for business.

A petite, manicured hand with a fat diamond ring on it, lands on top of mine, clinging on. Staring down at it, an instantaneous feeling to pull away from it follows, but I play the game smiling without feeling as I stare at Cara, my fiancée, pretending that we're in love, when we're anything but.

My mother got her wish, and these days she gets whatever she wants because she's the one my mother choose for me, and in the end, she'd been right.

If I think hard enough about how Ava betrayed me, the ache in my heart intensifies. So, I don't let her enter. I keep the door closed most of the time, the door blocked with a boulder, but every now and then the ghost of Ava sneaks up on me, drifting into my thoughts and making me think about what could have been.

Cara's the right pedigree of woman for my endeavors, and she is what I deserve. And it's already proving to be a partnership that's bearing fruit, her billionaire father introducing me to the right connections for Raven's Peak and adjacent ventures. The ink has dried on some of the contracts, but still, I feel nothing for the woman who occupies my bed every night.

“You made the right decision, son. You can’t let a little fling stand in the way of what our family is destined for. You’ve worked too hard to make a comeback. We’ve been the dark horses for too long, and it’s our time to take our spot in the Bratva ranks.”

My mother made the speech at our next family dinner. The one where she innocently inquired about what happened to Ava, but she’s just a distant fog, and only Raven’s Peak exists in her wake. I haven’t asked my associates where she went after she left that final day, and I don’t care to know, but I could find her location if I really wanted to.

“You look miles away, Dimitri. What are you thinking about?” Cara politely chuckles, her aquiline nose perfectly powdered, along with her immaculate polished features and turquoise-colored nails matching her off-the-shoulder ball gown.

She always knows what to wear at all times and how to greet high society members. She has a closet full of clothes that most women would die for and not a blonde hair is out of place. She resembles a Russian doll and couldn’t look more perfect on my arm. We even have matching hair color and eyes, and together we make a formidable couple.

“Nothing,” I lie. “Having a good night?” I ask, trying to find any reason to love her, and there’s plenty of reasons. She’s not unsatisfying in bed, and seems to be open to my every whim, but we don’t have chemistry, only a fake promise to make each other more money.

“I am. I think there’s a jazz ensemble about to play soon. Maybe we can dance a little,” Cara suggests, her blue eyes sparkling.

“Hmm, maybe.” I turn her hand over squeezing it for a second, but wishing it were someone else I was here with. No. Don’t think about the betrayer.

Disappointment rides over Cara's face, but I have no problem letting her down. She's merely a placeholder to me. And if it's supposed to work out, then we will have two perfect children and live in our mansion together all our days.

"Did you see your brother is here. Looks like he found a date for the night. I met her, and she seems nice."

"Oh, you did?" I small talk with her, the haunting face of Ava flashing in my mind. Ryurik and her got along well, and he seemed just as smitten by her as was I, but it's all just a bad dream.

"Yes! I spoke to him on the way to the bathroom earlier. Maybe he'll bring her to the family dinner." Scoffing at Cara's delusion, I shake my head.

"No. He won't bring her. It's likely she's been paid to attend the event, knowing my little brother," I whisper hoarsely. Cara doesn't flinch at all; she understands it.

"Yes. That might be true. Ruslan's here as well, I saw him talking to Dane." I stare at Cara for a moment. Nothing seems to get past her if she's at an event. Her ability to reel off every name in the room is why I like to bring her to these events. That and given the fact she's my fiancée.

"Ah. Of course, they're business partners. Makes sense," I tell her, distracted by the other men at the table, making small talk about business, but a thud hits my heart with a song change as "Pillars of You" by Ava's favorite songwriter and singer drifts through the speakers, the strum of a guitar starting the song. An assembly of old thoughts cascade in through the door I've got locked, the light shining in.

She would dance around the house to the song, singing out of tune, but I loved her voice. Everything about its distinct blend sounded like pure harmonics to me. Ava's ghost is still haunting me, and I don't know if I'll ever get rid of it completely. It's the

price I have to pay for entertaining her in the first place. I wanted to believe her when she told me, but what I saw... it was too much, and couldn't be denied. But I have the secret still. Cara has no idea, and she never will. She's not the type to snoop, she plays her role very well.

I held on to a keepsake of Ava that day. A scarf she left behind. A forest-green one stowed deep in the back of my closet with the scent soaked through its fibers. In the beginning, I would sniff it in torture, wanting Ava back, but I sat for nights on end privately reviewing the links, but I had to drag myself out of the sunken hole and send the links to archives. I didn't want to risk opening them accidentally and reliving the nightmare.

Our arrangement stood for Raven's Peak. I didn't go back on my word. Ava will receive a percentage as operations get underway, and we are almost there, clearing the way for mining permits and other bullshit had been a problem until they realized who I was. Mysteriously, all the permits required began to come through very quickly.

Sentimental feelings are what made me lose my head in the first place, and for a moment I got lost in them. I blink, removing the glaze of nostalgia from my eyes, clearing my throat.

"Are you okay?" Cara comforts as I stare at her coldly, because in reality she could never replace Ava, but she does try.

"I'm fine. Nothing to worry about," I reply, not caring if I've convinced her or not. "Look, the entrée is on the way." I redirect Cara to the food arriving, and to my relief the song gently fades away. It's five-star quality as usual, and the company at the table is respectable, and I know every man at the table inside and out. Most of them are stuffy rich people with hidden—sometimes open motives. They're wrapped up in their own worlds of politics, deceit, money, and private trivial dramas, and the one

person who gave me enough strength to stomach it was Ava.

With her sweet candor and innocent view of the world, she somehow was able to help me coax enjoyment out of these events.

“Why is caviar such a delicacy? Isn’t it just fish eggs?”

Amused, attending a business expo event together, I’d laughed, but other associates had given Ava a dressing down for not knowing what it was.

“Yes. It’s a delicacy, because it’s rare. Like you.” I kissed the place behind her ear, finding out it was a spot that got her hot, knowing she would be squirming at the table until we got home that night.

“I do like it, it’s different, but it’s not as filling as a hot pastrami sandwich near Broadway.”

“No. It’s not.” And it was those types of statements that reminded me of a real, normal life in Chicago. She wasn’t from the sheltered high-flying life that I lived, and that’s why she was refreshing to be around. She gave me the opportunity to see life with color. I stand up for a minute wanting to stretch my legs and to get a grip on my mind.

Other men at the table have the same idea after the entrée, taking the opportunity to mingle with other guests at the neighboring tables. Cara stands with me, her eyes longingly wanting to connect with mine, but Ava stole that romantic part of me, and I don’t necessarily want it back. My answer is a cool smile as she slides her hand around my waist. I stare at her for a moment, wondering how long she’s been brainwashed into acting in certain ways in order to have what she wants.

Not Ava. She had principles that she was willing to fight for. Or that’s what she had

me believe in the beginning, and she wasn't afraid to fight me over things. Cara only ever agreed with my plans. "If that's what you think is best," is always her response, and I'm sick to death of it.

Ava. Ava. Ava. Apparently, I wasn't enough for her, and she wanted more than I could give. I slide Cara's arm out from around my waist as she lays her head on my shoulder. She's getting too close, and that's not something I'm going to allow.

"Honestly, sometimes, I don't know what you want," Cara says in a quiet voice, but I remain stoic. Silent.

Taking a seat again, Cara's ashen face reveals a flash of sadness, but she has her own personal motivation for her jewelry and accessories line, wanting me to bolster it through my connections to the Chicago media outlets. Her father might know them, but he doesn't have the same relationship with them as I do. Marrying me is merely a beneficial power play, and one her father is aware of. If she ever wants the relationship to end, all she has to do is say the word. I don't give a fuck.

The main course arrives as the event begins, the founder arriving on stage as they explain the auction process and bring out the board to keep a tally of the profits being raised. I know for a fact all the profits aren't going to where they say they are. A third of them are being skimmed by the Bratva and coming right back into our pockets. Hence, why I donate a large amount only to receive it back double. It has the added benefit of giving me a "good name" in philanthropy circles, as well as the access to who I can corrupt and do business with in the future.

It's the way of the Bratva. During the main course any thoughts of Ava thin out, and Viktor, who's seated to the left of me whispers in my ear.

"Don't forget we have an early flight out to L.A. tomorrow."

“Ah, I forgot; I’ve been buried under paperwork at my desk lately.”

“Yes. I know, because I’m the one doing the burying,” he quips, cocking an eyebrow at me. Smirking, I clap him on the back.

“That’s right. I hate you. Remind me to deduct it from your wages,” I say to him sarcastically, noting Cara’s found somebody else at the table to engage with. Good. It takes the pressure off me entertaining her.

“I’m going to need a raise after our meeting tomorrow with Anatoly Petrov. He’s going to be a huge credit to our business, you understand, right?”

“I do indeed. Petrov Energy could be another solid investment for Raven’s Peak. I trust Anatoly enough to consider giving him a stake in the property. Especially if he can do what he claims he can.”

“Yes. And that’s the part we want to confirm. Can he do what he claims? Interesting enough, right?” Viktor proposes.

“Yes. L.A. here we come.”

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:11 pm

“That’s it. One more arm to go and then you can eat breakfast.” I don’t know why I brushed Ethan’s hair given I’m just going to pull the Sonic the Hedgehog windbreaker over his head, only to have to recomb it, but I’ve got one sole objective for the morning and that’s getting Ethan to sit up at the table and eat.

“ Mommy. Stay. Mommy! I want to go to the park,” Ethan moans as I smile at the growing boy, his legs strong and sturdy, his perfect face stuck in a manipulative pout. He’s the spitting image of Dimitri with sprinkles of me included. He’s got the same penetrating eyes as Dimitri, his cheekbones, and my nose and lips. His physical body is all Dimitri, and it’s obvious, he’s going to be tall. He’s already above average height for his age, and if he keeps on growing, I’m going to need a bigger apartment for him to run around in. The kid has too much energy, and I can’t keep up.

“Hey,” I tell him as I hit the mark, sliding the windbreaker down, his sandy blond mohawk flattening some. I spike it back up, kissing the boy’s head. “You can go to the park today with Emily.”

Emily has been a godsend in my life and since I’ve moved to L.A. I don’t know what I would do without her. The pace of life here is frenetic, and L.A. traffic is disgusting, but it’s home for us. For now. “Emily! She’s coming today?”

“Yep. She is. Right after you eat breakfast. She told me earlier that if you didn’t eat all the food on your plate that she wouldn’t come.”

“ No! I’m going to eat it. I promise I will.” Ethan’s the best boy, and he’s kept me focused and on track. I finished my degree with flying colors, determined to not let anything stand in my way. Tears prick in my eyes as I lay awake at night thinking

about how hard it was when I first arrived here. I had no friends in the city. No knowledge of how to get around the city and worse, Dimitri had no clue he had a son, but I managed, and finally I'm starting to find my feet in this crazy city.

Slowly, and painfully, I pulled myself together, transferring to UCLA Law School with my credits. If anything, the law kept me alive emotionally and mentally.

"You're such a good boy. Do you know that?" Kissing into his hair, I stop as Ethan twiddles in his hair ruining all my handiwork.

"Ethan, I just did your hair! Why would you do that?" I wail, but all he does is turn around and grin sheepishly at me, continuing to grab handfuls of his hair and twisting it into spiky horns. "Come on, now you're just being silly. I need you up at the table, eating!"

With my hands on my hips, I feel worn out already as Ethan does a complimentary lap around the couch, his hair sticking up. "I'm like Sonic! Zoom! Zoom!" I wait for him to stop, but I can't help but break into a smile because this kid is insane. In the best possible way, but as I look at the time ticking away, I think Emily might have a better chance of feeding him than me.

It's a miracle I got the job I have, Thompson and Associates are well known for grooming young lawyers, especially when they're fresh out of grad school. I'm getting a front row seat to one of the best commercial litigation law firms in the country. Needless to say, it's L.A., and there's more than enough work on the table.

Ethan tires out and I take the fleeting opportunity to calm down, resmooth his hair and set him up at the table so he can eat the scrambled eggs and spinach I have for him. That's the only thing he'll eat without playing around with it. I sit next to him eating mine, making sure he puts at least a mouthful in, and true to his word, I watch the fluffy yellow eggs make it into his mouth.

“Thank you. You have to eat something because you’re growing every day.” Ethan makes a series of noises, settling into eating his food.

The doorbell rings as I keep one eye on Ethan and another on the door. Peering into the camera, a smiling face stares back at me. “Hey, it’s me, Emily.”

“One sec!” I hit the button to open the door and a few seconds later, Emily is at it. Letting her in, I feel the relief sink into my skin. “Good morning. You’ve come right on time. Ethan’s finally eating.”

A gleeful laugh comes from Emily as she steps inside, letting down her backpack. “Oh, that’s progress. You look great. Ready to kill them in the office?”

Chuckling, I shake my head. “I wouldn’t go that far. More like a bunch of phone conversations and a stack of paperwork to go through wielding my highlighter.” The details are important in my profession, especially when it comes to legal documents, and it’s my specialty. My killer instinct has never subsided. I got lucky with Emily, bonding with her in classes and because she has a more flexible schedule than mine, she’s able to help me out with Ethan.

“You’re downplaying it. Remember that case scenario for Plumpton Merino? You nailed that case and blew the professor away with the details. That’s what you’re good at. Finding a needle in a haystack.”

“You’re right. I am good at that.” We high-five each other, laughing together, Ethan wanting to join in, putting up his hand, but not understanding. Emily and I both high-five him softly as I curl his hand around mine kissing him.

“You are so cute, even though you run Mommy ragged.”

“He-he.” Ethan smacks his small fork into the plate as Emily sits down next to him.

“I’m early, but go, I can take over from here. Any special requests?”

“Ah no,” I tell her, locating my laptop bag on the couch and sliding in documents for a contested slip and fall I’m working on. “Oh, yeah! There is. Ethan wants to go to the park; You know the one, down near the cinema. I think it’s because he likes to see all the puppies and doggies there.”

“Ah. No sweat. I’m all over it. He told me last time he wants to go there too.”

I grab everything, smoothing down my A-line skirt, ready for action. “Okay, that’s great, then. Ethan, Mommy’s going to be back later. Okay?” Kissing the top of his head one more time, I wave goodbye to Emily, realizing Ethan’s probably picking up the bad habit of not eating everything from me. I barely ate any of my eggs either, but I’m good to do a coffee run, and there’s always plenty of food in the office.

Stopping by my new L.A. coffee shop, which is bright and light, with overhanging plants in every corner, I place my order. “Hi, can I get a cappuccino, extra strong and extra hot?”

“Sure, coming right up.” I slip to the side, relaxing and letting my eyes skim over the menu. They stop at cocoa, part of me seizing up. The same beverage that tore apart me and Ethan’s dad. There’s a space in my heart that’s broken and hasn’t ever been repaired. He didn’t believe me, and that’s what hurt me the most. My best friend sold herself out for a buck. I know Ekaterina would have paid her enough to warrant her decision. Cindy constantly complained about her money troubles and how her car kept breaking down all the time.

She wanted out of the poverty cycle like I did. The word cocoa blurs as I wait for my order, pressing down the layers of grave shame and incredible hurt. Work covers it up, but it’s in my son, and I can’t escape because every time I look at him, I see Dimitri. Us. What could have been if he gave me the chance to explain. He took the

time to bring Cindy to the house, but he didn't want to take the time to listen to me. To me, that means we never established the trust I thought we did.

"Ava!" the barista calls out, shaking me out of the fractured memory, but it's rocked me enough to bump into the person behind me.

"Sorry, so sorry." I hold up my hand, clutching on to my coffee and bagel, but it's lucky it's a nice person.

"No problem." Frazzled, I slow down a little, getting a handle on my heart rate and taking a sip of my coffee, checking my watch. Good. I've got time. Taking a breather, I walk into the multilevel building occupied by other businesses on other floors and press the elevator button to level five.

Working for Thompson and Associates is my dream come true, and I'm making a good enough salary where I've gotten off the struggle bus and now with healthy addition of Raven's Peak dividends. It might have been tough, but standing my ground in the early days with Dimitri has led to my son and I being able to afford L.A. comfortably enough. Popping out of the elevator, I sneak past the kitchen, soliciting a second cream cheese bagel with salmon and capers, heading to my office.

Mark Thompson, the man who hired me himself, bumps into my shoulder as he's talking to someone else on the run. "Shit! Ava, great, you're in early. I need to talk to you if I can for a quick minute." Surprised, but intrigued, I point towards my office, and he shuts the door sitting down. It's uncommon for first year associates like me to have their own office, but I do, and I'm forever grateful for it, but I'm one of the best in his firm, and Mark isn't a man to gloss over talent. He's a likable guy but turns into a total shark in the courtroom. He's fun to watch.

"I hate to ask you this, and I know you have a full plate, but I need you to take on a new client." He steeple his fingers in front of his mouth as my eyes widen.

“Mark, I would love to, but I’m stretched thin as it is. I don’t know if I’m going to be able to handle it.” With Mark it’s best to tell the truth. He treats his staff like gold, which is why he has one of the highest retention rates as a boss, and it’s most likely the secret sauce to all the cases the firm’s won.

“Hmm, I can take that Rover case off your hands. It’s small fry for you anyway. I gave it to you so you could get more runs on the board. Andy just got himself into a jet-skiing accident in Miami. I tell that guy to take a vacation for one week—one week, Ava, and he literally breaks a leg.”

Close to spitting out my coffee, I stare at Mark in alarm, but he’s not laughing. He’s funny without trying. “Shit. Damn. That’s an unlucky break.”

Mark nods. “Right. But not for us, because I need you to hit the ground running, taking on the Anatoly Petrov case on an urgent basis. You’re the only person in the office who specializes in mergers and acquisitions. And you’re damn good at it.”

“Okay. I haven’t heard the name, but I’ll dig and find out everything. “When am I making a move with this client,” I ask, and Mark winces as I switch on my computer.

“How about right now?”

Taken aback, I steal a breath. “You weren’t joking about when you said ‘hit the ground running,’ were you?”

“No—no, I was not. Anatoly has a business meeting with another renowned businessman, and he’s tough. We want to be there in the meeting to back him up and provide legal counsel and reassurance. Here’s the case file.” Frowning, I carefully take the file from Mark’s hands as he stands up, pulling the lapels of his suit jacket together.

“Wow. Is there anything I should know about this?” I ask, a thick knot in my throat. I can walk in blind and fumble my way through, but I’d like enough time to prepare and feel at ease. If I’m dealing with a new client, I usually meet with them separately to feel out their situation and what their aim is so I can get them the best deal.

But not like this... blindfolded and walking in. “No. Only that I totally trust you with this, and I have another meeting to get to myself. Good luck, Ava. Anatoly’s in Boardroom A. Waiting.” He taps the glass as I nod, taking a couple of seconds to steady myself and glimpse over the file.

I pull out my mirror, reapply my lipstick, play around with my hair and walk into the boardroom. It doesn’t sound too bad. I’m just going to be providing legal counsel. Upon entry Anatoly stands, a tall handsome guy, with dark features and an amicable smile.

“Hi, Anatoly, I’m Ava Knight and I’ll be working with you going forward. Andy’s had an accident unfortunately, but rest assured you’re in good hands.”

“That’s good news. I’m going to need it.” Anatoly seems slightly agitated as I sit down.

“Any reason?” I ask politely as I open the case file but look at Anatoly as he sips his water, and I take a swig of my coffee.

“This deal is fairly important to me and could be quite lucrative. It involves a property, but it does need to be set up correctly for maximum benefit as the man I’m dealing with takes no prisoners. I do enjoy doing business with him, however. This is just for precautionary measures. He should be here soon.”

Frowning, I take a moment to look down at the case notes, my blood freezing and my jaw dropping when I read the name. Dimitri Utkin. Shit. I’m going to see Dimitri

face-to-face again. The man I cried over for nights on end. No, this can't be happening to me right now, but it is, and I need to face it and be as professional as possible. I blow out a slow breath but offer a polite smile to Anatoly.

“If I ever see your face again, I won't show mercy.”

I'm going to need more than mercy this time around, I'm going to need every ounce of strength I can muster.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:12 pm

Coming to L.A., like New York, is always a refreshing change, but nothing beats the Windy City. Chicago's where the Utkins first belong to forging their legacy, and I'm here to do my part and continue it on.

L.A. has a different energy to the hustle, bustle, and grit of Chicago. It's more laid-back, everyone is looking to "make it," and networking is the name of the game. There's plenty of young people wanting to rush it and make it big in Hollywood, and there's others in position looking to take advantage of this. There's the haves and the have-nots, but I'm not here for any of it. Only to sit down and meet with my friend Anatoly and discuss good business. I might be a shark, but if we've worked together and things are working well, then they will remain well.

Anatoly and I have been in business together for years. He knows I'm Bratva, and I've seen the prospectus for his energy company, and it has excellent returns, but not only for this year, but other years as well. If this energy company has a stake in Raven's Peak, it will give our already substantial returns a boost. There is enough lithium to expand with Petrov Energy, and given Anatoly's work in the tech space and Silicon Valley, this could work better than expected.

Viktor is with me as we take the ride over to Thompson and Associates, and I mull over the details. The deal does require extra advice, and Anatoly is smart at seeking the assistance of a law firm.

Business is business and in terms of documents being signed I, too, require one. "This should go well, eh? We can head out to Rival, that fancy new L.A. restaurant I heard about. What do you think?" I tell him, feeling relaxed and hopeful about what Anatoly has to offer.

Viktor drops his shades down on his face, giving me a nod. “Yes. I think that’s a good idea. Then we get some drinks.” He shakes his hips with a grin. “Then we go to the club, then we get some ass. Yeah, sounds good to me, Boss.”

I haven’t cheated on Cara, but I’ve harbored temptations in my mind since Ava warped it with her own deceitful betrayal, and the fact I’m numb inside about her isn’t helping either.

“I’ll think about it. Let’s see how this pans out,” I tell him as we enter the building. I don’t party as much as I used to, and that was before Ava, but even less after her, opting to sweat out my anger, hurt, and disappointment in the gym and kickboxing, but there’s a place none of it can fill, and I can live with it.

“Okay. It will be good to see Anatoly again.”

“Yeah, it will be.”

As the elevator ascends, we head to reception, directed to Boardroom A, but when I open the door, the trapdoor of pain opens, all of its demons flying out. One of them is in front of me, her voluptuous curves contained in a silk champagne-colored camisole and a tweed A-line skirt. Ava Knight has resurfaced, and I don’t like it one bit. I mask my surprise, stepping inside the room as she greets me coldly.

“Good morning Mr. Utkin. I was unaware you were bringing an associate with you, a business partner as well?” she adds smoothly, her full berry mouth just as tempting as ever.

“Yes, this is Viktor Brennov, he is my associate and will be joining me today. I let my eyes burn a hole in her as Anatoly stands up to greet us both with a hug and handshake, but her eyes don’t reciprocate. She avoids my gaze completely as Viktor leans over when we sit down.

“Are you going to be okay?”

“Of course I am,” I hiss in a low voice out of earshot from Anatoly. He might not have met Ava, but she was floating around at the same Chicago events at the time she lived there. Acid burns in my gut as all the questions I want answered brim on the surface.

Where do you live now? Here?

Who is occupying your bed?

Why did you betray me when I cared for you so deeply?

“Just before we get started, I wanted to advise I’m filling in for my associate Andy White as he’s been involved in a terrible accident. I will be offering legal counsel to Anatoly Petrov in his absence.” Ava nods at Viktor who nods back, but doesn’t pay attention to me.

First mistake Ava. And one of the many you’ve already made. The meeting starts as Anatoly explains what his energy company can do with Raven’s Peak’s resources. It’s the most ironic thing in the world for Ava to be in attendance as the deal is directly related to her inheritance. The same one she signed over to me.

I watch as she navigates the details of the deal with precision, circling and highlighting possible pitfalls and legalities to watch out for as it pertains to consumers and the use of lithium. I hate admitting to myself that she’s good. Really good, and if we were together still, I would want her on my team, but she lost that privilege when she decided to fuck me over.

“Let’s take a break and resume in ten minutes or so. I think we’ve worked through the most important parts of the contract for today, which is what Mr. Petrov wanted

to clarify, but we will need to work on Section C ii and iii as those terms aren't clear-cut, Mr. Utkin."

Cricking my neck, my skin crawls as she addresses me in a cavalier tone as if we're meeting for the first time. She shares her body freely with another man and then stares at me as if I'm nothing. "We can address them after the break, thanks. Anatoly, all good so far?" I return, my cold eyes burrowing into the side of her head.

"Yes. I'm pleased with how everything is going so far. This is feeling good." Anatoly smiles at us, and I plaster on a smile, but inside I want to do serious damage to Ava Knight. The anger I stored in a suitcase has popped open and it's ready to deliver painful consequences to her.

Who the fuck do you think I am, Ms. Knight?

Ava stays in the boardroom as I step outside the room and head to the bathroom with Viktor close by. "You didn't know she was going to be here today, did you?"

"No. Did you?" I hiss, careful so Anatoly doesn't hear, but he elected to stay in the boardroom with Ava.

"No, but it wouldn't make a difference. I've got what I wanted—Raven's Peak. She can go fuck herself if she thinks she's going to ignore me for the entire meeting."

I take my piss as Viktor claps me on the back saying nothing as he enters the stall, and by the time we reenter the boardroom, the rage inside me has somersaulted to astronomical heights.

We tee up the terms and conditions as I wait for Ava to acknowledge me and show some sign of remorse for betraying me, but all she does is her job, and after four years she doesn't look worse, she looks hotter than ever. Her hair is longer, glossier,

and the L.A. sun is agreeing with her in every way possible.

Fuck you, Ava Knight. “I think we just need to make some adjustments when it comes to the tiered percentages, and that’s up to Anatoly what those percentages will be, based on the performance metrics he’s using for the quarter,” Ava sums up at the end of the meeting and Anatoly nods in agreement.

“Yes. Give me a week on that, and I can turn around the projected numbers for the future and get them back to you.”

“Alright. I’m comfortable with those numbers as well. I’m happy to see what you come up with, Anatoly.” I hold the same professional, casual tone as Ava, but only for the sake of the meeting, but when it’s over, it’s going to be a different ballgame.

“Great. Then if everything else is in order, and neither of you has any further questions, I’ll draw up the final details for the next meeting and have them sent across to you in preparation.”

“Excellent. Thank you, Ava. You’ve done well,” Anatoly praises, but I want to tell him not to congratulate whores, but I keep my dark thoughts to myself.

We aren’t done, Ava. I told you what would happen if I ever saw you again.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:12 pm

I don't want him knowing Anatoly was my main client for the day so I take my time in my office pretending to work through files, but the reality is, I can't think straight. I'm falling apart, unlocked love coming to the surface.

How can I still want him after the way he treated me? But from the first moment Dimitri took up space in the boardroom, he sucked the air out of it with his dominating presence. His features are the same. His dirty blond hair cropped, and his beard grown out, but shaped. Shit. Was that a ring on his finger? Pouring myself a drink, I hyperventilate, thinking I've wasted enough time, and I should head to my car and go home.

Mark isn't a micromanager, and if anything, he's going to email me and ask how the meeting went. I handled myself as best I could, but as I gulp down the cool water, I don't know how I'm going to prepare myself for the next meeting.

He looks more than good. His gray suit clung to him as if it were custom made to cling to his muscles. Those icy blue eyes were as captivating and deadly as ever. That's why I avoided his gaze as much as possible during the meeting, but the heat in the room couldn't be denied. Viktor maintained his neutrality, but the timeline of his facial expressions gave him away.

Thankfully, I don't think Anatoly noticed the tension. That would have been my worst nightmare. Shit. I'm suffocating in here. I need to leave. The glass of water topples over on my desk, spilling over important documents. Picking up the glass, standing it upright, one of my colleague's passes by. Taking a breath, I wait until they pass, working out a game plan.

“Shit!” I can re-photocopy the documents and it’s not a big deal, but I’m scared. I don’t think for a minute Dimitri is going to just leave it there. His anger cut through the room like the sharpest knife and all of it directed at me for something I didn’t do.

Done for the day, I pack up my things heading down to the basement parking lot, thinking I might have gotten away with it. I run a hand over my chest, my heart pounding regardless. As I exit the elevator, the basement is devoid of noise—silent, except for the click of my heels as I cross over to my vehicle. A pulse thrums in my neck, perspiration on my brow, and for the first time in a long time, I don’t feel safe. There’s a lurking feeling, and the exact same feeling I had when I ran through the woods during that rain-soaked night at Raven’s Peak.

Please. Don’t let this be a re-run. I hate this feeling, but it grows, expanding into its own entity as I pick up my pace, practically jogging to my car, but the rapidly approaching footsteps behind me, let me know I’m out of time. Holy shit. It’s him.

“Can’t run. I told you what I would do,” I hear a stern voice echo as I steal a glance around the parking lot for random allies and finding no one. Only a car on its way out, the gate opening to the light. I think about flagging it down, but it’s already gone.

There’s a large concrete pillar between me and my car, and Dimitri catches up with me, flipping me around, pinning me to it, my head thumping against it. His hand is fisted around my top, his face contorted in ugliness, the monster I first met returning.

“Dimitri! Get your hands off me,” I scream, but he doesn’t let go, until I employ the self-defense tactic on him that he taught me—thrusting the palm of my hand deeply into the base of his nose, slamming as hard as I can, and elbowing him in the ribs. Dimitri’s head whips back, as he holds his face. But it’s not that the blow was that lethal, although it shocked him enough to start reeling on his feet, and stumble around for a second or two. If I can’t run from him, I can at least defend.

Dimitri cracks his jaw, his face breaking into a wide grin as he tests its mobility, sniffing, but shaking it off. Wide-eyed at his swift recovery, I hold the keys to my car firmly in my hand.

“Not bad, Ava. You learned something from me. But that’s not good enough to keep me at bay. I warned you, didn’t I?” he returns licking his tongue around his mouth.

“You warned me about what?” I snap back. I’m not the scared twenty-two-year-old he met years ago. Nope. I’m stronger—more resilient, and not only has Dimitri taught me about the world, so have others. I’ve taken my hard knocks and can stand my ground.

Dimitri’s cold blue eyes don’t scare me anymore. “I warned you that if I saw your face again, I would show no mercy.”

Scoffing, I readjust myself, one side of Dimitri’s face covered in shadow. “Is that right? Well, here I am, what are you going to do? Kill me?” I taunt, knowing he has a heart; it might be an icebox, but I know a deeper, more vulnerable side to Dimitri that nobody has seen.

“Nah,” Dimitri says, cracking his knuckles pacing in front of me, trying on his intimidation tactics. “That would be too easy. I want to see you suffer first. That’s much more appealing to me.”

The deep echo of his threat chills me, but I can’t back down from him, no matter what. “The last time I checked, you came to me, not the other way around, so it’s game off.”

“When you saw my name on the contract, you should have given it to someone else,” he rasps, coming closer, but I pull out my phone punching in a number.

“Why would I do that? You flew to L.A. I didn’t come to Chicago. And I didn’t pick the client. It was given to me, and trust me; if I would have known beforehand you were the time waster I would be dealing with, then I would have canned it immediately.” I put enough venom in the sentence for it to visibly affect him. Good. I want him to hurt for all the years I did, and still do.

“I don’t give a fuck! I told you if I ever saw your face again—”

“Dimitri, I was being what’s called a professional. You should try it sometime. I was doing my job, and you should learn to keep the past in the past,” I retort in a smooth, confident tone, holding his eye contact without flinching.

Dimitri glares at me, not moving a muscle, but if he was going to do anything, he would have already made his move, I figure. “You betrayed me, Ava. You fucking lied to me.” His voice shakes, leaving me confused.

He still thinks I would do that to him. Hurt him like that. After all I gave up....

“Betrayal only comes after trust is lost, but in our case, you never trusted me in the first place. You came to take from me, remember, Dimitri? That contract you’re about to sign! In there!” I add, raising my voice as Dimitri steps closer, his face changing, but the darkness growing.

Voices and laughter fill the parking lot, giving me enough saving grace for Dimitri to back off. “This isn’t over, Ava. You and I, we’ve got unfinished business.”

“Oh really? I’m shaking like a leaf.” Clicking my car door open with the remote beeper, I turn for only a split second seeing a huge grin on Dimitri’s face, and it’s either he’s amused by my sarcasm or is planning the greatest and deadliest revenge of all time.

That's the thing with Dimitri, you can never tell. Sucking in a deep breath, I will my hands to stop shaking. I keep my eyeline on the people in front of me walking across the threshold of the parking lot. Some of them are laughing as if they don't have a care in the world. Others' faces are glum as if they're leaving a job they loathe. One is walking with a briefcase, his shoulders slumped inwards. All I have to do is concentrate on anything else, then I can get through this.

As my bottom lip quivers, I hit the keyless drive reversing out of the parking lot, the tears rising to dangerous heights in my eyes. Don't cry. Don't cry over a man who doesn't believe you when you tell him the truth.

But I can't help how I feel. The tears roll as I head out in the afternoon L.A. light, and the worst of it all is the pain that sits in the base of my heart. There's an ache that can't be reconciled and it's Dimitri's fault. I might be scared of what he's going to do, but it's that—the intense pain of loving somebody who doesn't love you back that's the worst for me.

I thought I could handle his boardroom antics and that would be the last of it. I just had to grin and bear getting through looking at his face for one meeting, but no—there has to be a second meeting where I keep up the pretense.

We could have really had this beautiful life together. Together we were like two peas in a pod. I kept him grounded and happy, and he introduced me to grand new experiences, opening me up to a world unknown. In the beginning I liked all the fancy dinners and meeting new people, studying high society and wondering what their lives were like behind closed doors. And all the shopping sprees and eating at all the new restaurants that I would never be able to afford in Chicago. I had the world at my feet, and if I didn't want, I wouldn't have had to lift a finger. Dimitri told me so.

“You can do whatever you want, but I know how determined you are to finish your law degree, and I admire it. I want to give you the option, however, it's there.”

I remembered him saying it, and I'm glad I never took him up on it because where would I be now? But that's not what I loved the most. No, what I loved the most was when it was the two of us watching movies, discovering each other's favorite songs, walking along the streets of Chicago and just reveling in each other's company. The way we made love... I merge onto the off-ramp to my turn-off for home, stopping the tears. I can't let Ethan see me crying.

As soon as I see my boy's face in my mind, I stop... forgetting about Dimitri. For he can never know that I have a son. It would complicate things, and they're already bad enough. I pull into the underground parking lot of my apartment with a steel resolve.

Never can he know. Never.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:12 pm

I can't get her out of my head. And I've tried, but Ava's sticking inside it like glue. Where does she get off talking to me like that? With all that sassiness and wit? And how the fuck did she get smarter and more beautiful? A woman who betrayed me doesn't deserve for that to happen to her.

I sit in my hotel chair waiting for Viktor to come, contemplating, stewing and plotting what I should do with Ms. Knight. There's a punishment she needs to receive, but my head's not clear enough to work out what it is. All I can remember from the meeting is how those curvaceous hips of hers moved in the night. Or how she used to laugh when I tickled her under her armpit. She had all these places she was squirming in when I touched her. I liked how smart she was and when I used to ask her about how she would maneuver in a deal it had me thinking I could give her an arm of the Bratva business to open up.

Every man deserves one time to be foolish, and that's it. I had my fool's dream, and thankfully I've recovered from it. Twisting the ring around on my finger, I think about Cara, trying to do a dance in my head in order to convince myself that she's the right person for me to marry, but Ava's blowing that ideal to smithereens.

I'm angry, and she's the problem. She can't exist anymore for me, but here she is in sunny L.A. thriving in her law career after I turned her out of my house four years ago. No, no, no. Can't be.

The phone rings, interrupting my toxic thoughts, and I answer. It's Cara. "Shit," I say out loud under my breath, a flash of irritation riding over my face. She's the last person I want to talk to right now, even if she's my fiancée.

“Hey, how are you?” I ask tersely, hoping the call is quick.

“Nothing much. I haven’t heard from you since you got to L.A., and I wanted to know how the deal is going?”

Not about me. You wanted to know about the deal. I stare at the phone, my nostrils flaring, and heat flaming through my veins. “The deal’s going well. We’re on the last legs with it, and likely finalizing it this morning.”

Gasping, Cara claps as I wince. “Congratulations! That’s such a big deal, right? I’m proud of you,” she replies, knowing how to say all the right things at the right time, and frankly it pisses me off.

“Thanks. Is that all you wanted?” I snap, wanting to cause a fight—something that will show me a deeper depth to Cara, but she doesn’t fold, turning up the sickly sweetness in her voice even more.

“Yes, that’s all I wanted. Enjoy your celebrations, and I look forward to sharing the win with you when you get home. Bye, fiancé.”

“Bye, Cara.” I hang up the phone, the last sentence frying me. Bye, fiancé. The tone in which she said it made me feel as if she were taunting me a little, or maybe I’m paranoid because of Ava.

Viktor knocks on the door announcing himself. “Hey. It’s me. Open up.” Standing, I get myself together, wrenching the door back in a foul mood. “Ah, that bad a morning, is it?” He clamps a hand down on my shoulder with a smile. “Boss, it’s going to get better. We’re about to sign the deal of a lifetime. This will send profits through the roof!” Viktor swipes his hand against the other in a gesture that normally would make me smile. Because if there’s anything I like more, it’s power and more money, but Ava’s got her claws in my heart and mind, and she’s not letting go.

“Fuck. I need a drink.”

Viktor stares at me in surprise. “You don’t drink when you’re in meetings. Is this about seeing Ava?”

“Yes.” I pick up the whisky on the bar, adding two glasses and filling one for each of us. “That’s what this is about. You’re drinking with me. I need something to take the edge off.” Slamming the golden liquid down my throat I let the burn hurt good, shaking it out.

“What’s your plan for her. I know you have one.”

“Punishment.”

“Ah, punishment.” Viktor swirls his drink in the glass but knocks it back. “Ahh, I’m going to have plenty more of these after the deal. Come on. We have to go. We can talk about it on the ride over.”

“Alright, let’s seal the deal and be done.” On the way over, we don’t discuss Ava. As close as Viktor is to my operations, I don’t want him finding out the depths of my disdain for Ms. Knight. That’s my burden to carry, and mine alone.

As we near the building, I hear the hammer in my chest but ignore it as we ascend in the elevator and then enter the boardroom. Ava’s already in the room with Anatoly, prepared as usual. All the documents are laid out in front of us with tabs to be signed and discussed. I have to hand it to her; she’s savvy, methodical, and extremely good at her job. I hate to admit that Thompson and Associates are lucky to have her, but that’s maybe something I can set about changing....

Smirking, I greet Anatoly first as he stands with a grin on his face. As he should, he stands to make a lot of money from this deal. “Morning, gentlemen, are we ready to

make history here?”

“That’s exactly what we’re here to do,” I say, staring at Ava, who looks particularly tasty this morning, her familiar scent of orange blossom wafting through the air. I know the perfume; it’s one she picked out when she was with me. A stabbing ache hits my chest. I don’t want to remember. Fuck. Why couldn’t she pick a new perfume?

“Good morning, everyone,” she says professionally to both Viktor and me. Of course you won’t say my name, will you? You should be ashamed, Ava, not standing in here in your black dress with red lips and your glossy mane ready to cut deals. A man could die in her curves, and I should know; I had the pleasure of enjoying them every night in my bed. “Now that everyone’s here we can get started in a few minutes. Feel free to grab a drink and something to eat before we get started.”

I can’t let her get away with anything. Viktor and Anatoly catch up as Ava turns to the coffee station set up behind with cookies, croissants, and juice, making herself a coffee. I walk over, snatching the opportunity before the others join us. Ava side-eyes me, and I feel her shiver.

Good. I want to make her sweat as much as possible in this meeting. She holds her ground, pouring water from the urn and stirring in milk. The sugar is on the other side of her and all I have to do is step around her back, but I don’t. I reach my arm across in front, grazing her breast, and she gasps, her cherry-red lips parting, her eyes glaring at me.

“Sorry, Ms. Knight.”

“Don’t be a dickhead, Dimitri,” she hisses under her breath, taking a croissant with her, alarming me with her straightforwardness.

“Ms. Knight, you are full of surprises.” I stare her down as the others step up to the station preparing their own drinks.

Shit. I didn’t rattle her the way I wanted to. I’m going to have to work harder. Maybe L.A. and me kicking her out has done the opposite of what I wanted it to do. She’s resilient, ready to fight. I don’t fucking like it one bit.

The meeting commences after a few minutes, and Ava gets straight down to business. “I received your emails about Section C ii and iii regarding the issue with energy consumption and the values. Thank you, Anatoly. Those have now been amended as you’ll see. If we can read through page by page and initial each then that will be the way we can start.”

“Great. Were you good with the changes, Dimitri?” Anatoly asks me, and I nod.

“I’m fine with them. Raven’s Peak deserves the right person to handle its affairs.” I say with a smart mouth, wanting to undermine Ava, but when I look up, she’s stony-faced, sipping her coffee and looking towards Anatoly.

“You’re absolutely right, and by the looks of this deal, we’ve got it in good hands.” Anatoly grins, and he’s a happy man.

“You’re on the money. If you only knew what I had to do to acquire the property,” I add with loaded sarcasm, indirectly throwing the blow at Ava. She doesn’t flinch, but Anatoly takes the bait raising his head from the document.

“How so?” I grin as Ava wriggles in her seat. Gotcha. How does it feel, Ms. Knight, to be humiliated?

“I had to pull a few strings to get it, but it’s worked out in my favor,” I tell him as Anatoly chuckles.

“I’ll say, and in both our favors.”

“I think we’re onto page thirty-one. I think we should continue,” Ava states and for the first time in the meeting other than the coffee stand, she glances up at me, but it’s not a glare. No, I would have been good with that because that would have told me I was successful in getting under her skin.

Oh no. This is something else. A stoicism, almost as if I’m glass and she’s staring right through me. This isn’t working out, not that I had a plan, other than to throw her off some. Ultimately, I want the deal signed as much as Anatoly does.

Ava’s phone lights up on the table towards the end of the meeting, and I observe her reaction carefully. There’s worry there, and whoever’s on the other end of the line is causing it. I keep initialing the pages, but I can feel the energy in the room shift.

“Excuse me, I have to step out for a minute. I have an important call to take,” she says, distracted by the caller.

“Hey, no problem, I think we only have ten pages to go. Am I right, Ava?” Anatoly asks as Ava looks between the phone and him, clearly flustered. Oh, this is fucking good.

“Yes—yes, that’s correct. I won’t be long.” She steps out of the room, and I perk my ears up to see if I can catch anything, but all I hear is a hushed tone, but the real magic begins when she returns. She’s clearly in distress and her cheeks are reddened.

Something’s happened, and it’s got my attention. “Everything alright, Ava?” Anatoly asks in concern.

“Ah no, it’s not actually. I have an emergency. I need to go. The deal is pretty much wrapped up, all you really need is both your signatures, and you have a deal,” she

pushes out, her hand streaking through her hair.

“Yep, I’m ready to sign these pages. I’ve already seen them enough,” Anatoly pipes up, but my eyes glisten for the opportunity to fuck with her. I could stall, make it hard for her, and she’s clearly stressed out, her leg bouncing as she waits for Anatoly to sign.

With my pen firmly in hand, I stare at her blankly. What to do? An even better plan pops into my head. “Dimitri, can you sign your section please? There’s a few to get through,” she nudges as Viktor and I exchange glances.

“Fine. I don’t want to hold you up,” I reply, but that’s contrary to the fact. However, it’s Anatoly I’m thinking about.

After we sign, Ava stands quickly, shaking Anatoly and Viktor’s hands sneakily bypassing mine, but I don’t offer it either. There’s no chance I’m offering my hand to shake for a cheater.

Ava leaves only the scent of her orange blossom behind as I shake hands with Anatoly, and we agree to meet in the future to kick off proceedings. I’m aware of Ava being ahead of us and want to move out of the meeting as soon as possible to get to her.

Once in the car with Viktor driving, my obsession gets the better of me. I remember Ava’s silver car from our last little meeting and point it out. “Follow her. I want to see where she’s going.”

Viktor nods solemnly. “Okay. Let’s see what the emergency is.” As the wheel screeches and he hooks a left, we trail behind Ava. Viktor poses a question I don’t want to answer. “Are you in love with her? Only a man who is in love with a woman would go to these lengths to get to them.”

“She betrayed me, Viktor. How can there be love?” I reply, a rawness catching in my throat. I should be in a celebratory mood given how big the deal I just signed is, but all I want to think about is wielding a sword of wrath down on Ava so fierce that she crumbles like I did when I discovered what she did to me.

Viktor slides neatly behind a car, directly diagonally to Ava, whose hands are thumping on the steering wheel. I keep my eyes on her side profile, wondering what has her so stressed. Is it a new lover? If it is, I want to know if it’s him. The one she betrayed me for.

“That’s not the question I asked, Boss, but I’ll say this, only a woman can drive a man mad like this.” Viktor’s wise words are unwelcome at this time, but I see his point.

Yet I don’t care. I want Ava to fall. Hard. If I can find her weakness, then I can work at chipping away at it and have my sweet revenge. We follow along, reaching a hospital and parking at the same time Ava does. In hot pursuit, I go in alone behind her as she speaks to reception, jogging through to the pediatrics section where a waiting nurse directs her to a room.

“Thank you so much!” I hear her say as she opens the door to the room. I slow my walk, my heart pounding in my chest. A kid? When the nurse departs, I approach the door, seeing her hugging a small kid who has a Band-Aid on his forehead.

My blood freezes when I see the little boy’s face. He has the very same piercing blue eyes I have. An identical nose. His hair is a sandy blond color. The same as mine was when I was his age, and there’s a woman, maybe a little younger than Ava—pretty with brown hair.

This better not be what I think it is, but it is. The heart pounding doesn’t end. It only expands as I watch them on the inside as the boy hugs Ava’s legs. I can’t just stand

here.

Unlocking the door, I enter the waiting room.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:12 pm

If anything happens to Ethan, I don't know what I'm going to do. This is a mother's curse. Kids are young and they're bound to get into trouble and have things go wrong, but it doesn't mean I can't hate it. I didn't want to be in the meeting with Dimitri there anyway, but he's the last thing on my mind, even with his threats.

I raced out of the car and into the hospital suite looking for him. Emily told me not to panic, and that it wasn't serious, but I didn't care. All I knew was Ethan was hurt and I needed to get to him on the double.

The call took me by surprise, but in some ways, I think it was a blessing in disguise. "Hi, Ava. I hate to bother you," Emily had said in a scared voice, but I didn't care. I told her to call me if she were ever unsure of anything to do with Ethan. He's my world, and there's only us.

"No, don't be sorry. What's going on?" I chewed on my nail, wanting to be done with the Raven's Peak deal and Dimitri's not-so-subtle digs the entire meeting.

"Ah, Ethan has fallen off the bed while I was making lunch and hit his head. Please don't be angry, but I'm taking him to the emergency room right now. I'm so sorry," she blubbered in a panic.

"Send me the details of the hospital, and I'm coming there now." I went into solution mode, thinking I would speak to Emily face-to-face when I saw her. I knew Ethan could be a handful because he's such an active boy.

"Okay. I have him in the waiting room. I can assure you; he's going to be okay."

I didn't want her reassurance, I wanted proof with my own eyes, but as I stand with Ethan's warm body hugged on to mine, I'm happy. My boy is smiling goofily with a multicolored Band-Aid on his forehead. "You gave Mommy a fright. Don't ever do that again, okay?"

"Mommy, I'm fine. Band-Aid make it better. I wanted to fly."

I hug him again, rubbing his head as I crouch down so I can see his face. "Baby, you can't fly from the bunk. You gave Emily a fright too. What have I told you about climbing onto things and jumping?"

Ethan pouts, putting a finger in his mouth. "That I might fall and hurt myself?" I run my hands through his hair, his blue eyes bright.

"Yes, that's exactly right. Mommy loves you, but you have to listen, alright?"

"Okay, I will."

As I stand, ready to take Ethan out, the door opens, and Dimitri is standing there with a straight face. Fuck. Vomit rises in my throat as I hold on tight to Ethan's hand wanting to run out of the hospital with him in tow, but Dimitri is blocking the door.

Ethan looks at the man with playful curiosity, the past coming back to ruin me. "Mom, who's that?" He points his little finger up to his own father. This day can't get any worse.

"Um, this is an old friend," I tell him as Emily herself puts two and two together. She knows about Dimitri. I've told her the full story, but her mouth hanging open isn't helping me out.

"Old friend, huh? How far we've come," Dimitri answers bitterly, but his face

quickly softens when he looks down at his son. “Ava, we should talk,” he adds in a polite tone as I ask Emily to look after Ethan for a minute and I kiss into his soft hair one more time.

I would have thought I might not be calm in this situation, but there’s no more flight or fight left in me, only a bone-weary tiredness. Dimitri doesn’t just want to talk inside the hospital. No, he wants me out of it. We walk towards the exit in silence, side by side. I’ve got no other choice, so there’s no point resisting.

We walk to Dimitri’s SUV. “What do you want, Dimitri?” I ask in a weary tone.

“Get in, Ava.” He points to the passenger seat, and I slide in, sitting in the crux of the door so I can be as far away from him as possible. Dimitri fumbles with the keys in his hands, looking down at them. I can’t tell if he’s pissed off or sad. I wish I knew which. “You have a son now.”

His blue eyes don’t hold the anger I expect. No, they hold pain, and longing. Shit. That’s even worse. “Yes. I have a son.”

“What’s Ethan’s birthdate?”

Fuck. I didn’t expect him to ask that. Now the panic rears up again. “September. He’s a spring baby.”

Dimitri scoffs, his fingers tapping on the wheel, his brooding energy hanging over me. A deep whirlpool of nausea sweeps me up as I put a hand over my belly to stop it, but the memories and the grief of our relationship float to the top, destined to take me under.

“Right. So, you had Ethan eight months after we separated. This means you were pregnant after we first had sex.” I can see the inner workings of his mind ticking over,

and I need to come up with a lie. Fast.

I want to protect Ethan. I can't let him go to Dimitri. No. I just can't. "I don't know what you're talking about because Ethan was born premature."

That brooding energy has metamorphized into white-hot rage. "Stop with the fucking lies, for fucks sake!"

Bracing myself, I hold on to the car door as Dimitri spontaneously starts the car driving off, alarm bells ringing in my head. No. My baby is back in the hospital. Fuck!

"Dimitri! Stop!" I yell as his jaw clenches like steel while he hysterically laughs. "Slow down, you're going to get us killed!" His foot jams on the accelerator as the SUV hits a dip on the road out of the hospital. He speeds through a red light, cars leaning hard on their horns, his face in a menacing snarl.

"Nope. Ava, I'm not slowing down until you tell me the truth!" I feel part of myself wanting to detach from my body. I don't have to experience this trauma, but I white-knuckle it, quickly putting on my seat belt as I watch the odometer click up.

"Okay, okay Dimitri! I had Ethan when we were separated."

"Is he my blood?" Dimitri asking me this question spirals me back to the day I left his mansion heartbroken and my life in complete tatters. He still thinks I slept with another man. Years have passed and he's had the time to dig deeper and find out the truth, but he hasn't. He's just in his own head believing whatever he believes.

A small voice inside me tells me to protest, to fight him tooth and nail to listen to what I have to say and remind him that I told him the truth as plain as day, but he didn't want to hear it.

“You know what, Dimitri?” I spit out bitterly, a lump lodging in my throat.

“What, Ava?” he cuts back as he lets off the gas a little.

“For a man who has access to so much, and with so much power, you still only see what you want to see. I don’t give a fuck anymore; you believe what you want to believe,” I tell him, giving up in defeat. Whatever he’s going to do to me, he can. All I want to do is protect my son and get back to him in one piece. I haven’t figured out the rest, but if I can get back to Ethan, then everything’s going to be okay. “Even if Ethan is your son,” I stipulate. “You better stay the fuck out of his life. He doesn’t have a place in yours.”

I realize Dimitri’s driven us in a wide arc around the hospital as we re-enter the parking lot.

“Then you’re going to give me a DNA test, and then, Ava, I’m not going to stay away from my son. No, you have one week to pack your stuff. He’s coming back to Chicago with me where he belongs amongst his family roots.” Dimitri’s used to dishing out commands and controlling everything and everyone around him, but not this time. I will fight tooth and nail for my son, even if it means putting my life on the line.

“No. You’re not going to do that. I refuse to give my son away to the dangerous playground you live in, Dimitri. What’s he going to become? A ruthless fucking bloodhound like you.”

The corners of Dimitri’s eyes crinkle into a devastating smile as he chuckles, stopping the car and facing me, his eyes chilling me to the bone. “You don’t have a choice,” he concludes arrogantly. “You might think your fancy law degree is going to get you somewhere, but you have no idea of what strings I can pull to gain custody of Ethan.” His eyes glower as I take the gut punch, winded, knowing it’s true. My hands

are being tied behind my back, and there's nothing I can do about it.

"You wouldn't—" I shake my head, tears stinging at the back of my eyes.

"Oh yeah, I would. I'm a monster, don't you remember how I got Raven's Peak." Tears slowly roll down my cheeks. I'm trapped by a monster and one I can't escape from. I'm horrified by the thought of Dimitri having the power to take my son from me, and if I want to see Ethan again, I'm going to have to answer Dimitri's commands.

Chapter Twenty- Four - Dimitri

One week later...

There's a light breeze in L.A., but there's redemption coursing through my veins as I stand on the tarmac, the sweet revenge I wanted for Ava, falling right into my lap. Together, we've got a son, and that's one thing she didn't lie about.

I had the DNA results rushed through using my connections.

"Yes. I want the results from the lab rushed through, and I will pay extra under the table. I don't care if you have to work overtime to do it. Get me the results and get them back to me in the next three days or else," I advised the head of the pathology lab.

He overdelivered, producing the results in less than forty-eight hours. Viktor delivering the news with an envelope. "Here, I think you're going to be pleased with the result."

I'd taken the envelope silently from him in my Chicago office, the wait for the results—agonizing as I replayed the movie of Ava betraying me over and over again

on loop. What if it wasn't my kid? But again, the evidence was too great. I saw Ethan with my own two eyes. The kid was a doppelganger for me in the flesh and my seed was not going to stay in some condo in L.A. with Ava as a single mother. No. I would give him the world, and he would live like a king.

I opened the envelope staring at the results again and again searching for the right information, my name in the fine print in the bottom right-hand corner.

Father: Dimitri Utkin. Confirmed. I'd thrown the paper on my office desk, standing, fuming that Ava would add another knife in my back, keeping my son from me without my permission.

"Ah, Ms. Knight. You have no idea who you're dealing with. I'm going to make your life a living hell on earth."

"Sooo, not okay with the result?" Viktor chipped in, but I'd forgotten he was standing in my office. Grinning, I turned around to him, his smirk mirroring mine.

"No. The opposite. This is fucking too perfect. Revenge has fallen right into my lap. I want you to track Ava for the rest of the week, and maybe give her a shove in the right direction if you smell anything fishy."

"Already on it, but my dibs are on her coming with Ethan to Chicago."

"Oh. I want her there. How can I inflict the maximum amount of heartache if she's not," I countered with a wry smile. "But I'm going to rip away everything she holds dear. Then she's going to see what type of monster I can really be."

So, it was decided my son was coming back to Chicago with me. I didn't tell Cara the truth. Ethan is my son and she's going to have to deal with it. With my shades on, I wait for Ava and Ethan to arrive. I don't care about her fucking career, her happiness,

or how badly I've fucked things up for her. She took something from me when I gave her my all, and I would never let a woman do that again.

She knew she had no choice but to come with me. My legal team is too strong for her, and it would have been an easy win for me in the courtroom. If she defied me, I planned to pull out all the stops, including her infidelity during our relationship, and showing how bad a parent she is for not telling me she was with child.

Ava never stood a chance. The sun's direction changes, causing me to drop my sunglasses down on my head, covering my eyes. Despite the revenge I've enacted, I never planned to take Ava away from Ethan. No. That was a back-up plan in case she decided to make foolish moves.

She might be a high and mighty lawyer, but she's not a stupid one. I hate Ava. With every bone in my body, I hate her for what she did to us, and the secret she carried for four years without my knowledge. She arrives and my heart rate picks up as Viktor walks beside her, making sure she doesn't make a last-ditch attempt to escape.

It's not as if she hasn't done that before. I've got hired guns in place if she does, but given she's walking with Ethan hand in hand, I assume she doesn't plan on doing that. The anger lifts as Ava walks to the plane, sophisticated with her shades on. Ethan's carrying some sort of bear in his hand, and he's pointing at the plane. A part of me softens when I see him. He has the same wide-eyed wonder about the world as his mother, but he's too young. I can't parent the little boy by myself.

Ava reaches me, her pretty mouth tight as she places a protective hand on Ethan's back. He buries his face in Ava's leg. I'm bringing her along for good reason. She's his mother, and Ethan needs her for survival. If there's one thing she is, it's a good mother. I can see that, but once Ethan is old enough, maybe Cara can step in and play the role. She'll have to learn to give up her coldhearted ways, but I don't give a damn. I'm going to send Ava away, dragging out my revenge over several years, just like

she wants to milk the Raven's Peak deal until the end.

She's lucky I haven't found some way to annihilate the contract and put her in the poor house on the street. Once Ethan sees my smile as I lift my sunglasses, I crouch down to his level, not wanting to intimidate the little fella.

He's mine. My flesh and blood, looking up to me, and Ethan doesn't think I'm a bad man. He doesn't know that unless Ava's tainted him against me already. She better not have, otherwise I'll send her packing quicker than intended.

I can't tell what's behind her eyes, and I'm sure she won't show me. Either way I don't care because I've got what's mine. A son. It feels good to meet him, and there's something we both did right together producing him. I can't believe I have one. There's no shame, only happiness when I look into his eyes.

Ethan steps forward courageously, his finger in his mouth. "Hey, Ethan. Have you ever been on a plane?" I ask him, running a hand over the back of his neck, wanting to hug him, but letting him take the time to get used to me first.

"No. It's loud! Big jet plane."

"That's right. A big jet plane. You're going to be on it with me. Are you ready?"

Ethan nods, a big grin on his face. Looking into his innocent eyes makes me want to cry. I can't believe I have a son. This is a dream come true. I didn't know when I would have one or if it were a good idea, but seeing Ethan answers all those questions.

As much as I hate it, Ava is the perfect mother figure for Ethan. Cara is one I'm going to have to work on if I decide to go through with our marriage. "Dad?" Ethan says, chewing on his brown bear's arm.

Tears glisten in my eyes as Ava watches the exchange from a short distance. “Yes,” I tell him enthusiastically. “I’m your father, Ethan.” I draw the little boy into a hug, my heart opening to him. He lays his tiny head on my shoulder, and I lift him up in my arms. “My big strong boy.”

He grins showing me all his teeth, holding his bear up to my face. “Can Mr. Bear come too?”

Nodding, I laugh a real laugh, like the ones I used to share with Ava.

“Yes. You can bring Mr. Bear and whatever else you want.” Ethan spreads his tiny arms open wide, his bright blue eyes shining as I take him up the stairs, Ava cutting a solemn figure following behind with a duffel bag.

“Yay! Mommy, Mommy, we’re going on the airplane! Mommy!”

“Yes, we are, Ethan.” Her voice is strained, but Ava’s sharp tongue has done nothing but get her in trouble. There’s no way out—I’ve banished any hopes she’s ever going to have. Soon she’ll be a washed-up lawyer who lost her son, broken and lost forever.

I’m Dimitri Utkin, and I always have a master plan. It’s how I got on top, and it’s how I’m going to stay on top.

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"Yes. I want the results from the lab rushed through, and I will pay extra under the table. I don't care if you have to work overtime to do it. Get me the results and get them back to me in the next three days or else," I advised the head of the pathology lab.

He overdelivered, producing the results in less than forty-eight hours. Viktor delivering the news with an envelope. "Here, I think you're going to be pleased with the result."

I'd taken the envelope silently from him in my Chicago office, the wait for the results—agonizing as I replayed the movie of Ava betraying me over and over again on loop. What if it wasn't my kid? But again, the evidence was too great. I saw Ethan with my own two eyes. The kid was a doppelganger for me in the flesh and my seed was not going to stay in some condo in L.A. with Ava as a single mother. No. I would give him the world, and he would live like a king.

I opened the envelope staring at the results again and again searching for the right information, my name in the fine print in the bottom right-hand corner.

Father: Dimitri Utkin. Confirmed. I'd thrown the paper on my office desk, standing, fuming that Ava would add another knife in my back, keeping my son from me without my permission.

"Ah, Ms. Knight. You have no idea who you're dealing with. I'm going to make your life a living hell on earth."

"Sooo, not okay with the result?" Viktor chipped in, but I'd forgotten he was standing in my office. Grinning, I turned around to him, his smirk mirroring mine.

"No. The opposite. This is fucking too perfect. Revenge has fallen right into my lap. I want you to track Ava for the rest of the week, and maybe give her a shove in the right direction if you smell anything fishy."

"Already on it, but my dibs are on her coming with Ethan to Chicago."

"Oh. I want her there. How can I inflict the maximum amount of heartache if she's not," I countered with a wry smile. "But I'm going to rip away everything she holds dear. Then she's going to see what type of monster I can really be."

So, it was decided my son was coming back to Chicago with me. I didn't tell Cara the truth. Ethan is my son and she's going to have to deal with it. With my shades on, I wait for Ava and Ethan to arrive. I don't care about her fucking career, her happiness, or how badly I've fucked things up for her. She took something from me when I gave her my all, and I would never let a woman do that again.

She knew she had no choice but to come with me. My legal team is too strong for her, and it would have been an easy win for me in the courtroom. If she defied me, I planned to pull out all the stops, including her infidelity during our relationship, and showing how bad a parent she is for not telling me she was with child.

Ava never stood a chance. The sun's direction changes, causing me to drop my sunglasses down on my head, covering my eyes. Despite the revenge I've enacted, I never planned to take Ava away from Ethan. No. That was a back-up plan in case she decided to make foolish moves.

She might be a high and mighty lawyer, but she's not a stupid one. I hate Ava. With every bone in my body, I hate her for what she did to us, and the secret she carried for four years without my knowledge. She arrives and my heart rate picks up as Viktor walks beside her, making sure she doesn't make a last-ditch attempt to escape.

It's not as if she hasn't done that before. I've got hired guns in place if she does, but given she's walking with Ethan hand in hand, I assume she doesn't plan on doing that. The anger lifts as Ava walks to the plane, sophisticated with her shades on. Ethan's carrying some sort of bear in his hand, and he's pointing at the plane. A part of me softens when I see him. He has the same wide-eyed wonder about the world as his mother, but he's too young. I can't parent the little boy by myself.

Ava reaches me, her pretty mouth tight as she places a protective hand on Ethan's back. He buries his face in Ava's leg. I'm bringing her along for good reason. She's his mother, and Ethan needs her for survival. If there's one thing she is, it's a good mother. I can see that, but once Ethan is old enough, maybe Cara can step in and play the role. She'll have to learn to give up her coldhearted ways, but I don't give a damn. I'm going to send Ava away, dragging out my revenge over several years, just like she wants to milk the Raven's Peak deal until the end.

She's lucky I haven't found some way to annihilate the contract and put her in the poor house on the street. Once Ethan sees my smile as I lift my sunglasses, I crouch down to his level, not wanting to intimidate the little fella.

He's mine. My flesh and blood, looking up to me, and Ethan doesn't think I'm a bad man. He doesn't know that unless Ava's tainted him against me already. She better

not have, otherwise I'll send her packing quicker than intended.

I can't tell what's behind her eyes, and I'm sure she won't show me. Either way I don't care because I've got what's mine. A son. It feels good to meet him, and there's something we both did right together producing him. I can't believe I have one. There's no shame, only happiness when I look into his eyes.

Ethan steps forward courageously, his finger in his mouth. "Hey, Ethan. Have you ever been on a plane?" I ask him, running a hand over the back of his neck, wanting to hug him, but letting him take the time to get used to me first.

"No. It's loud! Big jet plane."

"That's right. A big jet plane. You're going to be on it with me. Are you ready?"

Ethan nods, a big grin on his face. Looking into his innocent eyes makes me want to cry. I can't believe I have a son. This is a dream come true. I didn't know when I would have one or if it were a good idea, but seeing Ethan answers all those questions.

As much as I hate it, Ava is the perfect mother figure for Ethan. Cara is one I'm going to have to work on if I decide to go through with our marriage. "Dad?" Ethan says, chewing on his brown bear's arm.

Tears glisten in my eyes as Ava watches the exchange from a short distance. "Yes," I tell him enthusiastically. "I'm your father, Ethan." I draw the little boy into a hug, my heart opening to him. He lays his tiny head on my shoulder, and I lift him up in my arms. "My big strong boy."

He grins showing me all his teeth, holding his bear up to my face. "Can Mr. Bear come too?"

Nodding, I laugh a real laugh, like the ones I used to share with Ava.

“Yes. You can bring Mr. Bear and whatever else you want.” Ethan spreads his tiny arms open wide, his bright blue eyes shining as I take him up the stairs, Ava cutting a solemn figure following behind with a duffel bag.

“Yay! Mommy, Mommy, we’re going on the airplane! Mommy!”

“Yes, we are, Ethan.” Her voice is strained, but Ava’s sharp tongue has done nothing but get her in trouble. There’s no way out—I’ve banished any hopes she’s ever going to have. Soon she’ll be a washed-up lawyer who lost her son, broken and lost forever.

I’m Dimitri Utkin, and I always have a master plan. It’s how I got on top, and it’s how I’m going to stay on top.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:12 pm

One eye opens slowly, the environment foreign to me. Discombobulated, I panic, touching the sheets, opening both eyes, but looking around the room recognizing the furnishings, the bedding, the smell, the chair arrangements and the big screen TV on the wall. Mostly I recognize what happened the last time I was here.

Entrapment. I'm in Dimitri's home, in the exact same room he kept me as his prisoner the first time. Doom sets in as I lay back down, the sun's warmth shining on my back as I check the time. Normally I would be checking on Ethan and getting him ready for Emily. I would be feeding him, dressing him, ready to head out the door to Thompson and Associates. I hated telling Mark I had to resign. It took all my willpower to walk into his office and give up on my career, but it was either that or lose my son, and I couldn't stomach being without Ethan, having carried him for nine months.

"Mark, can I speak to you for a minute?"

"Sure. Come on in. I wanted to talk to you too. You did a stellar job with Anatoly. Andy is impressed. He's ready to come back onto the account and take the reins. I can tell you, that's the type of teamwork that gets you a run at partner down the line." Hearing Mark say that sent my heart plummeting to my feet, but making the ultimate sacrifice to be with my son was what I had to do.

"Then you're going to hate what I have to say to you next," I winced, sitting down, feeling like the most miserable woman in the world. The great irony of it all was if Andy hadn't broken anything, I would have been able to go on with my life, and Dimitri might never have known of his son.

But in many ways that wasn't fair to Ethan. As he got older, I suspected he would have asked more about his father, and I would have had to tell him the truth regardless.

"I gotta say, I don't like the way you're starting this out, but go on."

"I have to resign and go back to Chicago. It's a really long story, and I don't want to scar you with the details of, but the short story is Ethan's father is back in his life, and I want him to know him and be raised with him," I lied, knowing if I told Mark the outrageous truth about Dimitri and Anatoly being his business partner he would leap into action immediately. I couldn't risk it, for my sake or for Ethan's. I didn't doubt Dimitri's power. If he wanted to shut down a law firm, I'm sure he could.

"Damn, Ava. You're right on the brink of something magnificent in your career, but hey I get it. You've got a kid, and I understand. I've got two, but can't you split time?"

I stared down at my hands, a sense of melancholy plummeting me deep into my emotions. I couldn't sit talking to him about it anymore, because it hurt so badly to leave. I'd built myself up all on my own without Dimitri, and he'd come in and torn it all down in a couple of weeks.

"No. I'm afraid not. I have to go. Is there anyone I can hand over my clients to?"

"Ava, you're leaving me in a tight position, but sounds like you're in one too. I can split your client list between Andy and me until I find someone for mergers and acquisitions. Do me a favor, though. Don't give up law. You're too good at it."

Sorrow filled my heart as I packed up my desk, and explained to Ethan that "the man" he saw at the hospital was his father.

“That’s my dad? He has the same hair as me!”

“Yeah, he does. But we have to leave this home and go to a new home. You’re going to love it there.”

And that part was the truth. Dimitri can give Ethan what I can’t. I pull back the sheets heading into the room next door where Ethan is sleeping. I’ve never traveled far with him, so I don’t know how he’ll go, but he loved the plane and laughed when there was turbulence. That was a good sign.

I listen to the soft whisper of him snoozing as he lays on his side, oblivious to what’s really going on. I hate that I have to be here like this, but Dimitri’s going to be good to him, I can tell. Maybe it’s better he’s here and he’ll have a safer future. I watched the way he played with him on the plane, and it was as if he was already a father to Ethan.

Lost in the transition as I walk out, I think about what I want to do with my life now that I’ve been forced to come back to Chicago. Maybe I can find work in the city, and things will be okay. I can get back some sort of routine. Will Dimitri even allow me to work?

Having that conversation with him bristles the hairs on my neck, and I can already predict him shutting me down. A sharp ache rides through my heart. All this from Cindy’s betrayal. She cost me the life of my dreams, and I’ll never forgive her. Being back in the same city frustrates me as much as being cooped up under Dimitri’s rule does.

I don’t know how to be. What to do. If I can talk to the staff and get food for me and my son and how to organize things. My head whirls when I think about the logistics of having to navigate parenthood with a monster who only wants to keep me caged for his benefit.

Taking the chance, I walk down the cold corridor with bare feet towards the kitchen. I think it's this way, if I remember right. There it is. The scent of the man holding me hostage, and his bedroom door is slightly ajar. I stop in front of it, close by, until I hear a voice. It's a woman's voice. Shocked, I tell myself I shouldn't be. It's been four years, and I saw the ring on Dimitri's hand.

Of course he has another lover.

"Dimitri. You're not thinking straight. You can't have Ava in the same house as us. Are you mad?" Her accent sounds Russian. Where have I heard that accent before? "I don't give a flying fuck if she is Ethan's mother."

"I don't want to hear it, Cara. He's my son and I've made my decision," Dimitri declares angrily as the wind from the door being yanked back shocks me. As my mouth drops open, Cara emerges, and I understand what the game is. Ekaterina won after all. She's the one she wanted Dimitri to marry, and here she is, sharing a bed with Dimitri, replacing me.

Cara sends me a look that could kill as she swoops past me. "Nice play with the kid, you bitch," she hisses, startling me, but I retaliate swiftly.

"I didn't bring myself here. Your fiancé did," I remind her coldly, sending her a deathful dagger of my own.

"Gah," she stalks out of the room to the kitchen, forcing my pulse to increase as I peek inside the room, Dimitri's shirtless, the ink of his past etched into his back. Flashes of him flood back into my mind. Him shirtless. The mirror above the bed. The things we did.... All of the sweet murmurings the morning after, breakfast in bed, the good life. I kill my feelings, pushing them down somewhere where they can never be found, but my mind doesn't let me run so easily.

Did he use the mirror with Cara? Did he? Dimitri's back is faced away from me, but I wonder. You have a right to think about it. It's not jealousy. Overriding my denial, I stand rooted to the spot, waiting for Dimitri to notice me.

Almost as if he senses my presence at the door, his head swivels. The room doesn't smell like sex. Maybe they're not as close as they should be. "Come in, Ava."

"That was your fiancée?" I ask, but it's more of a statement rather than a question.

"Yes," he snickers, his blue eyes as arresting as ever. "Are you jealous, Ava?" he jabs, trying to hurt me, but I deny any feelings I'm having, rolling my eyes at him instead.

"I don't care about her. I came to find you to ask about working in Chicago. At a new law firm," I say plainly. "There's no point dancing in the shadows with Dimitri. If I want to get anywhere with him, I have to lead with the same integrity I always have."

Dimitri scans me from top to toe, rubbing his hands together, gleeful that my fate is in his hands. With the slight curve of his mouth, he gives me a look of dismissal.

"Let me make myself clear so we have an understanding. You're only here to take care of Ethan. Nothing else. You will be a present mother, and you won't be working until he's old enough and I say so. Once Ethan's old enough—and that's for me, also, to decide, I'm getting rid of you," he reveals icily.

"You're a fucking monster! I'm Ethan's mother. You can't kick me out of Ethan's life." The fierceness leaps out of me, and I want to attack. I won't be taken from Ethan, and Dimitri has taken this stupid power tripping too far.

"Oh, but Ms. Knight. I can and I will. You betcha. I can send you straight to hell and back."

“The only reason you’re doing this is because you think I slept with someone else. You’re going to fuck up Ethan’s life. Stop and think about what you’re doing. Get off this stupid vendetta of yours. I’ve suffered enough,” I tell him, my voice shaky, and my body quivering from head to toe, but from the glint in Dimitri’s eye it’s as if he likes to see me distraught and falling apart.

“Ms. Knight. I warned you. And I’m only getting started,” Dimitri sneers, the “Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde” side of him materializing.

“You can’t act like this. You have a son. Don’t you think he’s going to end up hating you when he finds out what you’ve done.”

“Then he’s never going to find out, and I’m going to paint you as the villain. I don’t know... hmm, what story can I make up. Oh, how about your mother ran off with another man. Sound familiar, Ms. Knight?” Dimitri pitches, his repeated story sad to listen to.

“Do you believe the lies you buy into, Dimitri?” I hiss back at him, but I watch his face change from one of anger to calm and serene. I turn to see Ethan standing at the door, his head bowed looking confused and sad with Mr. Bear in his hand. Shit. He heard us. My heart breaks when I see his face.

“What’s going on?” Ethan asks as I find the strength to pretend for the sake of my son.

“Nothing, honey. We didn’t mean to wake you up. I was talking to your father and saying how much I want us to get along since we’re all going to be living in the house together.”

Dimitri wants to glare at me, I can tell from the way his mouth twitches, but instead he smiles at Ethan.

“I agree with your mother. I want you to be happy here in your new home. Your mother and I are working out the details, that’s all.” His voice is smoky, and his attitude completely different. It’s amazing how quickly he can turn it off and on, and the way he’s talking to his son is heartwarming and heartbreaking all at the same time. Ethan wobbles forward, putting his small hand in mine.

“Mommy, do they have chocolate milk here like they do at our place? Can I have some?”

Both Dimitri and I grin at the same time. “Yes. We have chocolate milk right here at your new home. Coming right up.”

Ethan is the strand keeping us civil, and he’s the one person we’re both wanting to keep happy. Other than that, I’m not holding out for hope for anything else.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:12 pm

Three weeks have passed since Ava and Ethan have started living at the house, and it hasn't been an easy ride. For the first two weeks, Cara and Ava were at each other's throats, and I had to break them up before Ethan saw them.

Not until I pulled Ava aside in the study for a chat did she catch on to how serious I was about sending her away, but I had to watch my step because I didn't want me son thinking I was a cruel man. Often I had to bite back the hatred I have towards his mother for the greater good.

"Both you and Cara are here together, and it's going to be this way until I say otherwise. Do you understand?" But every night I had to fight and win the battle of Ava worming her way into my heart again.

"This is so confusing for Ethan. I'm not going to lie to my boy. What am I supposed to tell him about her? He keeps asking about the lady Daddy goes to sleep with! Explain it to me, Dimitri."

She carried her newly inherited sass from L.A. or wherever she had it and brought it with her full force back to Chicago. I hated the sharp cutting tone she employed, but sometimes it got me hard when I was in the office thinking about bending her over on my desk. It took everything in me, not to give in to temptation. Hidden behind the sheet of our anger, I feared there was something else... feelings unresolved that needed to be dealt with.

Standing up in my office, it's midday and I've had back-to-back meetings. Most of them have been mundane. I draw in a sip of my coffee as Viktor knocks before entering.

“Morning, Viktor. Everything good?”

“All good from my end. How about you?”

“Pretty good, considering.”

“Good, then. Ava and Ethan are shopping, The bodyguard is with them.” I smile fondly, the little boy carving a space in my heart so easily and simply it’s been a miracle.

“Ah, good. Shopping for Ethan?”

“Yes.” Viktor stands in the door with a smirk on his face unmoving as I study the people on the ground. The office overlooks the river, and it’s a view that I enjoy most days, but today I’m restless and want to be with Ava and Ethan. Sipping my coffee, I turn to Viktor.

“Have my meetings bumped to the afternoon, will you? And tell me where Ethan and Ava are.”

“Thought as much,” Viktor says, grinning, and I grin back. “They’re near Darling Promenade, the shopping strip there.”

“Ah, I know where. Thanks.” I put down my coffee determined to catch them before they leave. Ethan being out and about in Chicago is good for him. I don’t want him cooped up in the house, but I had to watch Ava, so that’s where the bodyguard stepped in. She was only allowed out with him in tow, otherwise I threatened to let Cara take him out, but I didn’t have to execute that plan, with Ava following my commands for once.

Snatching my jacket up from the back of my chair, I moved off to my SUV, heading

towards them. I find a parking spot with ease and call the bodyguard.

“Sir, they’re about to enter LaLaBaby department store near Pico Boulevard.”

“Thanks.” I walk towards the store, but the strip of stores aren’t packed. There’s a few people scattered along the walkway, and next to the baby store is a café tucked in between stores. I fall into the gap, watching Ava being playful with Ethan. It’s a joy to watch and I allow myself the secret of my heart melting with ease. She’s good with him, and despite the restrictive circumstances I have her under, she looks better—well rested. The glimmer shines in her warm brown eyes when she’s with Ethan, and as I watch her, I can’t imagine the woman in front of me doing the things I saw on that fateful link all those years ago.

There’s a hole in my heart when it comes to Ava, but having her close enough to take care of Ethan gives me a fraction of what I had with her. Only pieces of what we enjoyed together remain, but watching her brings the best of the memories back. I angle myself where I can keep watching her from afar.

She doesn’t see me. She would have to step out from where she’s standing outside the door and peek around the corner to the café to spot me. I hang back, watching as Ava enters the store. Stepping forward, I see her picking out clothes with him. I can’t stand outside the window. I would look like the creeper I am, so I move through the racks at the front of the store, enjoying the sound of my boy’s voice as he picks out shirts.

As time moves on, Ava stands at the counter with the black card I’ve given her paying for Ethan’s clothing. As she turns, I gulp down the hard lump in my throat. Her beauty is the type that becomes more serene and sophisticated as time passes. Cara’s no match for her, and it shows.

Anticipating them seeing me, I walk back out of the store, enjoying witnessing them

together without my influence, but I watch as Ava suddenly draws Ethan in towards her, the bodyguard a few paces back behind her.

The woman's face is one I've seen before, and Ava's nervous disposition informs me that she knows the woman well too. Ethan stands in front of her as she places a protective shield of arms in front of him. Passersby move around them as I move to within earshot, desperate to hear their conversation.

"Cindy, what are you doing here?" Ava shoots warily as I press my eyes shut, a ball of anger collecting inside my body. I didn't instantly recognize her because the woman's hair is strawberry blonde and she's thinner. This ought to be interesting.

"I'm doing the same thing you're doing, I guess," she replies sheepishly, her eyes looking for something on the floor as she tucks her straight hair behind her ear.

"You have a child?" Ava asks in shock, her face crestfallen as she speaks to Cindy.

Good. I hope you feel the shame of what you did to me and what you did to yourself.

"Yeah, me and my boyfriend. You don't know him," Cindy replies as they stare at one another for a minute. "You look good these days. Is this your little man?" She attempts to bend down and talk to him, but Ava's face tightens as she shields Ethan, directing the bodyguard to step in. Cindy stares at the man, fear in her eyes.

"Don't put a hand on my son." Her voice is wracked with emotion, but I'm enjoying the show. Serves Ava right. She wouldn't be in this position if it weren't for her lust.

"Ava, I'm sorry for what it's worth," Cindy begs, misery in her voice. "I miss you, but I did what I had to do to get money. She paid me well." Cindy begins to break down as I lean closer, right behind the bodyguard. He's seen me already and I texted him earlier to pretend I didn't exist.

“Sorry?” Ava cracks now too, her voice breaking apart. “Cindy, what you did ruined my life. You spiked my drink and made up those photos when you could have just asked me for money.”

Cindy covers her body defensively, crossing her arms, diverting her eyes as her shoe scuffs on the ground over a pebble. “That lady told me she would make it worth my while, and I was desperate. I didn’t think it would affect you that badly,” she pleads, a river of lame justifications spilling from her mouth as the illusions I hold in my head come crashing down.

“Ekaterina gave you how much to screw up my life?” Ava asks, tears falling from her eyes.

My mother had something to do with this?

“Umm, we don’t have to do this, Ava. You’ve got your son here, and it looks like everything’s worked out, yeah? I wouldn’t worry about—” Cindy misdirects wanting to get out of swimming in her guilt and dirty betrayal.

But I’m a shattered man. I can’t believe Ekaterina. She would do something like this so I could marry Cara? I hold my position listening to the story unfold, pain clawing at my chest, but not for me—for Ava. She didn’t betray me; I betrayed her at the end of the day.

In so many ways....

“You don’t get to tell me what to be worried about,” Ava launches back, her words overflowing with high emotion as she points her finger in Cindy’s chest. “I told you I would help you when I got money from Raven’s Peak. How could you sell out our friendship for money? I hate you, Cindy,” she gasps, and I can’t let her endure it anymore. It’s too hard for me to watch.

“I’m sorry. I messed up, Ava. Shit—I did. Please find a place in your heart to forgive me,” Cindy sobs, but wanting to shield Ava and not have Ethan listen to any more, I make myself known.

Ava turns to face me, her warm brown innocent eyes full of tears. There’s hatred in hers, not only for Cindy but for me. Cindy takes the opportunity to scuttle away into the store, leaving the pieces for me to pick up.

“Ava,” I start gently, putting out a hand to her as Ethan runs to his mother.

“Mommy, don’t cry. It’s okay. You’re okay.”

“I know. Sorry, Ethan.” She sniffs, her bottom lip wobbling as fire blazes in her eyes.

“You told me the truth. You never lied.” I’d been blind to my mother’s greed and feeding into her vicarious living through me, so much so I’ve killed dead the only true love of my life.

“I told you I never lied to you. You didn’t listen to me. You didn’t—” she gasps in distress, holding her chest, the moment hard for her. “You didn’t believe me.”

Ethan bear hugs her legs as I stand in the mud I slung at Ava, wanting to rewind everything I ever did to her.

“I’m sorry, Ava. I’m so sorry.” I reach out as Ethan keeps hugging her legs. I want them in my life so badly, but I don’t know what to do to repair all I’ve done to her.

“Sorry?” Ava wipes her tears. “There’s a lot of that being thrown around this morning. She just replayed everything again. I never want to see her face. Ever.”

“Or mine I’m guessing,” I mumble, humbled by my mistake. I never get it wrong, but

this time I did, in a big way.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:12 pm

After the long ride home and after Ethan being put to bed, I'm face-to-face with Dimitri, the real and whole truth on the table. His arrogance is gone, left with a shell. Shame and guilt hang in the air as if they're old friends to one another as I sit and wait to hear what Dimitri has to say. I don't know how long he was standing there with Cindy, but it's obvious it was long enough to pick up the gist of the conversation.

I can't stand the awkward silence, wanting to get the conversation out of the way as quickly as possible so I can sleep. The interaction left me weary down to my bones. Dimitri must have felt bad enough to send Cara away, because I haven't seen her today.

Good. There's not much I can take. Numb on the inside, I start. "Dimitri, I'm not sure how long you were standing there, but I want to tell you that years ago, I told you the truth. All of it. When you got back that day, I planned to tell you about Ethan."

There's no emotion in my voice. No. I don't have anything left in the tank to fight. All I want to do is be with my son, that's all. Because he's the only light in my life left. Everything else is bleak and full of complications and darkness.

A confused frown covers Dimitri's face as he leans forward perched near the end of the couch. His head's lowered, but it's shaking now. "How?" Dimitri blurts out bluntly without warning, the word confusing me.

"How? I don't understand what you mean." Sadly, I cross my arms in front of myself, not wanting to get too close to him again. I can't. Loving Dimitri hurts.

Dimitri's face turns upwards to look at me. "How are you okay with this after everything I've put you through? I took Raven's Peak from you, and you fought for that...." He trails off as the tears I thought I was done with blow up in my face like a volcano.

"I don't know," I whisper.

"Fuck. Cara. Ethan. Shit. My mother. I should have known. All this time. She didn't say a word." Sheer relief floods through my body, but so does the pain of the years gone past and what I had to endure. I cry, full blown cry, letting it all go in front of him.

Dimitri pats the seat beside him, but I shake my head. I don't want to be near the man who crushed my heart and trampled on it ten times over, but I'm lying to myself. I want to bury myself in his arms again and be like we were.

"Ava. I fucked up. I have to find out what drug she used. How much my mother paid her off."

"What's the point of that, Dimitri? It's old news and she won't care. She told me at the party," I confess, the missing pieces of the story gluing together.

"Tell me, Ava. I want to know everything. Why didn't you tell me about what she said to you?"

Baring my soul to him again is a risk, but I've got nothing to lose at this point. "She warned me that she would make me go away if I didn't distance myself from you." I don't care about what I look like and I'm sure I look like a train wreck.

Dimitri does his best to wipe the tears from my waterlogged cheeks using the back of his thumb and it's amazing how I can still feel the tremors under his touch. I've

craved his hands on me for too long, but it's dangerous to love a man who never trusts.

"Ekaterina is a special breed, and she's pushed me to the top of my game. Driving me, but over the years, I've seen that it's been for her gain," Dimitri explains reflectively. "I didn't believe it was about her until Cara."

Sniffing, I leave my compassion out of it, I've felt sorry enough over Dimitri's upbringing for too long, and it's what led me down this dark tunnel and into the bowels of his world in the first place. "What about Cara?"

Dimitri's forlorn eyes don't hold the same ice in them anymore. They've melted into sorrow as I stare back at a man who's built his empire on bending others to his will and games of strategy. But he's more than that to me. I broke through the ice, discovering the real Dimitri beneath the surface.

"Cara." Dimitri cups my face in his hands, rubbing it. "She's not you, and never will be. My mother coerced me into being with her. Her father's a Russian billionaire, and—"

I interrupt filling in the blanks as Dimitri keeps talking. "It would be a good business move." Alarm filters through his eyes as he begins to see how predictable his world is. Money, business, greed, wash, rinse, repeat.

"Yes. A good business move."

"How's that working out?" I sigh, my heart heavy, and the emotions I've driven down to the ground, forcing their way up and out.

Dimitri closes his eyes, his dirty blond hair lighter these days from the change of season. "It's bad. But I guess you picked that up already. I don't love her and never

will,” he replies flatly. “She’s got nothing on you, Ava. I swear.” He shakes his head, the break in his voice sending me into a breakdown as I sob.

“You don’t know what I’ve been through these years, Dimitri. You really don’t,” I explain as Dimitri leaves the couch for a moment coming back with tissues, but I don’t give a damn what I look like anymore. It doesn’t matter.

“That’s why I asked how,” he replies, his voice all tangled up like mine. Dimitri reaches for my hand, the warmth of his perfect on my skin. “Ava... is forgiveness even possible?”

“I don’t know what you want me to say to that, Dimitri. I can’t make that type of decision right now.” Taking the tissue, I dab my sore eyes, but the tears offer no respite, turbulent emotions running through me as my shoulders sag.

Dimitri looks on expectantly, but I don’t have anything to give but the truth. “I was so alone, Dimitri. I went back to my apartment and managed to sell enough of my things to buy a plane ticket to L.A.”

“I’m listening,” Dimitri adds tenderly, not letting go of my fingers.

“I sold what I could, and I barely had enough money to cover the first month’s rent, but I’m a fighter, so I found a way. They transferred me from Chicago Law School to UCLA Law School based on my grades. That’s what pulled me through.”

Dimitri’s mouth curves into a watery smile. “You’ve always been a smart one. It’s why I was so attracted to you in the first place.”

“I fought and moved twice and had all these complications with Ethan.” I cry harder as the trauma returns. “I thought I was going to lose him in the third trimester. I was bleeding heavy, from all the stress and everything. I was fainting all the time, but

what's worse is I couldn't stop thinking about you. I hated that I loved you," I confess, clearing the air and my soul.

At breaking point, I see a man in front of me—a vulnerable one. Not some Bratva boss taking over the world, but a man who wanted love like I do, his eyes welling with tears.

"Shit, Ava." He rubs my leg, and I can tell he's digging to find the words. "I couldn't do it either," he finally admits, looking at the ceiling.

"Do what?"

"Be connected to anybody else. I tried, but every time they got close, I would break from them. I thought about you every day and night for years, keeping up with the lie I was fed, even under the anger. Don't you understand I would never be angry about anything I don't care about?"

Worn out, I shrug. "Who knows...?" I trail off, shaking my head, willing myself to stop the slow burn of desire rising to the surface. It won't go away.

"I know." He smiles affectionately, and I feel some of the pain of the past slip. "I've loved you ever since I chased you in the woods that day. I can't change it, and God knows I've wanted to. I love you, Ms. Knight."

Dragging me into his arms, his kiss acts like a balm to take the pain away. I breathe, letting him do it as we fall back to the groove of our early days and I remember the grooves of his mouth, the taste of his tongue. It's still the same, and it's scary to feel with him like we never left each other.

I'm the one to pull back first, my head getting in the way, telling me all the reasons why I shouldn't let him in again. "Dimitri, I don't see how this changes things.

There's so much for us to work out," I remind him, pushing on his chest slightly, wanting to process.

"Ava, would you give me a second chance? Do you think it's possible?"

Stalling, I open my eyes wide, not having the words to say. "Dimitri, you hurt me so badly. I don't think I can. You have Cara. And a life you've gone on and built without me."

He takes both my hands, holding them tight. "My life is nothing without you and Ethan. Cara's out of here. I don't want her. I only want you Ava, I've only ever wanted you. I need you both in my life. I won't leave you out in the cold ever again," he vows vehemently as I stop myself from being swept up by the power of his emotions.

"Dimitri, you can't guarantee it. What if somebody else tries to step between us?" I ask him in a wrung-out tone.

"No. I won't believe them." His mouth forms a grim line. "I will protect you, and honor you. I will trust you the right way. I've never had reason to doubt you in the first place. You're one of the most, loyal pure-hearted women I've ever met, and I don't deserve you."

Dimitri hangs his head, coming closer and pulling me into a soft embrace. It feels so good to be this close to his intoxicating touch. "Hmm," I sigh, wanting to let myself go with. Maybe I can....

"But if you don't want to be with me, I understand why, and it's a cross I will have to bear."

As I rest my head against him for a minute, I realize it's an unbearable feat having to

be apart from him. I give in with a muffled reply. “Yes. I’ll give you a second chance, but it’s the last one.”

Dimitri groans. “Ava, I’m going to make sure you’re a happy woman. Let me make love to you. Let me show you,” he whispers, as I give in completely to him. I’m powerless not to, but this time it’s on my terms.

I smile at him. “Then what are you waiting for?” He lifts me to my feet from the couch, holding my hand as we quietly enter the bedroom. I stand at it for a moment hesitant about the mirror, and about Cara occupying his bed.

“What is it?”

“My room. Not here. With her here.”

“Fair enough. You take the lead.” And I do, leading Dimitri to the spare room I’m in, emotions riding high as I kiss him lightly, the mere taste of his possessive mouth enough to bring me alive. I cave in to his tight drum of a chest, one heartbeat to another, and God, it’s the only place I want to be. It feels so damn right and good to be back in his arms.

We stand in our truths, coming full circle as our lips meet in an urgent clash of desire. We clutch at one another like two people drowning as the undying flame of our love grows brighter and brighter.

He buries his face into my hair as I luxuriate in the feel of his dominant hands sliding in and out of the deep folds of my curves. Weeping in joy, I let my barriers down as he peels layer upon layer of clothing off my body until we’re both naked, our hot flesh pressed together.

“You feel so damn good, Ava. And you’re more beautiful than ever. You made it

hard for me in the boardroom,” he groans. “I wanted you so badly in L.A., but we’re back. Together like we belong.” His feverish barrage of hot kisses make me feel like the adored woman he first made love to again, because love never dies. It only changes form and evolves if you let it, and I’m more in love with Dimitri than I’ve ever been.

“You too in your suit,” I confess with a giggle, letting the tension go as Dimitri cups my full breasts. “I hated that you looked so good.” I smile, my voice hoarse as Dimitri drags me backwards to lay on top of him in one smooth motion.

He studies my features, his hands pulling back the curtain of my brown hair so he can see my face clearly. I groan lightly, biting my lip as the hard girth of him rubs on my stomach and reminds me of what Dimitri’s capable of in the bedroom. I’m wet already from his touch, the restraint of him controlling himself with me very sexy.

“There’s so much we have to learn about each other, and so much I want to do with you and Ethan. You bring my life color—joy, and I promise to be true always.”

My heart soars as I slide backwards, finding the right place to slot himself into me. He watches, and I can see myself through his eyes. There’s such admiration in them as we connect.

His hands roam over the many curves of my body as I ride him, connecting, falling deeper and deeper into him. We’re not fucking anymore. We’re making love, and it’s powerful.

Groaning, I let the momentum of riding him take me away. Dimitri pants as he watches, circling my clit and raising himself up. “Wrap your legs around me, Ava. I want to be close to you.”

Chuckling, I wrap my plentiful thighs around his chiseled back as we rock back and

forth together, the moment intimate. Chest to chest, our mouths colliding in unbridled passion for all the time together we've missed.

Linking my fingers into his, Dimitri lays his head into my bosom thrusting hard, and the deeper he moves inside me, the more unleashed I become. Sighing, I feel the peak rising inside my core as I run my fingers through Dimitri's hair. He kisses my collarbone, his breath ragged.

"Ava, you're all the woman I've ever wanted."

"All these words we didn't say," I respond in a croaky whisper. "Come with me, Dimitri," I urge, placing the sultry request in his ear, the tenderness of his touch bringing me close to tears as we rock away the ghostly pain of the past.

"That's a request, I can fulfill." Our love has been a slow-burning one, scarred, but its flame is burning brighter than ever. Succumbing to my insistence, Dimitri gives me more of himself as the pads of my fingers dig into his back, holding on. He takes me higher, grunting and straining as the sweat pours between us. I moan, the first wave of orgasm budding as Dimitri thrusts, crying out. "Ava, you're the love of my life."

His words make me fly. "Dimitri, yes!" I shout as we release in sync, euphoria hitting as he loses all control, spasming in climax right along with me. We've left each other breathless, both of us heaving as we fall apart, laying together side by side, a sense of inner contentment filling me.

Together is where we belong. We do nothing for a while, laying sated and happy together.

"I could be here all day with you, and that's dangerous," I admit, rolling to kiss his cheek.

“No. It’s perfect, but you’ve made me hungry. Pick a movie and we can watch it and eat. Unless there’s something else you want to do?” He looks at me in earnest, but I beam.

“How did you know that’s exactly what I want to do?” I ask the mind reader.

Dimitri shrugs with a smug grin. “I don’t to be honest. I’m going with a hunch. We used to do it so much, and I’ve missed it. You—so much.” Admiring him, I lay on my side comfortably as he gazes at me.

“Are we going to get through the movie, Dimitri?”

“I’m not sure I can answer that, but I’m going to give it my best shot.” But we do, spending the night wrapped up in each other’s arms, laughing and enjoying each other’s company. It feels like a dream come true, but I haven’t forgotten the long road it took to get us back here, but they say time heals all wounds, and maybe I’m the woman who can tame the Bratva beast after all.

Raven’s Peak brought us together, taking us to the valleys of the lowest lows. The only thing I care about is we’ve made it back to the peak of the mountain.

Together.

Dimitri

One year later...

“I can’t believe this is happening. I don’t think I have enough photos. He didn’t even look back when I tried to take them!” Ava’s mouth slumps as we drop Ethan off to his first day at school, but I’m grinning from ear to ear watching how he’s changed and grown so quickly in front of our eyes. There’re many proud and anxious parents gathered around the school gates, and as Ethan finds his playmates, I watch on at his excitement. I stand next to Ava as she tries to squeeze out more pictures, waving furiously at Ethan and blowing kisses to him.

He’s at the age where he will blow them back, and he flaps his arms in a wave to us, but as the gates open and the sea of children engulf him, it gets harder and harder to see him. “Bye, Mom and Dad, I’m going inside. Bye!”

“Bye!” I call out, a proud father as he shuffles inside the gates, yelling and screaming with his classmates as the teachers wait near the brick building, calling each child in on roll call.

“Wow. He’s going in there. Can you believe it? Our son.” I hold on to Ava’s waist, whispering in her ear. “There’s nothing to fear; he’s an Utkin. Bravery is in his blood. Strong Bratva boy,” I growl, making her laugh.

“Dimitri, stop it! My baby, he’s gone,” she wails as the kids trail inside with backpacks on that are nearly bigger than they are.

Laughing, I tuck her sleek bob behind her ear, understanding why she might be worried, but I would cross mountains, rivers, and lakes to protect my blood. “I know the principal’s address. If anything goes down, I’ve got him covered.” I wink, reminding her of the Bratva privileges should they need to be exercised, and she sighs.

“That’s right. Sometimes I forget.”

“I make it, so you forget. We have a normal life like any other,” I tell her in amusement as she rolls her eyes, age looking good on her. She’s as curvy as ever, her hair sleeker. She moves with the grace of water, and I make sure she’s relaxed and pampered. The more I spoil Ava, the better I feel.

We’ve traveled to so many places together, including back to Raven’s Peak, but for R & R only. Profits are soaring through the roof and tech companies buying into the base as a power source. I ripped up the last contract with Ava for Raven’s Peak to show her I was serious about her. Now we own Raven’s Peak 50/50, and all the energy contracts for the property go through her as our lawyer. Together we make a hell of a power couple.

But there’s so much more I want to show her, but only her. Ava lingers as one of the last parents waiting for the doors close before she moves. I have to gently take her hand to move her on.

“Darling, it’s going to be fine. Come on, let me take you to breakfast. I’ve got a couple of hours, and I want to spend time with you before I go to work.”

I draw her into a loving hug as she smiles at me. “Okay, you can take me to breakfast, but do you think we could go to that cute little place near the river, at the quiet end?” Suspicious that she’s up to something, I grin as we reach the car.

“Sure we can. Any reason or you just want to eat there this morning?”

“Umm, no.” But there’s a glow to her when she says it as if she’s harboring a secret I don’t know about. She reapplies her lipstick and I stare at her mesmerized by all that she is. Some days I’m in awe at all that she handles with Ethan and now working directly alongside me. I thought mixing business with pleasure might be a problem, and cause fights, but it does the opposite. We’ve become closer than ever, and she’s become a valuable member of the Bratva as our official commercial and litigation lawyer for all mergers and acquisitions. Given our reach, we keep her busy, and I trust her implicitly with any Bratva dealings.

Getting rid of Cara proved to be a little more difficult. “I want to keep the ring. I don’t want that skank having it.”

“She’s not a skank, Cara. We’re not compatible, and you know it. Why don’t you find someone you truly love? Someone that makes you feel something,” I told her in a candid conversation one day.

She looked at me as if I had two heads. “What are you fucking talking about love? You’re the head of the Bratva. It’s what’s done. We do fit together Dimitri, but you don’t with her. Maybe you need a couple of days to sort through things and get back on track,” Cara replied coolly as we sat in the study, and it was at that moment I saw her for the opportunistic shark she was.

“I don’t know what plans you and my mother have cooking, but it’s not going to work, and you can keep the ring if you’re that desperate,” I told her, looking down my nose. It wasn’t as if she needed the money, it was more so that she did it out of spite.

“Fuck you, Dimitri. I told you to get rid of the kid, I knew he would be a hindrance.” I had to hold myself back from putting my hands around her throat.

“No. You don’t get to talk about my son like that. And if we had a child, you would be a shit mother,” I ground out, seeing red. Cara found a way to push my buttons in

those four years.

“Agh. I’m leaving. And my father and I are pulling out of our business deal for the Riveria with the Utkins. So there.”

“You’re a brat, Cara. Go. And I want all your stuff packed up in the next couple of days. I can have my housekeeping staff help you. I didn’t want it to end in a nasty way, but if this is the way you want to take it, so be it.”

“No, you made it that way by going back to some piece of ass from Raven’s Peak.”

I focus on the present, forever glad that I got rid of that little entanglement. “Okay, wherever you want to go, Ms. Future Utkin.” Her smile grows wider as we drive, snaking along the curved road to one of our favorite breakfast spots, the river out in front of us. There’s only a handful of people near the boardwalk, and it’s a blustery day. I hold Ava’s hand as she leads me to the railing, the cute café diner in front of us.

“Hi,” she says playfully, the Chicago wind whipping around her hair as she quickly tries to smooth it down. Smirking, I laugh as she giggles and I help.

“Hi, you need a scarf for the wind. We can get one after breakfast if we have enough time.”

“It’s okay, a little wind in my hair never hurt anyone. I wanted to talk to you about something,” she starts out, her warm eyes twinkling. There’s been an extra glow to her lately that I can’t put my finger on, but it’s working for her, and I love seeing her happy.

“Yes. Tell me anything.” I grasp her fingers in mine, blowing heat into them, the wind a little chilly, but Ava’s not bothered.

“We have one child in school. It’s such a big deal, and I can’t wait until we see the next one off too.” She reveals the happy secret so casually, I almost miss it.

“What? A second one...” I put the pieces together, turning towards her with a huge grin. “Does that mean what I think it means? We’re having another kid!” I hold on to her hips, wanting to shout from the rooftops.

“Yes. That’s exactly what I mean.” She bobs her head up and down. “We are having another one.” She holds up two fingers and I grab her, dragging her up into my arms as she screams with laughter, her hair flying about her face as people watch on.

“Dimitri! Put me down. Everybody’s looking at us.” She pats my shoulder, my teeth growing cold from the wind, but I don’t care because this is the most magical moment of my life. I slide her down, moving her unruly locks out of her face. “Hey, you.” I kiss her passionately, the cool chill of the weather no match for the warmth shared between us.

“Are you happy, Dimitri?” she asks, giggling as I stop and touch her stomach.

“Am I happy.” I throw my head back. “I’ve never been happier. We’ve come a long way you and I, Ava. And I promise you I’m going to be there every step of the way for this pregnancy. I’m not going to leave you alone. I’m going to be eyeballing you every day.” I make light of it, but I’m serious about our future together.

Ava rolls her eyes. “You already do that at work.”

“Is it too much for you?”

“No. You know it’s not. I like being part of the organization. I’ve found my place. Besides I have my own corner office. By the way, did you know Mark Thompson rang me yesterday?”

“What? Your old boss?” I inquire, the conversation taking a turn.

“Yes. But don’t worry, he wasn’t trying to poach me back. He wants to give me a client that’s on the move to Chicago.”

Impressed, my eyebrows raise. “You really are like a superwoman to me. I love you so much, and I can’t wait to have two babies running around.”

“Me neither. I’m sure it’s going to be chaos, but I wouldn’t have it any other way, Dimitri Utkin.” She touches the side of my cold face as we embrace, keeping each other warm. “But you know what?”

I grin back at her, our breakfast time fast running away, but I know I’m going to spend many a breakfast with her in the future anyway. “What?”

She scrunches her nose, shivering as I draw her close. “I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

“I promise not to bring you chaos. I want to be your peace from now on, Ava. No more,” I whisper as the wind whips up around us.

“You’re not, but now that we’re having the second baby, I wonder if you want your mother involved?” Ava proceeds with caution, but I let my connection to Mother die as soon as Ava told me the score.

“No,” I state firmly, placing a hand around her waist as we walk to the café. “You’re such a compassionate person, and it’s one of the things I love about you most, but my mother only chooses to corrupt. There’s no excuse for what she did,” I conclude, knowing I sound like a hypocrite given that Ava forgave me for all my sins.

This wasn’t the same. Not by a long shot. She’d been slowly manipulating me my entire life and molding me into the man my father wasn’t as her surrogate husband.

“Dimitri. You’re a shame like your father. Ava’s not for us and should respect Bratva and your mother. So what if I paid her little girlfriend off! Now you’ve got a bastard child! Why should you worry? Marry Cara and set us free. We send Ethan to boarding school when he’s old enough. Make a respectable man out of him.”

I remember the day I confronted her, days after at lunch and all she did was order another wine, not giving a shit about thwarting any plans I had for love in my life or Ethan. Livid, I had stood up throwing the napkin down, ending our relationship.

“No. You’re the woman who should carry shame paying off Ava’s best friend. I will be with and marry who I want to marry. And do yourself a favor, don’t you ever talk about my son like that. Ever. And if you come anywhere near him, I’ll have you dealt with. And I’m sure you can read between the lines when I say that.”

The lunch ended in a thunderstorm, and I haven’t spoken to my mother since. Not until she apologizes to Ava directly, but there’s no way she can make up for the years lost.

“Okay. I just don’t—”

I cut her off, anticipating what she’s about to say. “No. Don’t feel guilt for her. What’s done is done. We have our family to worry about, and it’s expanding. We’re happy together. Let’s stay happy. Okay?”

“Okay.” Her dreamy eyes melt, and I want to give her the world. “I love you, Dimitri Utkin. You make my heart pound.”

I laugh, the line from one of our favorite movies we watched the other night. “And you do the same to mine. I love you back harder.”

THE END