



Mountain Daddy (Broken Boss Daddies #1)

Author: *Milli Rabbitz*

Category: Romance

Description: I didnt know our one-night stand left her pregnant.

Cant blame her. Im not the type you take home to meet daddy.

As a mafia leader, Im not exactly marriage material.

But the moment I saw her bent over in that tight mini skirt,

I knew Id claim her for life.

Curves wrapped in leather.

A smile I would burn the world down to protect.

We had one night.

Then she saw me kill a man.

The next day, she vanished.

Now Ive found her again—in a quiet mountain town.

Baking cookies in a yellow apron

And a little boy smiling with eyes that look just like mine.

But Im not the forgiving type.

And neither are my enemies.

Total Pages (Source): 33

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:30 am

LILLY

I knew the skirt was too short even before I left my apartment.

“Lilly,” my manager snaps as I pass her, balancing a drink tray. “The dress code is sexy, not cheeky.”

Her eyes linger on the curve of my ass that is flirting dangerously close to the bottom of my skirt.

I don’t even slow down as I give my faux I’m-offended excuse. “Well, it fit back in college.”

She mutters something under her breath that sounds like an “HR nightmare,” but I keep moving, and so does my skirt, riding up inch by inch. Honestly, right now I’ve got bigger problems than my tiny skirt. Like delivering drinks to Table 9.

VIP section.

Usually, the VIP section means huge tips. But around here, we all know Table 9 by another name—Bratva hangout. None of the girls want that table. You might get tipped in hundreds, but you also get stared at like meat.

These are men who don’t ask. They command.

So far, I’ve been lucky. Since I started three weeks ago, I’ve never had to do VIP service.

Well, my luck's run out. Trish, my manager, thinks I'm ready. When I walked in earlier today, she handed me the dreaded slip with a cunning little smirk and said, "You'll do."

I'll do? Rude .

Now I'm stuck in my college-era mini skirt that screams "clubbing hottie"—or, let's be real, more like "hot-mess"—and hasn't seen the light of day in half a decade.

I can ignore Trish's "you'll do" comment, but the breeze on my ass cheeks? Not so much.

I wiggle my hips, hoping the damn skirt stops riding up, then with a nervous strut, I round the corner, heels tapping like gunshots, and instantly regret every decision I've ever made.

Because he's sitting there.

Alone.

Table Nine. Bratva Hangout.

Back corner.

Black-on-black suit. Night black hair slicked back like a fallen angel. Tattoos crawling up his neck.

He lounges like he owns the air itself, one arm draped lazily over the back of the velvet couch.

And those eyes?

Tiger eyes. Green.

Predator.

Tracking.

Locked on me.

The tray wobbles in my hands. I refocus. Don't drop it. Don't stutter. Don't faint.

My pulse is beating so hard I feel slightly light-headed. My throat tightens. And I'm already sweating in places I should not be sweating.

I try to hold it together. Focus on the tray, the low lights, literally anything other than the devil in a suit watching me like he already knows how this ends.

It feels like it takes ten years to walk ten feet. I feel his stare like a touch—skimming up my thighs, curling around my throat. Every step toward him feels like a countdown to something I can't name but already want too badly.

My brain is short-circuiting as I close the distance to the table.

Is my hair sticking up?

Why does my nose suddenly itch?

Do I walk weird?

What do I even do with my arms?

By the time I reach him, I'm all jumpy breaths, pounding heart, flushed cheeks—the

ones on my face—, and body screaming danger with a side of yes, please

Standing by his table, I stutter out, “G-good evening.”

Jesus. I can’t even talk in the presence of this Adonis. His bad boy vibes are giving Scarface movie set with a splash of prison sentence energy, unnerving, irresistible. I want to tear off those perfectly tailored clothes with my damn teeth.

They say instant attraction is a myth. Made-up tropes from romance novels.

They’re wrong.

I’ve never felt so instantly obsessed in my life.

He’s staring like he can read my thoughts. I place the menu down and commit the ultimate VIP service sin.

I hit his glass. Of very expensive wine. The glass goes onto the floor. The wine? Into his lap.

“Shit. Sorry—I—I—Oh my God. Sir, I’m so sorry.”

I back away, mortified. My face goes from bright red to plum red.

I have to fix this before Trish finds out. I bend to pick up the glass from the floor, and freeze. What the actual hell...

A sudden cold breeze assaults my inner thighs, splits directions to go straight between my ass cheeks while the other side cozies right up to God.

My black thong feels sheer, invisible, non-existent.

I'm kinda turned on by the feeling, and I kinda want to run. Then I remember I have an audience of one.

Don't panic. It's fine. He saw nothing. Accidents happen.

I stand up ram-rod straight, refusing to make eye contact. I can do this. Big girl panties. Well... almost panties.

He clears his throat.

I face him.

Our eyes lock.

Oh yeah. He saw everything .

The world goes still.

No music. No movement. Just him, staring like he owns me.

We skipped dating and went right to domination in my mind.

Like he's already undressed the rest of me and likes what he sees—he's hungry for it.

But this isn't the kind of man you do "show and tell" with.

This is the kind of man you never take home to Mom.

The kind who puts his hand around your throat and whispers, "Beg for it."

He knows it.

I know it.

Finally, after what felt like an eternity suspended somewhere between his eye-fucking and my do I like this , he speaks.

“It’s okay. Mistakes happen.”

That’s... generous. Also, a man that hot shouldn’t be allowed to have a deep, sexy voice.

Abort mission. Abort.

Red flag... Red flag. RUN.

I squeak out, “I’m sooo s-sorry.”

What the actual hell is wrong with me?

Normally, I’m a confident, social butterfly. Right now? I’m a teenage girl crushing on the senior quarterback.

He leans back in his chair like he doesn’t even notice the wine soaking into his pants. His gaze never wavers.

“You always give your guests such... personal service?” he asks, voice like smoke and honey and bad decisions that feel good.

“I—I usually wait until the second drink,” I say, too fast, then catch his meaning and blush. Again.

His mouth twitches. Not quite a smile—more like power wrapped in amusement.

“Well,” he says, enticing as sin, “if that was foreplay, I’m curious what bottle service looks like.”

My stomach flips.

My thighs... quiver.

Nope. Not okay.

I try to reset. “That’s reserved for men who don’t make me want to crawl into a hole and die.”

“Shame,” he murmurs. “I was hoping to taste something,” his gaze falls to my naked thighs, “special tonight.”

My brain short-circuits.

He has to be kidding.

Or maybe I just haven’t been laid in too long.

“Would you like another drink?” I ask, voice breathy by accident.

His eyes darken. “If it comes with that view again? Absolutely.”

I speak before I think. “Public indecency your thing?”

Given the glimmer in his eyes, I’m guessing that’s a yes.

He says, low and lethal, “Sounds like it’s yours.”

I bite my lower lip. The sound of Trish's harsh laughter somewhere behind me jolts me out of my trance.

And just like that, I remember where I am. I take a step back. "If you don't want that drink. I should... uh... go."

But before I can bolt, he slides something across the table.

A folded napkin.

I hesitate. Then pick it up and unfold it.

Floor 25. One drink. Just us.

Us? Who's us? I want to ask. I don't even know his name. I look up but he's looking in the opposite direction. Like I no longer exist.

He's played his move. Now, the ball is in my court. I get to choose.

I wiggle my skirt down and walk away without another word.

Back in the break room, I lean against the wall with trembling hands.

What the hell was that? I'm still clutching at the note. Reading it over and over again like it's Latin.

Someone pulls the note out of my hand. I look up and freak the hell out.

Trish. She's reading it and she doesn't look happy. Shit. I know the policy. No fraternizing with the customers.

“I know the rules,” I whisper. “I’m not going.”

“Who gave this to you?”

“Table Nine,” I tell her. There is only one man there tonight.

Her face transforms. She lets out a low whistle. “Damn. He doesn’t make requests.”

There’s something in the way she says it that fills me with pride. I’m his first... request ?

“You’ve seen him before?” I ask.

“Oh yeah. That’s Nikolai Vetrov. Bratva royalty. Comes through once every few weeks, never speaks unless he has to. Doesn’t smile. Doesn’t flirt. Doesn’t ask twice.”

That name hits like ice water down my spine. I’ve heard it in whispers around here before.

“I’m not going,” I repeat, though the words are a lie. I’m curious to know know more. To know him. To know why.

Trish says nothing. Hands the napkin back. I stare at it like it might bite.

“You can take the rest of the night off, Lilly,” she tells me. “Table 9 paid his bill already.”

My eyebrows lift. “Seriously?”

She shrugs. “What I don’t see can’t get you fired.”

With a knowing smirk, she turns and walks away.

No lecture. No warning. Just a manager who's seen everything— and knows exactly when to look the other way.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:30 am

LILLY

I don't remember making the decision. One moment, Trish walked off in the opposite direction, and the next, I was in the elevator.

Okay. Deep breaths. I don't have to go. I could take the elevator back down. No one would ever know.

He's dangerous. That much is clear. The kind of man who doesn't just play with fire. He is fire.

And yet, some twisted part of me isn't scared. Some part of me is curious. Reckless. Starving for a thrill I haven't tasted in years.

Trish said he never makes requests.

My heart is pounding like it wants out of my chest. My palms are damp. My stomach is doing acrobatics.

But I still keep moving forward, towards him.

As I walk down the hall, every bad thing that could go wrong enters my brain. I spot a 250-pound black-haired man standing outside the only door on this floor. Covered in ink. Wearing all black. And strapped. I mean, there's a gun under his jacket. I see it instantly.

This was a terrible idea.

I should've said no.

Should've gone home, microwaved leftover Thai, and binge-watched true crime documentaries instead of trying to star in one.

But I'm here.

I didn't even know hotels had rooms this high up.

The elevator ride took forever, and yes, there was an actual human being in there pressing the button, standing inside with me like this was Buckingham Palace.

He smirked when I said "floor 25," like he knew exactly what kind of trouble I was walking into.

The armed man doesn't say anything. Just looks at me hovering, then opens the door wider.

Oh. Okay. Guess we're doing this.

I step inside.

My breath catches. This isn't a hotel room. This is a damn rooftop mansion.

There's a skyline view of Chicago through floor-to-ceiling windows, marble floors so shiny I'm afraid to walk on them, and off to the side?—

Wait.

Is that a pool? An actual pool. On a private balcony. With a hot tub.

Who the hell am I meeting?

"You're late," a deep voice says.

I whirl around and nearly choke on my tongue.

He's shirtless with a towel around his waist and wet hair, and a glass in one hand.

He's built like a Roman statue, all carved muscle and inked skin.

Oh God.

My cheeks go nuclear.

"You're red again," he says, stepping toward me. Each step sounds like judgment. Like hunger.

He stops close enough to make my breath catch and my nipples harden. Close enough that I smell his cologne—spicy, dark, expensive. My eyes drop to his towel again, my mind picturing the bulge beneath it.

"Relax," he murmurs. "You came. That's all that matters, Lilly."

He knows my name? Ah, yes. The name badge on my outfit. Observant. It thrills me to feel... seen.

I try to laugh but sound nervous. "Figured I owed you a new drink. And maybe dry cleaning."

His eyes flash like he could eat me whole. "Let's start with the drink."

I swallow hard. “Just one drink.”

He walks over to the bar and I follow, not knowing what else to do with myself. He pours and hands me a glass, and I have no idea what’s in it, but I sip just to have something to do with my mouth.

He arches a brow, amused. “You’re not worried about meeting a stranger?”

“I’m more worried about what’s in this drink.”

“Good girl,” he murmurs.

Warmth, arousal, blossom between my thighs at how he says it. I realize it’s just him and me, alone, inside this gorgeous suite.

And for so many reasons, I feel flirty, powerful, even.

He arches a brow at my switch in energy. He smirks, sets his drink down, a dare in those eyes.

"Swim with me."

I blink. "Swim?"

And then he does the unthinkable.

He drops the towel, manhood standing up for me. I ogle him shamelessly as he walks across the balcony like a Greek god on vacation.

He’s built. He’s tattooed. And, um—girthy, long, perfect.

He dives into the water like he does this every day. And maybe he does. .

Me? I'm standing there trying to remember how to breathe. He's naked. Completely...naked.

"You coming in or just planning to eye-fuck me all night?" His voice is deep, challenging.

God, he has the nerve to smirk.

I set my drink down, kick off my heels, and walk outside.

"I'm thinking about it."

I sit there on a padded lounge chair, traitorous skirt still trying to be a tube top. Fine. I'll join him. I start out slow. First I take off my heels. He smirks wider.

"So," I say, forcing conversation. "Do you always invite waitresses up to join your nudist club?"

He laughs wickedly. "Only the ones who throw drinks at me."

"That wasn't a throw. It was more of a tragic fumble."

"Felt intentional."

"Please. If I wanted to throw something, I'd have nailed your face. Not your...crotch."

His eyes darken, and I instantly regret saying crotch.

The silence stretches. Heavy. Warm.

Then, he swims closer, eyes on me like he's already imagining how I'll taste.

"You getting in or what?" he breaks into a devilish grin. "You scared of some water?"

Now I feel challenged. I fire back. "Is all this for real? What the hell is going on here? Who has a penthouse like this?"

The smile on his face goes serious. "There's one rule in my world. Don't ask stupid questions."

How can a man go from smiling to murderer in five seconds?

Then the look is gone. Just a reminder who the lion is in this game.

I plan to strip naked and give in to what we both want, but the good girl in me is trying not to do what I really want to do right now: take this man on that outside sofa and ride him like his wet dream.

Plus, shouldn't he have to wait before the inevitable happens? So, I drag time out a little bit more and decide to let down my darkish brown hair.

Big mistake. His eyes go from lion to cheetah. Before I know it, he's out of the pool and standing next to me, massive cock fully erect and suckable.

And with him staring at me like that, like I'm the main course of the night, I'm done for. Game over. I drag the zipper of my tiny skirt down, slow and in control for now.

His eyes never leave me as the skirt hits the floor. The muscles in his jaw clench. I

whimper under that gaze.

His face hovers an inch from my neck, breath a ghost on my skin.

“You’re braver than you look,” he whispers.

I feel anything but brave, trembling inside like a leaf in the wind, aching for him to relieve the sexual tension in my body.

His fingers tease me, trailing lightly across my collarbone, pushing the fabric of my shirt out of the way, not touching so much as tracing air. I arch into him. The next thing I know, his hands are sliding down my sides, around to cup my ass. He groans.

He towers over me leaning in, head dipping low. “If I touch you now, you’re not walking away with just a drink.”

My breath catches. “Maybe I don’t want to walk away.”

His eyes storm over, darken. And then, his hands are on me.

Strong. Possessive. One at the back of my neck, pulling me closer. The other, squeezing the softness of my ass.

And then, he kisses me.

It’s not gentle.

It’s not sweet.

It’s hungry. Dominant. A kiss that says this isn’t a game, and I’m not walking out of here unchanged.

His lips press against mine, taking. I feel his hand cupping my face then slides lower until he's gripping my hip and pulling me flush against him. I can feel every inch of his length, and I moan into his mouth.

He groans, low in his throat, and I feel it everywhere.

The kiss deepens. One hand tangles in my hair. The other slides between my naked thighs, finding heat, arousal.

After what was definitely the best kiss of my life, he gently pulls back. Everything inside me is spiraling. I want more. I need more.

He pauses, brings his lips to mine. His voice is low. "Last chance. Say no, and I'll stop."

No isn't even a word I remember. I am about to absolutely lose my mind over this man.

I look into his eyes and hiss, "Don't you dare."

And he growls.

The city disappears. The past disappears. Even my name might've disappeared.

All pretense is gone and nothing around us exists. Not the other skyscrapers, not my job, not his clearly sordid past. Just us.

Then he starts.

Slowly.

Unbuttoning my blouse like he's unwrapping something sacred. He takes his time. His eyes stay locked on mine as the first button slips free. Then the second. The third. My breath catches on the fourth.

The blouse slips down my arms. His fingers trail over bare skin. His eyes glaze over my bra, a lacy little thing that barely covers my breasts, and he notices.

His mouth curves. "They match your panties."

I tremble at the memory of what he saw, what led to this moment.

And then he kisses each pale mound, flicking a tongue over my barely-covered nipples one by one. His lips trail down my warm skin in soft kisses as he drops to his knees.

His hands glide over my hips, clutching my flesh as he licks me from my navel to the top of my pussy.

Fuck yes. He tugs my thong, slow and smooth, like he's savoring every inch it reveals.

The fabric kisses the tops of my thighs, then slips lower, over my bare legs.

He exhales like a man seeing daylight after years underground.

"You're killing me," he mutters.

I smirk. "Good."

But that smugness doesn't last long.

His thumbs trace the sensitive skin of my inner thighs. Every nerve in my body is alive in ways I didn't know were possible.

He leans in, tongue landing for just a second on my sensitive folds. A taste? A promise? I pout as he stands again, every inch of his powerful body calling to me. And when he dips his head to my collarbone, sucks the skin and reaches behind me to unhook my bra, my body and my mind surrender.

I stand before him, as naked as he is, completely willing to be wrecked.

He doesn't speak. He just stares.

And I feel it—every inch of his attention like a heat source, a current, a vow.

The way he stares burns into me, makes me aware of every inch of skin I own.

I try to cross my arms, half-nervous at the intensity of that gaze.

He stops me.

“Don't hide from me,” he growls, pulling my arms down. “I like what I see.”

My breasts shudder with every exhale. The air feels electric. My skin grows warm under his stare. I should feel exposed. Instead, I feel worshipped .

He leans in, lips brushing mine.

“Bed?” I whisper, impatient for a release, eager to see what he'll do next.

He smiles, eyes wicked. “Eventually.”

And then he lifts me like I weigh nothing, like I'm already his, and throws me back down on the chaise lounge.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:30 am

LILLY

I land on the chaise with a soft thud, my naked body on display like an offering. He hovers over me, and I drink in the sight of him.

All ink.

Muscle.

Hungry eyes.

I need more, remembering his tongue tasting me, pressing into my mouth when he kissed me.

Nikolai doesn't waste time. He doesn't hesitate. And he doesn't ask.

He takes.

With his eyes, as he memorizes every curve.

With his body, as he lingers over me, pinning me beneath him.

With his hands, tracing over my curves, from the nape of my neck down the sides of my breasts, to squeeze at my waist.

My skin burns from his touch. I've been wet for him since the moment this cat and mouse dance began, just from the way he looks at me.

His broad shoulders blot out the city lights behind him. His erection stands proud.

I swallow hard.

“You're beautiful,” he says, hands sliding up my thighs, leaving trails of fire.

“You're so...” I whisper, trying for casual and missing by a mile at my own loss for words.

I'm at his mercy.

His smile is perfect. Knowing. “I'm going to taste every inch of you.”

I gulp.

“Spread your legs,” he commands. I do as he asks.

No second thoughts.

Just pure, animal instinct.

But I don't do a good enough job, it seems. His rough hands slide my thighs even further apart, like my body is his to claim.

I feel exposed. I barely have time to gasp before his mouth is on me—kissing, biting, sucking down my body like he knows just how to please me.

I arch up towards him, begging him to touch me where I want most. But he plays by his own rules.

He starts at my neck, sucking the tender skin beneath my ear until I'm arching off the

chaise. His tongue traces my collarbone, dips into the hollow of my throat. He makes his way down, painfully slow, like he's savoring a five-course meal.

When his lips close around my nipple, I gasp. He sucks, then flicks his tongue, and electric currents shoot straight between my legs. His hand finds my other breast, thumb circling, teasing. I'm panting already, my hips lifting, seeking friction.

“Patience,” he murmurs against my skin.

“No,” I fire back.

He chuckles, the sound vibrating through me. “Naughty.”

His mouth travels lower. Across my ribs. Over my stomach. His tongue dips into my navel, and my muscles tighten. Every touch is deliberate. Practiced. Like he's reading a map only he can see.

When he settles between my thighs, I hold my breath.

His eyes meet mine, dark and dangerous. “Watch me,” he commands.

And I do. I watch as he lowers his head. As his tongue makes first full contact with my center.

Holy. Fucking. Hell.

I moan louder than I mean to.

“Fuck, you’re loud,” he growls against my skin. “You’re going to wake the whole city.”

“I don’t care,” I pant.

The first stroke of his tongue has me gripping the cushions. The second has me biting my lip to keep from screaming. By the third, I’m lost.

He licks into me like a man who knows exactly what he’s doing.

Broad strokes that make my toes curl.

Quick flicks that make me whimper.

And when he wraps his lips around my clit and sucks—gently at first, then harder—I swear I see stars. My hands find his hair, fingers tangling in the still-damp strands. He groans against me, makes me feel every sense I own.

“That’s it,” he encourages, breath tickling my skin. “Let go for me.”

His tongue circles my clit, relentlessly. Two fingers slide inside me, curling upward, finding a spot that makes me jerk like I’ve been shocked.

“Oh god,” I choke out.

“Not God,” he says, looking up the length of my body. “Nikolai. Say it.”

“Nikolai,” I whimper.

“Again,” he demands, fingers pressing harder, tongue moving faster.

“Nikolai!”

My voice echoes across the empty balcony.

I should be embarrassed.

I'm not.

I'm too far gone.

The pressure builds. Tension coils in my belly, tighter and tighter. I'm climbing toward something massive, something I've never felt before.

“I'm going to?—”

“Come for me, Lilly,” he growls against me. “Now.”

And I do.

I shatter.

Explode.

I come hard. So hard, I swear I stop breathing.

I break apart into a million glittering pieces. The orgasm rips through me like a hurricane, wild and unstoppable. My back arches off the chaise. My thighs clamp around his head. My voice tears from my throat in a cry I barely recognize.

He doesn't stop. His mouth stays on me, gentler now but still moving, drawing out every last tremor until I'm pushing at his shoulders, too sensitive to take more. I've never come like that. He knew exactly how to rub, to lick, to press into the right spot like he had a damn GPS to my pleasure.

When he finally raises his head, his lips are glistening with me. He wipes his mouth

with the back of his hand.

“Never—” I gasp, trying to catch my breath. “Never felt that before.”

He arches an eyebrow. “Never?”

I shake my head, still pulsing with aftershocks. “Not like that.”

“We're just getting started.”

I whimper with need. He moves up my body. One hand grips my hip. The other wraps around mine.

“Stroke me, Lilly,” he growls at me in a velvet voice.

I reach out and take him in my hand, feeling each vein, every ridge, and the softness of his head. God. He's huge. Slowly, I grip him, stroking up and down, fingers caressing his balls. He hisses as I pick up the pace.

“God, yes,” he grunts out.

I feel powerful, owning his pleasure like this. When I can't wait any longer, I press the head of him up against my wet folds. His eyes lock onto mine.

He pushes into me slowly. Inch by excruciating inch. My body stretches to accommodate him. I gasp slightly at the intrusion. He's... not small.

“Fuck,” he hisses, eyes closing. “You're tight.”

I dig my nails into his shoulders as he pushes all the way in, then waits. His forehead drops to mine, arms bracketed around my head. The moment hangs between us,

heavy with promise.

Then he starts to move.

Slow at first. Deliberate. Testing my limits. Watching my face for signs of discomfort. But I don't want gentle. Not now. Not with him.

“Harder,” I demand, wrapping my legs around his waist.

His eyes darken, and a growl rumbles in his chest. “As you wish.”

He pulls almost all the way out, then slams back in. The force of it shoves me up the chaise. I cry out—not in pain, but shock at how good it feels.

He sets a punishing rhythm. Each thrust drives me higher, builds the tension again. His hands are everywhere—gripping my ass, squeezing my breasts, curling around my throat just firmly enough to make my pulse race.

“You like that?” he asks, feeling me clench around him when his hand tightens slightly on my neck.

“Yes,” I gasp, shameless in my admission.

He smirks.

The sound of skin slapping against skin fills the night air. Anyone in the surrounding buildings could see us if they looked, but I don't care. Let them watch. Let them see how this man is destroying me in the best possible way.

“I'm close again,” I whimper, surprised at myself.

“Good girl,” he praises, voice strained with his own approaching climax. “Come on my cock like it’s yours.”

His words push me over. The second orgasm hits harder than the first—deeper, fuller, spreading outward from where we're joined. I cry his name again, nails digging crescents into his skin.

He follows me over the edge, hips stuttering, face buried in my neck as he groans his release. His weight collapses on me, pinning me to the chaise, and for a moment, we just breathe together.

I’ve never felt so alive. I want to relish this moment.

Still half-hard, Nikolai pulls out and stands. He holds a hand to me, and I stand, falling into his broad chest.

He kisses me once, then scoops me up into his arms, bridal style.

I yelp. “Nikolai! What the?—”

But he manages to slap my ass, making me squeak.

“Don’t question me. ”

I moan.

My body should be sated. Should be begging for rest. Instead, I feel a fresh wave of arousal at his words.

He carries me into a bedroom as luxurious as the rest of the suite. The bed is massive, with white silk sheets that look soft.

He places me onto it, surveying me with a look that sees everything. I'm so turned on by this man, I can't believe it. With a sexy growl he's on me again, kissing my breasts, making me beg.

"Fuck me. I want it," I moan.

He flips me onto my stomach, tugging me to the edge of the bed, and nudges my legs apart. I arch for him, breasts pressed into the mattress, legs spread for him to see... everything.

"That's right, baby. Show me you want it," he commands.

He captures both wrists over my head in one large hand, pinning them to the bed.

The position leaves me completely at his mercy. Vulnerable. Exposed.

Exactly where I want to be right now.

I feel the bulge of him pressing against me, rubbing between my ass and down to my entrance, up and down he strokes me until I'm quivering with need.

Finally, I feel him enter me from behind.

My body adjusts to the new angle, and he presses deeper than before.

I cry out into the mattress, the sound muffled by silk.

"I want to hear you," he growls, fingers tangling in my hair, pulling just so. "Every sound. Every gasp. Every time I make you fall apart."

"Yes," I moan, the slight pain in my scalp mixing with pleasure until I can't tell them

apart.

His thrusts are powerful, exquisite, relentless. The slap of his hips against my ass echoes in the room. His grip on my wrists reminds me who is in control.

Then he leans forward, still keeping his pace, and his lips find my shoulder. He bites down—not quite breaking skin, but hard enough to leave a mark.

I cry out, the pain-pleasure combination overwhelming. He soothes the spot with his tongue, then moves lower, finding the side of my breast exposed by my position. Another bite, another cry.

“Mine,” he growls against my skin. “Tonight, you're mine.”

“Yours,” I agree without hesitation.

He releases my wrists, and flips me onto my back. His hands hook under my knees, pushing them toward my chest until I'm folded nearly in half. The position leaves me completely open to him, and he takes full advantage.

His strokes go impossibly deeper. Each one hits a spot inside me that sends shockwaves through my system. My hands scramble for a tether, finding only silk sheets that slide through my fingers.

I'm climbing again. Building toward a third peak I didn't know was possible. My body is one raw nerve, hyper aware of every point where we touch.

“One more,” he urges, voice strained. “One more time for me, Lilly.”

My name in his mouth sounds like a prayer and a curse. Sacred and profane.

“I can't,” I whimper, overwhelmed by sensation.

“You can,” he insists. One hand releases my leg to find my clit, circling it with his thumb. “And you will.”

The added stimulation is too much. I break apart for the third time, walls clenching around him, vision blurring at the edges. This orgasm is different—deeper, almost painful in its intensity. It tears through me like a tsunami, destroying everything in its path.

“Fuck!” he shouts, following me over the edge again. His hips slam into mine one final time as he empties himself inside me.

We collapse together, sweaty and spent. He rolls to the side to avoid crushing me, but keeps one arm draped across my waist, one leg thrown over mine.

“Holy shit,” I whisper when I can finally speak again.

He chuckles. “Appropriate response.”

“I've never...” I trail off, not sure how to articulate what I'm feeling.

“Had three orgasms in one night?” he finishes for me.

I turn my head to look at him. “I've barely had one during sex before, let alone three.”

He looks genuinely surprised, then smug.

I should feel awkward. Should feel the urge to grab my clothes and run. Instead, I curl into his side, oddly comfortable in this strange man's arms.

“Stay the night,” he says.

It’s not a question.

Not quite a command either.

I nod against his chest. “Okay.”

He pulls the covers over us both, tucks me closer against him. I feel his lips press against the top of my head, a gesture almost too tender after the roughness of the sex.

My eyelids grow heavy. The combination of three earth-shattering orgasms and the late hour pulls me toward sleep. The last thing I remember is his hand stroking lazy patterns on my back, and thinking that I should probably regret this in the morning.

But I don't.

When I wake, sunlight streams through windows. My body aches in places I didn't know could ache. I stretch, feeling the pleasant soreness between my legs, and reach across the bed.

Empty.

I sit up, looking around the bedroom. His clothes are gone. Mine are neatly folded on a chair by the bed.

“Nikolai?” I call out.

No answer.

I slide out of bed, wincing slightly, and pad naked to the bathroom.

Empty.

The main room.

Empty.

The balcony.

Empty.

He's gone.

Back in the bedroom, I notice a folded piece of paper on the nightstand I didn't notice before. I open it with trembling fingers.

Five words in elegant script: I'll be in touch. -N

I should feel used. Should feel angry. Instead, I press the note to my chest and smile.

Whatever this was—one night stand, terrible mistake—it was the best sex of my life. And deep down, I know I'll see him again.

Sinner or saint, I'm already addicted to Nikolai Vetrov.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:30 am

LILLY

One week.

Seven days of pretending I'm fine.

Seven days of serving drinks to men not him.

Seven days of waiting for a text that never came.

I never gave him my number. But Nikolai Vetrov is the kind of man who doesn't need permission to get what he wants.

He said he'd be in touch. He didn't call. Maybe he changed his mind. Maybe I was just a good fuck. A body. A fix.

I shouldn't care. It was a one-night stand. Sometimes, a little random sex is all a girl needs.

I should leave it at that.

But every time a six-foot-three man walks through that door, my heart gets whiplash.

It's never him.

I'm wiping down tables in the main dining area when Trish calls to me.

“Table 9 needs service.”

My stomach drops through the floor. Bratva hangout. Last time I walked into that corner, sin hung her head in shame.

“Can't someone else?—”

“He asked for you specifically.”

He. He's back.

My heart stutters, then sprints.

I glance toward the VIP section and my breath catches. There he is. Nikolai Vetrov, looking like the devil himself.

And he's staring right at me.

Dark hair, expensive watch, the kind of eyes that make knees hit the floor.

He's with a man. But it's Nikolai who beckons, who shines, who devours the world around me.

“Lilly.” Trish snaps her fingers in front of my face. “You're drooling.”

I'm not drooling. I'm having a small stroke.

I glance at her, silently begging for mercy.

She gives me a look like she dares me to flinch.

She saw me leave that night. She handed me back the napkin. Gave me the evening off.

But the other girls?

Jealous.

Asking why I left early. Why I glowed the next morning. What I spoke to Nikolai Petrov about.

They whisper behind their hands. Give me side-eyes and tight-lipped smirks. Around here, Bratva attention is currency. And I had all of it for one night.

If I go over there again and so much as blink wrong, I'm fucked. If word gets back to management that I'm sleeping with customers...

“Move, now!” Trish's voice is flat. Final. “He's not the kind of man you say no to twice.”

Right. Like I needed that reminder.

I have no safety net. Parents—gone. Car crash when I was twenty-two. No siblings. No trust fund. No soft place to land.

Just rent. Bills. And Trish, who looks one wrong answer away from firing me.

So I square my shoulders, grab my tray, and head toward the lion's den.

Toward him.

I spent the last week trying to convince myself it was just sex. The kind that ruins you

for every other man alive, sure.

But still—just sex.

Except every time I close my eyes, it's his hands I feel. Rough. Sure. Everywhere.

And all I can think about is how he made me come three times in one night without even breaking a sweat.

I'm screwed. Completely, utterly screwed. And not in the good way.

I check my reflection in the wall mirror as I pass.

Hair's decent.

Makeup's still intact.

Skirt's the right length.

But my hands are shaking. My heart kicks. My stomach flips. My skin burns with memory.

Get it together, Lilly. You're a professional. You can serve two men drinks without having a mental breakdown.

Even if one of them has seen you naked.

Even if one of them knows exactly how to make you beg.

Even if one of them left you a cryptic note and disappeared like a ghost.

The walk to Table 9 feels like a death march. Each step louder than the last. Every eye in the room might as well be on me.

I round the corner into the VIP section and there they are. The other man is younger. Blonde hair, sharp jaw. Good looking in a conventional way. The kind of guy who probably has women throwing themselves at him.

But compared to Nikolai, he looks like a boy playing dress-up.

Nikolai watches me as I approach, his eyes roving over my body. My toes curl. My throat goes dry.

And when he lifts a finger and crooks it, beckoning me over, exactly the way he curled it inside me, my knees nearly give out.

He sees it. Smiles. The kind of smile the devil would sell his soul to wear.

I approach the table on unsteady legs.

“Good evening, gentlemen. What can I get you to drink?”

My voice comes out steady. Professional. A surprise to my own ears.

The blonde man looks up now, and his eyes do a slow sweep from my face to my feet and back up again.

It's not subtle.

It's not respectful.

It's the kind of look that makes my skin crawl.

“Well, well,” he says, leaning back in his chair. “No wonder you wanted to come back here, Nik. The view's certainly improved.”

Nikolai's jaw ticks, but he doesn't say anything.

“I'll have a scotch,” the blonde stares at me like I'm on the menu. “Top shelf. And you, sweetheart, can bring it nice and slow. Give us something to look at.”

My cheeks burn, but I keep my expression neutral. I've dealt with worse.

Drunk college boys who think waitresses are fair game. Businessmen who mistake service for availability. Assholes who think money buys them the right to say whatever they want.

“Of course,” I say through gritted teeth. “And for you, sir?”

I force myself to look at Nikolai. It's a mistake. His eyes are storm clouds, dark and turbulent. When our gazes meet, I feel that familiar pull in my stomach. That magnetic force that made me follow him to the twenty-fifth floor.

“Vodka,” he says gruffly. “Neat.”

“Coming right up.”

I turn to leave, but the blonde man's voice stops me.

“Hey, sweetheart.”

I turn back with a smile, even though I want to tell him where he can shove his sweetheart.

“Yes?”

He leans forward with a predatory smile. “With a body like that, do you do private parties?”

The question hangs in the air like poison gas.

I open my mouth to deliver a cutting response, but nothing comes out. Why bother? Men like him will never change.

I notice the change in Nikolai just before I turn to go.

He's gone perfectly still. The kind of stillness that comes before violence.

“Viktor,” he says, voice deadly quiet. “Shut your mouth.”

Viktor just laughs. “What? I'm just being friendly. Aren't you friendly, sweetheart?”

He reaches out like he's going to touch my arm.

That's when Nikolai moves.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:30 am

NIKOLAI

V iktor's hand brushes her arm and I see red.

Mine.

The word echoes in my skull like a war drum. I claimed her. Marked her. Made her scream my name until her voice broke.

And this piece of shit thinks he can touch her?

I'm on Viktor before his fingers leave her skin. My hand closes around his wrist and snaps bone. He swears, tries to pull away, but I hold him fast.

"I said shut your mouth," I growl.

Viktor's face goes pale, but he's too stupid to back down. "Jesus, Nik, calm down. I was just?—"

I twist his wrist. Hard.

"You were just what?" I lean closer, voice dropping to a whisper that carries more threat than a shout. "Just disrespecting a woman who's doing her job? Just treating her like a piece of meat? Just being the kind of pathetic excuse for a man that gives the rest of us a bad name?"

"Nikolai—" Lilly starts, but I cut her off with a look.

“Stay back.”

Viktor tries to stand, tries to use his free hand to push me away.

Big mistake.

I grab him by the throat. My fingers close around his windpipe just tight enough to make breathing interesting.

“You apologize,” I tell him. “Right now. To the lady.”

“Are you insane?” Viktor gasps. “Over some waitress? She's just?—”

My fist punches his jaw hard enough to lift him off his feet. He goes sprawling across the floor.

The entire VIP section goes silent. Every conversation stops. Every head turns.

Perfect.

Viktor tries to scramble away, blood streaming from his nose, but I'm already moving. I grab him by his shirt and haul him upright.

Then I hit him again.

This time in the ribs. He doubles over, wheezing.

“Nikolai, stop!” Lilly's voice cuts through the red haze in my brain, but I'm too far gone.

I walk over, drive my knee into his stomach the minute he rises. He crumples to his

knees like wet paper.

“You want to know what she is?” I grab a fistful of his hair and force him to look at Lilly. “A woman doing her job. And if you ever look at her again, if you ever speak to her again, if you even think about her again, I will bury you so deep they'll need fucking archaeologists to find your bones.”

Viktor nods frantically, blood and saliva dripping from his mouth.

I release him and he falls back onto the floor. Then I turn to face the crowd of shocked onlookers.

“Anyone else have something to say?”

Silence.

I smooth back my hair and walk to Lilly. She's standing frozen by the table, tray still clutched in her hands, eyes wide with shock.

“We need to talk,” I tell her.

She shakes her head. “I can't. I'm working. I'll get fired if?—”

“Twenty-fifth floor. One hour.”

“No.” Her voice is stronger now, more certain. “I'm not doing this again. Whatever this is, whatever you think happened between us?—”

“What happened,” I interrupt, “is that you came apart in my arms three times and begged me for more.”

Her cheeks flush pink, but she doesn't back down. "That was one night. It doesn't mean anything."

"It means enough."

"I have to get back to work," she says, but she hasn't moved. Hasn't stepped away from me.

"One hour," I repeat. "Or I'll come find you."

It's not a threat.

It's a promise.

She stares at me for a long moment, and I can see the war playing out behind her eyes.

Fear battling desire.

Logic fighting instinct.

Finally, she nods. Just once. Barely perceptible.

But it's enough.

"Good girl," I murmur, and watch her pupils dilate at the praise.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:30 am

NIKOLAI

I slam back the scotch.

I wonder if she'll come.

If she changed her mind.

If she decided to run.

She'd be smart. To run, that is. That would mean the girl knows trouble when she sees it.

And still, I want caution to fucking run right out of her brain.

I want—no, need—her.

I still remember Viktor's filthy hand reaching for her. His foul words. But when I broke his nose, I saw something in her eyes, beyond the fear.

Something that lit a fuse in my blood and set it on fire.

Awe.

Like she knew what I'd done.

Like she felt relief at being mine.

There's a knock that sets my heart racing. Could it be...?

I open the door and there she is.

Hair down. Different clothes—jeans that hug her curves and a T-shirt that should be innocent but isn't.

Not on her.

Not when I know what's underneath. Not when I can still taste her on my tongue from a week ago.

“You came,” I say.

“I said I would.” Her hands are shaking slightly.

I step aside, and she brushes past me. The scent of her perfume turns me into a feral lion, wanting to shed off her clothes and bend her over right here.

I close the door. Lock it. I turn and she's staring right at me, standing in my living room.

“So,” I ask, inching closer. “Still think this is a bad idea?”

“After what I saw downstairs?” She shakes her head. “I don't think so at all.”

The admission hangs in the air like a lit fuse.

“What I saw,” I say, moving closer, “was you having second thoughts.”

“What I saw,” she counters, “was you nearly killing a man because he touched my

arm.”

Another step. She doesn't back away.

“He did more than touch your arm, Lilly. He looked at you like you were something he could play with.”

“And you looked at him like you wanted to bury him alive.”

“I did want to bury him alive.”

Her breath hitches. “Why?”

I'm close enough now to see the gold flecks in her hazel eyes. Close enough to count her eyelashes. Close enough to make her pulse jump in her throat.

“You know why.”

“Say it.”

The challenge in her voice sets something primal loose inside me. Something I've been trying to cage since she walked out of here a week ago.

“Because you're mine.”

The words come out rough. Raw. More honest than I intended.

Her eyes flash. “I'm not anyone's?—”

I cut her off with my mouth.

The kiss is not an exploration. It's an explosion.

Desperate. Hungry.

Seven days of wanting her, of thinking about her taste, her sounds, the way she felt wrapped around me can make a man go insane.

I groan into her mouth, swipe a hand through her hair, and tug. I lick across the slit of her lips.

And she opens. Like she's made for me.

She makes a small noise in her throat when my lips brush against hers. Her fists twist in my shirt, yanking me closer, and that's it. I'm gone. Wrecked. Owned.

I back her against the wall, pressing my body against hers, letting her feel how hard I am already. How much I want her. Always want her.

"Fuck," she breathes against my lips. "I tried to forget?—"

"Did it work?"

"No." Her hands are already working at my buttons. "Did you think about me?"

"Every goddamn day."

Her fingers find skin and I hiss. She's got small hands but they're everywhere—my chest, my shoulders, tracing the tattoos that wind up my arms.

She grabs my shirt and yanks. A button she left unchecked rips.

“Jesus, Lilly.”

I yank her T-shirt over her head, and fuck me... she's in black lace. Tiny, wicked, see-through. The kind of bra that makes my mouth water and cock throb.

Definitely not a bra she wore for comfort.

“Had plans, did you?” I murmur, dragging my thumb along the lace.

“Maybe.” She's breathless, chest rising and falling rapidly. “Maybe I hoped you'd rip it off with your teeth.”

“Be careful what you wish for.”

I don't reach for the clasp.

I dip my head, grip the center of that sinful lace in my teeth—and tear. The sound, the graze of my teeth, is enough to make her gasp.

I shed off the pitiful remains and cup her breasts, thumbs circling her nipples until they peak.

“Nikolai,” she gasps, arching into my touch.

“I love the way you say my name.”

Her hands fumble at my belt. Impatient. Desperate. I help her—shoving my pants and boxers down in one move. When I stand, she's staring. Wide-eyed. Silent. Wrecked already.

“God,” she whispers. “I forgot how...”

“How what?”

“Big.” Her tongue wets her lips and my cock jumps. “You're so fucking big.”

Holy Hell.

She's sinking to her knees.

She's bare from the waist up, eyes locked on mine, my cock inches from her mouth.

That look—wide-eyed, hungry, fucking perfect—nearly undoes me right there. One breath from her and I'd come like a rookie.

“Lilly—”

She wraps her hand around the base of my cock and strokes—once, twice, slow. Pre-cum beads at the tip. She leans in and licks it off like it's dessert.

“Fuck,” I groan, head falling back against the wall.

She smiles—actually smiles—and then takes me into her mouth.

Hot.

Wet.

Perfect.

She starts slow, just the head, swirling her tongue around the crown. Then she takes me deeper, cheeks hollowing as she sucks.

“That's it,” I breathe, threading my fingers through her hair. “Just like that.”

She moans around me, sending shockwaves through my system. Her head bobs. I go deeper and deeper and deeper. Until I hit the back of her throat and see stars.

“Such a good girl,” I groan and she whimpers. “You like that? Like being on your knees for me?”

She nods with my cock in her mouth, eyes watering. They never stray from mine.

I watch, mesmerized. Her lips stretched around my girth, the way her throat contracts when she swallows.

It's too much. Too perfect. I'm going to come down her throat if I don't stop her soon.

“Enough,” I say, gently pulling her off me.

She releases me with a wet pop, lips swollen and slick, a question in her eyes.

This woman has no idea she could ruin kings with that mouth aimed right.

I help her to her feet, backing her against the wall again. “I want to be inside you when I come.”

Her jeans and panties hit the floor, joining the growing mess we're making. I grab her ass, lift her easily—she wraps her legs around my waist, her pussy dripping against my cock already.

I carry her to the bedroom, her mouth on my neck, teeth grazing skin. She's making these soft, desperate sounds—half moans, half whimpers. Fuck.

I set her on the edge of the bed and she immediately reaches for me. I catch her wrists.

“Lie back.”

She obeys. I position myself between her thighs. She's already wet, slick with arousal, and when I slide just the tip inside her, she arches off the bed.

“Please,” she whispers.

“Please what?”

“Please fuck me.”

I push in slowly, watching her face as I stretch her. Her mouth falls open, eyes fluttering closed. When I'm fully seated, we both freeze.

“Look at me,” I command.

Her eyes snap open, dark and dazed.

“How do you want it?”

“Hard,” she whimpers.

Something primal and possessive roars to life in my chest.

I start moving then, slow and deep at first. Building the tension just until her hands fist into the sheets.

And then, she throws her head back like a vixen, her fists clenching sheets and I

begin to pound.

She's wet. Soaking. Warm. My cock feels the softness of her clenching muscles.

I pick up the pace.

She draws me deeper. Her breaths now ragged. Her breasts bounce from how hard I slam into her.

"Harder," she gasps. "Please, harder."

God. She wants more. She's insatiable. A beast. And I'm here to serve.

I grab her wrists, pinning them above her head. I fuck her without mercy. Her breasts bounce, like little clouds and I dip low. Suck hard. Swirl my tongue around the peak.

She cries out my name and it sounds like scandal beckoning. Hoarse. Broken. Sexy.

"Fuck, Lilly, the things you do to me," I growl and my pace increases, each thrust driving her further up the bed.

"Is this what you wanted?" I growl against her ear. "To be fucked like this? To be claimed?"

"Yes," she sobs. "Yes, yes, yes."

Her moans turn to screams, and I cover her mouth with mine, swallowing her sounds. I angle my cock deeper, hitting the inside of her clit.

She tenses, her muscles clenching. My cock hardens, lengthens until there's no more to give.

She bites my lip. Draws blood. I growl into her mouth. Bite into her lip.

Her nails rake down my back, leaving stinging trails. Good. I want her marks on me.

She's mine.

And though she won't say, those marks scream I'm hers.

I can feel her tightening around me, getting close. Her breathing becomes ragged, desperate little sounds escaping her throat.

"Come for me," I demand, shifting the angle to hit that spot that makes her scream. "Come on my cock like a good little girl."

And then, she comes.

She comes like the storm. Fierce. Her body writhes and twists into a thing of beauty. I feel her pleasure like it's mine.

And when she closes her eyes, bites into her lip to stay tethered, I know I can't hold back much longer.

But I'm not ready to let go yet. Not until I've wrung every last drop of ecstasy from her body.

She shatters, back arching, nails digging into my shoulders as I release her wrists. She comes, wave after wave and only when her back hits the bed, do I give in.

For a brief moment. There's darkness and fire and ecstasy. There's her. Nothing else. My sight implodes. I see stars. The pleasure sweeps from toe to head.

And then, I come back down to earth.

“Mine,” I growl against her throat as we both ride out the aftershocks. “You're mine, Lilly.”

She doesn't say it back.

I should be afraid. Yet every instinct I have to run, to keep things simple, to never let anyone get close enough to matter, goes non-existent.

I feel like I'm home.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:30 am

LILLY

I lie in his arms afterward, skin still buzzing like I've been struck by lightning. My head rests on his chest. I hear his heart thundering in my ear like horses running wild.

Lovemaking. Is that what this was?

I can't call it just sex. This time, it felt heavier with meaning. Deeper. In the way he looked at me.

In the way he vowed me as his.

The possessiveness should terrify me. Should send me running for the hills. Instead, it makes me want to curl deeper into his arms and never leave.

His fingers trace lazy patterns on my bare shoulder. I shiver at the gentle touch.

"You okay?" he asks, voice rough with satisfaction.

"Mmm." I turn my face to press a kiss to his chest.

He nods. I just lie there. Listen to him fall off to sleep. And then, dare myself to look up.

His hair is mussed from my fingers. When asleep, he looks softer. Younger. Less dangerous.

But he broke that man's nose.

So what the hell am I doing? Staying in his arms? Wanting more? Thinking he's someone I could fall for?

The thought sends me off-kilter.

I panic.

Calm down.

This is only physical. I'm letting my brain run like a train. I should stop before I wreck myself.

This means nothing. It's simple, really. Just sex.

Except it's not working. If anything, being with him again has only made the craving worse.

And that's dangerous. Men like Nikolai Vetrov don't stick around for waitresses from Chicago.

But what choice do I have? I can't walk away. Not when he smells all heady. Not when he feels so safe. Instead, I close my eyes and let myself pretend, just for tonight, that this could be something real.

His arms tighten around me. I feel myself relax. Just a little while, I tell myself.

But as sleep drags me under, one thought cuts through the haze. I'm already dreading the moment I'll have to walk away.

And worse?

I know I won't want to.

The soreness in my thighs hits me like a truck. I smile. I dig into his bed. I smell him all around me.

And I want more.

I reach across the bed, expecting to find warm skin and solid muscle.

Empty.

I sit up, clutching the sheet to my chest, look around like a crazed animal. No sign of him. His clothes? Gone.

And the worst part? This time, there's no note on the nightstand.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:30 am

LILLY

Once again, he never called.

In his defense, he never said he would. There was no note the last time around. No promise.

All I'm left with is the memory of his touch burning on my skin.

His breath, hot against my lips.

His words, dirty when he asked how I wanted it.

I'm serving the hotel guests at the bar, trying not to look toward the VIP section. Table 9 has customers tonight—three men I don't know.

None of them Nikolai.

Where the hell is he?

I shouldn't care. Definitely shouldn't be counting the days since I woke up alone in his bed.

But he's a bad idea I can't shake.

"Lilly, you're spacing out again," Trish says.

I force myself to focus, to move through the motions of my job. Pour drinks. Smile at customers. Pretend I don't scan every tall, dark-haired man who walks through the door hoping it's him.

I force myself to focus.

Pour the drinks.

Fake the smiles.

Go through the damn motions.

And pretend I'm not scanning every tall, dark-haired man who walks through that door. Have been for the past week.

It's never him.

Maybe he's done with me. Maybe two nights was enough to scratch whatever itch I was.

The thought shouldn't hurt as much as it does.

It's not just the sex I'm missing—though God knows that was next-level.

It's the way he looked at me afterward. Like I wasn't just some waitress from the wrong side of nowhere.

"Mine," he'd growled.

And he fucking meant it.

I think.

But if I was really his, wouldn't he be here? Wouldn't he have called?

My shift ends at midnight. I grab my purse. Put on my coat. Head out into the Chicago night. The city hums like it's on edge.

That's when I hear it.

The sound of a fistfight.

I freeze, listening.

I should walk away. Get in my car and drive home. Mind my own business.

Instead, I creep toward the sound, staying in the shadows.

Across the street, in the mouth of an alley, I see him.

Nikolai.

He's standing over a man crumpled to his knees, face bloodied. Nikolai's in a pristine white shirt. Like the violence never touched him.

Except for his hands. Split and dripping red.

"Where is it?" Nikolai roars.

The man on the ground mumbles but I can't hear.

Nikolai kicks the man's ribs. My stomach lurches at the sound of bones cracking.

“I asked you a question.”

I watch, frozen. Transfixed. Horrified. Nikolai slips a hand into his jacket. I pray it isn't a gun.

It's not.

No.

It's something worse.

He pulls out brass knuckles.

This isn't the man who made love to me. Who whispered my name like a prayer. Who held me afterward like I was something precious.

This is a monster.

Nikolai slides the brass knuckles over his fingers like he's enjoying this. The man on the ground scrambles backward, dragging a streak of blood across the concrete.

“Please,” the man begs. “I don't know anything about?—”

The brass knuckles connect with his jaw. His head snaps back with a wet crack.

I can't move.

Can't breathe.

Can't look away.

Nikolai's not wild. He's surgical. He doesn't snarl. Doesn't shout. He simply dismantles the man till he stops making sounds.

Nikolai stops. Checks his watch.

Like he has somewhere else to be.

Like he didn't just beat a man unconscious.

That's when he turns and sees me.

Our eyes lock across the dark street, and everything inside me turns to ice. He doesn't flinch. Doesn't look surprised.

No guilt. No shame.

Just calm, steady... like it doesn't matter what I saw.

I should run. Shit. I should get the hell out of here. Head back to the club. To my car. To safety.

Away from this man who casually destroyed another human being.

But my feet won't move.

Nikolai walks toward me. Unhurried. Confident. Like he knows I won't run.

I'm afraid he's right.

“Lilly.”

“Is he dead?” The words come out as a whisper.

Nikolai stops in front of me. Tilts his head like he’s trying not to laugh. “No.”

“Will he be?”

“Anyone could die anytime.”

The casual way he says it makes my knees weak. This is who he really is. This is Nikolai Vetrov. Bratva enforcer.

Monster.

“You shouldn't have seen that.” His hand wraps around my upper arm. Not painful, but firm. Unmistakable.

“I was just leaving work?—”

“I know.” He starts walking, pulling me along. “My car's this way.”

I should resist. Should demand he let go of me. But the shock of what I witnessed has left me numb, compliant. I let him guide me to his car.

He opens the passenger door and helps me in like some old-school gentleman. Like he didn’t just beat a man half to death thirty seconds ago.

Maybe I didn’t get the memo. Chivalry’s not dead—it’s just covered in blood.

He slides into the driver's seat, starts the engine.

“Where do you live?”

I give him my address without thinking. My brain feels disconnected from my body, floating somewhere above this surreal nightmare.

We drive in silence. I stare out of the window, try to make sense of what I saw. The same hands that made me come apart a week ago... tore another man's face open.

"You're scared of me now."

It's an assessment.

I turn to look at him. His shadowed face is both beautiful and terrible.

"I should be."

"But you're not."

He's right. I should be terrified. But I'm not. I'm remembering the way his hands felt on my skin. The way he whispered my name in the dark.

He pulls up outside my apartment. Kills the engine.

"I should go," I say, but I don't move to get out.

"Should."

The word hangs between us, heavy with implication.

Should.

But won't.

He gets out of the car, comes around to my side. Opens my door. Offers his hand.

I take it.

He walks me to my building, waits while I fumble with my keys. My hands are shaking. Whether from shock or anticipation, I can't tell.

“Lilly.”

I look up at him. In the dim light from the streetlamp, he looks like sin incarnate.

Dark hair.

Tiger eyes.

The kind of beautiful that leads good girls straight to hell.

I freeze. Shake. Go breathless and heady. He takes my keys from my trembling fingers, unlocks my door. Pushes it open.

We climb three flights of stairs in silence. Outside my apartment, he takes the keys again. Lets us in.

My place is small. One bedroom, kitchen barely big enough for two people. Nothing like his penthouse suite.

But he doesn't seem to notice the difference.

The door closes behind us with a click. A gunshot in the silence.

“Nikolai—”

“I can leave,” he cuts me off. Burns a hole into my heart from how he stares.

The thought. The idea. Of having him so close. Of depriving myself of one more night scares the hell out of me.

Feels like I’m having something precious snatched away.

I meet his gaze. Shake my head. Ever so slowly. Afraid. Testing what I’m afraid to admit out loud.

And just like that, the tiger in him roars. His eyes turn hungry and he’s standing skin to skin. One hand fists in my hair, angles my head.

My heart races. Hands go clammy. Toes curl.

And then, his lips brush against mine. Teasing, filtering.

I moan and the kiss is no longer precious. It’s raw, wild, starved. His tongue slides across my lips, forces its way in. He slides it over the roof of my mouth. Teeth graze teeth. Fist pulls hair. Heart calls to heart.

It's not gentle.

It's possession.

Claim.

I should remember what I just witnessed in that alley. Instead, I kiss him back just as desperately.

His hands are everywhere—sliding down my back, gripping my ass, pulling me

against him so I can feel how hard he is already. The evidence of his want makes me moan into his mouth.

“I can't stop thinking about you,” he growls against my lips. “About this.”

His hand slides between my legs, pressing against me through my skirt. Through my panties, I can feel the heat of his palm.

His touch sears.

My hips buck involuntarily.

“Every night,” he slides down the zipper. “I think of how you taste. How you feel wrapped around me. How you scream my name.”

The skirt drops and I'm on fire with need for him. His hand slides inside my panties.

“Fuck,” he breathes. “You're so wet already.”

I am. God help me, I am. Despite what I witnessed. Despite knowing what he's capable of. Despite everything logical and rational, my body wants him.

Needs him.

“More,” I whisper. I crave. I yearn.

He knows. He always knows.

His hands grip the hem of my shirt, yanking it over my head. My bra follows, torn apart in his haste.

“I need to see you,” he says in a voice too hoarse to get me going. “All of you.”

He backs me toward the bedroom, mouth never leaving mine. We stumble through the doorway, a tangle of desperate hands and urgent kisses.

The back of my knees hit the bed. He pushes me down onto it.

He stands over me. Lets his eyes rake down my body. Burns an image into his brain.

“So fucking beautiful,” he murmurs.

His hands go to his belt. When it hits the floor, my legs clench with anticipation.

Pants.

Boxers.

All off.

He's gloriously naked, standing at the foot of my bed. A dark god of sex.

“Lift your hips.”

I obey.

He hooks his fingers in my panties, dragging them down my legs. I shiver.

“Spread your legs for me.”

I spread.

My brain shuts down completely, leaving only instinct and need. I'm not a rational woman. I'm just his. Completely, utterly his.

He climbs into bed, settles between my thighs. His hands slide up my legs, thumbs brushing dangerously close to where I need him most.

“Tell me you want this,” he demands. “Tell me you want me.”

“I want you,” I breathe. “Please, Nikolai. I want you.”

One finger slides inside me.

Then two.

I arch off the bed, crying out at the sudden fullness. He pumps them slowly, curling against that spot that makes me see stars.

“So wet,” he groans. “So perfect. My perfect girl.”

“Mm-hmm,” I moan and throw back my head.

His.

God, yes.

Right now, I'm not the girl who plays it safe.

I'm the girl who lets him wreck her and begs for more.

The kind who wants to be ruined.

His good girl—gone deliciously, hopelessly bad.

He teases me with those strong, unrelenting fingers. Slow, then deep. Then just right until my thighs are shaking and I can't keep my hips still.

Until my breath comes in gasps and my thoughts fall apart.

I'm right there, right on the edge, every nerve strung tight.

Begging—broken, breathless, soaked—for more.

For him.

For anything that will tip me over and finish what he started.

And then, like the devil he is, he stops.

“Look at me,” he commands.

My eyes snap open.

He positions himself at my entrance, the head of his cock sliding through my wetness. Teasing. Promising.

“I'm going to fuck you now,” he whispers, his voice like a glinting knife. “So hard you'll forget your name. The way you need it.”

“Yes,” I gasp. “Please.”

He thrusts in with one slow, brutal stroke—deep and all at once—stretching me wide around him.

It's too much. Not enough.

The burn borders on pain, but it's the kind that makes my toes curl and my lips part on a gasp.

Full. Claimed. His.

And God, it's perfect.

So fucking perfect I could cry.

He's so deep I swear I can feel him in my throat.

"Fuck," he breathes. "I forgot how tight you are. How good you feel."

He starts to move then, pulling almost all the way out before slamming back in. The force of it drives me up the bed, makes the headboard bang against the wall.

I don't care. Let the neighbors complain. Let the whole building know what's happening in here.

"Harder," I beg. "Please, harder."

He grins, feral and devilishly. "Well, sweetheart, since you asked so nicely..."

He grabs my hips like he owns them and gives me exactly what I asked for. He drives into me.

Hard. Fast. Relentless.

Until I moan and gasp and hiss with each pounding of his cock.

He fucks me filthy. Leaves me clawing at the sheets. My legs wrap around his waist, pulling him deeper, tighter.

He fucks me like he's branding me from the inside out.

Like he's claiming me. Like he's marking me. He reaches places inside me that no one else ever has.

But it's not enough. I need more. Need all of him.

I grab at his shirt, tear it open. Desperate for his skin.

My nails rake down his chest, leave red marks.

“You marking me sweetheart?” He punishes me with a slam that makes me slide up. That makes the bed groan.

And I want more.

“Yes,” I gasp.

Something dangerous flashes in his eyes. He pulls out. Leaves me empty. Aching.

“Turn over.”

I flip onto my stomach, breath ragged.

He doesn't wait. Just grabs my hips and hauls me up onto my knees, ass in the air, back arched—offered.

Exposed.

His.

He drags his hands down my spine, slow and sinful, like he's tracing a racetrack he plans to win.

Over my lower back, across the curve of my ass—palms firm, fingers splayed, claiming every inch like he owns the rights to my body.

Then he thrusts back inside me from behind—deeper, sharper, devastating.

I scream into the pillow, not from pain, but from the pure overload of sensation.

He's everywhere.

Inside me, over me, all-consuming.

“That's it,” he growls, setting a punishing pace. “Let me hear you. Let the whole world know who's fucking you.”

His hands grip my hips hard enough to leave bruises. I'll wear those marks like badges of honor.

One hand slides up my spine, fisting in my hair. He pulls my head back, forcing me to arch, to take him even deeper.

“Who do you belong to?” he demands.

“You,” I sob. “I belong to you.”

“Say my name.”

“Nikolai!”

“Again.”

“Nikolai! Oh God, Nikolai!”

He releases my hair, both hands moving to grip my breasts. His fingers find my nipples, pinching and rolling them until I'm writhing beneath him.

“Such perfect tits,” he groans. “Made for my hands.”

The way he pounds into that spot deep inside me. The way hands grip my breasts like fruits for the taking. It's perfect. It's too much.

My body's spiraling, that pressure building low in my belly.

Tight.

Hot.

Merciless.

I'm right there, seconds from coming apart, and he knows it.

He's dragging it out. Driving me mad.

And I want to break for him.

Hard.

“I'm close,” I gasp.

“Not yet,” he commands. “Wait for me.”

His pace becomes erratic, his breathing harsh. I can feel him getting close too, his control finally starting to slip.

“Now,” he urges me.

That’s all it takes.

His permission detonates something inside me. I break—hard.

The orgasm hits like a goddamn tsunami, ripping through me, stealing my breath, leaving me shaking, wrecked, undone.

I collapse forward, barely able to moan, when he follows. A grunt. His hips slamming in a few final times, then holding deep as his whole body locks up.

I feel him come inside me, hot and heavy. I shudder harder.

I’m ruined.

Completely, beautifully ruined.

We collapse together onto the bed, sweaty and spent. His arms wrap around me, pulling me against his chest.

“Mine,” he whispers into my hair.

I want to say it back. Want to tell him he's mine too. But the words stick in my throat because I know this isn't real.

By now I know he'll be gone tomorrow.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:30 am

LILLY

The nausea hits like a freight train the minute I wake.

No warning. No mercy.

I bolt upright. Slap a hand over my mouth. Fuck. Get to the bathroom NOW! Or you might hurl all over the bed.

I run. My knees barely hit the floor before last night's sketchy Chinese food makes a violent exit.

When the retching finally stops, I slump against the cold tile — sweating, aching.

Food poisoning. Has to be. That kung pao chicken did taste a little off.

Except...

This is day three.

Three mornings in a row of this same stomach-flipping hell.

Yesterday. The day before that.

I drag myself up, splash cold water on my face. I look pale and clammy. Sick. Like something chewed me up and spat me out.

“Get it together, Lilly,” I mutter. “You've got bills to pay.”

I stumble through my morning routine—shower, clothes, autopilot.

But the second the eggs cook, the smell slams into me like a punch to the gut.

I grip the kitchen counter hard, breathing through my nose, swallowing against the rising wave.

One more whiff and I'm gonna lose it all over again.

This nausea?

It's not normal.

It's not food poisoning.

It's something else.

That's when it hits me.

The thought crashes over me like ice water, freezing me mid-motion.

When was my last period?

I turn off the stove and start counting backward. Three weeks ago? Four?

No. No, no, no.

Panic claws its way up my throat. I grab my phone, open my period tracking app.

Six weeks.

Six.

Fucking.

Weeks.

Six weeks since I watched him beat a man bloody in an alley. Since I let him take me in my bed—raw, reckless, no condom in sight.

My legs give out. I sink onto the floor.

This can't be happening. I'm on birth control. The pill. I take it every morning like clockwork.

Except—

Fuck.

That week I forgot to pick up more. I said I'd do it later.

I never did. I got lazy. Tired. It wasn't like I was fucking on a daily basis.

I bury my face in my hands. How could I be so stupid?

No pill. No condom. No brain cells, apparently. Of all the things I've fucked up, this one might top the charts.

One night of heat and I threw common sense off a rooftop. He made me stupid. Made me forget all except how he felt inside me.

The one time in my life I throw caution to the wind, and this happens.

I need a test. Need to know for sure.

Half an hour later, I'm back home from the pharmacy. I run to the bathroom. Lock the door. There's no one here, but he crawls around in my mind.

My hands shake so hard I can barely rip open the damn box.

The instructions might as well be in Sanskrit.

Wait three minutes.

Whatever.

My brain doesn't work. I skim the pictures.

Pee on stick. Wait. Look for lines.

Simple enough.

The peeing part is easy. The waiting around? Not so much. For the first time in my life, I understand just how long three minutes can be.

My heart rattles around in my chest. Makes me sick. The test waits on the counter. I pace. Up and down. Up and down.

The bathroom's too small for this kind of panic. Too quiet for the noise in my head.

I think about Nikolai.

About the man on the ground. The brass knuckles. The blood.

What kind of world would I be dragging a child into?

What kind of life?

Trouble will follow that man everywhere. He even fucks like he's at war.

My phone buzzes. Three minutes.

I close my eyes, take a deep breath, and look.

Two pink lines.

Clear as day. Unmistakable.

Pregnant.

I'm pregnant with Nikolai Vetrov's baby.

The test slips from my numb fingers and clatters into the sink. I grip the counter so hard my knuckles go white.

This isn't real. This can't be real.

But the evidence stares back at me, tells me to look again at the two pink lines that just changed my entire life.

I sink to the bathroom floor and let the panic wash over me.

What the hell am I supposed to do now?

I can't tell him.

Won't tell him.

Nikolai Vetrov is one of the most feared names in the city.

Men like Nikolai don't want unexpected pregnancies from waitresses they've fucked a handful of times.

Men like Nikolai have people who make problems disappear.

And I've seen what his version of “making problems disappear” looks like.

He can make my toes curl and my brain short-circuit all he wants. But the man who split a guy's face open with brass knuckles isn't exactly PTA material.

No. Absolutely not.

I will not let my child grow up in that world. Will not put my child in danger.

This desperate, addictive pull I feel toward Nikolai? It's not love. It's danger masquerading as desire.

I can no longer confuse good sex with good for me. Good for my child.

Good sex doesn't make a good father. And a man who beats people bloody for a living doesn't make a good role model.

My phone buzzes. A text from Trish asking where I am. I'm supposed to be at work now since my shift starts in twenty minutes.

I stare at the phone like I forgot how to use it.

Work. My job. My life.

Everything I've built here, small as it is, suddenly feels fragile. Temporary.

How long before Nikolai shows up again? How long before his enemies decide I'm leverage?

I think about the bruises he left on my hips. At the time, they felt like promises. Now they feel like warnings.

The bathroom walls feel like they're closing in. I scramble to my feet, stumble into the bedroom.

I need to leave. Need to disappear before he comes back around here. Before anyone else in his world notices I exist.

My hands shake as I pull my suitcase from the closet. It's a small thing, barely big enough for a week's vacation. But it'll have to do.

I start grabbing clothes without thinking. Whatever fits. I empty my jewelry box—nothing too valuable, but I can pawn what little I have if I need to. Besides, I've got my savings account with a little stored away.

It's not much, but it's enough to get me out of Chicago. Enough to start over somewhere he'll never think to look.

I need to run before the devil catches up to me.

LILLY

Kids are sweet, they say.

And my kid? He's the sweetest.

But he makes me grow my patience every day.

I know he's going to fight me on the dinosaur shirt the second I pull it from his drawer.

“No, Mama,” Chleo crosses his arms like a tiny dictator. “I want the dragon one.”

“The dragon shirt is in the wash, baby.” I hold up the T-rex instead. “How about this fierce guy?”

Those stormy green eyes—so familiar they sometimes stop my heart—narrow with five-year-old suspicion. “T-Rex has tiny arms. Dragons breathe fire.”

The tone? Dead serious. The logic? Flawless.

And God help me, he looks just like his father when he's questioning bullshit.

“T-rex has giant teeth,” I counter. “And he's the king of all dinosaurs.”

Chleo tilts his head, thinking it over.

The resemblance hits hard.

That same calculating stare. The same way of sizing up the world—like he’s not five, like he’s planning a goddamn takeover. Just like his father.

And it guts me every time.

But then he grins. Pure sunshine. All mine and my chest unclenches.

“Okay, but can we roar like dinosaurs at the ducks?”

“Deal.”

I wrestle him into the shirt. Smooth out that dark, unruly hair. And before I can say sunblock, he’s off. Sprinting toward the kitchen. Begging me to hurry. There are ducks to feed.

Five years in Fern Falls, and mornings like this still feel like miracles.

I lay out the cinnamon rolls and fruit.

“Can I have two?” he asks, pointing at the cinnamon rolls.

“One now, one later.”

Too much sugar and he turns into a little monster.

He takes a massive bite, getting frosting on his nose. “The baby ducks are getting bigger.”

“They are. Pretty soon they’ll be as big as their mama.”

“Will I be as big as you someday?”

The question hits me sideways. I ruffle his hair, ignore the way my throat tightens.

“Bigger. Much bigger.”

He'll be tall like his father.

Broad-shouldered.

Dangerous.

I shake off the thought. Chleo isn't dangerous. He's sweet and funny. Helps old Mrs. Smith carry her groceries from the car without having to be asked.

He hates loud voices. Any display of aggression.

He's a child. Innocent and pure.

Nothing like the man who gave him those eyes.

“Finish up, troublemaker. The ducks are waiting.”

Fern Falls on a Sunday morning is everything Chicago never was.

Quiet. Safe. The kind of place where kids ride bikes without helmets and mothers don't check over their shoulders every five minutes.

The park sits in the center of town, surrounded by beautiful mountains. Protected. Hidden.

Chleo takes off toward the pond with the bag of day-old bread. He runs like the

world's safe. And for his sake, I pretend it is.

I follow behind at a slower pace, nodding to the families already scattered along the water's edge.

"Morning, Lilly!" calls Sarah, whose twin girls are Chleo's age. "How's the bakery?"

"Busy," I lie with a smile. Truth is, I'm one bad month away from closing. But Fern Falls doesn't need to know that.

"We'll stop by later for those chocolate chip cookies. Emma's been asking for them all week."

"I'll save her the biggest ones."

Chleo's already tossing bread to the ducks, laughing as they paddle over in a frenzy. Three ducklings come swimming behind their mother.

"Look, Mama! The babies remember me!"

"They love you." I smile.

This is the life I built. Peaceful mornings and safe places and a son who thinks the world is magic.

No Bratva.

No blood.

No men with brass knuckles and eyes like winter storms.

“Can we get a duck?” Chleo asks.

“Ducks need ponds and other ducks. They'd be sad in our little house.”

“What about a dog?”

“Dogs need yards.”

“What about a fish?”

I laugh, pulling him against my side. “Maybe a fish.”

He leans into me, warm and solid and mine. “I love you, Mama.”

“I love you too, baby. More than all the stars.”

It's our thing. Our ritual. The way we say how much we love each other.

The mountains rise around us like guardians. This place makes me feel like we're untouchable here.

But there's work to be done. We pack up. Say goodbye to the ducks. Head over to my bakery.

Sunday afternoons at Sugar and Spice are my favorite. Slow days. Families walk in. No one's in a rush. No one's hurling abuses for quicker service.

Once at the bakery, Chleo sits at the corner table with his coloring books. I prep for tomorrow.

It's not much, my bread and butter.

Just a small storefront with a good coffee machine and mismatched chairs.

But it's mine.

Every crooked tile, every hand-painted sign, every recipe I perfected. All mine.

“Mama, can I help with the cookies?” Chleo abandons his dinosaur coloring page.

“Wash your hands first.”

He drags the step stool to the sink. Makes a production of scrubbing his little fingers. I watch him with love. And like every time, it's followed with terror.

He's smart. Too smart sometimes. Last week he asked why we don't have any pictures of his daddy.

I told him some families are just mamas and babies because the daddies are away. I hated lying, but he accepted it with five-year-old trust.

He asked where he was. Where away was. I pretended I heard the doorbell ring.

It terrifies me.

I hate lying to the kid.

But what else is a woman to do?

Those questions will get harder, I know. And those eyes—God, those eyes—will start demanding real answers.

But until then, I try to make time stop. Try to not think. Try to take it one day at a

time.

“All clean!” He presents his hands for inspection.

“Perfect. You can help me roll the snickerdoodles.”

We work in comfortable silence, flour dusting everything within a three-foot radius of Chleo. He's careful with the dough, tongue poking out in concentration.

“Mrs. Patterson says I'm a good helper,” he tells me.

“You are the best helper.”

“She says her grandson in Denver is my age, but he doesn't know how to crack eggs.”

“Everyone learns different things.”

“Did my daddy know how to crack eggs?”

The question comes out of nowhere, freezing me mid-roll. “I... I don't know, baby.”

“Do you miss him?”

Miss him?

I dream about him.

I wake up aching for hands that touched me like I was holy and profane at the same time.

I see tall strangers on the street and my heart stops until I realize it's not him.

But missing implies loss, and you can't lose something that was never really yours.

“It's complicated,” I say finally.

“When I'm bigger, will you tell me?”

When he's bigger. When his hands grow strong enough to break things.

“Maybe,” I whisper. I feel my throat clench. “Just...take over, will you? I need to go out back.”

My throat is all clenched up. I need a moment to calm down. A moment to make him forget any more questions. To distract him.

I make my way to the pantry. Watch over him through the glass peephole. Collect some more sugar, more flour. Might as well, while I'm in here.

But then, the bell above the door chimes, and I look out the glass. To see who it is.

And my world stands still.

I don't know what to do with my hands, my feet, my legs that crumble like dry buttered bread.

For right there, in my haven of work, stands the shadow of my past himself.

Nikolai Vetrov.

The same slicked-back hair.

The same gait, like he owns the damn place.

The same green tiger eyes.

He's dressed in Armani. Time hasn't touched him—just sharpened the edges.

His eyes scan the room and my breaths begin to flutter. It's not me I fear for.

I'm out back, behind the swing door, breath catching.

Those eyes land on Chleo.

My son.

His son.

And he doesn't even know it.

Not yet.

But he might soon.

The devil just walked into my quiet little life.

And he's looking straight at the reason I've been hiding.

Page 11

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:30 am

NIKOLAI

Fern Hills looks like the kind of place where nothing ever happens.

Main Street. White picket fences. The whole American dream bullshit wrapped up in a postcard.

Perfect place to disappear.

I park the Aston Martin between a rusted pickup and a soccer mom SUV. Feels a little like dropping a wolf into a petting zoo.

I shouldn't be here. Should be back in Chicago, cleaning up the mess I left behind.

But the heat's too much right now.

Police asking questions.

Bratva politics turning ugly.

The man I killed deserved worse than what I gave him.

No regrets. He had it coming.

But the cops don't care what I think. And the rival family wants blood for blood, consequences be damned.

So here I am. Middle of nowhere.

I step out of the car. The air tastes different here. Clean. Like it's never seen anything dark, ugly.

That's when I see the bakery.

“Sugar and Spice” in curving script across the window. Gingham curtains. The kind of wholesome that makes my teeth ache.

The place pulls at me like gravity.

I cross the street. Push through the door. A bell chimes overhead—cheerful, innocent.

And that's when I see him.

A boy. Maybe four, five years old. Dark hair that won't stay flat. Serious eyes that track my movement like he's cataloguing threat levels.

Smart kid.

He's standing behind the counter on a wooden step stool, small hands gripping the edge. Alone.

Something twists in my chest. I don't understand what it means.

“We're not open yet,” he says sweetly. Voice clear, though. Confident. No fear.

Most kids take one look at me and hide behind their mothers. This one plants his feet and meets my stare head-on.

Brave little bastard.

“That so?” I keep my voice gentle. Soft as I can make it. “What time do you open?”

He checks a clock on the wall. Frowns. “Fifteen minutes. But Mama will tell you.”

The way he says “Mama” gets me curious. I don’t know why. But I’d like to see who he belongs to.

“You work here alone often?” I ask.

He shakes his head. “Rosa's supposed to be here. She's always late. She’s a busy writer.”

As if summoned, the front door chimes again. A woman rushes in—mid-twenties, wild curly hair escaping from a messy bun.

“Sorry, sorry!” She's breathless. “The muse struck at three Aa.m. and I completely lost track of time.”

She notices me and stops. Takes in my size, the ink crawling up my neck, the way I fill the space.

“Oh. Um. Sorry, we're not quite?—”

“I told him,” the boy interrupts.

The woman—Rosa—ruffles his hair. “Good man, Chleo. Where's your mom?”

Chleo. The name hits me like déjà vu for no reason.

“Pantry,” Chleo explains. “She’s getting sugar.”

Rosa nods, ties an apron around her waist. “Right. Well, I can help if you'd like to wait, sir. Though fair warning—I'm much better with words than pastries.”

“You're a writer?” I ask.

She blushes. “Romance novels. Escapist stuff, really. But it pays for coffee and rent.” She gestures around the bakery. “This is just for extra cash. And because Chleo's mom is basically family.”

Chleo tugs on her apron. “Can I take his order?”

“Of course.” Rosa steps back, lets the kid take point.

Chleo straightens his shoulders. All business. “What would you like?”

I lean against the counter, bring myself closer to his eye level. “What do you recommend?”

He considers this seriously. Weighs options like he's negotiating arms deals instead of baked goods.

“Mom makes the best scones. Lemon ones are my favorite.” He pauses, then tilts his head, stares right into me. “But you might like chocolate. You’re old. Old people like chocolate.”

Christ. This kid reads people at this age?

“You're very observant,” I tell him.

“Mom says it's important to notice things.”

Smart mother. Teaching her son to be aware. To be careful.

But there's something else. The way he holds himself. The tilt of his chin when he's thinking. The exact shade of his eyes.

Grey-green. Like looking in a mirror.

My chest tightens. Blood pounds in my ears.

No. Coincidence. Kids can look like anyone.

But the pull I felt walking in here. The recognition. The way he doesn't flinch from me.

“Chocolate croissant then,” I manage.

Chleo nods. Turns to the display case. Has to stretch on his toes to reach the tongs.

“I can get that,” Rosa offers.

“I've got it.” His voice carries that same stubborn determination I hear in my own.

Fuck.

The door to the pantry opens. Rosa and Chleo both look up, smiling.

“Finally,” Rosa says. “I was starting to think you'd fallen asleep.”

I turn to see who she's speaking to.

And I freeze.

She's pale.

She's five years older. Hair longer. Curves fuller.

But unmistakably, it's the woman who disappeared from my bed. From my life. From Chicago without a trace.

Lilly.

The woman I've thought about every day since.

Our eyes meet and she stumbles, loses balance as she tries to clutch at the table behind her. A bowl slips. Shatters on the floor. Brown liquid spreads across white tile like spilled blood.

"Mama!" Chleo jumps down from his stool. "You're making a mess! You said we can't waste things. We have no money!"

Mama.

The word echoes in my skull.

And what does the kid mean that they have no money?

I look at Chleo. Really look. The eyes. The stubborn chin. The way he stands like he's ready for war.

The timeline crashes over me like a freight train, reels into my mind like an itch.

Could it be...?

Five years ago. A few nights together. No protection.

Holy fuck.

Lilly hasn't moved. Hasn't breathed. She's staring at me like I'm a ghost. Like I'm the devil come to collect.

Which, apparently, I am.

“Lilly,” I say. My voice comes out rougher than intended.

Rosa looks between us, confusion written across her face. “You two know each other?”

“We...” Lilly's voice cracks. She clears her throat, tries again, but can't speak.

Chleo tugs on Lilly's hand. “Mama, you're shaking.”

She is. I can see it from here. Can see the way her pulse hammers in her throat.

“I'm fine, baby.” She kneels down, starts picking up ceramic pieces with trembling fingers. “Just clumsy.”

I move without thinking. Kneel beside her. Our hands brush as we both reach for the same shard.

Electric. Five years and she still burns like live wire.

“Let me,” I say quietly.

“No.” She jerks her hand back. “I’ve got it.”

But she doesn’t. She’s shaking too hard. Cuts her finger on a sharp edge.

“Shit,” she hisses, then glances at Chleo. “Sorry. Language.”

“It’s okay, Mama. You’re bleeding.”

I pull a handkerchief from my pocket. Clean white cotton. Reach for her hand.

She lets me. God knows why, but she lets me wrap the fabric around her finger.

Her skin is soft. Warm. Familiar.

I want to pull her against me. Want to demand answers. Want to ask her why she ran.

Why she has a kid that looks like me.

I can see it now. Clear as day.

The realization should terrify me. Should send me running.

Instead, it makes me want to hear what she has to say.

“There,” I say. Release her hand before I do something stupid.

Like kiss her. Like claim her. Like show Rosa and my son exactly what it means to call someone mine.

“Thank you,” Lilly whispers.

She stands. Backs away. Puts distance between us.

But there's nowhere to run. Not anymore.

I found her.

And I'm not letting her go again.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:30 am

LILLY

This can't be happening.

I'm twisting and turning inside.

And he's here.

He found me.

I'm shaking. I'm torn. He's the monster I ran from.

I can't breathe. Can't think. Can't process the fact that Nikolai Vetrov is shooting glances at my son with a question in his eyes.

Our son.

God, what if he figures it out? What if he already has?

"Rosa," Nikolai doesn't take his eyes off me. "Take the boy somewhere else. We need to talk."

Rosa sees it. The inferno between us. "Come on, kiddo. Let's go get some burgers. You must be hungry."

"But Mama?—"

“Just for a little while,” I say sweetly. “I’ll be right here.”

Nikolai watches Chleo go. The bell chimes. The door closes. Then it’s just us.

Me. Him.

And everything I’ve been running from.

“What did he mean?” Nikolai’s voice is deadly quiet. “About having no money?”

I wrap my arms around myself and hold tight. Keep myself from shattering under his eye.

“It’s nothing,” I lie.”Just... business is slow.”

“Try again.”

His voice cuts through me. My spine snaps straight like it remembers who he is. Five years gone, and he still does this to me.

Still makes me want to obey before my brain catches up. Almost makes me forget why I ran.

“The bakery’s closing,” I admit. “End of the month. The landlord doubled the rent and I can’t... I can’t make it work.”

His jaw ticks. “How much do you owe?”

“It doesn’t matter. You can’t just?—”

“How much, Lilly?”

The way he says my name. Like he owns it. Like he owns me.

“Fifteen thousand,” I whisper. “But Nikolai, you can't?—”

“Fifteen thousand.” He says it like it's pocket change. Like it's nothing. “That's what's keeping you awake at night?”

“I'm fine.”

“You're not fine. You're barely holding on.” He takes a step closer. Then another.

“You ran from me. Disappeared without a word. And now I find you here, struggling to keep food on the table for your kid.”

My kid.

He hasn't figured it out.

Or has he? And he's toying with me.

“I'm not?—”

“Don't.” His voice drops to a whisper. “Don't lie to me. Not about this.”

I stare at him, this man who could destroy me with a word. This man who already destroyed me five years ago and made me love every second of it.

“I'm in trouble,” I breathe.

His mouth curves into something that might be a smile on anyone else. On Nikolai, it looks like a promise.

“Not anymore,” he moves closer until I can smell his cologne. Until I can feel the heat radiating from his body. “I can help if you want.”

And just like that. He’s promising me the moon. Like it costs him nothing. I shouldn’t trust him. Should remember that trouble follows the devil.

Always.

But he shows me a future. A way out. A breath. And God help me—I want it. With every broken, desperate cell in my body.

And it shows on my face.

Shows in the way my lips part.

Shows in the way I go all heady with trembling knees.

He steps closer. My back hits the counter. Nowhere to go.

His eyes rake over me. Slow. Possessive. Like he’s remembering what’s under my clothes.

Like he wants to see if he still fits the way he used to.

I swallow hard. My breath’s all wrong.

He’s not touching me.

But my skin tingles like he is.

The heat between us? Nuclear.

I clench my fists to keep from grabbing his shirt. From dragging myself back into the fire I barely escaped.

He can make me forget. And with him standing so close, my body starts to buzz, hum, sing.

I thought I could forget him. But seeing him again? I'm a puddle at his feet.

And I can't hold back. I look up, straight into his eyes. See my hunger in his.

And then he's kissing me. Hard. Hungry. Like five years of distance was nothing but foreplay.

This kiss isn't sweet. Nor gentle. Nothing like one of those reunion kisses in a movie.

It's a claim. It's anger. It's possession.

His hands are in my hair, yanking my head back. His tongue slides in on a ruthless expedition, curving along mine, arching to lick the roof of my mouth.

My knees go soft.

My stomach clenches.

My thighs press together, aching for more.

I dig my fingers into his shirt, needing something to hold on to as he devours me.

His hands slide around my waist, gripping tight, walking me back.

I should resist.

Should push him away.

Should remember all the reasons I ran in the first place.

But I want it too. I've been starving for five years and he's a feast.

I moan into his mouth, pulling him closer. I can feel how hard he is already, pressing against my stomach.

And my body responds like it's been programmed to want him.

“Fuck,” he growls against my lips. “Five years and you still taste like sin.”

He backs me through the pantry door, kicks it shut behind us. The sound echoes like a gunshot.

Then his hands are everywhere. Sliding up my sides, cupping my breasts through my shirt, making me arch into his touch.

“I should have tracked you down years ago,” he says, mouth moving to my neck. “Should have found you the minute you disappeared.”

“Nikolai—”

“I asked around, you know? Went back to Table 9. Figured you found better options.” His hands grip the hem of my shirt.

He starts to lift. Fingertips drag up my stomach. My breath catches. The shirt clears my ribs. My bra.

His eyes never leave mine. “You didn’t come back.”

The shirt slides over my head. Hits the floor.

Now I'm bare from the waist up. Breathing hard. Burning. And he's staring at me like I'm something precious he lost and found. And plans to never lose again.

"Say the word, Lilly," he murmurs, thumb brushing the edge of my bra strap. "Say stop."

I don't.

I can't.

Because I don't want to.

My bra follows the shirt, torn apart by hands that don't have the patience for clasps. Then his mouth is on my breast, tongue circling my nipple until I'm gasping.

"God, I missed these," he murmurs against my skin. "Missed the way you taste. The sounds you make."

He backs me against the wall, the cold surface shocking to my naked back. His hand slides down, under my skirt.

Finds me wet over my panties.

He hisses in approval. "I could smell the heat off you the moment I saw you," he whispers into my ear.

I startle, I ache, I arch.

His fingers slide under my panties, finding my clit, circling it to make my hips buck.

I gasp.

He stops moving. Just watches me squirm.

I gasp, eyes fluttering open, meeting his.

“Use your words,” he whispers against my mouth. “I’m not a mind reader.”

“I want you to ruin me,” I whisper. “Right here. Right now. Don’t stop until I forget my name.”

His finger slides inside me, making me cry out. “That’s right.”

He adds another finger, curling them inside me, finding that spot that makes me see stars. His thumb stays on my clit, circling, pressing, driving me to the edge.

“That’s my girl,” he murmurs. “There she is. My perfect, filthy girl.”

Good girl gone bad.

The thought flickers through my mind like a neon sign.

That’s what I am with him. That’s what I’ve always been.

The responsible single mother disappears. The careful, cautious woman vanishes.

In her place is someone who digs her nails into his shoulders. Someone who spreads her legs wider, begging for more.

Someone who comes apart at the seams when he adds a third finger and whispers dirty promises in her ear.

“Come for me,” he commands. “Right here against this wall. Show me how much you missed me.”

And I do.

I shatter.

The orgasm rips through me like lightning, making my legs shake, my vision blur.

I'm only standing because his body pins me to the wall.

“Fuck,” he breathes, watching my face as I fall apart. “Beautiful. So fucking beautiful when you come.”

Before I can catch my breath, he's turning me around. Bending me over the small table we use for prep work.

His belt hits the floor. Then his pants.

When I feel him behind me, hard and ready, I spread my legs wider. Arch my back. Offer myself like the shameless thing he makes me become.

“You want this?” he asks, running the head of his cock through my wetness.

“Yes.”

He thrusts in with one brutal stroke that steals my breath. Fills me completely. Stretches me until I'm gasping.

He pulls almost all the way out, then slams back in.

His hands grip my hips, holding me steady as he sets a punishing pace. “You're not running from me again,” he growls.

Every thrust punches a moan from my throat. Every slap of skin on skin drives me higher.

I shouldn't want this.

Shouldn't crave the pain laced with pleasure.

The control.

The way he uses my body like he owns it.

But God, I do.

I want him deeper. Rougher. Until I forget I ever ran.

His fingers bite into my hips like he's anchoring me to this moment.

To him.

And maybe he is.

Because with every thrust, I forget the bakery, the lies, the years.

All I feel is him. Hard. Hot. Brutal.

One hand slides up my spine, tangles in my hair, pulls my head back. The slight pain mingles with pleasure until I can't tell them apart.

“You feel that?” he growls. “Feel how perfectly you take me? Like you were made for this.”

His other hand cracks across my ass, making me cry out. The sting spreads across my skin like fire.

“Again,” I gasp.

He obliges. Again and again until my skin burns and I'm sobbing with pleasure.

“My perfect little whore,” he says, voice thick with satisfaction. “I knew you'd like that.”

He's right. God help me, he's right. I love the way he takes control. Love surrendering to him completely.

His pace becomes erratic. I can feel him getting close, his control finally starting to slip.

“Come with me,” he demands. “Right fucking now.”

It coils deep—hot and tight—somewhere low in my belly.

A pulse.

A spark.

Then an inferno.

Every thrust shoves me closer. I grip the edge of the table like it might save me.

It won't.

He thrusts again—hard. Brutal. Perfect.

His cock hits that spot inside me like he's carving his name there.

And I shatter.

The second orgasm hits harder than the first, deeper, more devastating. I scream his name, not caring if a client out might hear.

He follows me over, hips slamming against mine as he empties himself inside me. His groan echoes off the pantry walls.

We collapse together, breathing hard. Sweaty. Wrecked.

“Fuck,” I whisper when I can finally speak.

We dress in silence. My bra is destroyed, so I grab my spare apron and put it on over my shirt, tying it tight to cover myself.

“Now,” he says, straightening his tie like he didn't just fuck me senseless against a prep table. “Tell me what you're really doing here.”

The question hits like cold water. Brings reality crashing back.

“The city got expensive,” I lie, not meeting his eyes. “Small town seemed like a better place to raise a child.”

“Don't lie to me.”

“That's the truth.”

“Lilly.”

The warning in his voice makes me shiver. But I can't tell him the real reason. Can't admit I ran because I was terrified of what it would mean for our son.

“I have to get back to work,” I say, moving toward the door.

He catches my wrist. Gently. But firm enough to stop me.

“This isn't over.”

I pull free, walk past him into the main bakery. My legs are still shaking. My body still humming with satisfaction.

But my mind is clearer now. Focused.

He can't know about Chleo.

Because if he finds out, I know exactly what will happen.

He'll never let us go.

Page 13

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:30 am

NIKOLAI

I 'm waiting when she opens the bakery.

Seven a.m. sharp.

I've been here since six, leaning against the brick wall across the street. Watching. Learning her patterns.

She unlocks the front door. Flips the sign from “Closed” to “Open.”

She moves with routine, doing, not thinking. From a place of necessity, from a hard life without a second to spare.

She hasn't seen me yet. She's too focused on getting through her morning checklist. Turning on the lights. Starting the coffee. Checking the display case.

I study her face through the window. The stress lines that weren't there five years ago. She's been raising Chleo alone .

It's bound to take a toll on a woman.

She could've come to me. Told me. Trusted me.

But she didn't.

And ever since I laid eyes on that boy—with my eyes, my scowl, my fire—I haven't

been able to stop thinking one thing.

Ours.

Mine.

What should've been.

The thought still hits like a punch to the chest. I've had all night to process it, and it's no less devastating in daylight.

The question is why she ran. Why she kept him from me.

Lilly disappears into the back. Emerges with a tray of fresh scones. Sets them in the display case.

That's when she sees me.

Her hands freeze on the glass door. Her face goes pale.

I push off the wall. Cross the street. The bell chimes when I enter.

“Good morning, Lilly.”

She straightens, but her composure slips. “We're closed.”

I glance around. “Looks open to me.”

“Nikolai.” She sighs. “Go someplace else.”

“All I want is a coffee. You do sell coffee, don't you?”

She stares at me. Those hazel eyes searching for my angle. Smart girl.

“What kind do you want?”

“Coffee. Black. No sugar.”

She begins to prepare the pot, but the truth is, I want something else entirely.

I want to know why she disappeared. Want to understand how she could keep my son from me for five years.

But I also want to help her. Want to fix whatever's broken in her world.

The dichotomy should confuse me. Instead, it clarifies everything.

Her hands shake as she fills my cup.

“Careful,” I murmur. “Don't want another wine incident.”

Her cheeks flush.

The coffee sloshes as she sets it down.

I take a sip. It's good. Rich. Better than anything I've had in Chicago.

“You're talented,” I say. “The coffee. The scones. All of it.”

“Thank you.” Wary. Waiting for the trap.

“Shame you're losing the place.”

Her shoulders tense. “I told you. Business is slow.”

“Fifteen thousand.” I set the cup down. Lean against the counter. “That's what you owe.”

“It's not your problem.”

“I'd like to make it my solution.”

“No,” she’s quick to say. “I don't need your help.”

“Your pride won't feed your son.”

The words hit her like a slap. She flinches.

“What if I don’t want your help?” she hisses with anger, having been hurt.

“But you do need help, don’t you?” I ask simply. “I can get you suppliers. Renovate. Expand. Make Sugar and Spice something this town actually lines up for.”

“Why?” Her voice is small. Sharp. “Why the hell would you care?”

Because I walked in yesterday and saw our son.

Because I haven’t slept since.

Because the sight of him nearly brought me to my knees.

I don’t say any of that.

Instead, “I’m investing in clean businesses. Laying down roots.”

Her eyes widen. “You can't be serious.”

“I don't joke about business.”

“People don't just hand out business investments to waitresses they slept with.”

“No,” I agree. “They don't.”

“So why are you here? Really?”

The question I've been expecting. The one I've been preparing for.

“I'm looking into legitimate investments.” The lie slides out smooth as silk. “Things with good cash flow and community connections. Your bakery would fit right in.”

She stares at me like I'm speaking a foreign language.

“Clean businesses,” she repeats slowly.

“Clean money. Clean books. Clean reputation.”

Her laugh is sharp. “Since when do you care about clean anything?”

Since I killed a man and brought heat down on myself. Because Chicago went to hell and I need a place to lay low in.

Because I found you again.

“People change,” I say instead.

“Do they?” She crosses her arms. “Because the man I saw in that alley didn't look

like he'd want to settle into Fern Hills and take on a bakery to expand."

There it is. The real reason she ran.

She's afraid of me.

She should be.

"That was work," I tell her. "This is different."

"How is it different?"

"Because this is about you."

The words hang between us like a lit fuse. Her breathing quickens. Pupils dilate.

Even afraid, she wants me. I can smell it. The same heat that's been burning between us since Table 9.

"I can't." Her voice is barely a whisper. "I can't get involved with you."

"Why not?"

"Because people around you die." The words come out harsh. Raw. "And I have a son to raise."

Her son.

My son.

The truth sits between us like a grenade with the pin pulled.

“He's a good kid,” I say carefully. “Smart.”

“He is.” Pride creeps into her voice. “He's everything to me.”

“Must be hard. Raising him alone.”

Her face hardens. “I manage.”

“I'm sure you do. But it doesn't have to be that way.”

“What are you saying?”

I finish my coffee. Set the cup down and let my eyes meet hers.

“Who's the daddy?”

Page 14

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:30 am

LILLY

The question hangs between us.

Heavy.

Hot.

Like smoke curling from a house fire.

Who's the daddy?

My mouth opens. Closes. Nothing. No sound. No lie. No truth. My brain is scrambling.

Then— “Shit, Lilly! I was up writing late last night.”

Rosa barrels out of her car and to my side, flashing Nikolai a smile. Arms full of crumpled papers. Hair an utter disaster. Panting. Wild-eyed. Late, as always.

“I know, I know—I'm behind. Just tell me where to start.”

Nikolai stares her down like he's ready to kill. With eyes like knives and jaw tight.

He doesn't like this interruption.

I, on the other hand? I could kiss her.

I hook my arm through hers. Grateful. Shaking. Saved.

“Plenty to do,” I say. “Let’s start now.”

And without looking back, without another breath?—

I walk away. Leave him standing there with the question still burning and my answer locked tight behind my teeth.

I can feel him watching as we walk into the bakery. He knows I’m running.

And something tells me he’ll be back.

And he is.

Two hours later, when the morning rush finally dies down, the bell chimes.

Nikolai walks in carrying a toolbox.

My heart does that stupid fluttering thing. The same thing it does every time I see him.

“Need something?” I ask, trying to sound casual while preparing for the worst.

“Noticed you have a broken chair.” He nods toward the corner table where one of the wooden chairs sits with a wobbly leg. “Thought I’d fix it.”

I blink. “You want to fix my furniture?”

“Problem with that?”

I don't have an answer.

He kneels beside the broken chair. Opens his toolbox.

And with the same hands that can shatter ribs, I watch him thread glue. Tighten bolts.

I watch. Even though I shouldn't. Black sweater. Sleeves shoved up. Forearms inked with dark poetry.

That little line between his brows appears as he focuses. Like his world has narrowed to the crack in the wood.

And I can't stop staring. Can't stop remembering what those hands did to me. On me. Inside me.

God help me.

The bell chimes again. Mrs. Patterson shuffles in, leaning heavily on her cane. She's eighty-three, comes in every Tuesday and Friday for a blueberry muffin and coffee with extra cream.

"Morning, sweetie," she calls to me, then sees Nikolai. "Oh my."

He looks up. "Morning, ma'am."

Mrs. Patterson's wrinkled face lights up like Christmas morning. "Well, aren't you a tall drink of water. I'm Eleanor Patterson. And you are?"

I wince. Small town. Curious folks. I used to love that once. Now? Not so much.

"Nikolai." He actually stands to shake her hand properly. "Pleasure to meet you, Mrs.

Patterson.”

“Oh, such manners!”

She pats his arm like he's her grandson. “What brings you to our little town?”

“Business,” he says smoothly. “And the coffee here is excellent.”

Mrs. Patterson beams at me. “Did you hear that, Lilly? This nice young man appreciates good coffee.”

I force a smile. “He certainly does.”

“Are you single, dear?” Mrs. Patterson asks Nikolai without an ounce of shame.

Rosa chokes on her latte.

Nikolai's mouth twitches like he's fighting a smile. “I am.”

“Well, that's too bad. A handsome man like you should have someone to take care of him.”

She leans in conspiratorially. “Though between you and me, our Lilly here is quite the catch. Makes the best scones in three counties.”

My face burns. “Mrs. Patterson?—”

“What? I'm just saying. You're both young, both single. Life's too short not to take chances. In my days, when a man fixed your furniture, it meant something.”

Nikolai meets my eyes over Mrs. Patterson's silver head.

There's heat there. Sizzling, dazzling heat.

"I couldn't agree more," he says quietly.

Mrs. Patterson leaves after her muffin and coffee. More people trickle in.

And Nikolai stays.

Finishes the chair repair. Notices a loose hinge on the display case. Fixes that too. When Mrs. Chen mentions her car making a funny noise, he follows her outside to take a look under the hood.

Who the hell is this man? I follow to stare out the window.

Rosa slides up to me. "You two got history or something?"

"None," I lie.

"He's really something," she whistles. "You should catch him while you can."

"He's not interested," I lie, yet again.

"The way that man looks at you? I bet you're wrong."

I want to tell her it's more complicated than that.

But I can't. So I just watch. Watch him be kind to a lonely old woman who probably hasn't had anyone really listen in years.

And it guts me.

Because this morning? He looked at me like a loaded weapon. Asked about Chleo's father with eyes sharp enough to bleed.

Yesterday?

He fucked me like vengeance. Bent me over and ruined me with his hands, his mouth, his name in my throat.

But now?

Now he's crouched beside Mrs. Chen's busted Honda.

Explaining engine trouble. She laughs. He looks up and smiles.

And I stand here, heart melting for a man I should fear.

How can someone be so gentle and so dangerous at the same time?

The question haunts me as the day continues. Nikolai doesn't leave.

He just... stays. Helps. Charms every person who walks through that door.

"You're going to spoil me," I tell him during a brief lull.

"Good," he says, and there's something in his voice that makes my stomach flip.

That's when Chleo comes running in from school, backpack bouncing, cheeks flushed from the cold.

"Muama! Guess what? Tommy's mom brought cupcakes for his birthday and—" He stops short when he sees Nikolai. "Oh. Hi."

“Hey there,” Nikolai says softly.

I hold my breath.

“You fixed the wobbly chair.” Chleo observes his toolkit, the chair in the corner, always noticing everything.

“I did. Does it meet with your approval?”

Chleo tests it out, sitting down and rocking slightly. The chair holds steady. “It's good. Mama's been saying she'd fix it for weeks.”

“Sometimes it helps to have the right tools.”

“Can I see them?”

Nikolai glances at me. I nod, not trusting my voice.

He opens the toolbox, explains what each tool does in simple terms that don't talk down to a five-year-old. Chleo listens.

Then, he looks up at Nikolai: “Want to see what I built at school?”

“Absolutely.”

And just like that, my son is showing this dangerous stranger his Lego creation. Explaining how the wheels turn and where the secret compartment hides treasure.

Nikolai listens like it's the most fascinating thing he's ever heard.

Before I can protest, Nikolai is lifting Chleo onto his shoulders. My son squeals with

delight, hands gripping that dark hair I used to run my fingers through.

“I’m so tall! Mama, look how tall I am!”

I look. And my heart breaks a little more.

Because Chleo looks so happy up there. So secure. Like he belongs.

And Nikolai... the way he holds my son so carefully. Like Chleo is made of spun glass and starlight.

They walk around the bakery like that, Nikolai pointing out things from Chleo's new height.

The top of the display case.

The old tin signs on the walls.

The way the afternoon light catches the dust motes dancing near the window.

“This is such fun,” Chleo announces.

“I’m glad,” Nikolai says softly.

When he finally lifts Chleo down, my son's face is flushed with excitement and something else. Something that looks like longing.

He comes over to me, tugs on my apron.

“Mama?”

“Yes, baby?”

“When is my dad coming to visit?”

The question hits like a physical blow. I kneel down to his eye level, brush a strand of dark hair from his forehead.

“I don't know, sweetheart. His work keeps him very busy.”

“But he loves me, right? Even if he can't visit?”

My throat closes up. Behind Chleo, I see Nikolai go very still.

“Of course he loves you,” I whisper. “So much. More than you could ever know.”

It's not a lie. Not exactly. Because if Nikolai knew about Chleo, he would love him. I'm certain of that.

But love from a man like Nikolai comes with chains. With danger. With a world I can't let my son be part of.

“Okay,” Chleo says, apparently satisfied. He bounces back to his usual sunny self.

“Can I have a cookie?”

“One. Then homework.”

He selects a sugar cookie shaped like a star, then disappears into the back room to do his homework.

The afternoon stretches on. Nikolai leaves for a while, but returns. Like this is his life now.

And maybe that's what scares me most.

That he fits.

That watching him with Chleo feels so right it makes my chest ache.

That I could get used to this. Could let myself believe in the fairy tale.

When six o'clock comes, Rosa packs up her writing supplies.

“See you tomorrow, Lilly. Nice meeting you, Nikolai. Try not to fix everything before I get back—I like having things to complain about.”

After she leaves, it's just the three of us. Nikolai, and Chleo, and me in the back room doing homework.

I should ask Nikolai to leave. Should tell him we're closing soon.

Instead, I start cleaning the espresso machine. Anything to keep my hands busy.

“Mama!” Chleo calls from the back. “Can you come look at this?”

I find him bent over a piece of paper, tongue poking out in concentration. He's drawing something with crayons, completely absorbed.

“What are you working on?”

“A picture for the nice man. For fixing our chair.”

My stomach drops. “Chleo, you don't have to?”

“But I want to.” He holds up the paper proudly.

It's a drawing of three stick figures holding hands. A tall one with dark scribbles for hair. A medium one with brown hair in a ponytail. A small one in the middle.

It looks like a family.

“It's beautiful, baby, but?—”

“Can I give it to him now? Please?”

How do I explain that the nice man isn't family? That he can't be family? That family means running in the middle of the night?

I can't.

So I nod.

Chleo races out to the main bakery, clutching his drawing. I follow, my heart hammering against my ribs.

Nikolai is wiping down tables. He looks up when Chleo approaches.

“I made this for you,” Chleo announces, holding out the paper. “For fixing our chair and being nice.”

Nikolai takes the drawing carefully, like it's made of gold leaf. He stares at it for a long moment.

The big stick figures. The little stick figure.

When Nikolai looks up, his eyes are bright with something that might be tears.

“This is...” His voice cracks slightly. “This is the most beautiful thing anyone's ever given me.”

“Really?”

“Really.” Nikolai kneels down so he's at Chleo's eye level. “Thank you. I'll treasure it forever.”

Chleo beams. “Maybe tomorrow you can help fix other things. The bell on the door is loose too.”

“Maybe I can.”

Nikolai stands slowly. He's still holding the drawing, still staring at it like he can't quite believe it's real.

When he looks at me, there's something broken in his expression. A single tear tracks down his cheek.

The drawing flutters slightly in Nikolai's hands as he folds it carefully, reverently, and slips it into his jacket pocket.

Right over his heart.

Page 15

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:30 am

NIKOLAI

Three weeks in Fern Falls and I'm losing my goddamn mind.

This town is a postcard. All white picket fences and Sunday morning church bells.
The kind of place where people wave at strangers and leave their doors unlocked.

The kind of place that makes my skin crawl.

I don't belong here. Never will. I'm a wolf trying to play house cat, and it's eating me
alive from the inside out.

But Maksim was right. Chicago's too hot. The cops have my face plastered on wanted
posters. The Kozlov family wants my head on a spike. All because I put three bullets
in Viktor Kozlov's chest.

No regrets. The bastard had it coming.

But killing a Kozlov comes with consequences. Even when they deserve worse than
death.

So here I am. Hiding in Norman Rockwell's wet dream while the heat dies down.
Maksim bought me time, but time has a price, and I'm paying it in sanity.

Honestly, if I hadn't found her, I'd have been off in hours.

She's the only thing keeping me here.

Every morning, I wake up in the rented house on Maple Street. Drink coffee that tastes like dishwater. Pretend to read the local paper that covers nothing more scandalous than the church bake sale.

And every morning, I find myself staring through the window at Sugar and Spice.

At her.

God. She's beautiful in a way that makes my chest tight.

One week, and I can't stop watching.

Can't stop thinking about the way she feels wrapped around me.

The sounds she makes when I'm inside her.

The way she tastes like sin and salvation.

Can't stop thinking about Chleo.

The kid has my eyes. It's like looking in a mirror.

The timeline fits. Five years ago, a few passionate nights, no protection.

He's mine. I know it. Feel it in my bones.

But she ran. Kept him from me. And every time I try to bring it up, she deflects. Changes the subject. Builds walls higher than I can climb.

The smart thing would be to leave them alone. Let them live their quiet life while I serve my exile.

But I've never been smart when it comes to Lilly.

The coffee shop on Main Street serves liquid disappointment, but it gives me a clear view of the town square. I sit at the corner table and watch the world go by.

Boring as hell.

Until she appears.

She's wearing jeans and a sweater the color of autumn leaves. Simple. Sweet. The kind of outfit that shouldn't make my blood run hot.

But everything about her makes my blood run hot.

She stops near the fountain.

That's when I see him.

Tall. Lean. Dark hair slicked back. Wearing a leather jacket that screams trouble.

And there's ink crawling up his neck.

I go very still.

The tattoo is small. Subtle. But unmistakable to someone who knows what to look for.

Bratva ink.

Specifically, the serpent wrapped around a dagger. Symbol of the Moscow syndicate.

What the fuck is Bratva doing in Fern Falls?

The man approaches Lilly. She lights up when she sees him. Genuine happiness. Relief.

They embrace.

Not romantic. Familiar. Friendly.

But my vision goes red anyway.

She's hugging him. Smiling at him. Talking to him like he's out of a Hallmark movie. Like he's not connected to the world she judges.

I watch them talk. Can't hear the words from here, but I can read body language. He's animated. Gesturing. She's laughing.

Laughing.

With a man who wears the mark of killers.

She doesn't know. Can't know. Lilly's too pure for this world. Too innocent.

Unless it's all an act.

They part ways after ten minutes. Lilly heads back to the bakery. The man walks in the opposite direction.

I fold my newspaper. Drop a five on the table.

Follow.

My feet move without conscious thought. Muscle memory from twenty years of hunting predators.

He's good. Keeps to main streets. Doesn't look over his shoulder. Maintains the facade of a tourist.

But I'm better.

I stay two blocks back.

Use storefronts as cover.

Move like smoke.

He turns into an alley behind the old movie theater. The kind of place where rats go to die.

Perfect.

I give him a thirty-second head start. Then slip into the shadows.

He's not alone.

Another man waits in the alley. Shorter. Stockier. Face like a bulldog.

I recognize him immediately.

Dmitri. Works for human traffickers. Runs girls from Eastern Europe through the port cities.

Son of a bitch.

They're speaking Russian. Low voices. Careful.

“—told you to not ask about my family,” the tattooed man is saying.

“Family?” Dmitri laughs. “You think I give a shit about your cousin? She's just another pretty face in a nothing town.”

Cousin.

The word hits like a physical blow.

Lilly's cousin.

Family.

“She doesn't know anything,” the cousin continues. “Never has. I keep that life separate.”

“Whatever. Let's get talking.” Dmitri steps closer. “This town's perfect. Quiet. Trusting. Nobody asks questions.”

“No.” The cousin's voice turns hard. “Not here. Not her town.”

“Her town?” Dmitri's laugh is ugly. “Since when do you care about geography?”

“Since I decided to get clean. Find a different life.”

“Clean?” Dmitri spits. “You think you can just walk away? You think the brotherhood lets people retire to play house?”

“I'm not asking permission.”

Wrong answer.

Dmitri's hand moves toward his jacket. Toward the gun I know is there.

That's when I step out of the shadows.

“Gentlemen.”

They spin. Hands reaching for weapons.

I'm faster.

The cousin gets slammed against the brick wall before he can blink. My forearm across his throat. Not crushing. Not yet.

“Lilly's your cousin?” My voice is deadly quiet.

His eyes go wide. “Who the fuck are?—”

I press harder. Cut off his air.

“Answer the question.”

“Yes,” he gasps. “I swear to God, she's my cousin.”

I study his face. Looking for lies.

Find none.

“She Bratva?”

“No. Never. She doesn't know shit about the business.”

I believe him. Can hear the truth in his voice. The desperation.

But then Dmitri laughs.

And I know that sound.

It's the sound of men who've done unspeakable things and never paid the price.

Not yet.

“Well, well. Another knight in shining armor. How sweet.”

I release the cousin. Turn to face the real threat.

Dmitri's got his gun out now. Pointed at my chest.

“You picked the wrong alley, friend.”

“Did I?”

My smile makes him nervous. Good.

“You know what I think?” Dmitri's getting chatty. Bad sign. “I think small-town girls are the best kind. Sweet. Innocent. Easy to move.”

The words hit like gasoline on a fire.

“They trust so easily,” he continues. “Believe anything you tell them. Perfect for overseas clients who like their merchandise unspoiled.”

Red.

Everything goes red.

The gun doesn't matter. The alley doesn't matter. Nothing matters except the rage burning through my veins.

I move.

Fast. Brutal. Unforgiving.

The gun flies from Dmitri's hand before he can pull the trigger. My fist connects with his jaw, snaps his head back like a rag doll.

He stumbles. Tries to regain balance.

I don't let him.

My knee drives into his stomach. He doubles over, retching.

I grab his hair. Slam his face into the brick wall.

Once.

Twice.

Blood streams from his nose.

“You like small-town girls?” I growl in his ear.

Slam his face again.

“Think they're easy to move?”

Again.

“Perfect for overseas clients?”

This time I hear something crack.

He's sobbing now. Begging.

I don't care.

Men like Dmitri don't deserve mercy. Don't deserve breath.

They deserve pain.

I let him drop. He crumples to the pavement like a broken doll.

But I'm not done.

My boot connects with his ribs. He screams.

“Please,” he whimpers. “I'll disappear. Never come back.”

“You're right,” I say, kneeling beside him. “You'll never come back.”

I wrap my hands around his throat.

His eyes bulge. Hands claw at mine.

“The next time you think about trafficking innocent girls,” I whisper, “remember this

moment. Remember me.”

I squeeze. Watch the life drain from his eyes.

Almost.

Then I let go.

He gasps. Rolls onto his side. Vomits blood and bile.

“Get out of my town,” I tell him. “If I see you again, I’ll finish what I started.”

He scrambles away on hands and knees. Disappearing into the shadows like the rat he is.

I turn to the cousin. He’s still pressed against the wall. Pale as death.

“You stay clean,” I tell him.

He nods frantically. “I swear. I swear on my mother’s grave.”

“Good.”

I pull a handkerchief from my pocket. Wipe the blood from my knuckles.

That’s when I hear it.

A sharp intake of breath.

I turn.

And there she is.

Lilly.

Standing at the mouth of the alley. Face white as bone.

She saw everything.

The violence. The rage.

Our eyes meet across the blood-stained alley.

Hers are wide with horror. With fear.

With recognition of what I really am.

She takes a step back.

Then another.

Then she turns and runs.

“Shit!” I gasp.

She's gone.

And I'm standing in an alley with blood on my hands, watching the only good thing in my life disappear into the distance.

Again.

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:30 am

LILLY

I run.

My feet pound against the sidewalk like I'm being chased by demons. Which, honestly, I am.

The image burns behind my eyelids. Nikolai's hands around that man's throat. The blood streaming from split skin. The way Nikolai's face went cold and deadly, flipped from human to monster.

And God help me, the sick part?

It turned me on.

I should be horrified. Should be packing our bags and running as far from this town as my car can take us.

Instead, I'm wet.

My thighs clench and I hate myself for it. Hate that watching him nearly kill a man made my body respond like he'd touched me instead.

What kind of sick, twisted woman gets aroused by violence?

The kind who's been ruined by Nikolai Vetrov, apparently.

I push harder. Faster. Like I can outrun the memory of him in that alley. Dangerous, beautiful, completely in control. The way his muscles flexed beneath that shirt. The power that coiled through him, outward, for all to see.

He was completely in control. He wasn't angry. Wasn't acting on his emotions. That's what scares me the most.

He was methodical. Like he'd done it a thousand times before.

Like he enjoyed it.

My lungs burn. Sweat stings my eyes. But I don't slow down. Can't slow down. Because if I stop moving, I'll have to think about what I saw. What it means.

What it means for Chleo.

The thought hits like ice water. My son. My sweet, innocent boy who thinks Nikolai is just a nice man who fixes chairs.

If Nikolai is capable of that kind of violence—and clearly he is—what does that make me for wanting him anyway?

What does that make me for letting him anywhere near my child?

I round the corner onto Elm Street.

Completely spent.

Tired.

Breathless.

My house sits at the end of the block. White clapboard siding. Blue shutters. A garden where I grow herbs for the bakery.

Normal. Wholesome. Everything Nikolai isn't.

That's when I see him.

Sitting on my porch steps like he owns the place.

Looks like he's been waiting.

My feet stutter to a stop. Every instinct screams at me to turn around. To run back the way I came and keep running until I hit the state line.

But I can't.

This is my home. My life.

Nikolai looks up as I approach. No guilt in his eyes. No shame. He's cleaned the blood from his hands.

"You're a fast runner," he says conversationally.

"How did you know where I live?"

"Small town. It's not hard to find people."

The casual way he says it makes my skin crawl.

"You followed me."

"I've been watching you, Lilly. Your address was never a secret."

Watching me.

The words settle in my stomach like lead. "You've been stalking me."

"I've been protecting you."

I laugh bitterly. "Protecting me? From what?"

"From men like the one in that alley."

He stands slowly, and I take an instinctive step back. Even casual, even sitting, he radiates danger. Standing? He's a predator uncoiled.

"You mean men like you?"

His mouth curves into something that might be a smile on anyone else. On Nikolai, it's something else. A threat. Amusement.

"No, Lilly. Not like me. Men like me don't hurt innocent women. We hurt men who try to."

"Is that supposed to make me feel better?"

"It's supposed to make you understand."

I wrap my arms around myself, suddenly cold despite the sweat cooling on my skin.

"Understand what?"

"That I'm not the monster you think I am."

"I saw you nearly kill a man."

"That man was dangerous. The things he had in mind, I wouldn't upset you with them."

The conviction in his voice makes me want to believe him. Makes me want to think there was a reason for the violence. A justification.

But I've seen enough of the world to know how this works. The dangerous man always has an excuse. Always has a reason why his violence was necessary.

"Even if that's true?—"

"It is true."

"—you can't just decide to be judge, jury, and executioner."

"Can't I?"

The quiet question hangs between us like a loaded gun. Because the answer is obvious, isn't it?

He can.

He did.

And he'd do it again without hesitation.

"Who are you?" I whisper. "Really?"

"You know who I am."

"No. I know you sit at Table 9. I know you're dangerous." My voice rises despite my efforts to stay calm. "But I don't know who you really are."

He studies my face for a long moment. Like he's deciding how much truth I can handle.

"I hurt people who try to take what's mine."

Simple. Direct. Honest.

And absolutely terrifying.

"Am I yours?" The question slips out before I can stop it.

His eyes darken. "What do you think?"

I think I'm in way over my head.

I think I should grab my son and run as far as we can get.

I think I'm playing with fire and pretending it won't burn me.

I think I want to be his anyway.

The realization hits like a physical blow. Despite everything, I want to belong to him.

I'm going crazy.

"I need to change and head out to get Chleo from daycare," I say, moving toward the front door.

He doesn't stop me. Just watches as I climb the porch steps on shaking legs.

I fumble with my keys, drop them twice before managing to get the door open.

To my shock, I hear voices.

Panic claws up my throat. "Chleo!"

"In here, Mama!"

His voice comes from the living room. Relief floods through me, followed immediately by confusion. He should be at daycare.

I follow his voice and freeze in the doorway.

My son is sitting on the floor, surrounded by toys. Nothing unusual about that.

Except for the man sitting across from him.

Tall. Lean. Dark hair. Wearing an expensive suit.

And when he looks up at me, I see the same predatory intelligence I recognize in Nikolai's eyes.

"Mama! Look, this is Maksim. He picked me up from daycare because you had to run an errand. He has the coolest cars!"

My blood turns to ice. A stranger picked up my son.

"You." My voice comes out as a croak. "You can't just—who are you? How did you?—"

"Breathe, Lilly."

Nikolai's voice behind me. Calm. Steady.

I spin around. "You did this. You arranged this."

"I thought you might need some time to process what you saw. Chleo was safe with Maksim."

"Safe?" My voice cracks. "Safe with a complete stranger?"

The man—Maksim—stands smoothly. He moves like Nikolai does. Like violence is always an option, just waiting to be unleashed.

"I apologize for the informal introduction," he says, his accent slight but unmistakable. Russian .

"You should have left my son at daycare where he belongs!"

"Mama?" Chleo's voice is small, confused. "Are you angry? Did I do something wrong?"

My heart breaks. None of this is his fault. He's five years old, playing with toy cars. Completely unaware that his world just shifted on its axis.

"No, baby. You didn't do anything wrong." I kneel down beside him, check him over with my eyes. "Are you okay? Did you have fun with... Maksim?"

"He's really nice. And he brought snacks!"

Snacks. Like this is a playdate instead of... whatever this is.

"Maksim," Nikolai says, "meet Lilly. Lilly, this is my oldest friend. My brother in everything but blood."

Brother. This isn't just a friend. This is someone Nikolai trusts completely. Someone who's part of whatever world Nikolai comes from.

And he's been alone with my son.

"It's a pleasure to finally meet you properly," Maksim says. "Nikolai speaks of you often."

"Does he." It's not a question.

"Only good things," Maksim assures me with a smile that's probably meant to be reassuring.

It's not.

Because now I know. This isn't just about Nikolai and me anymore. This is about Nikolai's world intersecting with mine. With my son's.

And once that line is crossed, there's no going back.

"Chleo," I say carefully, "why don't you go wash your hands for dinner?"

He pouts but obeys, disappearing down the hallway toward the bathroom.

The moment he's out of earshot, I turn on both men.

"Get out."

Maksim raises an eyebrow. "I beg your pardon?"

"Both of you. Get out of my house. Stay away from my son."

"Lilly—" Nikolai starts.

"No." My voice shakes with rage and fear. "My son is five years old. And I will not let your world touch him."

Maksim looks at Nikolai.

"Perhaps I should go," Maksim says finally. "Allow you two to talk."

"There's nothing to talk about," I snap.

But Maksim is already moving toward the door. He pauses beside me, leans close enough that only I can hear.

"He's a good man, Lilly. The best I've ever known. And he would die before letting harm come to either of you."

Then he's gone, leaving me alone with Nikolai.

"You can't do this," I whisper.

"Do what?"

"Pick up my kid without telling me."

Nikolai steps closer. "It'll never happen again," he says with a finality that tells me he means it.

Page 17

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:30 am

NIKOLAI

The kid moves like me.

I watch from across the small town square. Chleo's chasing pigeons near the fountain, arms outstretched like he's trying to fly with them.

But it's not the running that gets me. It's the way he stops. Sudden. Complete. Like someone flipped a switch. Like he tried amusement and decided there are better things in the world to focus on.

That's pure Vetrov.

My father used to do that. I do that. Maksim's commented on it a dozen times—how I can go from motion to absolute stillness in a heartbeat.

Chleo tilts his head, studies the carvings on the water fountain, traces his fingers along the edges. God, his intensity. His focus.

He's a serious kid. Too serious for five years old.

Just like I was.

Lilly sits on a bench twenty feet away, reading something on her phone. She's probably working, that woman.

Always fighting to keep her head above water.

She doesn't see me. Doesn't notice I'm watching her kid.

Chleo, with eyes just like mine.

With hair just like mine.

With expressions just like mine.

She doesn't see it. Doesn't notice the way Chleo's brows pull tight when he's focused. The little crease that forms—same as mine—when I'm planning something sharp.

It's there. Right between his eyes.

My mark.

The kid now charges after another cluster of birds. This time, he laughs when they take flight. Pure joy.

That laugh? That's all Lilly. Sweet and infectious.

Maybe that's why she ran. Maybe she saw the monster in me and decided her son, our son, deserved better.

She was right.

But being right doesn't change biology. Doesn't change the fact that the boy carries my DNA, my expressions, my instincts.

Doesn't change the fact that I want to know him. Want to teach him things. Want to be the father he's been asking about.

Want to give Lilly everything she needs so she never has to worry about rent or suppliers or whether the bakery will survive another month.

Which means I can't keep dancing around the truth.

It's time to force the issue.

Eight-thirty p.m. Sugar and Spice goes dark.

I wait across the street until Lilly flips the sign to "Closed." Until Rosa takes Chleo and disappears around the corner. Until it's just Lilly inside, counting the day's receipts.

Then I cross the street.

Within seconds, I'm inside.

Lilly looks up from the register, and her face goes from surprise to scepticism.

"We're closed."

"I know."

I lock the door behind me. Flip the deadbolt.

Her breathing quickens. "What do you want, Nikolai?"

Straight to the point. I've always liked that about her.

"The truth."

"About what?"

"You know what."

She finishes counting the bills in her hands. Sets them down slowly. Buying time.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

Lie. Obvious lie. Her hands are shaking.

I move closer. Slow steps that eat up the distance between us.

"Chleo," I say simply.

Her face goes pale. "What about him?"

Another step. "He's mine."

"No." Too fast. Too defensive. "He's not. His father?—"

But she stops. Can't finish her sentence.

"His father what? Where is he?"

She opens her mouth. Closes it. Opens it again.

"I..." The word comes out as a whisper. "I can't..."

"Can't what, Lilly? Can't tell me the truth? Can't admit you've been keeping a secret from me for five years?"

"You don't understand?—"

"Then make me understand."

I keep moving.

Closer.

Close enough to feel her body heat.

Close enough to smell her skin.

Close enough to feel my mouth water.

"He's... his father is..." She swallows hard. Tries again. "His father isn't in the picture."

"Because his father doesn't know he exists."

It's not a question.

Her silence is answer enough.

"Jesus, Lilly." My voice comes out rougher than intended. "You gonna lie to my face again?"

She squares her jaw, but her voice cracks.

"Chleo's not yours."

There's that look—flushed cheeks, glassy eyes, fists clenched at her sides. Everything

in her screams the truth, even as her mouth fights to bury it.

“You sure?”

“Yes.”

But her voice is a whisper.

And mine is a growl when I say, “Then why can’t you look at me when you say it?”

She doesn’t move.

Doesn’t blink.

Doesn’t breathe.

Just stands there. Silent. Fragile. On the edge.

So I close the gap.

Not because I believe her. But because I don’t. Because if she won’t give me the truth, I’ll take something else. Something real. Something I can feel.

“I don’t believe you,” I murmur.

Her breath hitches and she meets my gaze at last. The world around us disappears. All I see is her heaving chest, her flushed cheeks, her parting lips and when she inhales a long, whimpering little breath, I know she feels it too.

This tension.

This pressure.

This hunger that never fucking dies.

I lean in and she stands taller. Tilts her chin. Lips brush against lips.

Soft. Barely there. Then again. And again.

Until softness isn't enough.

Until I'm gripping her waist, yanking her flush against me. She gasps. I take advantage—slide my tongue inside her mouth, war with hers.

She moans into me, hands clawing at my shoulders, anchoring herself. My hand finds the back of her neck, fingers threading into her hair, tugging just enough to make her sigh. To make her arch.

And that sound?—

Fuck.

That sound undoes me.

My hands find the hem of her sweater, start to lift.

"We can't," she gasps against my mouth. "Not here."

"Where?"

She looks toward the back of the bakery. Toward the storage room where we fucked against the prep table weeks ago.

I don't wait for an answer.

I grab her ass and lift her clean off the floor.

She gasps. Her legs instinctively wrap around my waist. God. I feel her pussy through all these clothes. Know she feels my cock.

I carry her toward the storage room like I own her. Like I'm a caveman and she's mine. All mine.

Her breath is hot against my neck. Her nails bite into my shoulders. I kick the door open.

"The lights—" she starts.

"Leave them on. I want to see everything."

I kick the storage room door closed behind us. Set her down beside the prep table.

She's breathing hard, cheeks flushed, lips swollen from my kisses.

Beautiful. So fucking beautiful it makes my chest ache.

"Tell me you want this," I demand.

"I want this."

"Tell me you want me."

"I want you."

"Tell me you've thought about me every night since I left your bed."

Her eyes flash. "You first."

Fair enough.

"Every night," I admit. "Every morning. Every time I close my eyes, I see you spread out beneath me. Feel you wrapped around me. Hear you screaming my name."

Her pupils dilate. "Nikolai..."

"Your turn."

She swallows hard. "I touch myself thinking about you."

The admission hits like lightning. My cock throbs against my zipper.

"Show me."

"What?"

"Show me how you touch yourself when you think about me."

Her hands shake as she reaches for the buttons of her blouse. One by one, they slip free, revealing the black lace bra underneath.

"Fuck," I breathe. "You wear that to work?"

She shrugs.

Her hands slide over her breasts, thumbs circling her nipples through the lace. They

peak under her touch, and I have to grip the edge of the table to keep from grabbing her.

"Is this how you touch yourself?"

"Sometimes." Her voice is breathy. Wanting. "But mostly I think about your hands. Your mouth."

"What about my mouth?"

"How it feels between my legs. How you make me come so hard I forget my own name."

Christ. She's going to kill me.

I sweep everything off the prep table with one arm. Flour. Measuring cups. Rolling pins. All of it crashes to the floor.

She gasps at the sound.

"Up," I command, patting the now-empty surface.

She doesn't argue. Just hops up onto the table, legs dangling.

I step between her thighs, push them apart wider. Her skirt rides up.

"Jesus, Lilly," I groan and lean down, kissing her once again.

My fingers find the hem of her skirt. Slide up. Drag over skin so hot I nearly lose it right there.

She bites my lip.

I groan against her mouth.

“Still think I don’t have a right to ask?” I rasp.

Her answer is a growl—feral and needy—as she grabs my hand and shoves it under her skirt.

And I know?—

We’re past talking now.

My hands slide up her thighs, thumbs tracing the edge of her panties. She's already wet. I can feel the dark patch spreading through the fabric. I bite into her lower lip and she jerks, my finger digging into her panties.

God. I need more. My entire body is now tuned to hers.

Turned on for her.

I pull away. Stare into her eyes as I hook my fingers in the waistband of her panties. Slowly, I drag them down her thighs. Kiss the inside of her knees as I go. Make her wait until she trembles. Then, I let them fall to the floor.

I straighten and tower over her, my hands between her thighs as I push wider. "Spread."

She obeys. And fuck me, she's perfect. Pink and slick and begging for my attention.

She’s a wet little mess for me and I slide one finger through her, only to find it

drowning in her warmth. She gasps, hips bucking.

"So wet already. What were you thinking about?"

"You."

"Be specific."

"You bending me over this table. Taking what you want."

I slide one finger into her.

Her back arches.

A moan rips out of her throat.

"What else?"

I press harder on her clit and curl my fingers just right. Hit that spot over and over, relentless, brutal, tender. She's gasping now.

Whimpering.

Trying to hold back and failing.

"Come for me," I growl against her throat. "Let go, baby."

She shatters. Her body goes rigid. Back arches off the table. A choked scream tears from her lips as she pulses around me, wet and wild and fucking beautiful.

I let her ride out her orgasm. I don't stop until her whole body slumps forward, spent

and trembling in my arms.

I pull my fingers free, soaked and sticky.

Bring them to my mouth.

Taste her.

Perfect.

"Good girl," I murmur, holding her against me.

"But we're just getting started."

I unbuckle my belt. Shove my pants and boxers down.

Her eyes widen at the sight of me. Hard and ready and desperate for her.

I position myself at her entrance. The head of my cock slides through her wetness, making us both groan.

"Look at me," I command.

Her eyes meet mine.

"I want to watch your face when I fill you up."

I push inside slowly. Inch by inch. Watching her expression change from want to wonder to pure bliss.

When I'm fully seated, we both freeze. Adjusting. Remembering.

"Fuck," she breathes.

"Feel good?"

She nods and whimpers.

I start to move. Slow, deep strokes that make her moan with each thrust.

"That's it," I growl. "Let me hear those pretty sounds."

She's not quiet. Never has been. Each thrust punches a new sound from her throat—gasps, moans, my name whispered like a prayer.

"Harder," she begs. "Please, harder."

I grip her hips, change the angle. Drive into her with enough force to make her breasts bounce out of her bra.

"Dear God!" she screams.

The sound of skin slapping skin fills the storage room. Her nails claw into my shoulders, a delicious sting that makes my cock throb harder inside her.

Good. I want her marks on me. Proof that this isn't a dream. That I'm here. Inside her. Claiming her.

"Feel that?" I growl against her ear, dragging my teeth down her neck. "Feel how you squeeze me?"

"Yes," she moans, breath hitching.

"This cunt was made for me. Made to be fucked by me."

She moans, walls clenching around my cock. Every thrust feels like lightning ripping through my spine. She's hot and perfect and so fucking wet, I swear I could lose myself in the way she clenches.

"You like it when I fuck you like this?" I grit out, voice low and ragged.

"Yes."

"You like feeling me stretch you open?"

"God, yes."

Her words pour gasoline on the fire already tearing through my control. My hands grip her hips and I slam into her harder—relentless now. Hungry.

"Tell me what you want," I demand.

"Want you to fuck me harder. Want you to make me come."

"That's right." I change the angle, grind deep, hit the spot that makes her entire body jolt. "You want to come for me, don't you?"

"Yes—"

"Then fucking do it."

Her hand slips between us. Fingers on her clit. And I feel it—that flutter, that pull—her body going taut like a bowstring before she breaks.

And when she does? It wrecks me.

She screams my name, her whole body shaking, spasming around me. The walls of her pussy clench so tight I see stars.

I lose it.

My head drops, my body locking as I push as deep as I can go, groaning her name like I now worship her. The orgasm crashes through me, white-hot, violent, and so goddamn good it's blinding.

I empty into her with a raw, aching sound I couldn't hold back if I tried. It feels like peace. Like release. Like fucking home .

We collapse together. Sweat-slick. Breathless.

Spent.

But in my arms, she still feels like mine.

And that's the real problem because she's keeping a big secret. Reality creeps back in.

She slides off the table, starts looking for her panties. I watch her button her blouse with fingers that still shake slightly.

"This doesn't change anything," she says without looking at me.

"Doesn't it?" I ask in a bored tone.

I pull a napkin from the dispenser on the counter. Write my address in sharp, precise

letters.

"If you're gonna lie to me," I say, holding out the napkin, "at least do it to my face next time."

She takes it. Stares at the address like it might bite her.

"I'm not going anywhere," I tell her. "And neither are you. So we might as well figure this out."

I leave her standing there, clutching my address, looking at it like she's seen a ghost.

Page 18

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:30 am

LILLY

I find his wallet when I'm cleaning up the storage room. Expensive black leather, hidden behind a bag of flour like it fell out during our...activities.

I stare at it too long. I could toss it in the lost and found. Let fate decide. If he wants it, he'll come back.

Then Rosa comes in early, and suddenly my hands are grabbing my keys. My mouth tells her I'll be back soon. My brain screams to stop—but my feet are already moving.

I still have that address he gave me. My heart still races from the truth I know he knows. How long can I get away pretending he's got it all wrong when he hasn't.

He's sharp. Sharper than most men in their mid-forties. Sharper than the observations of the youth and wisdom of the old.

He sees through me. Through the lies I wear like armor.

He's already figured it out.

It's not if I tell him the truth. It's when .

I roll the windows down. The mountain air smells like pine. It calms me. Gets my heart to settle. It would be nice to not carry this secret, wouldn't it? To feel free of fear once again?

Maybe today.

Maybe today is the day I stop running.

The GPS leads me to the outskirts of town. Past the main drag. Straight into the woods.

His cabin sits at the end of a gravel drive. Log construction. Wraparound porch.

Looks fancy, but simple.

I park beside his Aston Martin. Sit there for a full minute, trying to work up the courage to get out.

Just return the wallet. Hand it over. Leave.

Simple.

That's when I hear it.

The rhythmic thunk of an axe splitting wood.

I follow the sound around the side of the cabin. And that's when I see him.

Holy. Hell.

Nikolai stands beside a massive pile of logs. Shirtless. Jeans slung low on his hips. Muscles rippling as he brings the axe down in a perfect arc.

Sweat gleams on his chest. His back. Slides down the ridges of his abs like liquid sin.

I can't move. Can't breathe. Can't think about anything except the way his body moves. Pure power. Beautiful brutality.

He's a Viking. A warrior. A man from a different time.

They don't make men like him anymore.

My mouth goes dry. My thighs clench. Every rational thought in my head evaporates like steam.

He splits another log. The wood cracks apart.

That's when he sees me.

His movements still. Those tiger eyes find mine across the forest clearing.

"Lilly?"

"You left your wallet." My voice comes out breathy. Weak. "At the bakery."

He sets the axe aside and starts walking toward me with a predatory grace that makes my pulse skip.

"Did I?"

He stops close enough that I can smell him. Sweat and wood and wild.

"Here." I fumble in my purse. Pull out the wallet. "I thought you might need it."

He takes it. Our fingers brush. Electric.

"Thank you."

He doesn't step back. Doesn't put distance between us.

If anything, he moves closer.

"You could have mailed it."

"I could have."

"But you didn't."

"No."

"Why not?"

Because I'm an idiot. Because seeing you half-naked just short-circuited my brain.
Because I can't stop thinking about last night.

"I was in the area," I lie.

His mouth curves into that smile. The one that promises he doesn't believe me.
"Were you?"

He knows I'm lying. Can probably smell the want rolling off me in waves. I gulp and nod.

"That's one more lie to your hat, Lilly," he whispers, his voice lapping across my skin like waves.

Oh. So we're doing this.

I cross my arms. "That's not fair."

It comes out of nowhere. The defensiveness. In the car, I had played with the idea of telling him the truth. But now? Seeing him like this? My brain's all jumbled and it doesn't seem like the right time.

"You ran," he warns.

"I left," I protest. "Didn't owe you nothing."

He steps closer, until I feel his chest graze against mine. When I look up, I see fire in his eyes. My pulse begins to feel like it's being electrocuted.

"You owed me a choice," he shakes his head.

"What choice?"

"My kid. My right to be in his life," he furrows his brows. Looks right through me.

"It wasn't your right," I look away.

Another step closer. Close enough that the heat from his skin makes mine tingle.

"Lilly."

"What?"

"Look at me."

I do. Mistake.

His hand comes up. Cups my cheek. His thumb traces my lower lip. "When's his birthday, Lilly?"

The question comes out of nowhere. Hits like a slap.

"What?"

"Chleo's birthday. When is it?"

My heart stutters. My stomach drops. He already knows—but hearing the date will make it real. But there's no way I can lie about this. He'll find out if he wants. Then, he'll know for certain.

"September fifteenth," I try to speak firmly.

"What year?"

It takes everything in me to not wince.

"What year, Lilly?"

"Two thousand nineteen," I whisper.

He nods slowly. Like he's doing math in his head.

"Five years ago. Nine months after that first night at the hotel."

"It's a coincidence."

"Is it?"

"Yes."

"He has my eyes."

"Lots of people have green eyes."

"My expressions. My mannerisms."

"You're imagining things."

"Am I?" He steps closer. Predatory now. Dangerous. "Or are you lying to yourself because the truth scares you?"

"The truth is that Chleo's father isn't in the picture. That's all you need to know."

"The truth is that I'm his father."

The words hang in the air like a grenade with the pin pulled.

"No."

"Yes."

"You're wrong."

"I'm not wrong. And deep down, you know it."

I back away from him. Put distance between us.

"You're delusional."

"Am I? Then prove it. Take a paternity test. Put this to rest once and for all."

"I don't have to prove anything to you."

"Don't you?"

His voice drops to a whisper. Becomes more dangerous than shouting.

"That boy is my son. My blood. And you've kept him from me for five years."

"I've protected him!"

"From what?"

The question stops me cold. Because there's no answer without admitting the truth. I protected my son from him. From his world.

His face goes very still. Very cold.

"I see."

"Nikolai—"

"No." He holds up a hand. "I get it. I'm the monster. The criminal. Not good enough for your precious son."

"That's not what I meant."

"Isn't it?"

He moves then. Fast as lightning. Backs me against the wall before I can react.

"Let me ask you something, Lilly. If I'm so dangerous, so wrong for you, then why are you here?"

"I told you. I was returning your wallet."

"Bullshit."

His body pins me to the wall. Hot. Hard. Overwhelming.

"You're here because you can't stay away. Because despite everything you tell yourself, you want me."

"I don't?—"

"You do. I can smell it on you. Can see it in your eyes."

His mouth hovers inches from mine. So close I can feel his breath on my lips.

His mouth hovers inches from mine. So close I can feel his breath ghost over my lips. Hot. Sharp. Infuriatingly sure of himself.

"You're trembling," he says, voice low, almost a growl. "Is it fear... or want?"

My hands flatten against his chest, meaning to push. Meaning to regain some kind of control. But the feel of him—solid muscle, heat radiating through his skin—melts my resistance like sugar in tea.

I hate him. I want him.

He's close enough to steal my breath. Close enough to burn every lie off my skin. I know I should walk away—but my body refuses to obey. My hands move before my

brain catches up.

And so instead, I clench his shirt into my fists and pull him closer. Until our lips smash against one another's. Until he's kissing me so damn hard, like he's fueled by anger.

And I'm all for it. I slide my tongue over his lips and he opens for me. All teeth and tongue and desperate hunger.

My hands fist in his hair. Pull him closer. Like I can't get enough. Like I'm drowning and he's air.

His hands are everywhere. Sliding down my sides. Gripping my ass. Pulling me against him so I can feel how hard he is.

"Fuck," he growls against my mouth. "You drive me insane."

He spins me around. Walks me backward toward the bedroom. His hands work at the buttons of my dress as we move. There's more skin and less clothes now.

I arch into his touch.

"That's it," he murmurs. "That's my girl."

We stumble through the bedroom doorway. He kicks the door shut behind us.

My dress is now gaping open from the top. He slides it off my shoulders.

"Beautiful," he breathes. "So fucking beautiful."

I reach for the remaining buttons. Want to help. Want this dress gone.

But he's impatient.

His hands grip the fabric. Pull.

The dress tears apart.

"Nikolai!" I gasp. "That was my favorite dress!"

"I'll buy you a new one."

"But—"

"I'll buy you ten new ones."

His mouth finds my neck. Bites down just hard enough to make me moan.

"A hundred."

The torn dress falls to the floor. Leaves me standing in nothing but my bra and panties.

He steps back. Looks at me like I'm a feast and he's been starving.

"Perfect," he says. "Absolutely perfect."

Then he's lifting me. Carrying me to the bed like I weigh nothing.

He throws me down onto the mattress. I bounce and giggle despite myself.

"Caveman," I accuse.

"Your caveman."

The possessiveness in his voice makes my stomach flip. Makes heat pool between my thighs.

He climbs onto the bed. Settles between my legs. His mouth finds my breast through the lace of my bra.

I arch beneath him. Fingers tangling in his hair.

"More," I whisper.

He doesn't need to be asked twice.

The bra disappears. Torn away like tissue paper.

His mouth closes over my nipple. Sucks hard enough to make me cry out.

"Sensitive," he murmurs against my skin. "I know."

His hand slides down my stomach. Fingers trace the edge of my panties.

"Already wet," he observes. "Always so ready for me."

"Nikolai, please."

"Please what?"

"Touch me."

"I am touching you."

"You know what I mean."

His thumb brushes over my clit through the fabric. Light as a feather. Nowhere near enough.

"This?"

"Yes."

"Ask nicely."

"Please touch me. Please make me come."

"Good girl."

My panties join the growing pile of destroyed clothing.

Then his mouth is on me. Tongue sliding through my folds. Finding my clit. Circling it until I'm gasping.

"God, you taste good," he groans. "Could do this all day."

But I don't want his mouth. Not right now.

I want him inside me. Want him filling me. Claiming me.

"I need you," I pant. "Now."

He lifts his head. Eyes dark with hunger.

"Turn over."

I flip onto my stomach. Rise up on my hands and knees.

The bed dips as he moves behind me. His hands grip my hips. Pull me back against him.

I feel his cock slide through my wetness. Hot. Hard. Ready.

"You sure about this?" he asks.

"Yes."

"Good. Because I'm going to fuck you so hard you forget how to lie to me."

He positions himself at my entrance. Pushes inside with one brutal thrust.

I cry out. Can't help it. He's so big. Stretches me so wide it borders on pain.

But it's good pain. The kind that makes my toes curl and my vision blur.

"Fuck," he groans. "So tight. So perfect."

He doesn't give me time to adjust. Just starts moving. Hard. Fast. Relentless.

Each thrust drives me forward. Makes the headboard bang against the wall.

I grab the wooden railing. Hold on for dear life as he pounds into me.

"That's it," he growls. "Take it. Take all of me."

His hands slide up my back. Cover mine on the railing. Fingers thread through mine.

The intimacy of it nearly undoes me. Makes this more than just sex. Makes it feel like something real.

Then he changes the angle. Hits that spot deep inside that makes me see stars.

"Oh God," I sob. "Right there. Don't stop."

"Never."

His free hand slides down my spine. Curves over my ass.

Then he smacks me.

The sharp crack echoes through the room. Stings in the best possible way.

"Again," I gasp.

He obliges. Again and again until my skin burns and I'm sobbing with pleasure.

"You like that, don't you?" he pants. "Like it when I mark you."

"Yes."

"Mine," he growls, punctuating the word with another thrust. "You're mine, Lilly."

I can't bring myself to say it. He doesn't ask me to. But his control finally snaps.

He fucks me harder. Faster. Like he's trying to claim every inch of me because I won't admit I'm his so he's going to prove it to himself.

I can feel my orgasm building. Coiling tight in my belly.

"I'm close," I gasp.

"Hold on. Wait for me."

His rhythm becomes erratic. Desperate.

Then his hand slides around. Finds my clit. Rubs hard circles that make me scream.

"Now," he commands. "Come for me now."

I shatter.

The orgasm rips through me like lightning. Makes my whole body shake and spasm around him.

He follows me over. Roars my name as he empties himself inside me.

We collapse together. Sweaty. Breathless. Completely wrecked.

His arms wrap around me. Pull me against his chest.

I should leave before he gets any ideas. Before he asks about Chleo again.

But I'm too tired. Too satisfied. Too content in his arms.

His breathing evens out. Becomes deep and steady.

He's asleep.

I lie there for what feels like hours. Listening to his heartbeat. Feeling the rise and fall of his chest.

This is dangerous. This feeling. This want to stay here forever.

Carefully, slowly, I slide out of his arms. He murmurs something in his sleep but doesn't wake.

I gather my destroyed clothes. What's left of them anyway.

His shirt hangs on a chair by the window. I slip it on. It falls to mid-thigh. Smells like him.

One last look at his sleeping form. So peaceful. So beautiful it makes my chest ache.

Then I slip out into the main room. Find my purse. My keys. I slip out the front door.

The drive home passes in a blur. My body still humming with satisfaction. My heart breaking with every mile. By the time I pull into my driveway, tears are streaming down my cheeks.

"I can't do this," I whisper to the empty car. "I can't."

Page 19

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:30 am

NIKOLAI

I wake to cold sheets.

Empty bed.

Gone.

The space where Lilly should be feels like a wound. Vacant, but her perfume still lingers. Traumatizes. Reminds.

I sit up, take a look around. The bedroom looks like a hurricane hit it. My shirt is missing from the chair where I left it.

She probably took it.

The thought should make me smile. Should make me happy that she took something to remember this by.

Instead, it pisses me off.

Because she still fucking left.

Without a word. Without explanation. Just slipped out like a thief in the night while I was sleeping off the best sex of my life.

I check my phone. No missed calls. No texts.

Nothing.

Like last night meant nothing to her.

I know that's bullshit. Know she felt what I felt. But knowing doesn't make waking up alone any easier.

I pull on jeans, grab a fresh shirt from the closet. The cabin feels too quiet without her here. Too empty.

This is exactly what she did five years ago. Disappeared without explanation. Left me wondering what the hell I did wrong.

Only this time, I'm not letting her run.

This time, I know where to find her.

The phone rings as I'm reaching for my keys.

Mrs. Chen's number flashes on the screen.

Odd. The elderly woman has never called me before. I gave her my number after I fixed her car. Said she could call if she had car trouble again.

"Nikolai?" Her voice is shaky. Worried. "I'm sorry to bother you, but something's happened at the bakery."

My blood goes cold. "What kind of something?"

"Vandalism. It's bad. That poor girl Lilly... you should come help her. You're her friend, aren't you? She's at the police station now, filing a report, trying to clean up

the mess."

I'm already moving toward the door. "I'll be right there."

"Thank you, dear. She shouldn't have to deal with this alone."

The line goes dead.

I drive like hell toward town, my mind racing through possibilities. Random teenagers. Petty criminals.

But something in my heart suggests this is more than random mischief. After all, I've been around her in public. People have seen us together.

The first thing I see is the shattered glass.

Sugar and Spice's front windows are completely destroyed. Jagged edges catch the morning sunlight like broken teeth.

Then I see the graffiti.

Spray paint covers the brick walls in angry slashes of black and red. A Russian word I recognize immediately.

Whore.

My jaw clenches so hard I taste blood.

But it's the symbol carved into the wooden door that makes my vision go red.

A raven flying above a burning building.

Kozlov family mark.

Viktor's cousins found me.

Found her.

I park across the street, scan the area for threats. The main drag is quiet this early. No suspicious cars. No watchers in doorways.

But they were here. Marked her business. Threatened her.

Made this personal.

I cross the street calmly. I left Chicago because of those cops, not the fucking Kozlovs.

There's no chance they're scaring me away. Not after what they've done.

The front door hangs open. I step through the frame, glass crunching under my boots.

The interior is destroyed.

Tables overturned. Display cases smashed. The espresso machine lies on its side, chrome dented and pipes bent.

But no Lilly.

I call her name. No answer. She must still be at the police station.

Check the storage room. Empty.

The office behind the counter shows signs of a search. Drawers pulled out. Papers scattered.

They were looking for something. Or someone.

Rage floods my system like molten metal.

They threatened her. Put sticky fingers in my woman's world. My son's mother.

Unforgivable.

I know how these operations work. Small crew, local muscle. Probably staying at the lodge on the edge of town where they can disappear fast if needed.

A couple of guys they don't care about. Some low-level enforcers sent to deliver a message.

They have no idea who they're fucking with.

The motel sits like a scab on the landscape. Twelve rooms arranged in an L-shape around a parking lot that's seen better decades.

Two cars with Chicago plates.

I walk past every room with one ear to each door. Room 7 has male voices inside. Russian accents.

Bingo.

I head out of the building and approach from the back now.

The bathroom window is cracked open. Sloppy security.

Through the gap, I hear them laughing.

"Boss said make it memorable. Think we did good."

"Maybe we should grab the kid. Real leverage. Boss'll give us a one-up for that."

The kid.

They know about Chleo.

Everything goes red.

I don't remember moving. Don't remember kicking in the door.

One second I'm listening through the window. The next, I'm standing in their motel room with murder in my eyes.

Three men.

The first one reaches for his gun.

Too slow.

My fist connects with his throat. Crushes his windpipe. He drops, making wet choking sounds till he stops breathing.

The second man gets his weapon halfway out before I'm on him.

I grab his wrist. Twist until bones snap. The gun clatters to the floor.

"Wait," the third one says, hands raised. "We can work this out."

"No," I tell him quietly. "We can't."

I break his neck with my bare hands.

Clean. Quick. Final.

The second man is still conscious. Cradling his mangled wrist. Bleeding out on the floor.

I kneel beside him. Let him see death in my eyes.

"You threatened my woman."

"Please—"

"You mentioned my son."

"We didn't touch?—"

I don't let him finish. My elbow crashes into his temple, cracking skull against tile. He twitches. Goes still.

All three. Dead.

Not unconscious. Not limping.

Dead.

I stand in the middle of the room. Breathing hard. Blood on my hands. Soaked into

my shirt. Dotting my jeans like paint splatter.

This is what happens. This is what happens when they come for mine.

I check their pockets. Find phones, cash, fake IDs.

And a photo.

Lilly leaving the bakery yesterday. Chleo skipping beside her.

Someone took surveillance photos of my family.

I pocket the photo. Set the rest on fire with their cheap cigarettes.

Let the Kozlovs find their boys like this. Let them know what happens when they threaten what's mine.

Sugar and Spice has some light, which tells me Lilly is inside, trying to fix things even in the dark.

I sit in my car for a full minute, trying to calm down. Trying to wash the blood from under my fingernails with wet wipes.

Doesn't work.

I still look like exactly what I am. A killer fresh from killing.

But she needs to know she's safe. Needs to know I've got it handled.

I walk in through the bakery.

"Who is it?" her voice is terrified, petrified.

"It's me."

Silence. Then she comes up round the back.

Lilly walks up to me in the doorway, her eyes wide. Her gaze drifts from my face to my clothes to the blood on my hands.

Her face goes pale. "Oh God. What did you do?"

I'm about to explain. To tell her about the threat I saw on the walls. Who those men were and why they wanted to hurt her.

Instead, her hand cracks across my cheek.

LILLY

The blood won't come out.

No matter how hard I scrub, it clings to the grout between the tiles. I don't know whose blood it is. Just that whoever vandalized my place left it here. A threat. A message. More?

The red's faded to a dark rust, but I can still see it. Smell it. Feel it in my throat.

Chleo could've been here. I could have been here.

What could have happened? They could have hurt us. Killed us. That thought plays on a loop. Haunts me like a nightmare.

Chleo's out back in the pantry. Nikolai is with him, keeping him distracted, helping him draw.

Thank God. At least my son didn't see this. Didn't see Nikolai stroll in here looking like he just walked off a slaughterhouse floor. Didn't see me slap his face so hard my fingers still hurt.

I can't believe I hit him. Nikolai.

I've never hit anyone before—not even in high school when Becky Garrison called me a slut behind the bleachers after she hooked up with my boyfriend.

But there was actual blood on his hands and all I could think about was that my son was out back doing his homework.

The memory burns, but what choice did I have? He showed up like something out of a nightmare. Like someone who had just murdered people.

Thank god my son doesn't know his father. Who he is. What he is.

As for Nikolai? He simply walked in past me, ignored the slap, insisted he was going to help.

I should hate him.

Should have sent him on his way.

But I was a deer in headlights.

And now? He's being so gentle with Chleo. Helping him color between the lines. That kind of tenderness shouldn't exist in a man like him. It shouldn't reach me the way it does.

I scrub harder. Need to stay busy. Need to not think.

Blood.

There's actual blood in my bakery.

On my floors.

Where my son plays.

I scrub harder and start to cry. I'm soaked to the bone up to my knees, but I don't care. Need to get it out. Need to make this place untainted for Chleo.

When the blood still doesn't come out, I pour bleach directly onto the floor. My eyes sting but I keep scrubbing. My hands hurt, but I keep scrubbing.

The tears now are on autopilot. I barely notice as they hit the floor. Can't hear myself sob over the roaring in my ears.

"Stop."

The word is soft but firm. A hand closes over mine, stilling the brush.

I look up. Nikolai's crouched beside me with agony in his eyes.

"You'll tire yourself," he murmurs. "You need a break."

I want to tell him I'm fine. But all I manage is to let out an ugly sob.

"I took care of it," he says softly. "The men who did this. They won't be back."

I throw aside the brush. "You killed them?" I ask, knowing he's capable. I saw him, five years ago, beat a man into deadweight. He's capable of things I've never wanted to consider.

He doesn't answer and I know why. Because he did it. He killed.

A sob tears from my throat. I reach for the brush again, needing to do anything other than this conversation. Nikolai stops me, his hand curling around mine.

And then next thing I know, I'm ugly crying. Like, ugly ugly crying.

That's when I feel it—the snap. I can't breathe. I can't think. I feel like I'll die right here. I want the floor to take me under and never spit me out again.

The very life is being crushed right out of me.

He grips my shoulders and pulls me away from the bleach soaked floors. I fight him, try to break free, but his touch is the only thing grounding me in the moment.

I stop fighting. Let my nervous system override all common sense.

“Breathe,” he murmurs. “Just breathe.”

He wraps his arms around me. Pulls me against his chest.

I let him hold me. Just for a while. He traces soft patterns on my back. He almost lets me forget that hell rained over. I bury my face in his shirt. It's clean. Warm. Smells like him. And it only makes me cry harder.

“I'm sorry,” he sounds gutted. “So fucking sorry for bringing this to your door.”

He's sorry? He did this? He brought this to my door?

God, it would be so easy to make him the villain. To pin it all on him.

But the truth? It's messier than that.

I've been lying for five years. Running. Hiding a boy from his father. And every step I took trying to protect him has somehow led us straight to this.

“They weren't going to stop at vandalism,” he explains to help me understand.

I push back. Just enough to see his face. Wipe angrily at my tears.

“It was necessary.”

Those three words he says scares the living daylights out of me. Some part of me believes he might be right.

I stumble back, put some space between us. I need air. I need a wall between me and him.

“This is exactly why I ran,” my voice quivers. “I don’t want my son anywhere near a world like this. Chicago was full of crime. You brought it here.”

“Tell me the truth, Lilly. Once and for all.” His voice drops lower. “Is he mine?”

The lie sits heavy on my tongue. Sour. Poisonous. But my version of necessary.

“No.”

“Bullshit,” Nikolai’s voice is agony. “Look me in the eyes and say it.”

I force my spine into steel. “He's not yours, Nikolai.”

“He has my eyes.”

“Many people have your eyes.”

“Please, can’t you just tell me the truth and we’ll figure it out from there?”

The desperation flashing across Nikolai's face is so raw, so genuine, that I almost want to tell him the truth.

But then I think of dead men. Of the blood on my bakery floor. Of the life Nikolai leads.

“Look. Chleo isn't yours.” I wrap my arms around myself. “And you need to leave Fern Falls. Today. Before more people die.”

“Lilly—”

“Please, Nikolai. If you care about me at all, if you ever felt anything real for me, you'll go. You'll leave us alone.”

Something breaks in his expression. Something final.

“Is that what you really want?”

No. God, no. I want him to stay. Want him to be the father Chleo deserves. Want him to hold me like he did moments ago.

But I can't have what I want. Not if it means putting my son in danger.

“Yes,” I whisper. “It's what I want.”

The silence between us stretches so thin I can hear my own heartbeat.

That's when the pantry door opens. Chleo comes racing out, a drawing clutched in his small hand.

“Mama! Look what I made!”

He skids to a stop when he sees Nikolai. His face lights up in that way that makes my heart ache.

“Hi!” Chleo waves the paper. “I drew a horse. Wanna see?”

Nikolai kneels down, bringing himself to Chleo's eye level. “I'd love to see it.”

Chleo proudly holds up his drawing.

“That's incredible,” Nikolai says softly. “You're very talented.”

“Rosa says I'm a natural. Do you like horses?”

“I do.” Nikolai's voice catches slightly. “I used to ride when I was a boy, in Russia.”

“Really?” Chleo's eyes widen. “That's so cool! Can you teach me?”

I see the pain flash across Nikolai's face before he masks it. “I'm afraid I have to go away for a while.”

“Oh.” Chleo's smile dims. “Will you come back?”

Nikolai glances up at me, and I see the question in his eyes. The hope. The plea.

I shake my head.

Something hardens in his expression. He turns back to Chleo. “I don't know, buddy.”

Then, without warning, Nikolai pulls Chleo into a tight hug. He breathes in deeply, like he's trying to memorize Chleo's scent.

“Be good for your mom,” he whispers.

Chleo nods solemnly. “I will.”

Nikolai stands, not looking at me. “Goodbye, Lilly.”

And then he's gone.

I stand frozen, in disbelief that he actually walked away.

“Mama?” Chleo looks up at me. “Who is that man?”

The question hits like a physical blow. “Just a friend, baby.”

“Just a friend?” His big, eager eyes look to me.

“Just a friend,” I repeat, my voice choking.

“Oh. I like him. He’s nice.”

My heart cracks a little more. “Yes. He is.”

I have to turn away before he sees the tears in my eyes.

“Sweetheart, how would you feel about a sleepover at Rosa's tonight?”

His face lights up. “Really? She has a PlayStation!”

“I know. I've already talked to her about it. She's going to take you for a few days while I fix up the bakery.”

“Awesome!”

I can't tell him the real reason—that I'm terrified of what might happen next. That I need to know he's safe while I figure out what to do. Whether to run again or stand

my ground.

Rosa arrives thirty minutes later to pick him up.

“You sure about this?” she asks quietly while Chleo gathers his treasures.

“I’m sure. Just... keep him safe, okay?”

She studies my face. “What’s going on, Lilly? For real?”

“I can’t explain right now. Just trust me. Please.”

Something in my expression must convince her, because she nods. “Call if you need anything. Anything at all.”

I hug Chleo fiercely before he climbs into Rosa’s car.

“Be good,” I whisper. “I love you more than anything in this world.”

“Love you too, Mama!”

I stand on the sidewalk, waving until Rosa’s car disappears around the corner. The sun is setting now. I turn to go back inside, to finish cleaning, to figure out my next move.

That’s when I feel it—a prickle at the back of my neck. The weight of eyes on me. A shadow crossing over me.

Page 21

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:30 am

LILLY

I spin around.

Fuck.

I didn't hear the footsteps.

My heart slams against my ribs. I'm surrounded.

Three guys.

Broad shoulders.

Dark clothes.

Mean eyes.

"Get her," one of them growls. The accent hits me like ice water. Russian.

I step back in panic, eyes locking to the bakery door. If I could lock myself in, buy myself time, call the cops...

Ten feet away.

It's too far.

I bolt toward it anyway.

The first one lunges for me, his fingers brushing my arm. I jerk back, twist myself free and scream as loud as I can.

“SOMEONE-”

A meaty hand clamps over my mouth from behind. My stomach lurches as I'm lifted off my feet.

“Don't fight,” the man hisses in my ear. “Makes it worse.”

Like hell.

I bite down on his palm, hard enough to taste blood. He howls, releases me for half a second. That's all I need. I drive my elbow back, smack into his face, before stumbling away.

But there's three of them, and only one of me.

The second man grabs my hair, yanks me backward. Pain explodes across my scalp, tears spring to my eyes.

My phone, I remember. It's still in my hand.

Chleo.

Oh my god.

He's safe. He has to be.

Rosa will look after him.

I kick backward, connect with a kneecap. The man lets me go with a swear, doubles over to clutch his knee in pain.

“Enough,” the third one snarls, pulling a gun from his pocket, flashing it just enough to make me freeze.

Think, Lilly. Think .

My thumb slides across the screen, my phone behind my back as I face three furious men. I know Nikolai's number by heart now. I've typed it a dozen times, erased it a dozen more.

Never called.

Too afraid.

Now it might be the only thing that saves me.

The world goes white and black with panic. There's a gun pointed at me. Can't breathe. Can't think. But my finger hits the call button just as two pairs of hands reach for my arms.

I don't even know if it rings. I just know it has to.

“Put her in the van,” one says in broken English. “Boss wants her intact.”

“She broke my fucking nose,” another snarls. “That little?—”

“Shut up and move.”

I slide my phone up the sleeve of my shirt. They grab my arms. Twist. Wrench.

I scream again as they drag me along. Find my loudest voice and let it tear from my throat. “HELP! ANYONE! HELP!” I drag my feet into the ground, try to stop myself from being dragged along.

Someone might hear. Someone might help.

“Shut her up!”

A hand clamps over my mouth again. I twist my head, sink my teeth into the flesh between thumb and forefinger. The man shrieks, slaps me hard enough that stars explode behind my eyes.

“Bitch!”

The phone is still up my sleeve. Is Nikolai there? Can he hear what's happening?

They drag harder. Grip harder.

Until I'm at the white van parked at the curb. The sliding door opens to empty interiors.

No seats.

No windows.

Just metal walls and floor.

They shove me into the van. Let go of my mouth just enough to let me scream again.

But it's too late.

I hit the metal floor hard. Before I can scramble away, one of them climbs in after me, grabs my ankles. I kick out, miss, try again.

“Hold her down!”

Another man pins my shoulders. His face hovers above mine, but the tattoo on his neck is all I see. A raven above a burning building. The same as above my bakery after the vandalism.

Fuck. They're the ones who ruined my place.

Nikolai knows these guys. He killed a couple of them just hours ago.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

Nikolai's enemies have come back with a vengeance.

One of the guys comes at me now, a needle in his hand.

They're going to drug me.

I fight and kick and try to pull away, but the man holding me down? He's too strong.

My eyes blast open. I shake my head.

“Please, please, please,” I cry. “No. No. Don't.”

They chuckle. The needle coming closer.

I hear one of them say. “Let’s go get her boy next. I took down the car plate number he went off in.”

NO! NOT CHLEO.

With whatever little fight I have left in me, I scream into the van. Pray Nikolai can hear. “NIKOLAI! THEY’RE GOING TO ROSA’S. THEY KNOW ABOUT CHLEO. THEY’RE GOING TO TAKE HI-”

The needle plunges into my neck before I can finish. Fire spreads through my veins. The world tilts sideways.

The last thing I hear is Nikolai's voice, distant and tinny through the phone speaker.

“Lilly? Lilly, where are you?”

Then darkness swallows me whole.

Page 22

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:30 am

NIKOLAI

I was still scrubbing blood from my shirt when the call connected.

A scream.

Her scream.

I'm already in the car. Driving towards the bakery. Listening to every assault she suffers. Preparing to make round two of kills for the day.

“NIKOLAI! THEY'RE GOING TO ROSA'S. THEY KNOW ABOUT CHLEO. THEY'RE GOING TO TAKE HI?—”

The line goes dead.

“LILLY? ARE YOU THERE? LILLY?”

Silence.

No. No, no, no?—

Her words sear into my brain like a branding iron.

They're going after Chleo.

My son.

My blood.

And I'm not there to stop them.

I screech to a halt. Two targets. Two directions.

Lilly—taken.

Chleo—still safe, but not for long.

An impossible choice no father should have to make.

I slam my fist into the steering wheel. I close my eyes. Force my breathing to slow. Panic helps no one. Fear helps no one.

Who do I save first?

Breathe. Think. Choose.

They won't kill Lilly immediately. I heard them say the boss wants her alive. She's leverage.

But Chleo...

Five years old. Innocent. He'll be terrified.

And they're heading for him now.

There's only one choice. I turn around, head in the other direction.

I take corners at speeds that should flip the car. The engine screams in protest. I push

harder. Faster. The road blurs beneath me.

It's not hard finding Rosa's. Small Town. Heard her mention it once.

It's a small cottage. Blue shutters. Pretty fairy lights strung across trees.

And a black SUV parked outside.

Too late. They're already here.

I kill the lights. Coast the final hundred yards. Stop behind a row of trees out back of the house, where I know they can't see me.

Grab my gun. Check it's loaded.

And then, I move silent and fast.

The back door has already been kicked open. I raise my gun. Press my back against the wall. Listen.

There's no sound.

I peer through the cracked door. Living room's destroyed.

Rosa lies crumpled near the sofa. Blood matting her curly hair.

Fuck. She's unconscious.

Where the hell is Chleo?

I move through the house, not caring if there are more men in there. I need to find my

son.

I walk past Rosa. Check out the window.

There. One of the men. He has Chleo's hand in his. He's dragging the boy to the car.

And my son? He's fighting every step of the way. Crying. Trying to pull away.

I'm instantly out through the front door.

The man turns, senses me a second too late.

He doesn't hesitate. Shoves Chleo behind him. Draws his gun.

I'm faster.

My bullet catches him in the shoulder. Spins him. His shot goes wild, punches through some tree.

Chleo screams.

"Go inside," I tell the kid. "Go sit with Rosa."

Chleo pales, his lips trembling. But he listens. He runs in without looking back. Seeing Rosa like that is bound to scare him.

Seeing what I'll do next? That'll scare him more.

So I chose the lesser of two evils.

I'm on the man before he can recover. My weight drives him against the garden wall.

His head cracks against the plaster.

He's strong. Trained. A professional. His elbow catches me in the ribs. Makes me grunt.

But I'm stronger. Angrier. Fighting for something more than money or revenge for once.

Fighting for my kid. For Lilly.

I smash my forehead into his nose. Feel cartilage give way. His blood sprays warm across my face.

He stumbles. I drive my knee into his stomach. He doubles over.

I grab his head. Twist.

The crack is loud. Final.

His body drops like a stone.

I search him quickly and grab what I can.

Phone.

Wallet.

Gun.

And there, peeking from beneath his collar. The tattoo. Raven over a burning building.

The Kozlov mark.

The man's eyes go dull.

Body slumps.

Dead.

Fuck. The Kozlovs have Lilly.

I put his things in my pocket. If I have to track her, I'll need information. Information he'll have on that phone of his.

I go inside. See Chleo sitting by her side, wide-eyed.

"I've got her, Chleo," I tell him. "You okay?"

He nods, but I can see he's trying to hold back tears. I'll talk to him. But first, I check on Rosa.

Pulse steady.

Head wound.

Breathing.

She'll live.

Chleo stands beside me, watching me with quiet, intense eyes. The kid's worried. I don't blame him.

“Rosa.” I shake her gently. “Rosa, wake up.”

Her eyelids flutter. “What...?” She focuses on me, confusion giving way to recognition. “Nikolai? What happened?”

She tries to rise. I press Rosa back down. “Lie here. Don't move. You're hurt.”

Then, I hear it. A small sob.

Chleo stands pressed against the couch. Eyes wide with terror. Tears streaking his cheeks. He's wearing dinosaur pajamas. He's the most precious thing I've ever seen.

“Chleo.” I kneel down, trying to make myself smaller. Less threatening. “Are you hurt?”

He shakes his head. His eyes dart to Rosa, then back to me.

“The bad man was going to take me away,” he whispers. “He said my mom sent him, but I knew he was lying.”

Smart kid. My kid.

“You're safe now,” I tell him. “I won't let anyone hurt you.”

His small body trembles. I stay where I am, not wanting to frighten him more.

But then he moves. A single step forward. Another. Until he's close enough to touch.

“You're the man from the bakery,” he says softly, his brain in shock. “The one who fixed our chair and helped with pictures.”

“That's right.”

“You're mama's friend?”

I nod.

Then he reaches out. His small hand touches my cheek. Warm. Soft. Trusting.

The gesture breaks something inside me. Something I didn't know could break.

“Where's my mom?”

“We're going to get her now,” I say, not wanting to lie.

“Promise?”

“Promise.”

That's when he steps forward again. And suddenly his arms are around my neck. His face buried against my shoulder. His small body shaking with sobs.

I freeze. My arms hovering awkwardly. Unused to this. Unused to comfort.

Then, slowly, I let them close around him. Hold him against me. Feel his heartbeat fluttering like a trapped bird.

“I'm scared,” he whispers.

“I know.” I tighten my hold. Just enough to make him feel secure. “But I'm going to take care of you. Both of you.”

He pulls back slightly. Looks up at me with tear-stained cheeks.

There it is. Unmistakable.

My eyes staring back at me.

Not just the color—but the shape. The intensity. The way they cut through bullshit and straight to truth.

My son.

The realization hits again, but different this time. Not a math problem of timelines and possibilities.

Visceral. Bone-deep. Cellular recognition.

This is my flesh.

My blood.

Mine.

I brush a tear from his cheek with my thumb. “You’re mine,” I whisper.

He doesn’t understand what I mean. But he leans into my touch anyway. Trusting me without knowing why.

That’s when I hear it. The wail of sirens in the distance. Growing louder.

Someone called the police. A neighbor, probably. Heard the gunshots.

I need to move. Need to get Chleo somewhere safe. Need to find Lilly.

I turn to Chleo. “We need to go, okay?”

He nods. Doesn’t fight me.

I stand, take his hand. Look back at Rosa, who is whimpering on the floor. “Don’t worry,” I whisper. “Help’s coming. The cops are on their way.”

She nods. Too exhausted and in pain to ask any questions.

I tuck Chleo closer.

And promise myself whoever took Lilly... bleeds next.

Page 23

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:30 am

NIKOLAI

The dead man's phone buzzes in my hand. A message. Location coordinates. These idiots think they're still talking to their guy.

Don't realize he's cooling on Rosa's lawn with a broken neck. Their mistake. My advantage.

The phone buzzes again.

ETA with package?

They're talking about Chleo. My fucking son. Like he's cargo. I'll pound these guys to fucking death.

I type back: Got delayed. On my way. Where are we taking her?

They give away their location immediately. Bloody idiots. Warehouse up North. Boss wants updates.

Perfect.

I know the place—I know all the places around here because it's my business to know. Old logging facility at the edge of the county. Abandoned years ago. Remote. Isolated. The kind of spot where screams don't travel.

My hands tighten on the wheel. My feet hit the accelerator.

I think of Chleo. Wonder if he's doing okay. I had no choice. I had to leave him somewhere safe. Couldn't bring him with me.

I called Maksim. Told him I needed him.

"Name it."

"I need you to watch my son."

Silence. Then: "Your what?"

"Long story. Need your help now. The Kozlovs have Lilly."

"Text me your location."

I hung up. Texted him where to meet us. Maksim's the only one who'd die protecting him the same as I would.

Ten minutes later, we pulled up where we needed to. Maksim was already there, leaning against his car. Watching. Waiting. Ready.

He looked at Chleo in the backseat. Eyes nearly popped out of his head.

"Christ," he muttered. "He's yours, isn't he? I never noticed..."

I nodded. Explained.

"Won't let anything happen to him," he promised.

And now? I'm counting on that. If shit goes south tonight, he'll be the one to watch over our son. Lilly's and mine.

I check the dead man's phone again. Follow to where she is.

I drive. Fast but controlled. Can't draw attention. Can't get pulled over. Not with blood on my clothes and weapons in the car.

The GPS leads me deep into the woods. Gravel roads. Then dirt tracks. Then nothing but tire marks cutting through underbrush.

I park a mile out. Move on foot.

Quiet.

Patient.

This isn't my first hunt.

The warehouse looms ahead. Concrete and steel. Broken windows like eye sockets in a skull. Two cars parked outside. Plus the white van they probably used to take her.

Three men visible. One smoking by the entrance. Two more patrolling the perimeter. Sloppy. Overconfident.

I watch their patterns. Time their rotations. Find the gaps.

The smoker finishes his cigarette. Tosses it. Heads back inside.

Move.

I keep to the tree line. Low and fast. Shadow to shadow. The guard on the east side won't circle back for a few minutes.

The west guard passes. Doesn't see me.

His mistake.

I'm behind him before he registers movement. My arm locks around his throat. He struggles. Claws at my forearm. Useless.

I squeeze. Tighter. His struggles weaken. Stop.

I ease him to the ground. Take his gun. His radio. Check his pockets.

Nothing useful. No phone. No keys.

I drag him into the bushes. Cover him with branches.

One down.

The east guard will be rounding the corner soon. I position myself behind a rusted barrel. Wait.

Footsteps.

Getting closer.

He passes.

Doesn't see me.

I follow. Silent. Close enough to smell his aftershave. To see the sweat beading on his neck.

He stops suddenly. Turns.

Too late.

My fist connects with his throat. Crushes his windpipe before he can shout. He drops to his knees. Hands clutching his neck. Eyes bulging.

I finish him with a twist of his head. Quick. Clean. Almost merciful.

Two down.

The main entrance is too obvious. I circle the building. Find a loading dock at the back. Door hanging off its hinges.

Perfect.

I slip inside. The warehouse is cavernous. Half-collapsed roof lets in strips of moonlight. Crates and machinery create a maze of shadows.

Voices echo from somewhere ahead. Three, maybe four men.

I move from cover to cover. Staying low. Using the darkness.

Then I see her.

Lilly.

Tied to a chair in the center of the room. Head lolling forward. Hair hanging in her face. Unconscious but breathing.

Four men around her. Armed. Laughing about something.

One of them slaps her face. Not hard. Just trying to wake her.

My vision narrows. Goes red at the edges.

The radio I took crackles. “Perimeter check. Report.”

The men look at each other.

“Perimeter, report.”

One of them—tall, scarred face—grabs his radio. “Ivanov, Petrov, report in.”

Silence.

“Something's wrong,” one says. “Check it out.”

Two men head toward the exits. One east, one west.

Good. Splitting up makes this easier.

I wait until they're out of sight. Then I move.

The first one doesn't see me coming. He rounds a stack of crates, gun drawn.

I grab his wrist. Twist until something snaps. He opens his mouth to scream.

My hand clamps over it. Muffles the sound to a whimper.

The knife slides between his ribs. In. Out. He goes limp.

Three down.

The second one is more cautious. Checking corners. Moving slowly.

I throw a piece of metal. It clatters across the floor.

He turns toward the sound. “Who's there?”

Huge fucking mistake. Hasn't he heard? Curiosity killed the cat.

I come at him from behind. He hears me at the last second. Starts to turn.

My knife finds the base of his skull. Severs his spine. He drops without a sound.

Four down.

Back to the main floor. Two men left with Lilly.

The leader paces, nervous. “Something's wrong. They should have reported back.”

The other one—squat, bald—shrugs. “Probably smoking.”

“Check outside. Now.”

Baldy sighs. Heads toward the front entrance.

I let him pass. Let him get halfway across the floor.

Then I step out of the shadows directly in front of him.

His eyes widen. “You?—”

My gun comes up. One shot. Center mass.

The sound echoes through the warehouse. No more stealth.

The leader spins. Sees me. Sees his man falling.

He grabs Lilly by the hair. Puts his gun to her temple.

“Stop right there, Vetrov!”

I stop. Lower my gun slightly. Not dropping it.

“Let her go,” I say. Voice calm. Cold. “You might walk out of here.”

He laughs. It sounds desperate. “You killed Viktor. You really think I'm walking away?”

“Your choice.”

His hand trembles. The gun barrel presses harder against Lilly's skin.

She's waking up. Eyelids fluttering. Murmuring something.

“Drop the gun,” he demands. “Kick it away.”

I do. Slowly. It skitters across the concrete.

The leader relaxes slightly. Mistake.

“The boss is going to enjoy this,” he says. “Breaking you piece by piece.”

“Where is he?”

“On his way. Should be here any minute.”

Good to know.

“You can still walk away,” I tell him. “Take your chances with the cops.”

“Fuck you.”

I shrug. Start walking toward him. Slow. Measured steps.

“Stop!” His voice rises. Panic edging in. “I’ll shoot her!”

“No, you won’t.”

“I swear to God?—”

“You shoot her, you lose your leverage. Then I’ll take you apart, joint by joint.”

I keep walking. Ten feet away now.

“I’m not bluffing,” he says.

“Neither am I.”

Five feet.

His nerve breaks. He swings the gun toward me.

I’m already moving. Ducking low. Driving forward.

The gun fires. Bullet whistles past my ear.

I crash into him. We hit the ground hard. The gun skitters away.

He's strong. Trained. A professional.

But I'm fighting for my family.

My fists connect with his face. Again. Again. Blood sprays. Bone cracks.

He gets a knee up. Drives it into my ribs. Pain explodes along my side.

I roll. He follows. Gets on top. Hands going for my throat.

I grab his wrists. Hold him off. But he's heavy. Determined.

His thumbs press into my windpipe. Black spots dance at the edges of my vision.

No. Not like this.

I buck.

Twist.

Get a leg free.

My boot connects with his groin. He howls. Grip loosens.

I surge upward. Reverse our positions. Now I'm on top.

My hands find his throat. Squeeze.

He thrashes. Claws at my face. Rakes bloody furrows down my cheek.

I squeeze harder.

Something hard hits the back of my head. Stars explode behind my eyes.

I roll away. Dazed. The leader gasps for air, crawling away.

Another man stands behind me. Must have come in during the fight. Holding a metal pipe.

He swings again.

I block with my forearm. Pain radiates up to my shoulder.

The pipe comes down again. I grab it. Yank.

He stumbles forward. Into my rising knee.

His nose shatters. Blood fountains.

I wrench the pipe from his hands. Swing it like a baseball bat.

It connects with the side of his head. The sound is wet. Final.

He crumples.

Where's the leader?

Movement by the door. He's running. Limping. One hand at his throat.

I start after him, then stop.

Lilly.

She's more important.

I turn back. Run to her. She's half-conscious now. Mumbling. Trying to lift her head.

“Lilly.” I cup her face. Check her pupils. Dilated. Drugged. “Lilly, it's me.”

Her eyes try to focus. “Nik...?”

“I'm here.” I cut the ropes binding her wrists. Her ankles. “I've got you.”

“Chleo,” she whispers. “They said... they were going to?—”

“He's safe.” I gather her against my chest. “He's with Maksim. No one will touch him.”

She sags against me. Relief making her boneless.

“Can you walk?”

She tries to stand. Wobbles. Falls back into my arms.

“S'okay,” I say. “I've got you.”

I scoop her up. Carry her like she weighs nothing. Her head rests against my shoulder. Arms around my neck.

“You came,” she murmurs. “You found me.”

“Always.”

I carry her out of that hell.

Page 24

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:30 am

LILLY

The world spins in and out of focus.

Drug-haze.

Panic-fog.

Nikolai's arms surround me like steel cables, carrying me through darkness.

Trees.

Night.

Stars overhead.

My tongue's too thick in my mouth but one word breaks through: "Chleo."

It's all I can think. All I can say. The rest of the world has narrowed to a pinprick with my son at the center.

"He's safe," Nikolai keeps saying. Over and over. "He's safe, Lilly. I promise."

But I need to see him. Need to touch him. Need to know those bastards didn't get to him.

Car doors open. The world tilts as Nikolai places me in the passenger seat. His hand

brushes hair from my face, tender.

“Stay with me,” he says. “We're going to him now.”

The drive passes in flashes. Streetlights. Darkness. Trees. Town. The drugs are wearing off, leaving my head pounding and my thoughts clearer, sharper.

When the car stops, we're outside a small B&B on the edge of town. Two-story Victorian. White trim. Hanging baskets on the porch.

“Maksim's got a room here,” Nikolai explains, helping me stand. My legs are still wobbly, but I can walk. Need to walk. Need to get to my son.

“Second floor,” he says, guiding me up the steps. “Room 204.”

The hallway stretches forever. Each step feels like walking through molasses, but I push harder. Faster.

Nikolai knocks. Three quick raps.

The door opens.

And there he is.

“Mama!”

Chleo flies across the room and crashes into my legs. I drop to my knees, grab him, pull him against me so hard it must hurt.

But he doesn't complain. Just wraps his little arms around my neck and holds on.

“Baby.” My voice breaks. Tears flood my eyes, spill over. “My baby.”

I can't stop touching him.

His hair.

His face.

His arms.

Checking for injuries. For trauma. For anything those monsters might have done.

“Are you okay?” I pull back just enough to see his face. “Did they hurt you?”

He shakes his head. “Nikolai saved me. He made the bad man go away. And he looked after Rosa. She was hurt.”

A sob tears from my throat. I bury my face in his hair, breathe in his scent.

“I was so scared,” he whispers.

“I know, baby. I know. But you're safe now.” I kiss his forehead, his cheeks, the crown of his head. “You're safe.”

Over Chleo's shoulder, I see Maksim. Standing quietly by the window. Watching us with eyes that miss nothing.

“Thank you,” I say. The words feel painfully inadequate. “For watching him. For keeping him safe.”

Maksim nods. There's respect in those eyes. Understanding.

“He's a good kid,” he says simply. “Smart. Like his father.”

His words hit like a physical blow. I look away, unable to meet his eyes.

Nikolai moves beside me. His hand finds my shoulder. Squeezes gently.

“We can't go back to your place,” he says. “Not safe.”

I nod. I know. After everything that's happened, there's no going back. Not to my house. Not to my old life. Not to the lies.

“My cabin,” he says. “Just until we figure things out.”

What choice do I have? Nikolai's enemies—they know where I live. Where I work. They know about Chleo.

“Okay.”

Chleo's eyes are already drooping. The adrenaline crash hitting him hard. I scoop him up, and he curls against me like he did when he was a baby.

“Let's go home, buddy,” I whisper.

But where is home now?

The drive to Nikolai's cabin is quiet. Chleo falls asleep almost immediately, his head in my lap.

Nikolai drives in silence. His knuckles are bloodied. His jaw tight. The darkness in his eyes no longer scares me. I know it's what kept us alive tonight.

The blood on his hands? I'm grateful to him for it.

"Thank you," I say finally. "For finding me. For saving him."

His eyes flick to me, then back to the road. "You don't need to thank me for that."

"I do." I swallow hard. "I was wrong, Nikolai. About Maksim. About... a lot of things."

He doesn't respond. Just keeps driving, the trees thickening around us as we head deeper into the woods.

The cabin appears, dark and hulking in the headlights. Log walls. Wraparound porch. Same as I remember.

The last time I was here? We had fucked each other senseless.

"Spare bedroom's on the left," Nikolai says as he kills the engine. "For Chleo."

I nod. Gather Chleo in my arms. He doesn't stir. Exhausted. Overwhelmed. My poor baby.

Inside, the cabin is surprisingly warm. Cozy, even. Leather furniture. Woven rugs. A stone fireplace dominating one wall. I hadn't noticed when I was here last. I was too busy tasting Nikolai.

I carry Chleo to the spare room. Tuck him into the double bed that swallows his small frame. Kiss his forehead. Whisper that I love him.

He murmurs something in his sleep. Turns over. Drifts deeper.

When I come back, Nikolai is standing by the fireplace. He's built a small fire, flames licking at the wood, casting shadows across his face.

There's a glass in his hand. Whiskey, probably. Another sits on the mantle.

“Drink,” he says, nodding to it. “It'll help.”

I take the glass. Sip. The liquor burns down my throat, ignites in my chest. Warmth spreads outward, chasing away some of the lingering chill.

“Chleo asleep?” he asks.

I nod. “Out cold. He's had... a day.”

A bitter laugh escapes me. The understatement of the year.

Nikolai watches me over the rim of his glass. Those intense eyes missing nothing. Seeing everything.

Including the truth I've been hiding for five years.

“We need to talk,” I say finally. The words taste like ash in my mouth.

“Yes.” His voice is quiet. Controlled. “We do.”

I take another swallow of whiskey. Bigger this time.

Liquid courage.

“Chleo is yours.”

The words hang in the air between us. My words? They change everything.

Nikolai doesn't move. Doesn't blink. Just watches me with those predator eyes.

"I know," he says finally.

Of course he does. He's known since he saw Chleo that first day in the bakery. Known in a way that goes beyond DNA tests or birth certificates.

Cellular recognition. Bone-deep knowledge.

"I'm sorry," I whisper. "For lying. For running. For keeping him from you."

He sets his glass down. Steps closer. "Why?"

It's not an accusation.

Just a question.

Simple. Direct.

Impossible to answer.

But I try.

"I was scared," I admit. "Terrified, actually. I saw what you did to that man in the alley."

He doesn't deny it. Doesn't try to explain it away.

"I found out I was pregnant some weeks later. I was alone, working a dead-end job,

had slept with a man I barely knew.”

The words tumble out now, unstoppable. “A dangerous man. A man who hurt people.”

“And you thought I'd hurt our son.” Not a question. A statement of fact.

“No.” I shake my head. “I thought your world would hurt him. I thought he'd get caught in the crossfire.”

Nikolai's jaw tightens. “Like tonight.”

The irony isn't lost on either of us. I ran to protect my son from Nikolai's world, only for that world to find us anyway.

“I didn't know if you'd even want him,” I continue. “I didn't know if you'd want a child with... someone like me.”

“Someone like you?”

“A waitress. A nobody. A one-night stand.”

His expression darkens. “You were never just a one-night stand, Lilly.”

The words hit harder than they should. Make my heart flutter in a way it has no right to.

“I know why you're in Fern Falls,” I say, changing direction. Needing to know everything now. No more secrets. “Those men weren't just random criminals. They knew you. They were looking for you.”

He turns away. Stares into the fire.

“Viktor Kozlov,” he says finally. “That's who I killed.”

The name means nothing to me. Just another Russian criminal in a world full of them.

“I know...you kill people.” I pale. He observes. Watches.

“He set fire to an apartment building in Chicago,” Nikolai explains. “Trying to force the owners to sell and when they wouldn't, thought he'd ruin the value of the place. There were families inside. Women. Children.”

My stomach turns. “Was anyone hurt?”

Nikolai looks harrowed. “Fifteen people died. Mostly women and children. Including a three-year-old girl.”

The horror of it settles over me like a shroud.

“So I killed him,” Nikolai says simply. “Three bullets to the chest. In front of witnesses.”

“That's why you left Chicago?”

“The police have a warrant out for me. And the Kozlov family... they want me dead.”

The pieces click into place. Nikolai didn't come to Fern Falls looking for me. He came here hiding from the consequences of his actions.

“And now they've found you,” I whisper.

He shakes his head. “They would have found me eventually. Small towns talk.”

“But they used me to get to you.”

“Yes.”

The truth hurts, but I need it. All of it.

“Why didn’t you just tell me?” I whisper.

“Didn’t know what to say. Didn’t know if you had it out for me,” he shrugs.

“Had it out for you?” I hiss. “Why would I ever?”

“Your cousin. The man in the square you were hugging. He’s Bratva. In with the Kazlovs sometimes.”

“He—what?” His words hit like a sledgehammer.

Nikolai's sighs. “He told me you were innocent. I didn’t know what to believe. You kept lying to me. I wondered why.”

“I knew Ivan had... connections. Tattoos he tried to hide when he visited. I didn't know exactly what kind,” I whisper.

“He was Bratva,” Nikolai says. “But I think he’s trying to get out. That's why he moved here. Fresh start.”

I close my eyes. The betrayal cuts deep. My own family, part of the world I've been running from.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper again. “For everything. For running. For keeping Chleo from you. I know I ruined any chance we might have had. I don’t expect forgiveness.”

I feel the tears coming again.

Hot.

Shameful.

I try to blink them away, but they fall anyway. Track down my cheeks like evidence of my guilt.

“I just want my son to be safe,” I say. “He can’t be mixed up in all this. In Bratva warfare. In violence.”

Nikolai moves closer. So close I can feel his heat. Smell his cologne mixed with blood.

“I agree,” he says softly.

I look up, surprised. “You do?”

“I don’t want that life for him either.” His hand comes up, brushes a tear from my cheek. “I should be furious with you, Lilly. Should hate you for what you took from me.”

I wait for the but.

For the anger.

For the punishment.

Instead, his thumb traces my cheekbone, gentle as a whisper.

“But I can't,” he says. “You're mine. And he's mine. The two of you are safe. That's all that matters.”

Something breaks inside me. Some dam I've built to hold back the terror and grief and exhaustion of the day.

I collapse forward. Into his chest. Into his arms.

He catches me. Holds me. His hands stroke my hair as I sob against his shirt.

“It's okay,” he murmurs. “You're safe now. Both of you.”

I don't deserve this kindness. This forgiveness. But I take it anyway. Selfish. Desperate.

Eventually, the sobs subside. The adrenaline crash hits me hard. My limbs feel leaden. My eyes heavy.

Nikolai guides me to the couch. Settles beside me. Pulls me against his chest.

His heart beats strong and steady under my ear. His arms hold me like I'm something precious. Something worth protecting.

Sleep pulls at me. Drags me under.

Just before I surrender to it, the words slip out. Soft. Unplanned. True.

“I love you.”

He doesn't say it back. Doesn't stiffen or pull away. Just presses his lips to the top of my head.

Not a promise. But maybe a beginning.

Page 25

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:30 am

NIKOLAI

I wake before dawn. Old habits. The weight of Lilly against my chest feels strange.

We've never done this before.

Woken up next to each other.

She told me she loved me.

This feels new. The fact of the matter is that she matters. She fucking matters.

And I don't know where to file this little fact. How to process it.

Finally. She's mine.

I extract myself carefully, lay her head on a cushion. In the kitchen, I stare at the contents of my fridge like they're written in a foreign language. Never cooked for a kid before. Never had a reason to.

The coffee maker gurgles. My hands move on autopilot, cracking eggs into a bowl. Adding milk. Salt. The mundane tasks feel surreal after last night's bloodshed. My knuckles are scraped. Evidence of what I did to keep them safe.

My son sleeps in the next room.

My son.

The words still feel foreign in my mind.

Like they belong to someone else.

Some other man who deserves this chance.

I hear small footsteps. Hesitant. Curious. I turn to find Chleo standing in the doorway, hair sticking up in all directions. Dinosaur pajamas rumpled from sleep.

“Morning,” I say, voice softer than I knew it could be.

He blinks at me. Studies me with those eyes—my eyes—taking in everything. “Are you making breakfast?”

“Trying to.” I gesture at the eggs. “You like pancakes?”

His whole face lights up. “With chocolate chips?”

“If I have them.” I check the cupboard. Find a bag. Must have been left by the cleaning service. “Looks like you're in luck.”

He climbs onto a stool at the counter. Watches me work.

“Does your mom let you have coffee?” I ask, only half-joking.

He rolls his eyes. Dramatic. Expressive. “I'm five.”

“Right.” I nod solemnly. “Orange juice it is.”

I pour him a glass. Set it in front of him. He takes a sip, leaving a small orange mustache on his upper lip.

“Did you really fight bad guys?” he asks suddenly.

My hands pause over the mixing bowl. “Who told you that?”

“I saw,” he says simply. “At Rosa's. You made the man go away.”

Shit. I thought he hadn't seen the violence. Hoped he hadn't.

“Yes,” I admit. No point lying to him. “I did.”

“Like a superhero?”

I almost laugh. Almost. Instead, I measure out flour, trying to decide how much truth this five-year-old can handle.

“Not like a superhero,” I tell him. “Sometimes people do bad things, and other people have to stop them.”

He considers this. Nods like he's processing complex information.

“Can I stir?” he asks, changing subjects with the mercurial ease of childhood.

I hand him the whisk. Watch as his small hand grips it determinedly. He stirs with fierce concentration, tongue peeking out between his teeth.

That's when Lilly appears. Hair tangled. Eyes soft with sleep. She's wearing one of my t-shirts, and it hangs to mid-thigh. Makes her look vulnerable. Beautiful.

“What's all this?” she asks, voice still rough with sleep.

“Breakfast!” Chleo announces proudly. “I'm helping.”

Her eyes meet mine over his head. Something passes between us.

An acknowledgment.

A question.

“He's quite the chef,” I say, taking the bowl back. “Takes after his mother.”

Her face softens.

“She burned spaghetti once,” Chleo confirms gravely. “The noodles turned black.”

I bite back a smile. “Impressive.”

“Betrayed by my own flesh and blood,” Lilly sighs, but she's smiling. She ruffles Chleo's hair, then leans against the counter. Watching us. Me.

The kitchen fills with the smell of coffee. Butter melting in the pan. For one strange, suspended moment, it feels normal. Like we're just a family making breakfast. Like I'm not a man with blood on his hands and a price on my head.

I pour batter into the hot pan. Add chocolate chips in the shape of a smiley face. Chleo gasps with delight.

“Can you do a dinosaur?” he asks, bouncing on his stool.

“Not a chance.” I flip the pancake. “But I can do a pretty mediocre circle.”

He laughs. The sound punches through me. Clean. Pure. Something I didn't know I needed to hear.

I stack the pancakes on a plate. Slide it in front of him. Lilly pours herself coffee, and I notice her smile. The horror of yesterday fading. Not gone, but manageable.

“Eat,” I tell them both. “Before it gets cold.”

We sit at the small kitchen table. Chleo drowns his pancakes in syrup. Lilly cuts hers into neat triangles. I watch them both, storing away details.

“So,” I clear my throat. “I had Maksim send some men to check your house. Make sure it's clear.”

Lilly's fork pauses halfway to her mouth. “And?”

“Clean. No sign of them. He's got people watching it, just to be safe.”

She nods, but tension creeps back into her shoulders. “We can't go back, can we? Not really.”

“Not yet,” I admit. “But soon.”

Chleo looks between us, sensing the shift in mood. “Can we go fishing?”

The question comes out of nowhere. Redirects everything.

“Fishing?” Lilly repeats.

“Yeah!” he nods enthusiastically. “Like on TV. Guy stuff.”

My chest tightens.

Guy stuff.

Father-son stuff.

The kind of thing I never had with my own father, who taught me to shoot a gun at eight but never took me fishing.

“I don't know if that's a good idea right now,” Lilly starts, glancing at me.

“I know a place,” I say before I can stop myself. “Private lake. Secluded. Safe.”

Her eyes narrow. Concerned. Protective. “Nikolai?—”

“I'll keep him safe,” I promise, and we both know I mean it. After all, I've already killed to protect him. Would do it again without hesitation. “No one will find us there.”

She hesitates. Torn between fear and the desire to give Chleo some normalcy.

“Please, Mama?” Chleo wheedles. “Please? I wanna do guy stuff with Nikolai.”

Something in her expression breaks. Softens. “Okay,” she says finally. “But you listen to everything Nikolai tells you, understand? No wandering off.”

“I promise!” Chleo pumps his fist in victory.

“I'll protect him with my life,” I tell her quietly when Chleo runs off to get dressed.

She touches my arm.

Light.

Brief.

Electric.

“I know you will.”

An hour later, we're in my car. Fishing gear in the trunk. Snacks packed by Lilly. Chleo strapped into a booster seat in the back, chattering excitedly about what kind of fish we might catch.

I drive carefully. Scanning for tails. For threats. Old habits don't die just because I'm playing dad for a day.

The lake sits hidden in the mountains. Accessible only by a dirt road most locals don't even know exists. I found it my second week in Fern Falls, marking it as a potential escape route if things went south.

Never imagined I'd be bringing my son here.

“Wow!” Chleo's face presses against the window as the lake comes into view. Crystal clear water. Surrounded by pines. Mountain peaks reflected on the surface like a mirror image.

I park near the shore. Pop the trunk. Start unloading gear.

“Have you ever fished before?” I ask him.

He shakes his head. Solemn. “Mama says fish are smelly.”

I laugh. Can't help it. “She's not wrong.”

I set up two chairs at the water's edge. Show him how to bait the hook. His face scrunches in disgust when I spear the worm, but he doesn't back down.

“Your turn,” I say, handing him a baited rod.

His small hands wrap around it. Uncertain. Determined.

“Like this?” he asks.

“Almost.” I kneel beside him. Guide his grip. “Hold it here. And here. That's it.”

I show him how to cast. His first attempt lands three feet away in the shallows. He looks disappointed.

“Not bad,” I tell him. “Try again. Harder this time.”

He frowns in concentration. Swings. The line arcs through the air, splashing down twenty feet out.

“I did it!” he shouts, bouncing on his toes.

“Good job.” Pride surges through me. Unexpected. Powerful. “Now we wait.”

We sit side by side. Rods held over still water. The sun climbs higher, warming the back of my neck. Birds call from the trees. Peaceful. Quiet.

Not the kind of quiet that comes before violence. Just... quiet.

“Are you hungry?” I ask after an hour passes without a bite.

He nods eagerly. I reach for the cooler Lilly packed. Sandwiches. Juice boxes. Cookies.

We eat, fishing rods propped against our chairs. Chleo gets crumbs all over his shirt.

Takes huge bites that barely fit in his mouth.

“Slow down,” I tell him. “Food's not going anywhere.”

He grins, cheeks bulging like a chipmunk's. I hand him a napkin. He wipes his mouth with exaggerated care.

“Did you know,” he says between bites, “that T-Rex couldn't really roar? They probably sounded like birds.”

“I didn't know that.”

“And they had feathers. Like chickens.” He makes a clucking sound, and I feel my mouth twitch into a smile.

“Smart kid,” I say.

“That's what Mama always says.” He takes a sip of juice. Considering. “Are you really strong?”

“Pretty strong,” I admit.

“Stronger than the bad men?”

The question hits harder than expected. “Yes,” I say. “Stronger than them.”

He nods, satisfied. Goes back to his sandwich. But something's shifted. I can feel a question building in him. Can see it in the way his eyes dart to me and away again.

Finally, he sets down his food. Looks straight at me. “Are you my real dad?”

The world stops. Just for a moment. Everything narrows to this small boy with my eyes, asking the question that changes everything.

I could lie. Could say we'll talk about it when he's older. Could defer to Lilly.

But I don't.

"Yeah," I say quietly. "I am."

He nods. Not surprised. Not upset. Like he's confirming something he already knew.

"I thought so," he says simply. "You have the same eyes as me."

"I do."

"Why didn't you live with us before?"

The question cuts deep. How do I explain five years of absence to a child?

"I was away," I tell him, settling on the simplest truth.

He accepts this with the easy logic of childhood. "But now you are here. So you can stay."

It's not a question.

A statement.

A fact in his world.

"I'd like that," I say, and I mean it more than I've meant anything in my life.

We spend another hour fishing. Actually catch two small trout, which Chleo is both fascinated and disgusted by. I show him how to release them back into the lake, his small hands gentle as he watches them swim away.

By the time we pack up, the sun is starting its descent. Chleo's eyes are heavy.

He falls asleep in the car, head lolling against the booster seat. I drive carefully. One eye on the road. One in the rearview mirror, watching my son sleep.

My son.

The words fit better now. Feel right in a way they didn't this morning.

I find myself imagining what life could be like.

Fishing trips.

School drop-offs.

Teaching him to ride a bike.

Normal things.

Things I never thought I'd have. Things I never thought I'd want.

But I want them. Want them with an intensity that rivals anything I've ever felt.

When we pull up to the cabin, twilight has fallen. The porch light is on. Warm. Welcoming.

I carry Chleo from the car. His head heavy on my shoulder.

That's when I see him.

A figure on the porch. Male. Tall. Familiar.

Ivan.

Lilly's cousin. Bratva ink hidden beneath his collar.

My body tenses. Immediately on alert. Every protective instinct flaring to life.

Ivan's hands are empty. Visible. A deliberate choice to appear non-threatening.

Lilly appears in the doorway behind him. Her face tight with worry.

“Nikolai,” she says, voice carefully controlled. “Ivan has something to tell us.”

I shift Chleo higher on my shoulder. Keep my free hand loose. Ready.

“I'm not here to cause trouble,” Ivan says. “I'm here to warn you.”

My grip tightens on Chleo. Protective. Fierce.

“Why should I trust you?” I ask.

“Because I love my cousin,” he says simply. “And that boy she's been raising alone.”

The quiet simplicity of it rings true. But trust doesn't come easily to men like me.

“Come inside,” Lilly says, stepping forward. “Both of you.”

I hesitate. Weighing risks. Calculating threats.

Chleo stirs against my shoulder. Murmurs something in his sleep.

And suddenly, I know what matters most.

Keeping him safe.

Keeping her safe.

Whatever it takes.

I follow Lilly inside, carrying my sleeping son.

The game has changed. The stakes have risen.

And I'm playing for keeps now.

Page 26

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:30 am

NIKOLAI

I van's warning still burns in my ears as dawn breaks.

The Kozlovs are angrier than I thought.

The timeline's shorter than I thought. I watch Chleo demolish his cereal at the kitchen table, chocolate milk dribbling down his chin. His innocence like a knife to my chest.

He has no idea his world's about to change again. That his father's past is circling like vultures, waiting to strike.

“Can we go outside today?” Chleo asks, mouth full of cereal. “I wanna see if there are fish in that creek we passed.”

Perfect excuse. I need to scout the perimeter anyway. Check for watchers. For threats.

“Good idea,” I say, keeping my voice light. “Let's go after breakfast.”

Lilly's eyes meet mine over Chleo's head. Questioning. Worried.

I give her a slight nod. I'll keep him safe. Trust me.

She understands. Doesn't like it, but understands.

“Bundle up,” she tells Chleo. “It's cold out there.”

Ten minutes later, we're heading out.

Chleo's hand in mine.

Small.

Warm.

Trusting.

I make sure my jacket hangs loose enough to conceal my weapon but tight enough for quick access. Life-saving habits.

“Stay where I can see you,” I tell him as we follow the path from the cabin.

He nods solemnly. Then races ahead anyway, scanning the ground for interesting rocks, sticks, bugs. Anything that catches his attention.

“Is this one special?” He holds up a rock. Ordinary. Gray. Unremarkable.

“Very special,” I say. “Good eye.”

His face lights up like I've handed him gold. He shoves it in his pocket, already searching for the next treasure.

We reach the creek after a five-minute walk. It's narrow. Clear water rushing over smooth stones. Tall pines create shadows that dance across the surface.

I scan the tree line. The opposite bank. The path behind us. Looking for anything out of place. Any movement that doesn't belong.

Nothing yet.

Chleo crouches by the water's edge, poking at minnows with a stick.

“Don't fall in,” I warn. “Your mom will kill me.”

“I won't.” He concentrates on the water. “Did you know sharks can't stop swimming or they'll die?”

“Is that right?”

“Yep. Their bones would sink to the bottom. Like rocks.” He demonstrates by dropping a pebble into the water. “Plop!”

I smile despite myself. Despite the danger I know surrounds us. “You're pretty smart, kid.”

“Mama says I get it from her,” he says, then looks up at me with those eyes—my eyes. “But maybe I get it from you too?”

The question punches through me.

“Maybe you do,” I say quietly.

He nods, satisfied. Goes back to poking at the water.

I feel it before I see it. That prickle at the back of my neck. The weight of eyes watching.

My body shifts subtly. Angling between Chleo and the tree line. Scanning shadows. Looking for the telltale glint of a scope. The rustle of clothing against bark.

There. Movement. Fifty yards up. Behind a large pine.

I don't look directly at it. Don't give away that I've spotted them.

Instead, I call to Chleo. "Hey buddy, want to see something cool?"

He looks up, curious. "What is it?"

I crouch beside him. Position us so my back is to the watcher. Pretend to show him something in the water.

My jacket falls open. Reveals the revolver at my hip. Not obvious. Not threatening. Just visible enough that whoever's watching can see I'm armed.

A warning.

Chleo's eyes widen when he spots the gun. "Is that real?"

"Yes."

"Can I hold it?" His voice full of excitement. Boy curiosity. No fear.

I smile, but my eyes never stop scanning the tree line. "Not until you're older."

"How much older?" he presses.

"We'll talk about it when you're ten," I say, knowing I'm buying time. Knowing I never want him to need to hold a weapon. To live the life I've lived.

He sighs dramatically. "That's forever."

“It'll go fast,” I assure him. “Trust me.”

Another movement catches my eye. Further up. A second watcher? Or the first one repositioning?

“Time to head back,” I say, keeping my voice casual. “Your mom's probably wondering where we are.”

He groans but doesn't argue. Takes my hand as we stand. I position him on my right side. Away from the watchers. Between me and the path back to safety.

We walk slowly. No running. No sign that I know we're being observed. Just a father and son heading home from a morning adventure.

But my senses are electric. Cataloguing every sound. Every shadow. Every potential threat.

That's when I see it.

A flash of metal embedded in a tree trunk just off the path. Right at eye level.

I stop. “Chleo, tie your shoe.”

“But it's not?—”

“Tie it,” I repeat, voice firm.

He kneels, confused but obedient. While he's distracted, I step to the tree. Examine what I already know I'll find.

A hunting knife. Buried two inches deep in the wood. A scrap of paper pinned

beneath it. Three words scrawled in black ink.

We see you.

I pull the knife free. Fold the paper. Slip both into my pocket before Chleo looks up.

“All done!” he announces.

“Good job,” I say, voice steady despite the rage building inside me. “Race you to the car?”

His face lights up at the challenge. He takes off running, and I follow close behind. Let him win by half a step.

“I beat you!” he crows, bouncing on his toes beside my SUV.

“You did,” I agree, unlocking the doors. “You're fast.”

I scan the area one last time as I help him into his booster seat. No movement. No watchers. But I know they're there. Know they're waiting.

“Did you have fun?” I ask as I start the engine.

“Yeah!” he grins, all teeth and innocence. “Can we come back tomorrow?”

“We'll see,” I say, noncommittal. Knowing we might not be here tomorrow. Might be running by then.

I drive slowly down the mountain road. Careful. Checking the mirrors every few seconds for tails.

Chleo chatters on.

I make the right noises. Ask the right questions. Play the role of engaged father while my mind races.

The knife in my pocket feels like it weighs a hundred pounds. The note burns against my thigh.

We see you.

Not a threat.

A statement.

A fact.

They've found us. Tracked us to the cabin. Been watching long enough to know our routines. Our weak spots.

My grip tightens on the wheel. The past, it seems, is finally here.

LILLY

The town shows up for Sugar and Spice. Not just shows up—they flood the place. Three days of cleaning, repainting, and refurnishing, and you'd hardly know someone tried to destroy my life here.

The reopening has turned into an impromptu street fair. Tables spill onto the sidewalk. Music floats through open doors. I watch it all like I'm dreaming, because none of it feels real.

Not the bakery rising from ashes.

Not the man passing donuts through the crowd.

Not the little boy who calls said man Dad.

“Need help with those?” Mrs. Chen asks, pointing to the tray of cupcakes I'm arranging.

“I've got it,” I say sweetly. She's too old. The fact that she cares is more than my heart can handle.

The mayor's strung fairy lights across the street. Someone's brought a portable speaker that pumps out country songs. There's a table for face painting, and Chleo's already got a dragon painted across his cheek.

Nikolai crosses the bakery, sets down a tray of apple cider. His shoulders are tense. I

notice he's always watching the street.

“You okay?” he asks, when I draw closer.

I nod. Lie. Don't want him to know I'm always terrified. “Just overwhelming.”

His fingers brush mine as he takes the empty tray. My hand feels a buzz. God, I always miss him.

Even when he's near, I miss him. His hands on my skin. His breath in places I won't name.

“They love you,” he says, nodding toward the crowd. “All of them.”

He's right. The whole town came together to help rebuild.

Men with hammers.

Women with paintbrushes.

Teenagers with the cool factor.

Even the hardware store donated supplies. But none of them know what really happened. Who the sweet helpful man on my arm, the one with the piercing green eyes, really is.

Chleo races past, chasing a pack of local kids in a game of tag.

“Careful!” I call after him.

Nikolai's hand finds the small of my back. Steadying. “He's okay. I've got eyes on

him.”

“I know.” I lean into his touch. “I just?—”

He squeezes my hip. “Trust me.”

And I do. That's the craziest part of all this. I trust this dangerous man completely. Trust him with my life. With my son's life.

The high school band starts playing something upbeat. People clear space for dancing. Nikolai's hand is still on my back, warm and solid, when Rosa appears beside us. A slight concussion but she insists she's fit as a fiddle.

“Well, look at you two,” she says, eyebrows waggling. “Playing house already.”

My cheeks heat. “Rosa?—”

“Save it.” She waves me off. “Listen, I'll take Chleo tonight. Bring him to the cabin tomorrow.”

Nikolai's eyebrows rise slightly.

“You've been through hell,” Rosa continues. “Both of you. Take a night. Breathe.” She winks, entirely unsubtle. “Or don't breathe. Whatever works.”

“Rosa!” I hiss, mortified and grateful all at once.

“I'm just saying.” She shrugs. “That boy needs a father. And that father needs some alone time with his baby mama.”

Nikolai's laugh surprises me. Genuine. He likes my best friend and what more can a

girl ask for?

“We appreciate it.”

“I know you do.” Rosa pats my arm. “I’ll drop him off after lunch.”

She disappears into the crowd before I can properly thank her. Already calling Chleo's name. Already planning their sleepover.

“Guess we have the cabin to ourselves tonight,” Nikolai murmurs.

A shiver runs through me. The anticipation is sweet, sinful torture.

“Guess so.”

His eyes darken, and for a second, I forget where we are. Forget the crowd around us. Forget everything but the heat in his gaze.

“Mom!” Chleo's voice breaks the spell. “They're gonna do fireworks! Can I watch? Please?”

I blink, drag myself back to reality. “Sure, baby. Just stay with Rosa, okay?”

He nods, already racing back to where the other children gather. Rosa gives me a thumbs up from across the square.

“Come dance with me,” Nikolai says suddenly.

“What?”

“Dance.” He takes my hand. “One song.”

The band's playing something slow now. Couples sway together in the fading light. Mrs. Chen and her husband. The mayor and his wife. Teenagers pressed close, shy and awkward.

It seems impossible. Dancing in the middle of town with Nikolai Vetrov himself. My sin. My salvation. My damnation.

My love.

Nikolai's already leading me toward the makeshift dance floor.

His arms encircle my waist. Mine loop around his neck. We sway together, barely moving. His heartbeat strong against my chest.

“They're watching us,” I whisper.

“Let them.” His lips brush my temple. “Let them see.”

What would they see, these townspeople who've known me for years? Would they see a woman in love?

Probably just that.

Because it's the truth.

Stars emerge overhead. Someone's lit candles on the tables, and they flicker like fireflies in the dark.

For a moment—just one moment—it feels like we could be normal. Like this could be our life. A bakery. A son. Dancing under the stars on a warm summer night.

“I saw your cousin,” Nikolai says, breaking the fantasy.

My body tenses. “Ivan?”

“He came to the cabin.”

“What did he want?”

Nikolai's jaw tightens. “To warn me. To tell me to leave town.”

The words hit like a physical blow. “He can't just?—”

“He's trying to protect you. Both of you.” Nikolai's hands tighten on my waist. “He thinks if I'm gone, the Kozlovs will leave you alone.”

My throat closes. “And what do you think?”

“I think they know about Chleo now. They know he's my son.” His voice drops lower. “I think they'll use him to get to me whether I'm here or not.”

The fear that's lived in my stomach for days twists tighter. “So what do we do?”

“We have options.”

“Like what?”

“I could go back to Chicago. Deal with them directly.”

“You mean kill them.”

He doesn't deny it. “Or I could run. New name. New city. Start over.”

Stay and fight.

Run and hide.

Neither feels right.

“Whatever you decide,” I say, “we stick together. All of us.”

His eyes widen slightly. “Lilly?—”

“I’m serious. If you leave, we leave with you.” I clutch the front of his shirt. “I’m done running from this. From you.”

“It’s dangerous.”

“Life’s dangerous enough as is.” I meet his gaze steadily. “Five years, Nikolai. Five years I’ve been raising our son alone. I’m not losing you now that we’ve found each other.”

The words hang between us.

The admission.

The choice.

“I love you,” I whisper. “I’ve loved you since that first night.”

His hand comes up. Cups my cheek. Thumb brushing my lower lip. “Say it again.”

“I love you.”

His kiss is gentle at first. Soft. Reverent. Like he's afraid I might shatter.

But I don't want gentle. Not tonight.

My fingers tangle in his hair. Pull him closer. Deeper. His groan is lost against my mouth as I press against him, shameless in a way I never thought I could be in public.

When we break apart, we're both breathing hard.

“I love you too,” he says roughly. “Both of you. More than I knew I could love anything.”

And God help me, but I believe him. Believe him with every cell in my body.

His mouth finds mine again. Hungrier this time. His hands slide lower, grip my hips with bruising force.

“If you keep kissing me like that,” I gasp against his lips, “people are going to talk.”

“Let them.” His teeth scrape my lower lip. “I don't care.”

“Nikolai—”

“I want to devour you right here,” he growls. “In front of everyone. Let them see who you belong to.”

Heat floods my body. Pools low in my belly. Between my legs. My cheeks flame at the image his words paint.

“I—we can't?—”

His laugh is dark. Wicked. He knows exactly what he's doing to me.

“Let's get out of here,” I whisper, grabbing his hand. “Now.”

We slip away like teenagers. Quiet. Furtive. Hearts racing with want and anticipation.

As we reach his car, I look back at the fair. At the bakery string with lights. At the town that came together to help us rebuild.

At Chleo, safe with Rosa.

For tonight, at least, we're safe.

For tonight, we can pretend this is our life.

For tonight, we can love each other without fear.

Tomorrow will bring danger. Decisions. The reality of who we are and what we face.

But tonight?

Tonight belongs to us.

Page 28

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:30 am

LILLY

He slams the cabin door shut behind us, and I don't even get a chance to look around before he's on me.

Mouth to mine.

Teeth, tongue, hands everywhere.

The drive here had been hell. His hand on my thigh, my lips on his neck, his protests through his moans. Telling me I was the distraction.

I kiss him like he's oxygen and I've been drowning. Like this is my final fuck before the world burns.

His tongue dives into my mouth like he owns it.

His mouth crashes into mine, hungry and fucking desperate. I claw at his shirt like it's the only thing standing between me and salvation—because it is.

I need skin. Need him. Need to feel every hard, ruthless inch of him wrecking me into a state of disorientation.

We've been circling each other all night like two animals in heat. And now? We're finally alone.

And the hunger between us doesn't simmer.

It detonates.

Gasoline on fire. That's what this is. Instant combustion. I bite his lower lip just to make him groan.

He slams me into the wall so fast the air leaves my lungs—but I don't care. I wrap my legs around him, grind up against his hard cock, shameless and soaking for it.

"I want you," I breathe, dragging my nails down his back. "No, I need you to fuck me into ruin."

He growls like a man on the edge. Good—because I'm not here for sweet.

I'm here to burn.

My body presses up against his, all heat and greed, and I feel everything—every rigid inch of him pressing against my core. I'm soaked through my panties, and we've barely started.

His hands slide under my ass and he pulls up, squeezes like I'm his little plaything. And that's exactly what I want to be.

I want him to fucking play with me.

I wrap my arms around his neck and he lifts me straight off the floor.

My legs wrap around his waist instinctively, grinding into him with a shameless whimper. I want to feel it tomorrow when I sit down. I want to be marked.

"Fuck, baby, you're wet already," he mutters, voice thick with hunger.

“Keep talking and you’re gonna find out how wet when you’re licking it off your chin,” I pant into his mouth, drunk on the way his cock bucks at that.

He slams me back against the nearest wall, and I gasp.

“You’ve been teasing me all night, sweetheart,” he growls, grinding against my soaked heat. “Now you’re gonna pay for it.”

“Take me to the bedroom then,” I gasp against his mouth.

“Too far,” he growls.

His hips grind into mine, cock thick and hard, right where I need it. Despite the clothes, the friction is enough to make me whimper like a little slut. And god, for him? I’ll be anything.

I roll my hips up into him, chasing the pressure like a girl who knows what she wants.

Because I do.

I want him inside me.

Now. Fast. Filthy.

“Been thinking about this all day,” he trails kisses down my neck. “Watching you in that dress. Wanting to tear it off you.”

“So do it.”

His eyes lock with mine.

Dark.

Dangerous.

Hungry.

“Don't rush me,” he says, setting me down. His fingers find the top button of my dress. “I've been waiting all day.”

One button. Then another.

Slow.

Deliberate.

Torturous.

“You're fucking killing me,” I hiss, hands sliding up under his shirt, greedy for skin, for heat, for him. “Hurry up.”

His smirk is cocky. “Patience, baby. I want to unwrap you slow—like the sweet little gift you are.”

The third button slips free. Then the fourth. At this pace, I'm going to combust. Right here. Against this damn wall.

“Nikolai,” I growl, grabbing his wrist. “Stop playing and fuck me.”

He chuckles, but his eyes are molten now. Lava. “So needy. You want me to rip it all off and take you like an animal?”

“Yes.” My voice is breathless, filthy. “I want your cock, Nikolai. Now.”

Something cracks inside him—restraint, reason, whatever. It’s gone.

And thank fuck for that.

His hands fist the sides of my half-open dress. Rip . The sound sends a jolt straight to my core.

Buttons scatter across the floor like a warning shot. Too late.

“Better?” he rasps, voice like gravel.

“God, yes.” My voice is breathy, desperate. I kick off my heels. I need nothing between me and him.

He pushes the torn dress off my shoulders, slow just to tease me, and it drops to the floor in a soft whisper. I’m left standing there in nothing but my lacy black bra and barely-there panties.

Damp, clinging, aching.

His eyes crawl over me like a goddamn firestorm. “So fucking beautiful,” he murmurs, but it’s not sweet. It’s feral. It’s hungry.

Then he drops to his knees.

My breath catches.

His big hands glide up my calves, slow and claiming, then higher—dragging his mouth after them. Hot, wet kisses. Rough little nips. Teeth grazing skin like he’s

leaving a fucking roadmap of where he's been.

"Mine," he mutters against my thigh. "You feel that, baby? That pulse under my tongue? That's how bad I want you."

I thread my fingers into his hair, already wrecked for him. "Then take it."

He looks up at me with those dark, stormy eyes. Unblinking.

Then does the cardinal sin.

He stands.

Leaves me panting.

He towers over me. Lowers his face. Without breaking eye contact, he bites down the strap of my bra.

Rips.

The sound is obscene. So is the way his teeth scrape against my skin as the lace gives. Then he does the same to the other side, tearing it apart like he's claiming the fucking ruins.

The bra hits the floor.

I'm bare.

Exposed.

His.

“Did you just destroy my favorite bra?” I ask, voice ragged, pulse racing like I’ve already come.

He grins up at me, cocky and wild. His hands are already on me, rough palms cupping my breasts, thumbs circling slow over my nipples until they tighten painfully. “I’ll buy you a hundred. All lace. All disposable.”

I arch into his touch, greedy for it. “You better. Or I’ll make you pay by tying you to my bed.”

He groans. “God, I fucking love your mouth.”

I no longer feel his hands. Lips hot and wet around my nipple. He sucks, bites, tongues me like he’s starving, and every nerve in my body lights up. My knees buckle.

His other hand slides down my stomach, fingers dragging slow like he’s testing every inch of me with touch. He dips beneath the waistband of my panties, growling against my breast.

“These...” he mutters, voice gravel and heat, “...are in my fucking way.”

His fingers hook into the sides of my panties and drag them down slow—too slow. Like he’s dragging the tension out just to watch me squirm.

I step out of them, completely naked. Nothing between us now but his self-control.

Because fuck, mine’s hanging by a thread.

I should feel vulnerable. Naked and trembling in the middle of the room while he’s still dressed like a goddamn Bratva King.

But instead?

I feel powerful. Dripping with it. Wanted in a way that makes my skin buzz and my core clench.

He's devouring me with his eyes like I'm his last meal—and he's starving.

“Your turn,” I say, my voice a dare, fingers slipping under the hem of his shirt.

He doesn't wait. Rips it off. His belt hits the floor with a snap that shoots straight between my legs. His shoes are gone before I can blink. But just when I think he'll strip the rest off?—

He sinks to his knees.

Right in front of my wet, aching pussy.

Like he's meant to be there.

I lean back against the wall, legs already trembling.

His hands grip my thighs, thumbs brushing so close to where I need him that my knees almost give out. His mouth is hot against my skin, breath ragged.

“I need to taste you,” he rasps. “Need to bury my tongue in this sweet fucking pussy and drink every drop.”

Jesus.

My fingers tighten in his hair as his lips hover—so fucking close.

“Been dreaming about this,” he growls. “Jerking off to the thought of you moaning my name, riding my face. Gonna make it real now, baby. Gonna ruin you with my mouth.”

And when his tongue finally drags over me—slow, possessive, fucking filthy—I swear I feel like I’ve met heaven.

His hands grip my thighs, spreading me wider. His mouth finds me again—hot, wet, hungry. His tongue slides through my folds, and my head falls back against the wall with a thunk.

“Fuck,” I gasp. “Oh, fuck.”

His tongue circles my clit. Teasing. Testing. Finding the rhythm that makes my hips buck against his face.

One finger slides inside me, then two. Curling. Hitting that spot that makes stars explode behind my eyelids.

“That's it,” he murmurs against me. “Let me hear you.”

I'm beyond holding back. Beyond caring how I sound. Beyond anything but the sensation of his mouth, his fingers, his breath hot against my pussy.

My hands fist in his hair, holding him closer. My hips roll against his face, shameless in my need. Every lick, every curl of his fingers inside me, pushes me closer to the edge.

“I'm close,” I warn him, voice high and tight. “So close.”

He doubles down, sucking my clit into his mouth, fingers working faster, harder. The

dual sensation is too much. Yet not enough.

Then it hits me. Hard.

Like a fucking lightning strike starting from my core. I shatter. My thighs tremble. My spine bows. My head slams back against the wall.

White-hot pleasure rips through me—violent, ruthless. So sharp it feels like pain.

I cry out. Can't stop it. Don't want to.

My body jerks in his grip, but he holds me down. Hands digging into my ass, keeping me right where he wants me. Where I want to be.

Held.

Owned.

Unraveled.

And I fucking come all over his face. Again. And again. Until there's nothing left of me but shaking legs and a heartbeat going wild in my chest.

My legs give out, but Nikolai's there, holding me up. His hands gripping my ass, keeping me pressed against his mouth as he works me through the aftershocks.

Just when I think I can't take anymore, when the sensitivity is almost too much, he stands. Lifts me over his shoulder like air.

“Nikolai!” I laugh, breathless and dizzy from the sudden change in position.

His hand comes down on my bare ass for a smack that echoes through the cabin. The sting spreads across my skin, melting into pleasure.

Page 29

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:30 am

“Been wanting to do that all night to that juicy fucking ass,” he says, carrying me toward the dining table.

He sets me down, spins me around, bends me over the table. My hands splay against the cold wood. It’s jagged crannies bites into my skin, makes me gasp.

Behind me, I hear the rustle of clothing. The sound of his pants hitting the floor. His boxers following.

I don’t dare look back.

I don’t need to.

He’s behind me. Towering.

Then his hand slides up my back, pressing me down between my shoulder blades. The other slides up my spine, making me tremble in anticipation.

“Stay right there,” he growls, voice dark silk. “Ass up. Legs wide.”

My whole body lights up at the command.

And I obey. Instinctively. Desperately.

Ready for whatever comes next.

I hear him spit. Feel the wet head of his cock slide between my folds. Not entering.

Just teasing. Rubbing against my still-sensitive clit.

“Please,” I whimper, pushing back against him.

“Please what?” His voice is smoke and sin. “Tell me what you want, Lilly.”

“I want you in me. Now.”

His hand slides up to the back of my neck, wrapping gently but firmly. Controlling. Possessive.

Then he's pushing inside me in one long, slow stroke that steals the breath from my lungs.

“Fuck,” he groans once he's fully seated. “So tight. So perfect.”

The feeling is indescribable. Full. Complete. Like a missing piece slotting into place. His cock stretches me in the most delicious way, hitting spots I didn't know existed.

He pulls back slowly, then slams back in. The force of it shoves me forward on the table. My breasts drag against the polished wood.

“Is this what you wanted?” he asks, setting a punishing rhythm. “My cock deep inside you?”

“Yes,” I gasp, each thrust driving the word from my lips. “God, yes.”

His hands grip my hips, holding me in place as he pounds into me. The sound of skin on skin fills the cabin, mixed with our gasps and moans.

One hand slides up my back, tangles in my hair. Pulls just hard enough to arch my

back, changing the angle. His cock hits something deep inside me that makes me see stars.

“Right there,” I sob. “Don't stop.”

“Never,” he promises, voice strained with effort. “Never gonna stop fucking you like this.”

The coil of pleasure builds again. Tighter. Higher. My fingers scrabble for control on the smooth table.

Then he's pulling out, flipping me over like. My back hits the table, and he's between my legs again before I can protest the loss.

“Want to see your face,” he growls, pushing back inside me. “Want to watch you come apart on my cock.”

In this position, I can see everything. The sweat glistening on his chest. The muscles in his arms bulging as he holds himself above me. The place where our bodies join, his cock disappearing inside me.

His eyes never leave mine.

“You're mine,” he says, punctuating each word with a thrust. “Say it.”

“I'm yours,” I gasp. “Always have been.”

One of his hands slides between us, finds my clit. Circles it in time with his thrusts.

“Come for me,” he demands. “One more time.”

I'm already wound so tight from the first orgasm, from the relentless pounding, from the look in his eyes that says he'll die before he lets me go again.

“I can't,” I sob, even as my body tightens around him.

“You can,” he insists. “Together. Want to feel you come on my cock.”

His thrusts become erratic. Harder. Deeper. I know he's close. Can feel him swelling inside me.

“Now,” he growls. “Come now.”

And I do. The orgasm rips through me like lightning—violent, white-hot, fucking feral .

I arch.

Scream.

My back bows off the table, fingers clawing at the edge for something to hold onto. My legs lock around his waist. Trap him. Drag him in deeper.

My pussy clenches. Tight. Greedy. Possessive. A sob rips from my throat. I can't stop it. Can't think .

Only feel .

My whole body convulses. Walls fluttering around his cock like I never want to let him go.

And then he breaks.

With a growl so guttural it shakes the table. Could be my name. Could be a curse. He slams deep. Hard. One final thrust.

Stays there. Buried to the hilt. His cock pulses. Hot release floods me. Thick. Claiming. His hands dig into my hips, holding me down, keeping me open for him while he spills every last drop inside.

I feel everything.

The weight.

The heat.

The absolute ownership of it.

His forehead drops against my neck. His breath rasps against my skin.

“Fuck,” he pants. “You’ll ruin me.”

I smile. Wrecked. Glowing.

“Good.”

We stay like that for a long moment. Connected. Panting. His forehead pressed against mine. My hands gripping his shoulders like I’ll drown if I let go.

Slowly, the world comes back into focus. The sound of crickets outside. The distant howl of a coyote.

Nikolai’s arms wrap around me, lift me from the table. I cling to him, face buried in his neck. Breathing him in. Memorizing this moment.

He carries me to the bedroom, lays me on the bed like I'm made of glass. Crawls in beside me, pulls me against his chest.

“I meant what I said,” I murmur against his skin. “I love you.”

His arms tighten around me. His lips press against my temple.

“And I’m yours,” he says quietly.

I believe him.

Tonight, and I hope forever more, we belong to each other.

Completely.

Irrevocably.

Forever.

Page 30

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:30 am

NIKOLAI

I wake to sunlight on my face. And Lilly's hair. Soft. Warm. Spilling across my chest like a damn silk curtain.

She's still asleep. Bare skin against mine. Her breathing slow. Steady.

Safe.

Last night crashes through me in flashes?—

Her nails. Her moans. The way her body clung to mine like it was made to fit.

Fuck.

My cock stirs, hard and ready again just from the memory. From her.

But it's not just that. Not just lust in my blood. It's something quieter. Deeper. The weight in my chest isn't heaviness. It's stillness.

Peace.

And goddamn it... I think it's her.

Her eyes flutter open, catch me watching her.

“Morning,” she whispers sleepily.

I brush hair from her face, letting my fingers linger on her cheek. “Morning.”

She stretches against me and for a moment I consider pulling her under me again. Taking her slow this time. Making her beg.

Then my phone buzzes.

Text from Rosa: On our way with the little man. 20 minutes.

“Rosa's bringing Chleo,” I tell Lilly, showing her the screen. “Twenty minutes.”

Her eyes widen. She bolts upright, sheet falling away from her naked body. “Twenty minutes? The place is a mess. We're a mess.”

I grab her wrist before she can leap from the bed. Pull her back to me. “Calm down.”

“But—”

I silence her with a kiss. Feel her melt against me before I release her. “Shower. I'll clean up.”

Ten minutes later, I'm collecting torn clothing from the floor when I hear it. The sound of tires on gravel. A car door. Then?—

“Mom! Dad!”

My heart stops. Just for a second.

Dad.

Did he just?—?

I'll never get used to that.

The front door flies open. Chleo bursts into the cabin like a hurricane. His eyes find me immediately.

“Dad!” he shouts again, racing toward me.

It's not the first time he's called me that, but it still hits like a bullet to the chest. A good bullet, if there is such a thing. One that expands instead of destroys.

I crouch down, catch him as he launches himself at me. His small arms wrap around my neck, squeezing tight.

“Hey, buddy,” I smile. “Miss me?”

“So much!” He pulls back, eyes wide with excitement. “Rosa let me have chocolate chip pancakes for breakfast. And I stayed up late watching movies. And?—”

“Sounds like you had fun,” I laugh, standing up with him still in my arms.

Rosa appears in the doorway, smiling. “Morning, lovebirds. Hope you two had a... restful night.”

The way she emphasizes “restful” makes it clear she knows exactly how we spent our evening.

I'm not embarrassed.

“Very restful,” I confirm, shifting Chleo to my hip.

Lilly emerges from the bedroom, hair damp from the shower, wearing one of my t-

shirts and a pair of jeans. She looks soft. Domestic. Mine.

“Mama!” Chleo squirms in my arms, reaching for her.

I set him down, watch him race to her. She scoops him up, covers his face with kisses until he giggles and protests.

“Did you behave for Rosa?” she asks.

“Perfect angel,” Rosa says, winking at Chleo. “Except for the part where he convinced me he's allowed ice cream before bed.”

Lilly raises an eyebrow at our son. “Is that so?”

Chleo's face scrunches in a look of pure innocence. “Dad lets me.”

I laugh. “Nice try, kid.”

The sound of another car approaching breaks the moment. I tense automatically. Remember I don't have my gun on me.

“Expecting company?” I ask Lilly.

She shakes her head, moving closer to Chleo. Protective.

I step to the window, peer out. Relief floods through me when I recognize the black Audi.

“It's Maksim,” I tell them, relaxing.

Rosa perks up. “The tall, scary one with the nice arms? Your friend?”

Lilly shoots her a look. “Rosa!”

“What? I have eyes. Seen him helping around when the bakery was being fixed up for opening day.”

I hide my smile as I open the door. Maksim climbs out of his car, casually dressed in jeans and a henley.

For him, that's practically pajamas.

“Didn't know you were coming,” I say as he approaches.

He shrugs. “Day off. Thought I'd check on the kid.”

What he doesn't say—doesn't need to say—is that he's been keeping tabs on all of us. Making sure we're safe. He's been my best friend for years. Knows my weaknesses. Knows what losing Lilly and Chleo would do to me.

“Uncle Maksim!” Chleo shouts, barreling past me to greet him.

I raise an eyebrow. “Uncle?”

Maksim looks almost embarrassed. “Kid started calling me that. Didn't correct him.”

I watch as he crouches, lets Chleo climb on him like a jungle gym. This man—who I've seen snap necks without blinking—gently swings my son around, making monster noises that have Chleo screaming with delight.

Inside, Rosa's already making coffee. Moving around the kitchen like she owns it. Lilly sits at the counter, watching Chleo through the window.

“Hope you don't mind company,” I tell her, coming up behind her. My arms slide around her waist, pulling her back against my chest.

She leans into me. “Not at all. It's nice.”

Rosa sets coffee mugs in front of us, then calls out the door. “Coffee's ready if you boys are done roughhousing!”

Maksim carries Chleo in, the boy perched on his shoulders. His eyes land on Rosa, and I see something shift in his expression. Interest. Appreciation.

“Don't think we've been properly introduced,” he says, extending a hand to her. “Maksim.”

“Rosa.” She takes his hand, holds it a beat too long. “I know you. You were watching over this little monster.” She reaches up to tickle Chleo, who squeals.

“I was,” Maksim says, voice softer than I've ever heard it. “He told me you bought him dinosaur pajamas.”

“A boy needs his dinosaurs in times of crisis,” she says solemnly.

The corner of Maksim's mouth twitches. Almost a smile. For him, that's practically a declaration.

“Hungry, buddy?” I ask Chleo, breaking the moment.

“Starving,” he declares dramatically. “Could eat a whole elephant.”

“Fresh out of elephants,” I say. “How about pancakes?”

“Again?” Lilly laughs.

“Always pancakes!” Chleo shouts, bouncing on Maksim's shoulders.

So that's what we do. Make pancakes. All of us. Chleo “helps” by spilling flour everywhere. Rosa directs traffic in the kitchen, ordering Maksim around like he's a new recruit instead of a feared Bratva enforcer.

And he lets her.

Watching them—Maksim and Rosa teasing each other, Lilly and Chleo setting the table—makes for one the happiest memories of my life.

“Earth to Nikolai,” Lilly says, waving a hand in front of my face. “You okay?”

I blink, realize I've been standing still, watching them. “Yeah. Just...” I don't have words for this feeling. This lightness.

She seems to understand anyway. Stands on tiptoes to press a kiss to my jaw. “I know.”

Breakfast is chaotic.

Loud.

Messy.

Perfect.

Chleo talks non-stop.

Maksim listens with surprising patience. Asks questions. Seems genuinely interested in the ramblings of a five-year-old.

And Rosa... Rosa watches Maksim with the same interest.

“So,” she says during a lull, “what exactly do you do, Maksim?”

His eyes meet mine briefly. Asking permission.

I nod slightly. Rosa's Lilly's best friend. She knows enough.

“Security,” he says simply. “For powerful families.”

“Hmm.” She studies him. “And what does that mean, exactly?”

“Making sure problems disappear before they become problems.”

She sips her coffee, watching him over the rim. “Sounds mysterious.”

“It's not,” he says, but there's a hint of amusement in his voice. “Just messy sometimes.”

“I bet you're good at it,” she says. “The scary face helps, I'm sure.”

“Scary?” he repeats, looking genuinely confused. “I have a scary face?”

The table erupts in laughter. Even Maksim cracks a smile.

“Terrifying,” Rosa confirms, but the way she's looking at him says she finds it anything but.

I catch Lilly's eye across the table. She smiles, knowing exactly what I'm thinking.

They'd be good together.

Fire and ice.

Light and shadow.

Maybe balance each other out.

After breakfast, we move to the living room. Chleo pulls out his coloring books, spreads them across the floor. Maksim sits with him.

Rosa and Lilly clean up, their voices drifting from the kitchen. Soft. Familiar.

I watch my son—my son—teaching Maksim the proper way to color a stegosaurus. “You have to stay inside the lines,” he insists. “Or it looks messy.”

“Maybe I like messy,” Maksim counters.

Chleo considers this, head tilted. “Sometimes messy is okay,” he decides. “But not for dinosaurs.”

I can't help but smile. The logic of children. Simple. Clean. Black and white in a world of grays.

That's when I hear it. Another car. Not slowing. Coming fast up the gravel drive.

Every muscle in my body tenses. I'm on my feet before I realize I've moved.

“Nikolai?” Lilly calls, sensing the change.

I don't answer. Move to the window. Scan the approaching vehicle.

Red Jeep. Familiar.

Ivan.

Rage floods my system like gasoline on embers. Ignites. Burns.

“Stay inside,” I order, already moving toward the door.

“Who is it?” Lilly asks, coming out of the kitchen.

“Your cousin,” I growl.

I'm out the door before she can respond. Down the porch steps. Across the yard toward the Jeep now pulling to a stop.

Ivan climbs out. Sees me coming. His face hardens, but he doesn't back down. Stands his ground.

“Vetrov,” he greets me, voice carefully neutral.

“You've got nerve,” I say, stopping a few feet away. Close enough to strike if needed.

“Showing up here after telling me to leave town.”

“I came to talk,” he says. “Just talk.”

“Nothing to talk about.” My hands curl into fists at my sides. “You made your position clear.”

“Things have changed.”

“Have they?” I step closer. “Or are you just here to threaten me again? To tell me I'm putting them in danger?”

His jaw tightens. “I was trying to protect them. Lilly and Chleo. My family.”

“They're my family,” I say, voice dropping dangerously low.

“Uncle Ivan!”

The voice stops me cold. I turn to see Chleo racing across the yard.

Within seconds, he's already at Ivan's side, arms wrapping around the man's legs in a familiar hug. One he's given many times before.

Uncle.

The realization hits like a slap. Ivan isn't just Lilly's cousin passing through. He's been part of Chleo's life. Part of their family.

“Hey, little man,” Ivan says, ruffling Chleo's hair with easy affection. “You being good?”

“The best,” Chleo announces proudly. “Dad took me fishing!”

Ivan's eyes flick to me. Something passes between us. Understanding, maybe.

“Chleo, honey,” I say. “Why don't you go show Rosa and Maksim your new rock collection? I need to talk to Uncle Ivan for a minute.”

“But I just saw him,” Chleo protests.

“I’ll be here when you’re done,” Ivan promises. “Go on.”

Chleo considers this, then nods. “Okay. But don’t leave without saying goodbye.”

“I won’t,” Ivan says softly.

I watch Chleo head back to the cabin. Only when he’s inside do I turn back to Ivan.

“You’ve been in his life,” I say. Not a question. A realization.

“Since he was born,” Ivan confirms. “Someone had to be the man in his life.”

The words should anger me. Should make me want to put my fist through his face. Instead, I feel something unexpected.

Gratitude.

“Thank you,” I say, the words rough in my throat. “For being there for him.”

Ivan looks surprised. “Wasn’t expecting that.”

“Neither was I,” I admit. “Why are you here, Ivan? Really?”

He runs a hand through his hair, sighs. “I’m here because Chicago’s not an option for me anymore. The families there— they’re always going to want me involved. And I’m done with that life.”

“So you came here.”

“To be near family. To start over.” He meets my gaze steadily. “Same as you.”

“I’m not starting over,” I say. “Just continuing what I’ve always done. Protecting what’s mine.”

“And what happens when the Kozlovs send more men?” The questions hit hard because they’re the same ones keeping me up at night.

“I deal with it,” I say.

“Alone?” He shakes his head. “That’s not how this works, Vetrov. Not when you’ve got family involved.”

I study him, trying to read behind the words. “What are you suggesting?”

“You should leave,” he looks pained. “They’ll find you here.”

“I can’t upend their life,” I refuse.

We both stand in silence for some time. Thinking of ways to make this work. Then, I remember he said something.

“You said the people in Chicago? They’d want you involved.”

“They like me,” he shrugs. But then, the wheels turn.

In his head, and mine.

“Do you think you could bring them to the table?”

He lets out a low whistle. “I still have connections in Chicago. People who owe me favors.”

He crosses his arms after thinking. “I could help finalize a truce with the Kozlovs. Make them understand that coming after you—after us— isn't worth the cost.”

The offer surprises me. “You’d do that?”

“Not for you,” he says bluntly. “For them. They deserve peace.”

I can't argue with that. “And what do you want in return?”

“Nothing.” He shrugs. “Except maybe your word that you're in this for the long haul. That you won't disappear on them again.”

“I never disappeared,” I say, voice tight. “I didn't know about Chleo.”

“I know that now,” he admits. “But intentions don't matter much to a kid growing up without a father.”

“I'm not going anywhere,” I tell him. “They're my family now.”

“Then we want the same thing.” He extends his hand. “Peace.”

I look at his hand. At the man offering me a way out of this mess. A chance to give Chleo the life he deserves.

I take his hand. Grip it firmly. “Peace.”

NIKOLAI

The abandoned storage facility looms ahead like a concrete tomb.

Rust-eaten and forgotten.

Perfect for what we need to do today. Ivan sits beside me in the passenger seat. Fingers drumming against his knee. Nervous energy. He should be. We're about to face down the devil and ask for terms.

“You sure about this?” I ask, killing the engine.

Ivan nods. “Boris will listen. He's reasonable. For a Kozlov.”

“Reasonable” isn't a word I associate with the family that sent men to terrorize my son. My woman. My life.

But here we are.

I check the manila envelope on the backseat. Insurance. Leverage. Justice.

“Let's go,” I say.

The air inside the facility smells like dust and neglect. I scan for cameras. Exits. Ambush points.

A man emerges from the shadows. Tall. Broad-shouldered. Expensive suit that

doesn't belong in this decay.

Boris Kozlov. Viktor's cousin. The reasonable one, according to Ivan. A representative for the family.

Two bodyguards flank him. Obviously armed. Prepared.

So am I. My Glock presses against my lower back. Comforting.

“Ivan,” Boris nods. “You said this was important.”

His eyes slide to me. Cold. Calculating. Untrusting. “Vetrov.”

“Kozlov.”

No handshakes. No pretense of civility. Just recognition of the blood between us.

“This way,” Boris gestures toward a metal table set up in the center of the room. Four folding chairs. A single fluorescent light dangling overhead.

We take our seats across from each other. A chessboard with human pieces.

“You killed my cousin,” Boris says.

I don't flinch. Don't deny it. “I did.”

“Three bullets to the chest,” he continues. “In front of witnesses.”

“Should have been more.”

Boris's jaw tightens. One of his guards shifts his weight. Hand drifting toward his

holster.

Ivan clears his throat. “We’re here to settle this, Boris. Peacefully.”

“Peace?” Boris laughs. Cold. Empty. “He murdered my blood.”

I slide the manila envelope across the table. “Your brother murdered fifteen people. Women. Children. For a real estate deal.”

Boris doesn't touch the envelope. Just stares at it like it might bite.

“Open it,” I say.

He hesitates, then nods to one of his men. The guard steps forward, flips the envelope open. Spills its contents across the metal surface.

Photos. Reports. Evidence.

The guard's face pales.

“What is this?” Boris asks.

“The truth,” I say. “About what Viktor did.”

I reach across, flip through the photos until I find the one I want. Push it toward him with one finger.

A small body. Charred beyond recognition. Except for the pink shoes, somehow untouched by the flames.

“Three years old,” I tell him. “Her name was Sophie. She was playing with dolls

when the fire started.”

Boris stares at the photo. His expression doesn't change, but something shifts behind his eyes.

“My cousin did this?” His voice has dropped. Quieter now.

“He ordered it,” I confirm. “Set fire to an apartment building because the owners wouldn't sell. Fifteen dead. Five of them children. Eight women. All innocent.”

I push another photo forward. The building. Flames reaching toward the sky.

“Your family's mark was left at the scene. Your raven. Your fire.” I lean forward. “Is this what the Kozlov name stands for now? Burning children alive?”

Boris looks up. Something flickers across his face. Disgust. Shame, maybe.

“I have a daughter,” he says finally. “Four years old.”

I hadn't known that. It's not in any of our files on the Kozlovs.

“She likes the color pink?” I ask.

He nods. Once. Barely perceptible.

“I didn't know,” he says. “About the fire. About the children. Viktor handled that side of business.”

“Now you do know,” I push the rest of the photos toward him. “This is what your brother was. What he did in your family's name.”

Boris looks through the photos slowly. Deliberately. His face hardens with each one.

“These go to the FBI if we don't reach an agreement today,” I tell him. “Your family's name attached to fifteen murders. Including children.”

“You'd destroy us all.”

“If I have to.”

He sits back. Studies me. “What do you want, Vetrov?”

“Peace,” I say simply. “For my family. For myself.”

“You want me to forget you killed my brother.”

“I want you to acknowledge he deserved it.”

Silence stretches between us. Taut as piano wire.

Then Boris does something unexpected. He nods.

“If this is true,” he taps the photos, “then yes. He deserved it.”

Relief floods through me. Carefully masked.

“But a blood debt is still owed,” he continues. “Family for family.”

My hand moves toward my gun. I'm not leaving this place without assurance my family is safe.

“The debt is paid,” Ivan interrupts. “With Viktor's death. If what Nikolai says is true,

your brother disgraced your family name. Brought shame to the Kozlovs.”

Boris considers this. Eyes never leaving mine.

“There's one condition,” he says finally. “We stay out of the mountains, you stay out of the city.”

Territory lines. Clear boundaries. It's more than I hoped for.

“And my family?” I ask. “They're untouchable.”

“As is mine,” Boris counters.

I nod slowly. “Agreed.”

“Then we have a deal.” He stands. “The blood debt is settled. Your hands are clean, Vetrov.”

I stand too. Don't offer my hand. Don't smile. Just nod once in acknowledgment.

“These never reach the FBI,” he says, gathering the photos.

“As long as our agreement holds,” I confirm. “But I need my name cleared in Chicago. Can't have cops looking over for me.”

He pauses, one photo still on the table. The little girl. Sophie.

“My brother was sick,” he says quietly. “I didn't see it. I'll make sure the FBI know he acted alone. Make sure they realize he wasn't a part of the family. Hadn't been for years.” He looks at me pointedly.

“I was shocked too, to hear he did this,” I say with a small smile. “Viktor was always deranged. The family never stood for it.”

He nods. We’re in agreement.

For a moment, he's just a man. Not a mob boss. Not an enemy. Just a father, looking at another father's loss.

“I'll take care of this,” he tucks the photos away. “Make it right with the families. As much as can be made right.”

“Do that.”

He leaves without another word. His guards follow, eyes never leaving us until they disappear into the shadows.

Ivan exhales beside me. “Jesus. I thought we were dead for sure.”

“Not today,” I say, though I'd calculated our odds at fifty-fifty walking in.

We drive back in silence. My mind racing ahead to Lilly. To Chleo. To what this means for us.

Peace.

A chance at normal.

A future that doesn't involve looking over my shoulder every second.

The bakery comes into view. Sugar and Spice. Warm lights. Inviting. Home.

“You should be the one to tell her,” Ivan says as we park. “About the agreement.”

“We'll tell her together,” I say. “She deserves the whole truth. From both of us.”

Lilly's face when we walk in is cautious. Hopeful. Scared.

“Well?” she asks, wiping flour from her hands onto her apron. “What happened?”

“It's done,” I tell her, pulling her close. “We have peace.”

Her body sags against mine in relief. Then she turns to Ivan, questions in her eyes.

“I need to tell you something,” he says. “Should have told you years ago.”

We sit at one of the small tables. Lilly listens as Ivan explains everything. His connection to the Bratva. How he tried to get out. How he came to Fern Falls to start over.

“I kept it from you to protect you,” he finishes. “I'm sorry.”

She's silent for a long moment. Processing. Then she reaches across the table, takes his hand.

“You're family,” she says simply. “That doesn't change.”

The forgiveness in her voice makes my chest tight. This is who she is. Forgiving. Loving. Loyal.

“I'm leaving,” Ivan says. “Going back to Chicago. Just for a while.”

Her hand tightens on his. “Why?”

“To make sure the peace holds,” he explains. “To finish cutting ties. To make a clean break.”

She nods, understanding in her eyes. “And then?”

“Then I find my own Fern Falls,” he smiles. “My own fresh start.”

He stands. Hugs her tight. Whispers something in her ear that makes her eyes fill with tears.

Then he turns to me. Extends his hand.

I take it. Grip firm. A promise between us.

“Take care of them,” he says.

“With my life,” I promise.

He nods. Satisfied. Then heads for the door, pausing with his hand on the knob.

“I won’t be back. Will never bring trouble at your door. I’ve made peace with the devil to protect heaven,” he says, looking back at me, then Lilly. “Worth every sacrifice.”

And then he's gone.

Lilly's arms slide around my waist. Her head rests against my chest.

“Is it really over?” she asks.

I kiss the top of her head. Breathe in the scent of her. Vanilla. Cinnamon. Home.

“Yes,” I tell her. “It's over.”

And for the first time since I put three bullets in Viktor Kozlov's chest, I believe it.

Page 32

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:30 am

LILLY

Peace feels like a foreign language.

One I'm just starting to learn. Still fumbling through the vowels. Still half-convinced it's all a lie.

It's been two weeks since Ivan and Nikolai came back from that meeting with Boris Kozlov. Two weeks of nothing. No gunshots in the distance. No cars trailing us down backroads. No threats veiled behind polite smiles.

Just quiet.

Just mornings with coffee and Nikolai's bare chest and Chleo's sleepy yawns.

Just evenings with dinner and cartoons and the soft hum of a life I never thought I'd have.

And now?

Now I'm staring down at a tiny pink plus sign that's about to blow it all to hell.

Again.

Because apparently, peace isn't enough.

My body wants more.

His baby. Again.

Honestly—I do, too.

I stare at it, sitting on the edge of the bathtub in Nikolai's cabin. Our cabin now.

“Mama!” Chleo shouts from outside the door. “Dad is saying breakfast is ready.”

Dad.

The word still catches me sideways. The way Chleo says it makes it seem like something always meant to be.

“Coming, baby!” I shout, flushing the evidence. Wrap the test in toilet paper. Stuff it deep into the trash under used cotton pads and a half-empty mascara tube. I’ll tell Nikolai. Just... not with Chleo watching.

Not yet.

The kitchen smells like syrup and heaven. Nikolai’s at the stove. Chleo’s stacking strawberries into smiley faces on our plates. One for me. One for him. One for the man who somehow became ours.

It’s domestic. Ordinary.

Beautiful.

“You okay?” Nikolai’s voice cuts through my haze, low and full of heat.

His eyes find mine. They always do. The man misses nothing.

“Just tired,” I lie, planting a kiss on his stubbled jaw.

His hand finds my waist. Holds me there. Not hard. Not soft. Just his.

“You sure?”

“Later,” I whisper, lips brushing his skin, low enough that Chleo doesn’t hear.

A domestic life is a busy life. Later doesn’t come until a week after.

I find him on the porch one evening, staring out at the mountains like he’s waiting for a war to arrive with the morning mist.

His shirt’s half unbuttoned. Hair still damp from the shower. He’s brooding. Tense. Handsome.

I step behind him, wrap my arms around his waist. He doesn’t flinch. Just lowers his head, exhales slow like it hurts.

“They’re not coming, you know,” I whisper against his back.

“They always come.”

His voice is gravel. Rough with a lifetime of waiting for bad things to happen. With the FBI still on his heels, he’s only waiting for the other ball to drop.

As for me? I’m ready to let the past go. Even if they’ll come, we’ll handle it. Together.

There’s a whole bright future for us to look towards.

I turn him around. Look up into those storm-green eyes. My heart's about to punch through my ribs.

"I need to tell you something."

He watches me, unreadable. But I see the flicker—worry. Readiness. That part of him that braces for the worst.

"I'm pregnant."

The silence stretches.

Then—

He smiles.

A real one. Slow. Deep. It hits his eyes. "You think I didn't know?"

I blink. "What?"

He takes my face in his hands, thumbs stroking my cheekbones. "Lilly, I've been watching you throw up every morning for a week. You've been turning green at the smell of coffee. And you fell asleep sitting up on the couch last night."

"Why didn't you say anything?" I ask, tears pricking at my eyes.

"Waiting for you to be ready to tell me."

He drops to his knees so fast it knocks the breath from my lungs. Hands splayed over my stomach. Lips soft against my skin.

“Hello in there,” he whispers, voice softer than I’ve ever heard it. “I’m your father.”

I hold back a choked sob.

“This baby…” His voice is reverent, fingers tracing circles on my stomach. “Ours.”

I nod. Tears bite the corners of my eyes.

“Time we get married, don’t you think?” he says, looks up at me with those gorgeous grey eyes.

I laugh. It comes out choked. “Yes.”

Just like that. No ring. No speech. Just the truth, warm between us.

He rises. Takes me into his arms. We hold each other. No words. Just breath. Just heartbeats.

The church in Fern Falls was built in 1892. Stained glass windows. Wooden pews polished to a shine. Flowers everywhere—roses and lilies and baby’s breath turning the simple space into something magical.

I stand in the small room at the back, staring at my reflection in a full-length mirror. The dress is simple. White lace. Empire waist that hides the smallest suggestion of a bump.

“You look beautiful,” Rosa says, adjusting my veil. “Like a freaking fairy princess.”

I laugh. “A pregnant fairy princess marrying a Bratva enforcer. Tale as old as time.”

“The best kind of fairy tale,” she winks. “One with some spice.”

The door opens. Chleo peeks in, dressed in a tiny suit that makes my heart melt.

“Wow,” he breathes, eyes widening. “Mama, you look like an angel.”

I crouch down, careful not to wrinkle the dress. “And you look like the handsomest ring bearer ever.”

He grins, showing off the gap where his front tooth used to be. “Dad said I should come check on you. He's nervous.”

“Nikolai? Nervous?” I can't imagine it.

Chleo nods solemnly. “He keeps fixing his tie. Uncle Maksim told him to stop fidgeting before he strangles himself.”

I laugh, picturing the scene. “Tell him I'm ready whenever he is.”

As Chleo races off, Rosa helps me stand. “You ready for this? Marrying the most dangerous man in the mountain?”

“Former most dangerous man,” I correct. “And yes. I've never been more ready for anything.”

The music starts. Rosa squeezes my hand, then heads out to take her place as my maid of honor. I take a deep breath, pick up my bouquet, and step into the hallway.

The first thing I see when the doors open is Nikolai. Standing at the altar. Back straight. Eyes fixed on me like I'm the only person in the universe.

And then I notice the rest of it.

The church is full. Town on the left. Bratva on the right. Like the world's most awkward family reunion.

Mrs. Chen sits beside the mayor's wife, both of them eyeing the tattooed men in suits with expressions ranging from fascination to horror.

On the other side, Maksim stands as best man, flanked by three men I've never seen before. All built like brick walls. All watching the church entrance with the hypervigilance of men who expect trouble at any moment.

It should be terrifying. Should make me want to run.

Instead, I start walking.

Down the aisle.

Toward Nikolai.

Toward our future.

His eyes never leave mine. Not when I reach him. Not when we exchange vows. Not when he slides a simple gold band onto my finger next to the engagement ring he got me. A solid fucking diamond, if I ever saw one.

"I promise," he says, voice low and sure, "to love you and protect you and our children until my last breath."

And I know he will.

The reception is held at the town park. Fairy lights strung across the street. Music floating through the grounds.

It's chaos. Beautiful chaos.

Chleo races between tables with the mayor's grandson, high on cake and adventure.

The florist keeps crossing herself whenever she passes a table of Bratva men, their jackets carefully arranged to hide their weapons.

Rosa has cornered Maksim by the punch bowl, his stoic expression softening every time she laughs.

And Nikolai—my husband—stands by my side the whole time.

I slip my hand into his. “Happy?”

He pulls me against his side, presses a kiss to my temple. “More than I knew was possible.”

That's when Maksim approaches, something urgent in his expression.

“Lilly,” Maksim gestures for Nikolai and me to join him in a quiet corner.

“I told him to wait for the honeymoon to kill someone,” I deadpan.

Maksim grins. Hands me a folded sheet of paper.

“He’s clear.”

I blink. “What?”

“The charges. The warrants. All of it. Gone. Dmitri came through.”

The air rushes out of me.

Nikolai turns to me, face alight with something I've never seen before. Relief. Pure and complete.

“It's done,” he says, breaking into a smile. “Boris came through. The FBI has officially closed my case.”

“You're free,” I whisper, the implications hitting me all at once. “Completely free.”

He pulls me closer, hand sliding protectively over my stomach. “We all are.”

He pulls me into him. Kisses me hard. The crowd cheers.

Kids run between tables, stealing cupcakes. Mobsters raise crystal glasses. A grandma is whispering to her priest about “those suspicious Russians.”

It's awkward.

It's unusual. It's perfect.

Because we're here. We made it. And no one's taking this life from us now. Not ever.

THE LEGACY

NIKOLAI

I sip my coffee. Black, strong enough to wake the dead and watch my children play in the backyard.

Three years.

Three years of peace.

Three years of waking up next to Lilly without checking for a gun under my pillow first.

My daughter squeals as Chloe swings her from the back. Anastasia. Named after my grandmother. We call her Ana. Three years old and already as fierce as her mother. As stubborn as me.

“More!” she demands, her little fists grabbing to the ropes when he stops swinging.

He winces but complies. Eight years old now and already protective of his sister’s demands.

She giggles, fearless. Dark curls dancing in the breeze. My eyes. Lilly's smile. The best of both of us wrapped in pink overalls with dirt on the knees.

I take another sip of coffee. Let the bitter warmth slide down my throat.

I never thought I'd have this.

Never thought I'd survive long enough to see my son grow tall.

Never imagined I'd have a daughter with Lilly's laugh.

Never believed I'd live in a house with a white fence and fucking wind chimes on the porch.

Yet here we are. The cabin's long gone.

Sold two years ago when we bought this place on the edge of town. Close enough for Lilly's bakery. Far enough for privacy. Four bedrooms. A yard with space for a dog and two kids and all the ghosts of the man I used to be.

I watch them now arrange sticks in a square. He's patient with her. Kind in a way I never learned to be until I met Chleo.

Ana's not having it though. She wants to build it her way—three sticks balanced precariously. More sculpture than structure. Determined little thing. Gets that from me.

“No, Ana,” Chleo explains. “It'll fall down if you do it that way.”

“My castle,” she insists, bottom lip pushing out in a pout that's pure Lilly.

I smile into my coffee.

Chleo sighs, sounding exactly like me when I'm trying not to lose my temper. “Fine. We'll do it your way.”

And they do. The castle is a disaster. It falls immediately. Ana laughs like it's the

funniest thing she's ever seen.

Chleo just shakes his head, already rebuilding.

That's my son. Builder. Fixer.

The floorboards creak behind me. Soft footsteps. The scent of vanilla and sleep-warm skin.

I don't turn. Don't need to. My body knows her presence before my eyes confirm it.

Lilly.

Her arms slide around my waist from behind. Her cheek presses between my shoulder blades. Heat blooms where she touches me.

“Morning,” she murmurs, voice still rough with sleep.

I reach back, cup her hip with one hand. “Morning, Mrs. Vetrov.”

She laughs, soft and low. “Three years of marriage and you still say that like you're surprised.”

“I am.” I turn, finally looking at her. “Every damn day.”

She's wearing my t-shirt. Black. Too big. Hanging to mid-thigh. Her hair's a mess of curls around her face. No makeup. Pillow creases still marking her cheek.

Most beautiful fucking thing I've ever seen.

“Coffee?” I offer, already reaching for a second mug.

“Please.” She slides onto the barstool at the kitchen island, legs crossing. The shirt rides up. Just enough to tease.

I pour her coffee. Add cream. Two sugars. Slide it across to her. She gets some coffee on her lip.

I lean down. Kiss her clean. Taste coffee and mint toothpaste and Lilly. My wife. My life.

Her hand slides up my chest, rests over my heart. Coffee? Abandoned.

“Sleep well?” I ask against her lips.

“Mmm. Would have slept better if someone hadn't kept me up past midnight.”

I grin. Can't help it. “Complaints?”

“Not a one.” She kisses me again, deeper this time. Her tongue teases mine.

I'm about to suggest we send the kids to Rosa's for the morning when a crash from outside pulls us apart.

“Ana!” Chleo's voice, sharp with alarm.

We both move at once. Parental instinct overriding everything else.

Through the window, we see Ana sitting on the ground, tears welling in her eyes. A small cut on her knee. Nothing serious. Chleo's already kneeling beside her, checking her over.

“I'll go,” Lilly says, already heading for the back door.

I watch her go. Watch her crouch beside our daughter. Watch Ana's tears dry almost instantly when Lilly kisses her knee better.

My family.

My heart outside my body.

Walking around in the world.

Vulnerable.

Precious.

Sometimes I still wake up in cold sweats. Dreams of men coming for them. Dreams of blood on bakery floors. Dreams of what I'd do—what I'd become again—if anyone threatened them.

But the dreams come less often now.

I rinse my coffee mug in the sink. Watch through the window as Lilly helps the kids rebuild their castle. Bigger this time. Sturdier.

I'm still watching them when I hear a car on the gravel driveway. The sound sets off old alarms in my head. Instincts that never fully die.

I move to the front window. Look out.

Relax.

Maksim's black Audi.

But not the car that catches my attention. It's who's getting out of the passenger side.

Rosa.

Her wild curls unmistakable even from here. Wearing a sundress. Laughing at something Maksim's said.

Well, well, well.

This is new.

I open the front door before they reach the porch.

“Wasn't expecting company,” I say, leaning against the doorframe. Arms crossed. Eyebrow raised.

Maksim shrugs, casual as ever. “Was in the neighborhood.”

“In the neighborhood,” I repeat. “Two hours from your place.”

Rosa grins, not even pretending to be embarrassed. “My car broke down. Your knight in shining armor here stopped to help.”

“Knight in shining armor?” I can't keep the amusement from my voice. “Maksim?”

“What can I say?” Maksim claps me on the shoulder as he passes. “I'm a fucking gentleman.”

I note the way his hand lingers at Rosa's lower back as she steps inside. The way she leans into it slightly.

Interesting.

“Lilly's out back with the kids,” I tell them, closing the door. “I'll let her know we

have visitors.”

“No need,” Lilly says, appearing in the hallway with Ana on her hip. Chleo trailing behind. “I heard a car.”

Her eyes widen when she sees Rosa and Maksim standing together in our entryway.

“Rosa!” She shifts Ana to her other hip. “What are you doing here with...?”

She leaves the question hanging, but her eyes dart between them with obvious curiosity.

“My car died on Route 16,” Rosa explains, reaching out to tickle Ana's chin. “Maksim happened to be driving by.”

“Happened to be driving by,” Lilly repeats, shooting me a look that says she's not buying it either.

Maksim, for his part, looks completely unaffected by our scrutiny. But I notice the way his eyes soften when they land on Rosa.

Ana wriggles in Lilly's arms, reaching for Maksim. “Uncle Max! Up!”

He takes her without hesitation. This man who once broke a man's neck with his bare hands. Now letting my daughter tug at his beard and giggle.

“Hey, munchkin,” he says, voice gentler than most people would believe possible. “You gotten bigger since last week?”

“I'm this many!” She holds up three fingers proudly.

“That's a lot of many,” he agrees seriously.

“Well,” Lilly interrupts. “You'll have to stay for breakfast. Both of you.”

She shoots me another look. One that tells me she's up to no good.

“We'd love to stay,” he says, ignoring her comment. “If it's not an imposition.”

“Not at all,” Lilly insists. “Family breakfast. It'll be nice.”

Rosa and Maksim agree. Walk past us, the kids tagging along.

“Sweetheart.” I grab Lilly before she causes a mess. “Don't interfere.”

“Who said anything about interfering?” she gives me a grin I know all too well.

My wife? She's up to no good. She rushes off to the kitchen, not looking back.

I hang back. Just for a moment.

Watch them go.

My family.

Extended now.

Growing in ways I never anticipated.

Lilly glances back. Catches me watching. Her smile softens, knowing.

She gets it. Gets me. Always has.

We both know what this is. What we've built here.

Something neither of us thought possible.

Peace.

Home.

Life.

I push off from the wall. Follow them into the kitchen. Into the noise and warmth and chaos of a Sunday morning with people I love.

Into the life I never thought I'd live.

But the only one that matters.