



Plus-Size Bratva Bride (Vadim Bratva #9)

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Category: Urban

Description: My brutal Bratva boss took my virginity and knocked me up.

He's an absolute nightmare to work with, but I have to obey him.

He points out my mistakes, then plays with my innocent plus-size curves.

And before I know it, I'm pregnant with my Bratva boss's baby.

He's the muscle of the Bratva, the one who always wins physical fights.

I'm no match for him. He completely overpowers me.

I might be a decade younger than him, but I'm determined to at least win our verbal fights.

Until he shuts me up by kissing me into oblivion.

I've always been prim and proper, but his tattoos and piercings are getting under my skin.

I know he's just playing with me, like he does with a lot of women.

But my body is getting addicted to his rough play.

My curves are obeying his every brutal command.

Will my Bratva boss be the baby daddy I need?

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I entered the casino and, like every time, was immediately taken in by the sounds, sights, and colors. A buzz of laughter wafted in from the right, a whoop from the craps table. Women bustled around in glittering clothes, kissing chips for the men they had accompanied. They were all clearly dressed for the night, but outside this well-lit, alive cavern, the sun had already risen.

I couldn't blame them for not knowing.

In here, there was no sense of time. Most people didn't say this openly, but the reason there weren't any clocks on the walls was to ensure that once a person entered, they lost track of time. Once they did that, the money rolled right in for the casino.

The music played soft and repetitive, giving the illusion that it was still the same song. The drinks had always been free for the high-rollers and cheap for the rest. Once you entered, the world outside faded away.

That place was meant to be a sanctuary, an escape. For some addicted, it became a nightmare. But for me, it had always remained a safe haven. It was the only place where I truly belonged.

The opulent space buzzed with activity--the chiming of slot machines, the excited chatter of patrons, the clinking of glasses. But it was more than just another day at work for me.

I made my way through the main floor, nodding and smiling at the staff I passed. They were more than just colleagues; after six years here, they were my extended family.

"Morning, Pippa!" called out Jack, one of the dealers. "Looking sharp as always."

I grinned and waved. "Thanks, Jack. Catch you later for our weekly poker game?"

"You know it! Prepared to lose again?" He winked.

"In your dreams," I shot back with a laugh. Our banter was a comforting routine.

My smile remained as I continued on. This was my domain. Here, I wasn't just plus-sized Pippa who could have been so pretty if she only lost some weight—my aunt's words, not mine. Here, I was Ms. Burrows, the assistant manager who commanded respect. I kept this place running like a well-oiled machine.

Sure, I still had moments of doubt when I caught my reflection and wished I could shed a few pounds, my relatives' constant taunts coming back to bite me when I least expected it. But I never let it diminish my confidence or work ethic. I was made to feel valuable here, in every way that truly mattered. This place healed me in ways I never thought possible.

With a determined squaring of my shoulders, I headed for my office, ready to tackle the day.

As I approached the entrance, I spotted Mariana leaving the office, her elegant figure wrapped in a tailored coat. Her face lit up when she saw me, and she greeted me with a warm smile and a kiss on each cheek.

"Pippa, Darling! I'm so glad I caught you before leaving," she said. "I left some homemade cookies in your office. I know how much you love them."

My heart swelled with affection. "Thank you, Mariana. You know I can never resist your baking."

She laughed a melodic sound that always made me feel at ease. "Well, it's the least I can do for our hardest worker. You're like a sister to us, Pippa. Never forget that."

As she bid me farewell and walked away, I felt a lump forming in my throat. The Vadims' kindness never ceased to amaze me, especially considering my past.

My thoughts drifted back to my childhood after my parents had passed away. My aunt and uncle had taken me in, but they had never made me feel loved or wanted. They treated me like a burden, constantly reminding me of how much I owed them for their "generosity."

I could still hear my aunt's harsh voice echoing in my mind. "You're lucky we took you in, Pippa. No one else would want a chubby, orphaned brat like you."

Those words had stung, leaving invisible scars that I carried with me my whole life. I had grown up feeling neglected and unworthy, always striving to prove my value through hard work and dedication.

But with the Vadims, everything was different. They appreciated me for who I was, never making me feel like I had to earn their love or respect. They treated me like family, and I was fiercely loyal to them in return. Vlad was the stern but fair boss, trusting me with major responsibilities. And Mariana, his wife, showed me the familial affection I'd missed for so long.

I blinked back the tears that threatened to fall, not wanting to ruin my carefully applied makeup. I pushed open the door and entered my office, the scent of Mariana's cookies filling the air.

I savored the taste of Mariana's homemade cookie, the sweet vanilla and chocolate

chips melting on my tongue. As I settled into my chair, I couldn't help but dream about my future. I had been saving every penny I could, determined to buy my own home someday. Vlad and Mariana knew of my dream, and every year, the Christmas bonus they gave me was more than generous.

A knock at the door interrupted my thoughts. "Come in," I called out, straightening my pencil skirt and adjusting my blouse.

Vlad entered, his usual confident smile replaced by a more serious expression. "Pippa, do you have a moment? There's something important I need to discuss with you."

"Of course, Vlad. Is everything alright?" I asked, concern etched on my face.

He sat down across from me, clasping his hands together. "I've been thinking about the future of the casino, and I've decided it's time for me to step back and focus on some new ventures."

My heart skipped a beat. For a brief moment, I felt nervous, almost afraid.

While the casino worked under legal licenses, I was aware of Vlad's other illegal dealings. I had initially joined this company completely unaware, but over the years, there were signs and paper trails that showed up. For a while, I pretended not to know, but after Vlad got married to Mariana, she became involved, and with the keen eye she had, she figured out I knew more than I let on. They both sat me down and told me all they could about being the Bratva. I was free to leave, they said, if the situation made me uncomfortable. But there never was any reason.

However, trouble sometimes arrived at our door, and Vlad handled it quietly. As his direct under-command, I worried about what would happen if such a situation arose again. How would I have handled it?

My voice betrayed my fear. "I'm prepared to do what it takes, Vlad," I said quietly. "But...what does that mean for us? For the casino?"

Vlad leaned forward, his eyes locking with mine. "Pippa, you've been an invaluable asset to this company. I have no doubt that you can handle the challenges ahead. I want you to take on more responsibility, to be my eyes and ears when I'm not around."

I nodded, a mix of excitement and nervousness coursing through me. "I'm honored, Vlad. I won't let you down. I'm ready to prove myself."

He smiled, the warmth returning to his eyes. "I know you won't, Pippa. You've always been a hard worker, and I have complete faith in your abilities."

I nodded, overwhelmed by his faith in me. My eyes wandered to the picture on my desk of us on my birthday last year—Vlad, Mariana, and their daughter. For them, I would work harder than ever to ensure the success of the casino, and to make Vlad and Mariana proud.

Thinking the conversation was done with, I reached for some papers subconsciously to get started on work when Vlad cleared his throat.

"Pippa, there's one more thing I need to discuss with you," he said.

I raised an eyebrow, curious. "Of course, Vlad. What is it?"

He took a deep breath as if steeling himself for my reaction. "There will be some changes, and I know you'll handle them with grace and professionalism. However, I've decided to bring in someone I trust to oversee the casino operations in my absence. This whole operation would require a little more than your capable hands, given our other dealings."

A mix of emotions washed over me—surprise, curiosity, and a hint of apprehension. I had always been Vlad's right-hand woman, and the thought of someone else stepping into that role was unsettling. But I was also touched that Vlad cared to ensure I wasn't thrown into the deep end. And besides, I trusted Vlad's judgment and knew he would never bring in someone who couldn't handle the job.

"I see," I said, keeping my voice calm and even. "And who might this person be?"

"A trusted man who does odd jobs for our family. He's good. And he's waiting in my office as we speak. I'd like to make introductions straight away."

"Of course, Vlad," I said, standing up immediately. "I appreciate your trust in me."

He patted my shoulder affectionately as I joined his side. "You've earned it, Pippa. I couldn't ask for a better person to have by my side during this transition."

With that, we left my office and headed to his.

Vlad swung the door open, motioning at me to enter first. I strode in and saw a man sitting on a chair. Rather, I saw the broadest shoulders I'd ever seen.

Vlad shut the door behind me, and the man turned in his seat. The first thing I noticed was his piercing gaze. His eyes glued right onto me, all blue-grey and dazzling. For a brief second, my breath hitched in my throat as I took in the sight of him. Tall, his one arm placed casually across the backrest of the chair. His dark brown hair was styled to perfection, not a single strand out of place, and his beard, cut close to the skin, was shaped to accentuate every sharp angle in that strong jawline.

He looked like he was straight out of a magazine cover or something.

“Abraham,” Vlad said from behind. His voice jerked me into the present because I swear I’d forgotten he was even in the room.

Abraham gave a single nod of acknowledgment, his eyes never straying away from my face, and I felt the heat creep down my neck. I blinked, forcing myself to look to my side, to where Vlad stood.

Vlad led me toward the chair beside Abraham and took his seat across the table. It took everything in me to not look toward the handsome stranger sitting beside me. But, my eyes flickered to his arm. His shirt was rolled up to his elbows, and through that tattooed skin, I could see every strong vein. It was clear he worked out hard.

“I thought it would be wise for you both to meet each other,” Vlad explained, leaning forward. I looked at my boss, not trusting myself to stare at Abraham. “Pippa Burrows has worked with us for a long time now, and I think it would be good for you to be in contact with her while you run this place. She knows it like the back of her hand. Pippa, Abraham Ustinov is an excellent resource to have around here.”

From the corner of my eye, I saw his scrutinizing gaze lingering on me, his lips quirking up in a half-smirk that made my pulse quicken. "Pleasure to meet you, Pippa." His voice was low and smooth, sending shivers down my spine. I managed to look at him and push out a polite smile, trying to push down the unexpected flutter in my stomach.

"Likewise," I replied, trying to keep my tone professional despite the intense heat that seemed to radiate from him. It was as if his mere presence demanded attention and commanded the space around him.

What he said next stumped me. “I’m sure Ms. Burrows is very good at her job, but I don’t think I’ll be needing much assistance around here, will I Vlad? I know this place inside out.” He gave Vlad a grin.

I jerked my head toward him, eyes widening. Had he truly just said that? This man oozed arrogance.

Vlad cleared his throat, sensing the brewing storm in the room. "Now, Now, Abe. Things have changed since you were here last. There's always a question or two that could pop up and Pippa here is the right person to help you with that. I trust you will both find a way to work together smoothly—and together, you can take this casino to new heights."

I swallowed hard, my anger still simmering beneath the surface. But I knew Vlad was right. As much as I hated to admit it, Abraham and I would have to find a way to work together if we wanted to succeed.

"Of course, Vlad," I said, forcing a smile. "I'm sure Mr. Ustinov and I will find a way to... cooperate."

But even as the words left my mouth, I couldn't shake the feeling that this man was going to be a thorn in my side.

Abraham smirked, his eyes glinting with something that looked almost like amusement. "I look forward to it, Miss Burrows."

I plastered on a smile, determined not to let my annoyance show while Vlad still sat across us.

As Vlad and Abraham continued to discuss the details of the transition, I found myself studying the newcomer, trying to get a read on him. But the whole time, I found myself distracted by the thought that those good looks were a waste on a man this arrogant.

I shook myself mentally, pushing aside the unwelcome attraction. I had worked too

hard to let myself be distracted by a pretty face and a cocky attitude. I was here to do a job, and I would do it well, no matter who I had to work with.

As the meeting drew to a close, Vlad stood up and shook Abraham's hand. "I'll leave you two to get acquainted. Pippa, please show Abe around the casino and bring him up to speed on our operations."

I nodded, my stomach twisting at the thought of spending more time alone with this infuriating man. "Of course, Vlad. I'll make sure he's well-informed."

Abraham's lips quirked into a smirk as he turned to face me. "Lead the way, Miss Burrows. I'm sure you'll be an excellent guide."

Abraham's gaze swept across me, as though he was sizing me up, assessing if I was as capable as Vlad led him to believe I was. A smirk played at the corners of his lips, and I had the sudden urge to wipe it off his face.

As we stepped out of Vlad's office, I could feel the tension crackling between us like electricity. I tried to focus on the task at hand, pointing out the various features of the casino and explaining our day-to-day operations. But every time I glanced at Abraham, I found him watching me with that same intense gaze, his eyes roaming over my curves in a way that made my skin prickle with heat.

"Impressive," he murmured, but there was a hint of something else in his voice, something that sounded almost like mockery. "And what do you think of the Vadims' other business ventures?"

I paused, my heart skipping a beat. "I'm not sure what you mean, Mr. Ustinov. My role is strictly in the legal side of things."

He chuckled, a deep, rich sound that sent shivers down my spine. "Of course, of

course. How silly of me to assume otherwise. And please, call me Abe.”

I bristled at his tone of familiarity after he tried to put me down, my temper flaring. “For now, I could manage Abraham,” I retorted.

“How mighty kind of you,” he drawled, a bite to his tone. I ignored him and pointed ahead. “Come,” I said. “We’ve got a lot of ground to cover.”

By now, I’d realized it was best to keep things professional.

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"Everything's under control, Vlad. You worry too much," I said, leaning against the cool marble pillar in a quiet corner of the casino. The familiar weight of my phone pressed against my ear as I surveyed the bustling floor. "Nothing's getting past me."

As I did my job, I couldn't help but reflect on my long history with the Vadims. They had taken a chance on me and my brothers when we had nothing, giving us purpose, power. They had made us The Unholy Trinity to be feared. More than that, they had become family.

"I know I can count on you, Abe," Vlad said through the phone. "But I need to know if there's any trouble at the first hint of it."

I had tried to placate him multiple times already. Something told me he had trouble letting go of the reins. He had been calling every few hours. "I will, as I said. Now, there's a ton I need to get a hang of around here. Should we chat later?"

I was about to end the call when Vlad cleared his throat. I pushed the phone closer to my ear. The confident Vlad seemed unsure at that moment. "There's one more thing, Abe," he said hesitantly. "Um, I need you to keep a close eye on Pippa."

"On Pippa?" I frowned, confused by this turn of events. "We don't trust her?"

"No," he said, rather quickly. "Nothing like that. Pippa is aware of who we are but is innocent regarding our world. We have to make sure she stays safe."

Pippa. The name rang in my head as I scanned the casino floor, searching for her familiar figure. Vlad's request was unexpected, but I was used to following orders

without much question.

I finally spotted her, the prim and proper Pippa, talking to a group of guests near the roulette tables, her hands folded neatly in front of her. Her light brown hair cascaded in curls around her shoulders, and the red lipstick she wore stood out in stark contrast to her pale skin. Like yesterday, she was dressed impeccably in a fitted pencil skirt and a deep blue satin blouse that highlighted the dangerous curves beneath. Just the sight of her untethered me for a moment.

Vlad's voice crackled through the phone, his tone shifting from business to something more personal. "Abe, I can't stress enough how important Pippa is to us. She's not just an employee; she's family."

I felt the weight of his words settle on my shoulders. "I get it, Vlad. I'll keep her safe, no matter what," my voice came out hoarser than it should have. The responsibility was clear, and I wasn't about to let the Vadims down.

"Good," Vlad replied, a hint of relief in his voice. "She's been through enough. We owe her this much."

Vlad cut the call and I found myself pondering over his words. What was it that she's been through? I couldn't help but allow my curiosity to fester.

I straightened my tailored jacket, fingers brushing over the tattoos peeking out from my sleeves. To most, I looked like trouble—all ink and issues. But the Vadims had seen beyond that and recognized my potential. Now, at 44, my brothers and I were their most trusted enforcers. Their loyalty had earned my own a hundred times over.

My gaze drifted across the casino, taking in the flashing lights and cacophony of slot machines. Amid the chaos, one figure stood out—calm, poised, and utterly in control of her domain. Pippa. The woman I was tasked with protecting, though she had no

idea.

I felt a familiar spark of intrigue as I watched her deftly handle a situation with a drunk customer. With a confident stride, I made my way toward her. Time to ruffle some feathers and see what was hiding beneath that cool exterior.

I inhaled deeply, the scent of expensive perfume and whiskey mingling in the air. This was my element—the pulsing heart of the Vadim empire.

My mind was on a single track leading to Pippa.

"Time to see what you're made of, little firecracker," I muttered to myself, weaving through the throng of gamblers toward her. "What secrets are you hiding? What is it that you've been through now, hmm?"

This job just got a whole lot more interesting, and I was ready to play.

I had my eyes on her the whole time I walked. She was leaning over the bar, going over something on the computer. Her light brown curls framed her face as she bent over her work. Even from a distance, I could see the intensity in her sparkling green eyes, laser-focused on the task at hand.

"Damn," I muttered under my breath, admiring the way she commanded her space. Her fingers flew over the keyboard, her movements precise and efficient. She exuded an air of quiet authority that was impossible to ignore.

I couldn't help but recall our last encounter. The memory of her disguised annoyance sent a jolt of electricity through me. Despite her true feelings, she kept on a prim exterior.

Not to mention, there was an undeniable spark between us. The way her eyes had flashed when I'd pushed her buttons... it was intoxicating and I wanted more.

"You're playing with fire, Abe," I reminded myself, but I couldn't resist the pull.

I watched as her blouse rode down, giving me a peek of her cleavage. I looked away but looked back when she straightened up, smoothing down her skirt with one hand while the other adjusted her blouse. The red of her lipstick caught the light, drawing my attention to her full lips. Something about her had me hooked. She got straight back to work.

"Time to stir things up a bit," I grinned, making my way toward her. This was going to be fun.

I ran a hand through my dark hair, acutely aware of the tattoos peeking out from beneath my rolled-up sleeves. The silver glint of my piercings caught the casino's neon lights as I moved. I knew the image I presented—an unpredictable man. Most people took one look at me and made their assumptions.

I knew Pippa had made hers too.

I smirked, imagining how she saw me. Probably as some overgrown delinquent playing at being a businessman. Her disapproving glances only fueled my desire to prove her wrong.

My eyes never left Pippa as I approached, drinking in the sight of her curved figure.

The air crackled with tension as I drew nearer. I could almost taste the anticipation on my tongue. My intentions were clear—to rattle that composed exterior and see the fire I knew lurked beneath. As I closed the distance, I saw her stiffen slightly, no doubt sensing my presence.

"Evening, Ms. Burrows," I drawled, leaning against the bar with casual confidence. "Busy night?"

Pippa's green eyes flicked up to meet mine, a flash of annoyance crossing her features before she schooled them into professional neutrality. "Abraham," she replied, her tone clipped. "Can I help you with something?"

I grinned, enjoying the way she bristled at my presence. "Just checking in on my favorite employee. Making sure everything's running smoothly."

"Everything's fine," she said, her fingers flying over her keyboard. "As you can see, I'm quite busy."

"Oh, I can see that," I replied, my eyes deliberately roaming over her curvaceous figure. "But surely you can spare a moment for your boss?"

Pippa's jaw clenched, and I could practically hear her teeth grinding. "You're not my boss, Abraham. Mr. Vadim is."

I chuckled, noting the way her cheeks flushed with irritation. "Semantics, Sweetheart. I'm here on Vlad's behalf."

She exhaled sharply, her pencil skirt swishing as she turned to face me fully. "Is there something specific you need, or are you just here to disrupt my work?"

I couldn't help but admire her spunk. Most people cowered in my presence, but not Pippa. She met my gaze head-on, her green eyes blazing with defiance. It was... refreshing.

"Maybe I just wanted to see what you were up to," I said, my voice dropping an octave.

Pippa's eyes widened slightly, and I caught the slight hitch in her breath. But she recovered quickly, her lips pressing into a thin line. "Abraham, I have work to do. If you don't need anything, I'd appreciate it if you'd let me get back to it."

I held up my hands in mock surrender, but couldn't resist one last jab. "Alright, alright. I'll leave you to your important spreadsheets. But don't work too hard, Pippa. All work and no play makes for a very dull girl."

Her nostrils flared, and I could see the internal struggle playing out on her face. She wanted to snap back at me, I could tell. But her professionalism won out, and she simply turned back to her computer, dismissing me without a word.

I leaned against her desk, watching her do what it was she was doing. I could tell she was aware of my every breath, all the while trying to make sense of the jumped Excel sheet in front of her. "You know, Pippa, if you use Tally, it could be easier than Excel to balance the books of the bar. I could get IT to set it up on your computer."

She paused, her fingers hovering over the keyboard. I could see the wheels turning in her head, trying to decide if she should ignore me or engage.

"I'll give it a shot," she replied curtly, not looking up. "Now, if you'll excuse me—"

"Oh, what's the hurry?" I chuckled, shaking my head. "Come on, Ms. Burrows. There's gotta be more to life than just work."

Pippa's head snapped up, her green eyes flashing. "I don't recall asking for your opinion on how I should fill my life, Mr. Ustinov."

The sharpness in her tone sent a thrill through me. I loved seeing this feisty side of her.

"Fair enough," I conceded, holding her gaze. "But I bet there's a wild side hiding under all that... propriety. Maybe you just need the right person to bring it out."

I watched as a blush crept up her neck, coloring her cheeks. She opened her mouth to retort, then closed it again, clearly flustered.

The tension between us was palpable, crackling in the air like electricity. I found myself leaning in closer, drawn to her despite myself. Her scent—a mix of vanilla and something uniquely Pippa—filled my senses.

"I..." she started, her voice softer now. She had nothing more to say.

But the way her eyes darted to my lips told a different story. For a moment, neither of us moved, caught in this unexpected moment of connection.

I stepped back, a satisfied smirk playing on my lips. "Well, Miss Burrows, I look forward to helping you with any more... troubles with software." I winked, enjoying the way her blush deepened. "Until next time."

As I turned to leave, I couldn't resist one final parting shot. "Oh, and Pippa?" I called over my shoulder. "When you're ready to grab a drink, you know where to find me."

I caught a glimpse of her face—a mix of indignation and intrigue—before I strode away, the tension still thick in the air between us. The casino's ambient noise faded into the background as my mind replayed our interaction.

Pippa Burrows. She was nothing like I'd expected. That prim exterior hid a fire I was itching to stoke.

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"No, Dmitri, you need to stack the chips this way," I explained, demonstrating the proper technique. "It's more efficient and——"

"Actually," a deep voice cut in from behind me, "you should be stacking them like this."

I gritted my teeth as Abraham Ustinov's tattooed arm reached around me, his large hand deftly rearranging the poker chips. The scent of his cologne—spicy and masculine—invaded my senses. I forced myself not to react.

"Abraham," I said, injecting sweetness into my voice. "I appreciate your input, but I've been training our staff on this method for weeks. It's the casino standard."

His steel blue eyes met mine, amusement dancing in their depths. "And I'm telling you there's a better way, Sweetheart. Trust me on this."

I bristled at the patronizing endearment. Who did he think he was calling me sweetheart? Sure, he was looking over the casino, but this was my job.

"Right," I said tightly. "Well, thank you for your suggestion. Dmitri, please continue as I showed you."

I turned on my heel, my skirt swishing around my thighs as I strode away. My cheeks burned with a mix of anger and embarrassment. This wasn't the first time Abraham had undermined me, and I doubted it would be the last.

Later, I stood in a quiet corner of the casino floor, sipping water and observing the

bustling room. My eyes were drawn, as if magnetically, to a certain dark-haired figure making his way through the crowd.

Abraham moved with easy confidence, his tailored suit accentuating his broad shoulders. He stopped to chat with a group of women at the bar, flashing that trademark grin of his. One of them—a statuesque blonde—laughed at something he said, touching his arm flirtatiously.

I rolled my eyes so hard I nearly strained something. Of course the women were fawning over him. With his chiseled features and bad-boy charm, Abraham Ustinov was catnip to half the female population of Chicago.

"Need anything, Pippa?" a passing waitress asked me.

I tore my gaze away from the nauseating display at the bar. "No, thanks, Jess. I'm good."

As Jess walked away, I caught sight of Abraham again. This time, he was leaning close to whisper something into a brunette's ear. She giggled, batting her eyelashes.

I took an angry swig of water, nearly choking as it went down the wrong pipe. What was wrong with me? Why did watching his flirtations bother me so much?

It wasn't like I was interested in him. The man was infuriating—arrogant, cocky, and apparently determined to make my job harder at every turn. So what if he was unfairly attractive? I had more important things to focus on than Abraham Ustinov and his womanizing ways.

Squaring my shoulders, I headed back toward my office. I had work to do, dammit, and I wasn't about to let Abraham distract me any further.

The next morning, as I rounded a corner, I overheard Abraham's deep voice. "Great job with those new slot machines, Marissa. You're really nailing it."

I froze, my heart sinking. Marissa beamed at the praise, practically glowing. "Thanks, Mr. Ustinov! I'm so glad you like the setup."

I ducked behind a pillar, my cheeks burning. Why couldn't he ever say anything like that to me? It was always criticism, always pointing out what I could do better. I smoothed my blouse self-consciously, acutely aware of how it clung to my curves. Maybe if I looked more like Marissa—tall, willowy, perfect—he'd treat me differently.

No. I shook my head, banishing the thought. I refused to let Abraham's opinions dictate my self-worth. I was damn good at my job, and I didn't need his approval.

With renewed determination, I strode toward my office, focusing on the tasks ahead. I had reports to finish and a security upgrade to plan. Abraham Ustinov and his infuriating charm could go to hell.

I'd barely settled at my desk when I sensed a presence in my doorway. My fingers froze over the keyboard as I caught a whiff of expensive cologne. Dammit. I kept my eyes glued to the screen, pretending to be engrossed in an email.

"Pippa." Abraham's voice was smooth as silk. "Got a minute?"

I bit back a groan. So much for ignoring him.

I swiveled in my chair, plastering on a polite smile. "What can I do for you?"

He sauntered in, his blue-gray eyes gleaming with amusement. "I was looking over the security plans for the VIP lounge. Have you considered adding biometric scanners?"

My jaw clenched. Of course he had more opinions on my work. "We've discussed it, but the cost-benefit analysis didn't justify the expense."

He waved a hand dismissively. "Money's no object when it comes to security. Trust me, it'll be worth it."

I bit my tongue, reminding myself to stay professional. "I appreciate your input, but I assure you, we've thoroughly evaluated all options."

Abraham leaned against my desk, his tattooed forearms on full display as he crossed them over his chest. "Come on, Pippa. You know I have experience with this stuff. Why not hear me out?"

My heart raced, a mix of irritation and something else I refused to acknowledge. His cologne enveloped me, making it hard to concentrate. I took a deep breath, trying to ignore how his presence seemed to fill the entire room.

"Abraham," I began, proud of how steady my voice sounded. "While I value your opinion, this is my department. I've been entrusted with these decisions for a reason."

He smirked, and I felt my composure slipping. "Stubborn as always, aren't you? It's almost admirable."

I gripped the arms of my chair, fighting the urge to snap at him. Why did he have to be so infuriatingly arrogant? And why did part of me find it so damn attractive?

His smirk widened as he leaned closer, his blue-gray eyes glinting with amusement.

"You know, Sweetheart, sometimes it's okay to admit when someone else might know better. No need to get your panties in a twist."

That was it. The condescension in his tone, the patronizing pet name—it all pushed me over the edge. I felt my cheeks flush with anger as I stood up abruptly, my chair rolling back with a sharp screech.

"Listen here," I snarled, jabbing a finger at his chest. "I don't give a damn how much 'experience' you think you have. This is my job, and I do it well. Your unsolicited advice isn't welcome, and neither is your caveman attitude."

Abraham's eyebrows shot up, surprise flickering across his face before settling into an intrigued expression. He straightened up, towering over me, but I refused to back down. My heart pounded in my chest, a mix of adrenaline and defiance coursing through me.

"Well, well," he drawled, a hint of respect creeping into his voice. "Looks like the kitten's got claws after all."

I glared up at him, my eyes meeting his steel-blue gaze. "I'm not some timid little girl you can intimidate or charm, Abe. I've worked damn hard to get where I am, and I won't let you or anyone else undermine that."

A slow smile spread across his face, transforming his features from merely handsome to devastatingly attractive. "I can see that," he murmured, his eyes roaming over my face with newfound interest. "You're full of surprises, aren't you, Pippa?"

The tension between us crackled like electricity, and I suddenly became acutely aware of how close we were standing. I could feel the heat radiating from his body.

"I'm not here to surprise you," I retorted, struggling to keep my voice steady. "I'm

here to do my job, which I'd appreciate if you'd let me get back to."

He leaned in slightly, his voice dropping to a low rumble. "And what if I'm not ready to let you go just yet?"

My breath caught in my throat. The look in his eyes had shifted from amusement to something darker, more intense. I felt my pulse quicken, a flush creeping up my neck.

Abraham's gaze dropped to my lips, and I found myself frozen in place. He inched closer, close enough that I could feel his breath on my skin. My mind raced, a jumble of conflicting thoughts and desires.

I stood perfectly still, my heart hammering so loudly I was sure he could hear it. Part of me wanted to push him away, to maintain the professional distance I'd always insisted on. But another part, a part I'd been trying to ignore, wanted to close that final gap between us.

His lips parted into the smallest smile.

Suddenly, a cold realization washed over me. This was Abraham Ustinov, and from what I've seen, clearly a notorious playboy. The man who flirted with every woman in sight, who treated the casino like his personal hunting ground. He wasn't interested in me; he was just playing another one of his games.

I planted my hands firmly on his chest and shoved him back. "Nice try, Ustinov," I snapped, my voice laced with venom. "But I'm not one of your simpering fangirls. Keep your games for someone who cares."

His eyebrows shot up, surprise flashing across his face. "Pippa, I—"

"Save it," I cut him off, straightening my blouse. "I don't know what you think you're

doing, but I'm not interested in being another notch on your bedpost. This is my workplace, and I expect to be treated with respect."

I grabbed my tablet from the desk, clutching it to my chest like a shield. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I have actual work to do. Unlike some people."

Without waiting for a response, I turned and strode away, my heels clicking against the polished floor, I couldn't help but steal a glance over my shoulder. Abraham stood in the doorway of my office, his imposing figure filling the frame. His blue-gray eyes, usually dancing with arrogance, now held a look I'd never seen before.

Surprise. Admiration, even.

For a split second, our gazes locked. The corner of his mouth twitched, almost like he was fighting back a smile. Not his usual smirk, but something... different. It sent an unexpected shiver down my spine.

I quickly turned away, focusing on the path ahead. But I could feel his eyes on me, following my every step. My mind raced, trying to make sense of what I'd just seen.

My cheeks burned with a mixture of anger and embarrassment, but I held my head high as I strode down the hallway. My mind raced, replaying the scene over and over.

How dare he? Did he think I was that easily manipulated? That desperate for attention? I may not be one of the slim, giggling women he usually pursued, but that didn't mean I was going to fall at his feet just because he deigned to show interest.

As I rounded the corner, I took a deep breath, trying to calm my racing heart. This wasn't over, I knew. Abraham Ustinov wasn't the type to back down easily. But neither was I. Whatever game he was playing, I refused to be a pawn in it.

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I stormed into our family estate, slamming the heavy oak door behind me. The almost-kiss with Pippa played on repeat in my mind, her soft curves and bottle-green eyes haunting me. Fuck. What was wrong with me? I ran a hand through my hair, messing up the usually perfect style.

She thought I was toying with her, and god damn it, in that moment, I swear I wanted to kiss her.

Needless to say, I was reeling from how I learned I wanted her. Over the years, I'd been with plenty of women—all of them were as casual as casual can be. Pippa wasn't the wham-bam-thank you ma'am kind of girl. Of that, I was sure.

So, why the hell did I have to go stir shit up? On one hand, I was disappointed that she couldn't see what my intentions were. On the other? I was glad we didn't end up opening a can of worms I might not be able to pack back in.

"Well, well, look what the cat dragged in," my older brother Ivan's voice rang out from the living room. "You look like shit, Brother."

I grunted, making my way to the bar cart. I needed a drink, stat. As I poured myself a generous helping of whiskey, I felt Ivan and my younger brother Vlad's eyes burning holes in my back.

"What?" I snapped, turning to face them.

Vlad smirked, sharing a knowing look with Ivan. "Nothing. Just wondering what's got you so ruffled. Or should I say, who?"

I rolled my eyes, downing half the whiskey in one gulp. The burn in my throat was a welcome distraction from the tingling on my lips where Pippa's had almost touched. "Don't be ridiculous. I'm just tired."

"Tired?" Ivan chuckled, teasing me further. "Since when does the great Abraham Ustinov get tired? Unless..."

"Unless a woman's involved," Vlad finished, waggling his eyebrows.

I slammed my glass down, causing both of them to jump. "There's no woman. Drop it."

But even as I denied it, Pippa's laugh echoed in my ears, her sassy comebacks making my lips twitch involuntarily. I couldn't shake the feeling of her soft body pressed against mine, the scent of her perfume lingering on my clothes.

"Oh ho, he's got it bad," Ivan crowed, high-fiving Vlad.

I growled, my temper flaring. "I said drop it. Don't make me remind you why I'm the muscle of this operation."

They backed off, hands raised in mock surrender, though the damage was done. Under different circumstances, I would have played along. As I stomped up to my room, their confused looks followed me, along with the realization that maybe, just maybe, they were right.

I slammed the door behind me, relishing the sudden quiet. My brothers' laughter still echoed in my ears, mingling with Pippa's voice in my head. Fuck.

Pacing the length of my room, I tried to think of anything else under the sun, but Pippa kept running right back into my thoughts. My reflection in the window caught

my eye—I looked wild, unsettled.

"Get a grip," I muttered to myself, stopping to stare out at the manicured grounds of the estate. Usually, the sight brought me peace.

This time around? Nothing.

I couldn't shake the image of Pippa—her curves filling out that pencil skirt, her green eyes flashing with defiance, that luscious mouth painted red and bright for the taking. She was nothing like the women I usually went for, and yet...

"Dammit," I growled, turning away from the window only to find myself facing the bed. Unbidden, thoughts of Pippa sprawled across those silk sheets flooded my mind. For a brief moment, I imagined what it would be like to see her naked, to knead my hands across her generous curves.

I shook my head violently, trying to dislodge the fantasy. This was ridiculous. She was just another employee, albeit a feisty one. Nothing more.

Besides, Vlad Vadim had her under his protection.

But as I resumed my restless pacing, I couldn't help but wonder what it would be like to tame that fire, to feel her soft body yield to mine. To hear my name on those red lips, breathless and wanting.

"Stop it," I commanded myself, but my body refused to listen. For the first time in years, I felt out of control. And all because of one curvy, sharp-tongued woman who was sixteen years my junior.

I needed a distraction, something to occupy my mind before I did something stupid like call her or something. But as I glanced around my room, nothing held my

interest.

I stalked over to my desk, determined to lose myself in work. Flipping open my laptop, I scrolled through a sea of unread emails. Profit reports, security briefs, acquisition proposals—all of it blurred together, failing to hold my attention for more than a few seconds.

"Focus, dammit," I muttered, forcing myself to open a document detailing the Vadims' latest casino venture.

But even as I tried to concentrate on the numbers, my traitorous mind conjured images of Pippa bent over her computer.

"Fuck this," I growled, slamming the laptop shut.

Before I could talk myself out of it, I grabbed my phone. My thumb hovered over Pippa's name in my contacts, hesitating for a split second. This was a bad idea. I knew it. But I couldn't stop myself.

"It's just business," I lied to myself, hitting the call button. "Nothing more."

As the phone rang, I paced the room, suddenly unsure what to say. Why the hell was I nervous? I was Abraham fucking Ustinov. I didn't get nervous over women, especially not feisty little accountants who-

"Abe." Pippa's voice came through, professional but with an undercurrent of surprise. "To what do I owe this... pleasure?"

The fact that she called me by anything other than my full name took me by surprise. Quickly, I stood straighter, composing myself to get out of this conversation with my cool intact.

"So it's Abe now, is it?" I drawled, aiming for casual indifference. "I trust I'm not interrupting your thrilling night of spreadsheets and actuarial tables?"

"Oh, you know me," Pippa shot back, her tone dry as desert sand. "I live for the excitement of balancing books and crunching numbers. How else would I spend my evenings? Besides, I realized I'm too busy to call you Abraham when Abe saves me an entire second."

I chuckled, picturing her rolling those bottle-green eyes. "And here I thought you might be out painting the town red. Isn't that what you young people do on weeknights?"

"I'm hardly a spring chicken," she retorted. "Besides, some of us have actual work to do. Unlike certain casino managers who apparently have nothing better to do than harass their employees at odd hours."

Her sass hit me like a shot of top-shelf vodka—sharp, invigorating, and dangerously addictive. I found myself grinning despite my best efforts to maintain a stern facade.

"Harass? I'm wounded, truly," I said, dramatically clutching my chest even though she couldn't see me. "Here I am, calling to discuss important business matters, and you accuse me of harassment. I should fire you on the spot."

"Go ahead," Pippa challenged, a smile evident in her voice. "I'd love to see how you'd manage without me keeping your books in order. The IRS would have a field day. Not to mention, our boss Mr. Vadim might need a sincere explanation."

I barked out a laugh, caught off guard by her audacity. Most people wouldn't dare speak to me like that, but Pippa... she gave as good as she got. It was infuriating. It was intoxicating.

"You've got quite a mouth on you, Miss Burrows," I said, my voice dropping lower without conscious thought. "I hope you can back it up with results."

There was a pause, charged with something I couldn't quite name. When Pippa spoke again, her voice had a husky quality that sent a jolt straight through me.

"Oh, I can back it up, Mr. Ustinov. Would you like me to show you exactly how capable I am?"

Christ. I tugged at my collar, suddenly feeling overheated. Was she flirting with me? Or was I reading too much into this? I needed to get a grip, to remember who I was and why this was a terrible idea.

So, to reel it back in, I forced myself to steer the conversation to the cover I had planned all along. "Oh, I'd love to see. That's why I was calling actually. Tomorrow, I need to go over the budget for accommodating high-rollers. How about coffee in the morning? Just you and me? In my office?"

The words slipped out before I could stop them, so unlike my usual calculated demeanor. There was a pause on the other end of the line, and I could almost picture Pippa's green eyes widening in surprise.

"I... that sounds good, Abe," she replied, a smile evident in her voice.

And so, I found myself slipping further into dangerous territory.

We said our goodbyes, and I hung up, staring at the phone in disbelief. What the hell had just happened? Pippa's voice echoed in my mind, her clever retorts replaying on a loop.

"Fuck," I muttered, collapsing into an armchair. I had to admit it, if only to

myself—Pippa Burrows had gotten under my skin in a way no woman ever had before. She challenged me, infuriated me, and God help me, I couldn't get enough of it.

I closed my eyes, a reluctant smile tugging at my lips. This woman was going to be trouble, no doubt about it. But, I found myself looking forward to the chaos.

As I sat there, my mind wandered, conjuring up a scene of Pippa that was so vivid it took my breath away. It was intrusive as fuck. She was leaning over my desk, her cleavage so enticing. The next thing I knew, I was rising, meeting her gaze. God, I could almost smell her perfume.

"What's the matter, Mr. Ustinov?" Fantasy Pippa teased, her upper teeth grazing over her lower lip. "Cat got your tongue?"

I felt my heart rate quicken, my palms growing damp. Even in my imagination, she had this effect on me. I pictured myself standing, closing the distance between us in two long strides. My hand would cup her face, thumb brushing over her cheek. She'd lean into my touch, her eyes fluttering closed.

"Pippa," I'd murmur, my voice husky with desire. I'd rip off that blouse, bend her over my desk...

The intensity of my attraction hit me like a punch to the gut. I snapped my eyes open, lurching out of the chair with a growl of frustration.

"Get a grip, Abraham," I snarled at myself. "She's half your age, for fuck's sake. And an employee, no less."

This wasn't me. I didn't do this—I didn't fantasize about women like some lovesick teenager.

And how the hell was I to bring myself to stop?

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The flash of chips and the cacophony of slot machines faded into the background for all I could focus on was the red-faced man at the craps table, yelling obscenities at the dealer.

I frowned on noticing other patrons grab their chips and inch away from the table. This was bad for business.

I quickly strode over, first to check in on the dealer. "All okay, Mark?" I asked, worried for my colleague.

Mark nodded but I noticed the sweat on his forehead. "Yes, Ms. Burrows. Sir, there has been a problem. He lost all his chips and believes the table is rigged. He wants to play more, but he's out of cash."

I turned to the red-faced man, trying to maintain a professional demeanor despite the anger I felt toward him for causing such trouble on our premises.

He stepped closer, his hands fisting into balls. "Chips. You ought to give me more chips."

His bloodshot eyes and the stench of whiskey on his breath told me everything I needed to know about why he was causing a scene.

"Sir, I understand you're upset, but I'm afraid I can't allow you to continue playing here at this time," I said, keeping my voice steady and professional. I smoothed down my pencil skirt, a habit when I was trying to maintain composure. I could already predict his next move. Every bet was his decision, but he'd take no responsibility.

He'd call us thieves, accuse us of being greedy pigs.

To prevent that argument, I counter-argued in advance. "Perhaps we could get you a complimentary room for the night to rest?"

"Like hell, you will!" he roared, slamming his meaty fist on the blackjack table. The dealer flinched, and I instinctively stepped between them. "I'm not going anywhere until I win back what's mine!"

I took a deep breath to force my heart to slow. I'd dealt with difficult patrons before, but something about this man set me on edge. Still, I had a job to do. The Vadims trusted me to handle these situations, so that's exactly what I would do.

"I'm sorry, but that's not possible," I replied, injecting a hint of steel into my tone. "You've exceeded your credit limit, and your behavior is disturbing other guests. Now, if you'd rather not stay the night, I'd be happy to escort you to the front desk where we can arrange transportation for you."

The man's face contorted with rage. "You think you can tell me what to do, you fat bitch?" he snarled, lurching forward.

I stood my ground, even as my stomach churned at his words. Don't let him see he's gotten to you, Pippa, I thought. You're better than this overgrown man-child.

"Sir, I'm going to have to insist you leave the premises immediately," I said, my voice sharp as a razor. "Security will be here any moment, and I'd hate for this to escalate further."

He leaned in close, his alcohol-laden breath hot on my face. "I'd like to see them try," he growled.

My heart pounded in my chest, but I refused to back down. I'd faced worse than this drunken bully, and I'd be damned if I let him intimidate me in my own casino. I raised my hand just slightly to my waist, subtly prepared to signal for security when a deep, commanding voice cut through the din.

"Is there a problem here?"

I didn't need to turn around to know who it was. Abe Ustinov's presence filled the boundaries of my consciousness, radiating authority. From the corner of my eye, I saw him step forward, his broad shoulders blocking my view of the aggressive player.

"This doesn't concern you," the drunk spat, but I noticed a flicker of uncertainty in his eyes.

Abe chuckled, the sound low and dangerous. "When you threaten my staff, it becomes my concern." He moved closer, towering over the man. "Now, you have two choices. Leave quietly, or I'll personally escort you out. And trust me, you won't enjoy that option because it certainly won't end on a polite goodbye."

And then Abe put his hand inside his coat, as though motioning at a weapon.

I watched, torn between relief and irritation, as the player's bravado crumbled under Abe's intense gaze. Without another word, he turned and stumbled toward the exit.

Abe's eyes met mine, a smug smile playing on his lips. "Problem solved."

I clenched my jaw, fighting the urge to snap at him. "I had it under control," I said, my voice tight.

"Of course you did, Sweetheart," he replied, his tone patronizing. "But why handle it alone when I'm here to help?"

My cheeks burned with a mixture of anger and embarrassment. "I don't need your help, Abe. Not when it comes to my job!"

He raised an eyebrow, clearly amused by my frustration. "No need to thank me. Just doing my part to keep things running smoothly."

I bit back a scathing retort, aware of the curious glances from nearby patrons. As much as I wanted to tell Abe exactly where he could shove his help, I knew this wasn't the time or place. Instead, I forced a smile and said through gritted teeth. "If you'll excuse me, I have work to do."

I turned away, yet couldn't shake the conflicting emotions overpowering me. Part of me was grateful for Abe's intervention—the situation could have turned ugly fast. But a larger part bristled at his overbearing approach, at how easily he'd swooped in and taken control. It made me feel small, incompetent, and worst of all, it reminded me of the power imbalance between us.

I stormed into my office, my heels clicking angrily against the polished floor. The moment the door closed behind me, I let out a frustrated growl, my hands clenching and unclenching at my sides. I paced back and forth, my curled hair bouncing with each step, trying to burn off the excess energy thrumming through my body.

"Who does he think he is?" I muttered, pausing to straighten a picture frame on my desk with more force than necessary. "Security would have handled it. I was about to call them in!"

The door swung open, and there he was, Abraham Ustinov in all his infuriating glory. He leaned against the doorframe, arms crossed over his broad chest, his blue-gray eyes watching me like a hawk's.

"What?" I asked, glaring at him.

"Something on your mind, Sweetheart?" he drawled, in a tone that set my teeth on edge. "You looked upset."

I whirled to face him. "Don't 'sweetheart' me, Abe. What you did out there was completely out of line. I've handled difficult patrons without your intervention just fine so far."

He stepped into the office, closing the door behind him. "Is that so? Because from where I was standing, it looked like you needed a hand."

I could feel my cheeks flushing with anger, the heat rising to match the fire in my words. "I've been doing this job for years. I don't need you undermining my authority in front of the entire casino floor. Do you have any idea how that makes me look?"

I took a step closer to him, my heels clicking sharply on the polished floor. "It makes me look incompetent, Abe. Like I can't handle my own job without a man stepping in to save me."

Abe's eyebrow arched, a smirk playing at the corners of his mouth. "And here I thought I was being helpful. My mistake, princess."

The condescension in his tone made my blood boil. "Don't you dare patronize me," I snapped, jabbing a finger at his chest. "I've worked too hard to build my reputation here. I don't need you or anyone else jeopardizing that."

He caught my wrist, his grip firm but not painful. For a brief moment, I forgot my rage as I looked into his gorgeous eyes and right then, they burned with a protectiveness I didn't expect him to have. "Easy there, wildcat. I wasn't trying to step on your toes. But when I see a situation getting out of hand and saw you could be in danger—"

"It wasn't out of hand!" I interrupted, trying to ignore the warmth of his skin against mine. "I had it under control. You just didn't give me the chance to prove it."

Abe's eyes narrowed, his jaw tightening. "And if that drunk had decided to get physical? What then, Pippa?"

I lifted my chin defiantly, even as I felt a flutter in my stomach at his concern. "It's a risk I was willing to take. That's part of my job."

He stepped closer, still holding my wrist, his proximity suddenly making it hard to breathe. "Your job isn't to put yourself in harm's way. That's mine."

I swallowed hard, acutely aware of how close we were standing. The scent of his cologne filled my senses, making me lose my chain of thought. My eyes flickered to his lips for a split second before I caught myself.

"I'm not some damsel in distress, Abe," I said, my voice softer now but no less determined. "I don't need saving."

His gaze softened slightly, a hint of admiration creeping into his expression. "Maybe not. But has it occurred to you that I might want to keep you safe anyway?"

The air between us crackled with tension. Abe's words hung in the air, heavy with implication. My heart raced, anger and attraction warring within me.

"I don't need you to keep me safe," I whispered, but my voice lacked conviction.

Abe's hand slid from my wrist to my waist, pulling me closer. "Maybe you do," he murmured, his breath hot against my skin.

I couldn't think, couldn't breathe. Our faces were inches apart, his dark eyes boring

into mine. The argument faded away, replaced by a burning need I couldn't ignore.

I stepped closer, my fist grabbing his shirt before I could stop myself.

"Abe, I—"

His lips crashed into mine, silencing whatever weak protest I was about to make. The kiss was fierce, hungry, filled with all the pent-up frustration and desire we'd been dancing around for days.

I melted into him, my hands fisting in his shirt as I kissed him back with equal fervor. His tongue swept past my lips into my mouth, and I gasped at the sensation, my knees going weak.

Abe's arm tightened around my waist, supporting me as he deepened the kiss. His other hand tangled in my hair, messing up the carefully styled curls I'd spent an hour on this morning. I couldn't bring myself to care.

My mind reeled, struggling to process the conflicting emotions coursing through me. This was Abe—infuriating, overprotective, maddeningly attractive Abe. I should be pushing him away, not pulling him closer. But god, it felt so good.

My hands trembled as they moved from Abe's shirt to his shoulders, then hesitantly to the nape of his neck. His skin was hot under my fingertips, and I felt his muscles tense at my touch as I pulled him closer and lapped at his tongue. A low growl rumbled in his chest, sending shivers down my spine.

Abe's lips left mine, trailing heated kisses along my jaw and down my neck. I tilted my head, giving him better access, a soft moan escaping me. "Abe," I breathed, my voice barely audible.

His hands roamed my curves, setting my skin on fire even through the fabric of my blouse. I arched into his touch, craving more, yet feeling overwhelmed by the intensity of it all. I've never felt this way before. Never needed a man like this before.

He'd gone and given me a fever that needed curing, but did not know how. All I knew was that I wanted more.

I reached down to his belt with trembling fingers, the heat between us escalating with each passing moment. Abe's breath was ragged against my skin and he reached up beneath my skirt. I startled at the unexpected touch, as his fingers moved up my thighs, agonizingly slow, inch by inch. I felt my core flutter, and trembled so damn hard I thought I'd fall.

But, he caught me. His other hand gripped my waist and he pulled me close. My eyes widened and I looked into his as I felt his length dig into my skirt.

"So many unnecessary clothes," he growled, biting into my neck. I tilted my head back and his fingers then pushed aside my panties. I bucked my hips, a little afraid.

Not of him. But rather, of having been inexperienced.

A low groan escaped me as his fingers found what they were looking for. He glided one up my slit, my panties digging against the back of his hand.

When he reached my clit, he gave it a soft rub and I whimpered, my hands now clutching at his back, my face thrown into his neck. "Wow," I whispered.

His fingers ghosted over me, teasing. God, if this is how good it felt already, I couldn't imagine how having all of him would feel. Slowly, I planted my feet wider, giving him further access.

And that's when he slid his finger to get inside me. I closed my eyes, waiting for that first-time pain I've always heard so much about. The tip of his finger invaded me, yet my body obeyed like a puppet, undulating to meet him.

Abe moved the tip of his finger in and out of me, occasionally flicking that magical little nub that sent jolts of electricity throughout my entire body. I squirmed against him, angels singing in my ear.

My hands then untucked his shirt and reached beneath, feeling the rock-hard edges and angles of his chest, his back. I started to rock my hips into Abe's hand, unable to control my body's response to the teasing sensation.

"God," I whispered breathlessly, "what are you doing to me?"

The feel of Abe's finger thrusting back into me made me moan louder when his lips trailed back down to claim mine, tasting the sweetness there.

Then, he jammed into me a quarter in more. I squealed, and stood a little straighter, before falling back into his neck, reveling in this bliss. His hand left my waist, trailing up behind my leg till it trembled, till it rested on my ass.

I squeezed my legs together, partly from the thrill of how his hand felt imprinted on my ass, partly to make myself smaller. A man is holding my ass, claiming me as his, and a small voice at the back of my head wondered if I wasn't dainty enough for me.

But then he squeezed my cheek and dear god, his finger inside me feels like it was made for my nooks. But, why wasn't he moving it further?

"Why'd you stop?" I whispered, giving his neck a small bite.

"You're wet but so tight." I heard concern in his voice.

"I know," I whisper back. "Just...go slow, will you?"

He pulled back slightly, his blue-gray eyes searching my face. "Pippa," he said, his voice husky and strained. "Have you ever...?"

I bit my lip, heat rushing to my cheeks. "I... no," I admitted, averting my gaze.

Abe inhaled sharply, taking a step back. My panty snapped back into place, my skirt fell back down. The loss of contact left me feeling cold and exposed. I wrapped my arms around myself, watching as a myriad of emotions flashed across his face—surprise and something that looked almost like... regret?

"Fuck," he muttered, running a hand through his dark hair. The simple action shouldn't have been so attractive, but it was. "I didn't realize... I shouldn't have..."

The awkward tension in the air was palpable as Abe struggled to find the right words. I stood there, my heart pounding, unsure of what to say or do.

My stomach twisted into knots as I watched Abe's face, searching for any sign that he still wanted me. But all I saw was hesitation and... was that pity in his eyes? The realization hit me like a punch to the gut.

"Don't," I snapped, my voice trembling despite my attempt to sound fierce. "Don't you dare look at me like that, Abraham Ustinov."

I turned away, trying to hide the tears that threatened to spill. My hands shook as I smoothed down my rumpled blouse, desperately trying to regain some semblance of control.

"Pippa, I—" Abe started, his voice uncharacteristically soft.

"Save it," I cut him off, whirling back to face him. "I don't need your pity or your explanations. I'm a grown woman."

But even as the words left my mouth, I felt anything but grown-up. I felt small, inexperienced, and utterly humiliated. The way Abe's eyes roamed over me now, so different from the heated gaze of moments ago, made me acutely aware of every imperfection.

Maybe I was right all along. Maybe he realized he was making a mistake sleeping with me when he could have any pretty little waif of a thing walking out there. I'd seen him, flirting around with those bombshell blondes.

"Just go," I whispered, hating how weak I sounded. "Please."

Abe hesitated, conflict clear on his face. For a moment, I thought he might argue, but then he nodded stiffly and headed for the door. As it clicked shut behind him, I collapsed into my chair, the fight draining out of me.

Alone in the quiet of my office, I buried my face in my hands. Thoughts raced through my mind, each one more painful than the last. Was it my inexperience that turned him off? Or was it my body? After everything, I had tried to find pride in my curves, but now I found myself questioning everything.

"Stupid, stupid, stupid," I muttered, angry at myself for letting things go this far, for thinking someone like Abe could ever want someone like me. I glanced at the mirror on the wall, taking in my disheveled appearance—smeared lipstick, mussed hair, flushed cheeks. I looked exactly like what I was: a virgin who'd gotten in over her head.

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I burst through the casino doors, the cool night air hitting my face like a slap. What the hell just happened in there? My mind reeled, trying to process the fact that I'd nearly taken Pippa's virginity right there in her office.

"Fuck," I growled, pacing the sidewalk like a caged animal. My hands trembled as I ran them through my hair, tugging at the roots. The ghost of her soft curves still burned against my palms, her breathy moans echoing in my ears.

I was this close to ripping off her clothes, laying her on that desk, shoving my cock into her warm pussy. If I hadn't realized then, hadn't commented on how tight she felt around my finger, this could have ended all wrong.

I'd been with countless women, but none had ever affected me like this. Pippa was infuriating, challenging me at every turn with that sharp tongue and those high walls. And yet, the moment I'd touched her...

"Get it together, Ustinov," I muttered, clenching my fists so hard my knuckles turned white. I could still smell her perfume on my skin.

My body thrummed with unfulfilled desire, every nerve ending on fire. I wanted nothing more than to march back inside and finish what we'd started, consequences be damned. But the image of Pippa's wide, innocent eyes flashed through my mind, tempering my lust with an unfamiliar protectiveness.

"She deserves better than a quick fuck in a casino," I growled, kicking at a nearby trash can. The metal clang echoed down the empty street, matching the chaos in my head.

I took a deep breath, trying to regain some semblance of control. This was Pippa we were talking about—a woman who tries to keep me out every chance she gets. The fact that she was a virgin shouldn't change anything.

And yet, it changed everything.

My mind drifted to past conquests, a parade of faceless women who'd been nothing more than temporary distractions. I'd always prided myself on my prowess, my ability to leave them breathless and begging for more. Rough, demanding, taking what I wanted without apology. The images rush back, of women on their knees, of the perfectly timed smack on a tight ass, hands and mouths gagged.

But with Pippa... Christ, I'd want to be gentle. To savor every curve, every soft sigh. The urge to protect warred with my base instincts, leaving me off-balance and confused.

"This is insane," I muttered, running a hand through my hair. "She's practically half your age, you idiot."

The age gap was just the tip of the iceberg. I ticked off reasons in my head like a goddamn shopping list:

1. She's too young.
2. She works for the boss.
3. She's a virgin, for fuck's sake.
4. We can't stand each other most of the time.
5. I'd probably break her with my usual... proclivities.

"Face it, Abe," I growled to myself. "You're too rough, too set in your ways. She deserves someone who can give her the fairy tale."

But even as I tried to convince myself, all I could think about was the way she'd melted against me, those bottle-green eyes gazing up with a mixture of desire and trust that made my chest ache.

"Dammit, Pippa," I sighed, leaning against the cool brick of the building. "What the hell are you doing to me?"

The shrill ring of my phone cut through my brooding like a knife. I growled, fishing it out of my pocket with every intention of hurling it across the parking lot.

"What?" I snarled, not bothering to check the caller ID.

"Well, hello to you too, sunshine," my older brother Ivan's dry voice crackled through the speaker. "Having a lovely evening?"

I pinched the bridge of my nose, exhaling slowly. "Ivan. What do you want?"

"Oh, nothing much. Just thought you'd like to know the Pietros are on the move."

My irritation evaporated, replaced by laser-sharp focus. "Where?"

"Our guys spotted three of their top lieutenants near the docks. Looked like they were scoping out the Vadims' shipping routes."

"Fuck," I hissed, already striding toward my car. "How long ago?"

"About twenty minutes. Vlad's heading there now, but—"

“Vadim?”

“No. Our brother.”

"I'm on my way," I cut him off, sliding behind the wheel. "Keep me updated."

"Will do. And Abe?"

"Yeah?"

Ivan's voice softened slightly. "Whatever's got you wound up... handle it. We can't afford distractions right now."

I gritted my teeth, refusing to acknowledge the twinge of guilt. "I've got it under control."

"Sure you do," he replied, unconvinced. "Just get your head in the game, Brother."

The line went dead, and I tossed the phone onto the passenger seat. As I peeled out of the parking lot, tires squealing, I forcibly shoved all thoughts of Pippa to the back of my mind. The family needed me. Everything else could wait.

I gunned the engine, weaving through traffic with laser focus. The Pietros moving on our territory was a bold play—one we couldn't afford to ignore. As I sped toward the docks, I felt the familiar rush of adrenaline, grateful for the distraction from my earlier... complications.

My younger brother Vlad was already there when I arrived, his hulking silhouette unmistakable even in the dim light. I killed the engine and approached silently, years

of training kicking in as I scanned our surroundings.

"Anything?" I murmured, coming to stand beside him.

He shook his head, eyes never leaving the warehouse across the street. "Not yet. But something's off."

I nodded, trusting his instincts. Vlad might be the youngest of us, but he had a nose for trouble that rivaled even Ivan's. We stood in tense silence, the salty air prickling my skin as we watched and waited.

A flicker of movement caught my eye—a shadow where there shouldn't be one. I tapped Vlad's arm, gesturing subtly. He inclined his head, confirming he'd seen it too.

"I'll circle around back," I whispered. "You take the front. Quiet and clean."

"Always," Vlad replied with a hint of that cocky grin.

As I crept toward the rear of the building, my senses sharpened to a knife's edge. The crunch of gravel under my boots, the distant lapping of waves against the pier—every sound seemed amplified in the stillness of the night.

I reached for my gun, the weight of it comforting in my hand. Part of me hoped for a confrontation, craving the simplicity of action and reaction. It was so much easier than dealing with... other things.

Pushing away the unwelcome thought of that gorgeous full face and soft curves, I focused on the feel of the gun in my hand.

I edged around the corner, my back pressed against the rough brick wall. Vlad appeared on the opposite side, our eyes meeting in silent communication. Years of

working together had honed our ability to move as one unit, anticipating each other's actions without a word.

With a subtle nod, we burst through the door simultaneously. The room erupted into chaos—shouts, the scraping of chairs, the telltale click of weapons being drawn. My body moved on autopilot, muscle memory taking over as I disarmed the first assailant with a swift strike.

"Left!" Vlad called out, and I ducked instinctively as a fist sailed over my head.

We moved in perfect synchronicity, covering each other's blind spots and taking down threats with ruthless efficiency. It was like a deadly dance, and despite the danger, I felt a surge of adrenaline coursing through my veins.

As the dust settled, Vlad and I stood back-to-back, surveying the scene. A dozen men lay groaning or unconscious at our feet.

"Just like old times, eh?" Vlad chuckled, slightly out of breath.

I couldn't help but grin. "You're getting slow in your old age, little brother. I counted seven to your five."

Vlad rolled his eyes. "Quality over quantity, Abe. Besides, I was distracted trying to keep your ass out of trouble."

As we began securing the prisoners, Vlad's tone shifted. "Speaking of distractions," he said casually, "you seemed a bit off your game earlier. Something on your mind?"

I tensed, memories of soft skin and interrupted kisses flashing unbidden through my mind. "Just focused on the job," I grunted, hoping he'd drop it.

Vlad's knowing smirk told me he wasn't buying it. "Uh-huh. And I'm the Pope. Come on, Abe. I know that look. Who is she?"

I felt my jaw clench, a familiar tension creeping up my neck. "There's no 'she,' Vlad," I snapped, my voice harsher than I intended. "Drop it."

Vlad raised an eyebrow, that infuriating smirk still playing on his lips. "Touchy, aren't we? Must be someone special to get under your skin like that."

I turned away, busying myself with zip-tying one of the unconscious goons. "I said drop it," I growled, fighting to keep my composure. The last thing I needed was Vlad poking around in my personal life, especially when I couldn't make sense of it myself.

Thankfully, Vlad seemed to get the message. He held up his hands in mock surrender. "Alright, alright. Consider it dropped. For now."

I exhaled slowly, forcing myself to refocus on the task at hand. "What did you find in their communication logs?"

Vlad's expression turned serious as he pulled out his phone. "Looks like they're planning a major shipment next week. Weapons, mostly. Big enough to cause some serious trouble if it goes through."

I nodded, my mind already racing through potential strategies. "We'll need to set up surveillance on the docks. Ivan's got some contacts in customs that might be useful."

"Already on it," Vlad replied. "I've got a team ready to move in 48 hours."

As we continued to discuss the details of our plan, I felt my earlier distraction fading. This was what I was good at—strategy, action, the thrill of outsmarting our enemies.

It was familiar territory, unlike the confusing mess of emotions I'd been grappling with earlier.

Yet, despite throwing myself into the planning, a small part of my mind kept drifting back to Pippa. I pushed the thoughts aside. There would be time to deal with... whatever this was... later.

As I left the scene, the cool night air hit my face. I loosened my tie, feeling the weight of what nearly happened settle on my shoulders once again.

"Fuck," I muttered under my breath, running a hand through my hair. Despite my best efforts, thoughts of Pippa kept creeping in, like an unwelcome guest at a private party.

I pulled out my phone, thumb hovering over her contact. What would I even say? "Sorry, I almost took your virginity in a moment of weakness?" Christ, I was losing my edge.

"Get it together, Abe," I growled to myself, shoving the phone back into my pocket. She and I were like oil and water. I don't do well with innocence. Had I taken her virginity, she would have been scarred by who I was.

But as I climbed into my car, I couldn't shake the image of her flushed face, those full lips parted in surprise. The way her body had fit against mine, soft yet unyielding.

I gripped the steering wheel tightly, knuckles turning white. I tried to think of other things. But even as I pulled away, heading toward the compound to brief Ivan, I knew I was fighting a losing battle.

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I found myself staring at the vacant spot where Abe typically lingered to survey the scene on the casino floor. By then, on a usual day, he would have walked right up to me and picked on something I could have done differently. The uninterrupted workflow reminded me of old times before Abe ever entered my life, and I hated to admit it, but I missed our verbal sparring matches.

From the corner of my eye, I noticed an employee motion at me. I walked over, briskly. His eyes shifted around and he murmured under his breath, “We believe someone tried to tamper with the ATMs.”

I narrowed my eyes at him, feeling a prickle of suspicion run down my spine. “Tamper with the ATMs? Are you sure?” I asked quietly, trying not to attract attention.

The man nodded quickly, glancing over his shoulder nervously. “Yes, we saw someone messing around with the cash dispensers on CCTV. But, the man was wearing a cap and glasses. No way to ID him.”

I found myself at a loss of words. Abe would have known what to do. I sighed and ran a hand through my hair, shaking my head. “Keep eyes on the machines at all times. That’s all we can do for now.”

At the back of my mind, I almost heard Abe’s voice. It felt as though he was right behind me, his breath tickling my ear. Try tracing down the guests who walked by the machines—anyone who saw anything.

The employee was about to walk away, but I stopped him with a light touch on his

arm. "And Pete?"

He turned, meeting my gaze. "Trace down the people in the video surveillance. Someone might have seen his face."

"Good idea." Pete nodded and walked away.

As I watched Pete hurry off, a sudden wave of loneliness washed over me. I didn't want to handle this alone, but Abe hadn't shown up for two days now, and I missed him.

I was hearing Abe in my head, what I believed to be his unwanted advice filtering through my mind. Now, I felt differently about that advice. All those little arguments we had when he interrupted by days made me better.

From the corner of my eye, I saw a tall dark-haired man dressed all slick, with a hint of a tattoo. My heart raced as I turned, eyes glued on him.

When he turned right to walk past me, his brown eyes were nothing on Abe's. My heart was crushed with disappointment as I felt my racing heart slow to a damning, gut-wrenching pace as though it was crawling into my stomach.

"Get it together, Pippa," I muttered in annoyance, shaking my head and walking back toward the slot machines which I'm to have inspected for maintenance. But my traitorous mind kept wandering back to Abe's steel-blue eyes and the way his tailored suits hugged his muscular frame.

I groaned, burying my face in my hands. "This is ridiculous. You're supposed to be relieved he's not here, not pining like some lovesick teenager."

But as much as I tried to convince myself otherwise, I couldn't shake the memory of

our escapade in my office that night. We almost had sex, for crying out loud.

I wanted to. Oh, how terribly I wanted to. I recalled how he looked at me, like he could eat me alive, how desired he made me feel. But then, something changed and he hadn't shown up since.

Did whatever happen between us cause him such tremendous disappointment that he decided to blow up work? I wanted to tell myself that it wasn't me, but the timing of it all seemed too dubious to give myself the benefit of the doubt.

I glanced down at my curvy figure, smoothing my pencil skirt over my hips. "As if someone like him would ever be interested in someone like me," I sighed, my insecurities bubbling to the surface.

Yet I couldn't forget the heat in his gaze when he'd caressed me between my legs, one large hand spanning my waist. For a moment, I'd felt beautiful, wanted. But then reality had come crashing back, and he never took it forward.

"It's better this way," I told myself firmly, even as a part of me ached for what might have been. "He's trouble, Pippa. Handsome, infuriating trouble. And besides," I admitted to myself with a lump in my throat, "all evidence shows he thought he made a mistake with you."

Why else didn't I see him around, if not for the fact that he'd been avoiding me?

The next afternoon, the weekend beckoned, a rare respite from the endless grind of working tirelessly since Vlad left. But first, I had to finish reconciling these accounts.

"Just a few more hours," I muttered, fingers flying across the keyboard. Then, I get to

go on my first weekend away from work since nearly a month.

As the hours ticked by, the usual bustle of the corridor outside faded into the background. I barely noticed the change, too focused on my work. It wasn't until I finally looked up, stretching my aching neck, that I realized how late it had gotten.

"Time to call it a night," I said to myself, saving my work and shutting down the computer. I stood and gathered my things.

For a brief moment, I thought to take my usual route—down the elevator and out through the main casino floor, where I'd wait for the valet to bring me my car. However, I knew that if I did that, I'd be working a few more hours.

After all, there was always something going wrong on the casino floor. After working three weekends in a row now, I thought it best for myself to focus on getting home. Besides, if any true emergency arose, I'd receive a call.

So, I decided to push away my instinct and instead, take the fire escape down to the ground where my car is parked. That way, I'd avoid wasting precious moments getting home. The truth was that I was exhausted and a weekend of rest and relaxation was in order.

I walked down the steel steps, thinking over my plans. Tonight, I'd order in some pizza and have a glass of wine. Tomorrow, I could sleep in late. And gosh, I had all that laundry to do. I groaned, realizing Sunday would involve more work and less kicking back on the couch. And somewhere in between all this, I should definitely find some time to catch up with a friend or two before they forget I existed.

With all that settled, I finally realized I was surrounded by an eerie silence.

Frowning, I cocked my head, straining to hear the usual shouts from the kitchen

loading dock down below. But there was nothing. Just an unsettling quiet that made the hair on the back of my neck stand up.

"What the hell?" I murmured, my heart rate picking up. Is it really that late that the kitchen's been restocked for tomorrow?

I hesitated at the second-floor landing, just for a brief second. I had worked here too long to know that it was dangerous to be on casino premises all alone. There was always an angry customer who lost it all, always an enemy on the sidelines.

But, going back up was as good as going back home. Perhaps I was just being paranoid.

Taking a deep breath, I continued down with my senses on high alert, my heels echoing ominously in the unnatural silence. I'd rather no one heard me, so I walked softer. In the stillness and silence of the night, I couldn't shake the nagging feeling that something was off.

My mind drifted to Abe, how he would have chided me for taking this route out. God, I wish he had been at the casino today and talked me out of this idea. Just say no, he would have told me, if anyone needs help on the casino floor, there are others they can reach out to. Go tell the valet to get your car. He would have watched me like a hawk until I left the premises. I shook my head, annoyed at myself.

Here I was, thinking of him again when I was pretty certain he hadn't shown up for four days now so he didn't even have to lay his eyes on me. A small sadness filled my soul.

Just then, I was pulled away from my thoughts, turning darker when I smelled cigarette smoke. The scent hung heavy in the air, and it meant one thing. Someone was nearby.

As I took one cautious step down and put my back against the wall, I peeked out from the corner of the rounding stairwell. There, partially hidden behind an open door for the first floor, I spotted one of our employees engaged in what looked like a heated discussion with a stranger.

My breath caught in my throat as recognition dawned. It was Tony, one of the dealers known for his shady connections outside of work. He wasn't supposed to be here at this hour, especially not lurking around the fire escape.

“With the Vadims out now, we can finally put our plan in motion,” the stranger said in a frenzy.

“There are always other eyes around,” Tony said. “Don’t get confident.

My brow furrowed. This didn’t look good. What bosses was he talking about? The only bosses that should matter are the Vadims.

Just then, Tony pulled something out of his pocket. I realized with a jolt it was a thick package wrapped in paper. My mind raced, connecting the dots. This wasn't just a heated argument; this was something definitely illegal happening right under our noses.

What was the plan here? Were they stealing right under our noses? What does the package contain? Money? Secrets? Video footage? The memory rushes back from earlier today, of someone tampering with our ATMs. Not on my watch.

I hesitated, knowing that for my safety I should probably turn back around and pretend I didn’t see a thing. But the responsible part of me, the part that took my job seriously, couldn't let it go. With a deep breath, I squared my shoulders and started toward them.

"What's going on here?" I demanded, my voice sharper than I intended.

The pair jumped, startled by my approach. The stranger now looked panic-stricken. Tony glared at me.

My heart was pounding as I realized it was too late to turn back, but I steeled myself. "What's in the package?" I demanded.

The stranger's face drained of color. "It's not what you think—"

"Save it," I cut him off, my green eyes narrowing on the employee, Tony. "I know you're not supposed to be doing whatever it is you are, and it stops now." I turned to the stranger, my chin raised defiantly despite my racing pulse. "You need to leave. Immediately."

Tony's scowl deepened, his hand disappearing into his jacket. "You should've minded your own business, Sweetheart."

I saw the glint of steel before I fully registered what was happening. A knife. He had a knife.

"Oh God," I thought, fear flooding my system. My legs trembled, threatening to give out. Shit. I needed to act fast, but apart from words, I saw no other way out.

"Put that away, Tony," I said, trying to calm the situation, my voice wavering slightly despite my best efforts. "You don't want to make this worse for yourself."

The stranger looked between us, trying to stop this situation from escalating. "Hey, Tony, this wasn't part of the deal. The bosses will get angry if the plan gets thwarted. Let's just go—"

"Shut up!" Tony snarled, his eyes never leaving mine as he advanced, the knife held threateningly in front of him. "This bitch is in with the Vadims. We have to get rid of her, or there is no plan."

I took a step back, my mind screaming at me to run, to call for help. But I couldn't move, couldn't look away from the blade that now seemed to fill my entire vision.

"Please," I whispered, hating how small my voice sounded. "You don't have to do this."

But before he could say more, Tony made a sudden move with the knife toward me. My heart leaped into my throat as I realized I might have just walked into something far more dangerous than I'd anticipated.

I needed to fight to get out of here alive. Without thinking, I quickly pushed off the wall and kicked him in the groin. He groaned and reached to clutch between his legs and I shoved past him, past the stranger, running a floor down to reach my car.

It didn't take long for Tony to give chase. I heard him, felt his rugged breath on my back. I ran faster, faster, faster. I reached the ground, the tarmac stretched beyond. My breaths now came in heavy rasps, and I saw my car in the distance.

His hands came for my waist, lugged at it. I tried to fight him off by kicking back, but it wasn't enough to make him stop. From the corner of my eye, I saw the glint of the knife.

From the right, I saw a car entering the parking lot.

"Help," I screamed at the top of my lungs as tears poured down my eyes. Please, I prayed silently as his grip on me won't loosen. Don't let me die out here.

He twisted my arm behind my back and I turned to see him just as he lunged forward, his movement so sudden I barely had time to react. I stumbled backward, my heart pounding in my ears, but I wasn't fast enough. A searing pain erupted across my shoulder as the blade grazed my skin.

"Ah!" I cried out, my hand flying to the wound. Warm blood seeped through my fingers, staining my favorite blouse. The pain was sharp, but the fear was worse. This was real. This was happening. He was going to kill me.

"You should've kept your mouth shut," Tony growled, readying for another strike.

I frantically looked around for an escape, for help, for anything. The parking lot, usually so bustling, now seemed eerily empty. Where was security? Where was anyone?

Just as despair began to overwhelm me, the car from before stopped right beside me. The door swung open, and through teary eyes and the glaring headlights, I couldn't make out the face.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you."

Abe. My heart leaped at his voice, equal parts relief and confusion flooding through me.

He appeared as if from nowhere, moving with a fluid grace that belied his size. In an instant, he was between me and my attacker, his broad shoulders a protective wall.

"Abe," I breathed, wincing as I pressed harder on my wound. "How did you—"

"Not now, Pippa," he said, his voice low and dangerous. His eyes, usually so playful when fixed on me, were cold as steel as they locked onto the knife-wielding

employee. "Drop it. Now."

I watched, mesmerized, as Abe's hands clenched and unclenched at his sides. The air around him seemed to crackle with tension, with barely restrained violence. This was a side of him I'd never seen before, and it terrified me despite the relief of being saved.

Tony hesitated, his eyes darting between Abe's imposing figure and the space behind him. In a split second, he made his decision, lunging forward with the knife.

What happened next was a blur of motion and violence. Abe moved with a speed I'd never imagined possible. His hand shot out, catching the attacker's wrist mid-strike. There was a sickening crack, followed by a howl of pain as the knife clattered to the floor.

"I warned you," Abe growled, his voice barely recognizable.

I watched in horror as Abe's fist connected with Tony's jaw, sending him sprawling. The brutality of it made my stomach churn.

"Abe, stop!" I cried out, my voice shaking. "He's down, it's over!"

But Abe didn't seem to hear me. He advanced on the fallen attacker, his eyes blazing with a cold fury. I'd never seen anyone look so menacing, so utterly lethal.

"You touched her," Abe snarled, emphasizing each word with a vicious kick. "You. Don't. Ever. Touch. Her."

The sound of fists meeting flesh, of pained grunts and gasps, filled the air. I couldn't look away, couldn't move, couldn't breathe. This was a nightmare, but I was wide awake.

At last, Tony was down on the ground.

“Abe,” I said, pleading now. “You can stop. He’s not moving.”

But Abe wasn’t listening. He grabbed Tony’s head, brutally smashing it against the concrete over and over again. I felt like retching, watching all that blood trail down the crevices of the road, Tony’s face now unrecognizable. I looked away and closed my eyes, but the sickening sounds got worse and worse. I tried to take deep breaths, to stop myself from hurling all over the place.

Finally, mercifully, it ended. I opened my eyes, knowing already that Tony was dead. Abe stood over the motionless form of my attacker, his chest heaving, his knuckles bloody. He turned to me, and for a moment, I saw something wild and unfamiliar in his eyes before they softened with concern.

"Pippa," he said, his voice gentler now. "Are you alright?"

I stared at him, my mind reeling. Relief washed over me—I was safe, the danger had passed. But mixed with that relief was a horror I couldn't shake. The violence I'd just witnessed, the raw brutality of it, left me shaken to my core.

"I... I don't know," I whispered, my eyes darting between Abe and the dead man on the floor. "What... what just happened?"

My gaze locked onto Abe, unable to look away from his intense blue-gray eyes. My heart raced, a cocktail of fear, adrenaline, and a strange relief coursing through my veins.

"You're bleeding," Abe said, his voice low and rough as he approached me.

I glanced down at my shoulder, surprised to see red seeping through my blouse.

"Oh," I mumbled, the sting of the cut finally registering. I'd forgotten all about it.

Abe's large hand gently cupped my face, tilting it up to meet his gaze. "Let me take care of that for you, Doll."

The pet name sent an unexpected shiver down my spine. I swallowed hard, trying to gather my thoughts. "I... I can handle it myself."

What I didn't say was that I was still afraid of what I saw him do.

His thumb brushed across my lower lip, silencing me mid-sentence. "You're a woman who just had a knife pulled on her. Let me help, Pippa. Please."

The softness in his voice, so at odds with the violence I'd just witnessed, made my resolve crumble. I nodded, letting out a shaky breath. As Abe led me to his car, his hand warm and steady on the small of my back, I couldn't help but wonder what I'd gotten myself into—and why, despite everything, I didn't want to walk away.

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I gunned the engine, tires screeching as we peeled away from the curb. My eyes darted between the road and Pippa, slumped in the passenger seat. Her normally rosy cheeks were ashen, bottle-green eyes wide with shock.

The car fell into a tense silence as I sped toward the safehouse. I couldn't help but steal glances at Pippa. This wasn't her world—the violence, the danger. She was all prim blouses and manicured nails, not blood and knife fights.

"Abe," she said softly, breaking the silence. "Can you just... take me home?"

I shook my head, my jaw clenching. "No can do, Sweetheart. We're heading to a safehouse first. Need to patch up that wound and make sure you're really okay."

Blood seeped through her fingers where she clutched her shoulder. Fury ran hot through my veins. That bastard I killed fucking stabbed her. If I could go back and kill him a million times over, I would.

"Pippa, are you in pain?" I asked gently, trying to assess just how dire the situation was.

She startled at my voice, her eyes flickering over to mine just briefly before she looked away in near panic and nodded, biting her plump lower lip hard enough to draw blood. Her curled hair was coming undone, sticking to her damp forehead. Fuck, she looked terrible.

Not to mention, terrified. Every time she looked at me now, she probably remembered me smashing a man to death. This was exactly what I was afraid

of—that she would see who I truly was, and run in the opposite direction.

God, how I wanted to hear her say she understood. Couldn't she see? I killed him for her.

I gripped the steering wheel tighter and pressed harder on the accelerator, weaving through traffic like a madman. I needed to get her somewhere safe and patch her up. Before that, she would be in no state to talk. The thought of her hurting and the fact that I couldn't do anything about that made my blood boil.

"Hey, look at me," I said, gentling my tone. When those green eyes met mine, I managed a reassuring smile. "You're safe now, okay? I've got you."

A tiny nod, but her trembling didn't subside. I wracked my brain for a way to distract her from the pain and shock.

"Pippa, can you tell me what happened back there? What did you see?" I kept my voice calm, like I was asking about the weather instead of a violent incident.

She opened her mouth, then closed it, swallowing hard.

"Take your time, Sweetheart. Just walk me through it step by step."

As she began to speak, her voice shaky but growing stronger, I divided my attention between her words and the road.

Pippa's voice quivered as she spoke. "I... I saw Tony talking to this stranger. They were exchanging something, Abe. It looked like something illegal—money? Drugs? I don't know. They were talking about some plan and how the Vadims were no longer around." She bit her lower lip and stared out of the window.

"When I confronted Tony, the other guy freaked out. Tony, he just... he just lunged at me with a knife."

The fear in her voice was palpable, and it stirred something protective deep within me. Yet, at the same time, I had to have more information to keep her and the Vadims safe. "Did you get a good look at the stranger?" I asked, keeping my tone level despite the rage building inside me at whatever betrayal was taking place right under our noses.

She nodded. "Tall, bald, with a scar across his left cheek. He had this... this cold look in his eyes." A shudder ran through her body, and I resisted the urge to smash my hand through a window in rage.

My mind was racing, piecing together the implications of what Pippa had witnessed. This wasn't just some petty drug deal gone wrong. No, this reeked of a larger operation because had it been an innocent exchange, Tony wouldn't have come after Pippa with the intention to kill. Whatever he was up to, whoever he was involved with, could potentially threaten the Vadims' interests—and now, Pippa's safety.

I glanced at Pippa, her curvaceous form huddled in the passenger seat, and made a silent vow. Whoever was behind this would pay dearly for hurting her. The Unholy Trinity didn't take kindly to threats, and I'd show them exactly why I was the muscle of our operation.

"You did good, Sweetheart," I said, my voice low and reassuring. "Real good. We'll figure this out."

"Abe?" Pippa's voice was small, uncertain. "What's going to happen now?"

I reached over and took her hand. She flinched and moved it away. I felt a stab in my heart, but what was I thinking? She couldn't just forget the damage I caused, the life I

took.

Instead of dwelling on what felt like rejection, I cleared my throat and looked straight ahead, giving her an answer. "Now, we keep you safe."

"No." She spoke with such fierceness, that I almost forgot she was just stabbed. "What will you do to protect the Vadims? They could be in trouble, Abe. You must get to the bottom of this."

I kept my eyes on her, realizing in that moment that she was truly something special. Even after taking a knife to the shoulder, she cared first for the Vadims.

"You're right. Now," I told her quietly. "I call my brothers."

I pulled out my phone, my fingers flying over the screen as I dialed. The call connected after two rings, and I wasted no time.

"Ivan, Vlad, conference now," I barked, putting the call on speaker. "We've got a situation."

"What's going on, Abe?" Ivan's voice crackled through, concern evident.

I glanced at Pippa, who was watching me like a hawk. "Vlad Vadim's most trusted employee witnessed something she shouldn't have. A guy called Tony's involved with an unknown player. I need you two to dig deep and find out who this stranger is. Dark hair, scar on his left cheek. Bald. They were talking of the Vadims and exchanged a package. I killed Tony."

"Christ," Vlad muttered. "How bad is it?"

"Bad enough," I growled. "Pippa's been stabbed. Minor, but it could've been worse."

The other guy ran off. I want everything you can find on this guy, and something tells me it could be those Italians—the Pietros. With Ivan Vadim no longer looking after operations, they might consider the casino as their personal playground for vengeance."

"That's a good lead," my brother Vlad said.

"We've been hearing whispers of them being all up in our business over the past few weeks," Ivan said.

"Let's start there" I reiterated and ended the call.

"Your brother's called Vlad too?" Pippa asked when I ended the call.

"You don't miss a thing, do you?" I grinned, realizing just how sharp she was.

Five minutes later, I guided Pippa into the safehouse, my hand hovering at the small of her back. Even now, I could feel the slight tremor in her body. Once inside, I flicked on the lights and led her to the living room.

"Sit," I instructed, gesturing to the plush sofa. "I'll grab the first aid kit."

When I returned, Pippa was perched on the edge of the couch, her eyes darting around the room. I knelt before her, setting the kit on the coffee table.

"I need to take a look at that shoulder," I said, my voice softer than usual. "Is it okay if I...?"

She nodded, biting her lower lip. I gently peeled back her blouse, revealing the angry

red gash. My jaw clenched at the sight, but I forced my hands to remain steady.

"It's not too deep," I murmured, cleaning the wound with practiced efficiency. "You won't need stitches."

As I worked, I found myself hyper-aware of Pippa's every breath, every slight movement. Her skin was soft under my calloused fingers, warm.

"You're good at this," Pippa said quietly, breaking the silence.

I chuckled. "Occupational hazard. You pick up a few things in my line of work."

She tensed slightly, and I cursed inwardly. Way to remind her of the danger, idiot.

"Hey," I said, meeting her eyes. "You're safe here. I promise."

Pippa held my gaze for a long moment before her shoulders relaxed. "I know," she whispered at last, as though she'd battled out her stance in her head before answering.

Those words hit me like a punch to the gut. Though she didn't say, she trusted me enough to know she was safe with me, despite what she saw.

I finished dressing her wound, my touch lingering perhaps a moment too long. "There," I said, clearing my throat. "Good as new."

Pippa's lips curved into a small smile. "My hero," she teased through her fatigue, but there was a warmth in her tone that made my heart skip a beat.

"Don't let it go to your head," I smirked, trying to regain my usual swagger. "I have a reputation to maintain, you know."

She chuckled, the sound chasing away some of the tension in the room. "Oh, I wouldn't dream of ruining the great Abraham Ustinov's bad-boy image."

I grinned, settling beside her on the couch. "Smart woman."

I watched as Pippa's smile faded, her green eyes clouding with worry. She tucked a stray curl behind her ear, a nervous habit I'd noticed before.

"Abe," she said softly, "what exactly did I stumble into tonight? And why did you have to kill that man?"

I sighed, running a hand through my hair. This wasn't a conversation I wanted to have, but Pippa deserved the truth. "Listen, Doll," I began, my tone serious. "What you saw tonight... it's bigger than just Tony being a dick. There are dangerous people involved, people who wouldn't hesitate to silence a witness. Letting him live could have spelled more trouble for you, down the line."

Pippa's eyes widened, her full lips parting in shock. "But I didn't see anything specific! Just two men talking—"

I cut her off gently. "Doesn't matter. In our world, even the smallest bit of information can be deadly."

She swallowed hard, her fingers twisting the hem of her blouse. "And Tony was... what? Betraying the Vadims?"

I nodded grimly. "That's what we need to find out. Did someone bribe him to betray the Vadims? Or was he implanted as a spy? Are there others in our midst who could be a danger? But until we know these things for sure, you're a liability. Someone they might want to eliminate."

She nodded, putting two and two together. “And you’re also...The Bratva?”

I took a deep breath, knowing I had to reveal more. Vlad Vadim had told me she was aware of who they were, but she’d never been an actual part of the Bratva. That night had been her first tryst with the darkness of it all, and however shaken she had been, I could tell that her very being demanded the truth.

"Not exactly, Pippa. My brothers and I... we're not just employees of the Vadims. We have a contractual agreement with them. My brothers and I formed a group called the Unholy Trinity."

Her eyes locked onto mine, and I watched them widen slightly. Just then, her gaze traveled over my tattoos, as if seeing them in a new light. "And what exactly does that entail?"

"We each have our specialties," I explained slowly, not wanting to scare her. "Ivan's the brains, the strategist. He can hack into anything, find anyone. Vlad's our shadow—he infiltrates, gathers intel, becomes whoever we need him to be."

Pippa nodded slowly, processing. "And you?"

I sat up straighter, stiffening. "I'm the muscle. When diplomacy fails, I make sure our enemies regret crossing the Vadims."

“How?” she asked, her chest rising and falling with anxiety.

“Sometimes with a threat,” I began. “Sometimes, with a kill.”

She shivered but didn’t look away, and I wasn't sure if it was from fear or something else.

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

My heart stopped. The world tilted on its axis as Abe's words echoed in my head. The Unholy Trinity. Spies. Hackers. Killers. And he was one of them.

I sucked in a sharp breath, my chest tightening as if iron bands were constricting around my lungs. My fingers dug into the soft fabric of the couch, seeking an anchor in this surreal moment.

"You're... you're part of the Unholy Trinity?" I managed to choke out, my voice barely above a whisper.

Abe's blue-gray eyes met mine, unflinching. "Yes, I am."

I stared at him, taking in his impeccable appearance—the crisp white shirt, the perfectly styled dark hair. How could this man, who looked like he'd stepped out of a GQ magazine, be part of the most feared group of protectors in the Bratva? I've heard of them before from behind closed doors, in passing. I never thought they'd be walking amongst us like regular people.

"But... how?" I stammered, my mind reeling. "Why?"

Abe leaned back, his body relaxed despite the bombshell he'd just dropped. "It's quite simple, really," he said, his voice steady. "The Vadims gave my brothers and me a chance, and where we come from, a chance is a rare thing to have received." He leans over, fierce loyalty etched on his face. "For them, we would do anything."

I flinched at his focused use of the word 'anything.' My stomach churned as I processed the implications. "So you... kill people?"

"When necessary," Abe replied, his tone matter-of-fact. "But it's not just about killing, Pippa. We gather intelligence, infiltrate rival organizations, and protect our own. The Trinity is about maintaining order and safety for our people."

I listened, my mind racing. The Vadims had always kept me away from the darker side of the Bratva. But now, here I was, face to face with one of its most dangerous alliances. And yet...

"Why are you telling me this?" I asked, my voice trembling slightly. "Aren't you worried I'll... I don't know, be afraid of you or something?"

Abe's lips curved into a small smile. "Are you?" he challenged.

I bit my lip, considering. The smart thing would be to run, to get as far away from this man as possible. But something kept me rooted to the spot, a mix of everything; that night in my office, the way we innocently bickered all the time, how he killed a man to save my life, and his gentle hands when he fixed my wound.

"No," I admitted finally. "I'm not."

Abe nodded as if he'd expected nothing less. "Good," he said. "Because believe it or not, Pippa, I want to keep you safe."

His words sent a shiver down my spine, an unexpected thrill mingling in my chest as I realized that not only did I believe him, but that I felt a profound joy to know he wanted to keep me safe. The Unholy Trinity's reputation loomed large in my mind—stories of ruthless attacks and merciless revenge. Yet, as I looked at Abe with that small smile on his chiseled face, a hint of a dimple on his chin as he stared at me with the softest eyes, I felt an inexplicable sense of safety wash over me.

I realized in that moment that I didn't have to understand anymore. It wasn't all black

and white. He was both , the man who smashed another's head in tonight, and a man who fixed my wounds with the gentlest hands.

My hands trembled slightly, and I clasped them tightly in my lap, willing them to be still as I reconciled all the emotions flooding through me.

"Are you alright?" Abe asked, his voice low and intense.

I swallowed, and when I looked at him with all that concern across his face, I realized I could be honest. "Confused, mostly. But I'm alright."

He leaned forward and gently placed his hand over mine, before squeezing tight. I felt a spark shoot up my arm, and my heart raced at the touch.

"I understand," he whispered. I swear, he was so close I could have leaned forward and felt his breath on my nose. Gently, he released my hand, and the peaceful joy I felt a second ago was replaced with loneliness, as though something was amiss.

I stared at the spot where his hand had rested, where I could still feel his heat, but when I looked up, I caught him glancing at his watch. With a sigh, he rose from the couch, his eyes seeking mine out for that dreadful, imminent goodbye. My heart rate spiked as I realized what was happening.

"I should go," he said, his deep voice steady and reassuring. "But you'll be safe here, Pippa. This place is more secure than Fort Knox. There's food in the fridge, so you won't go hungry. Stay here tonight and tomorrow, we will see whether it's safe for you to go back home."

He stared at me for a brief moment, his eyes lingering on mine momentarily as though he was waiting for something. But, I was too shell-shocked to imagine spending the night here alone. That idea seemed unfathomable, but how would it

sound if I begged him to stay? What would he think?

I remembered that night in my office, how he'd walked out when I thought we'd be having sex. He didn't show up to work for four days after.

And so, I choked on my words, allowed the inevitable to happen.

He turned and began to walk toward the door, but with each step he took, this place felt darker. The walls were closing in on me and the panic rose in my chest. The thought of being left alone in this unfamiliar safe house, with everything I'd learned pressing down on me, was unbearable.

My vision narrowed on him, his hand on the knob. One more second, and I'd be here alone. What if someone came? Was there a gun around here? Did I know how to use a gun?

"Wait!" I cried out, my voice cracking. "Abraham, please... don't go."

I didn't know whether it was the sound of my voice, the desperation clawing in my tone, or the very fact that I asked him to stay, but he paused, hand on the doorknob, and turned to face me. I could see the hesitation in his eyes, a flicker of softness.

It seemed safe to tell him exactly how I felt after he admitted who he was.

"I know I should be stronger," I continued, hating how vulnerable I sounded. "But I'm scared. Everything's changed, and I... I don't want to be alone right now."

My lower lip trembled, and I bit down on it hard. I'd always prided myself on my independence, on being the tough, no-nonsense woman who could handle anything. But right now, with my world turned upside down, I felt like that scared little girl my aunt and uncle had taken advantage of all those years ago.

"Please," I whispered, my eyes locking on his. "Stay with me. Just for tonight."

I held my breath, waiting for his response, acutely aware of how pathetic I must look—a trembling mess in a rumpled pencil skirt and blouse, mascara probably smudged from fighting back tears. But in that moment, I didn't care about my image. I just knew I couldn't bear the thought of facing this new reality alone.

Abe's hand slipped from the doorknob, his shoulders relaxing as he turned to face me fully. The conflict in his eyes was palpable, but something shifted in his expression. From the anguish I saw in his eyes, it almost felt as though my pain hurt him .

"Alright, Pippa," he said, his deep voice rumbling through the room as he strode toward me in a hurry. "I'll stay."

I felt my breath catch in my throat as he approached, his presence filling the room in a way that made everything else fade into the background.

"Thank you," I murmured, relief washing over me.

Abe settled beside me on the couch, close enough that I could feel the warmth radiating from his body. The scent of his cologne—expensive, masculine—enveloped me, and I found myself leaning slightly toward him, drawn in by his comforting presence.

"You're safe here," he said, his voice low and reassuring. "I won't let anything happen to you."

I nodded, trying to ignore the way my heart raced at his words. This was Abe, after all—arrogant, infuriating Abe who drove me crazy on a daily basis. But right now, he felt like an anchor in the storm of my emotions.

"I know," I said softly but my voice cracked all the same. "It's just... a lot to process. It's been a long, scary, difficult day."

He shifted slightly, his arm brushing against mine. And then, ever so slowly, he placed it up on the couch behind me, like an invitation. I felt so damn exhausted and he felt so damn warm, that without thinking, I nestled closer, my head resting on his chest.

I took a deep breath, and my heart was beating ever so wildly, but for a completely different reason. This time, the wildness of its pace was accompanied by a sweet calm. I felt his hand fall to my shoulder, slowly pulling me in.

"Rest now," he said into my hair. "It's all going to be okay."

I felt his lips on my hair as he spoke, and I became acutely aware of how close we were sitting. I could see the intricate designs of his tattoos peeking out from beneath his crisp shirt sleeve, the way his muscles moved beneath the fabric.

I lifted my gaze to meet his, and suddenly, the air between us felt electric. His eyes were mere inches away from mine, flickering across my face in rapid motions. His chest rose and fell harder against mine and I could feel this strange need to be closer to him. My breath caught in my throat as I realized the look he was giving me wasn't just concern—it was desire.

"Abe," I whispered, my voice barely audible. The fear and adrenaline that had been coursing through my veins began to transform into something else entirely, a heat that spread from my core outwards.

He leaned in closer, his breath warm on my cheek. "Tell me to stop, Pippa," he murmured, his voice husky. "Tell me you don't want this."

But I couldn't. I didn't want him to stop. Instead, I found myself drawn toward him, like a moth to a flame.

"I can't," I admitted, my heart pounding. "I don't want you to stop."

That was all it took. Abe's hand came up to cup my face, his thumb traced my lower lip, and I shivered at the contact.

"Are you sure?" he asked, giving me one last chance to back out.

"More than anything," I whispered before I leaned forward and pressed my lips to his. I felt him hold back a little, but when I grabbed his shirt and pulled him closer, he weakened. The soft, tentative kiss gave way to something fiercer. He repositioned himself straighter, his hands reaching for my hips. When he held me in his hands and pulled me atop his lap, I swear I felt like the luckiest girl in the world.

I melted into his lap, my arms wound around his neck, and my legs straddled his waist. He then slid his hands to the back of my neck and pulled my face closer, his tongue parting through the gap between my lips, gently flicking over my teeth and everything in his motions told me he wanted more.

I parted my lips wider and curved my back to feel closer. And that was when I felt it—that bulge between his legs, digging against my pelvis.

Shit. He wanted me bad.

His hands roamed my body; Down the swell of my breasts, thumbs flicked across my nipples, fingers dug into the rolls along my waist. Each touch was reverent. I gasped as his lips trailed down my neck, my fingers tangling in his dark hair.

"You're beautiful," he murmured against my skin, and for once, I believed it on

another's lips without an ounce of internal doubt. He then reached for the buttons of my shirt, slowly undoing the first one.

I watched as he looked down at the peek of skin before his eyes flicked up to mine attentively. I assured him of my intentions, reaching for his belt.

"Pippa," he groaned, closing his eyes for a brief second, struggling with something. "If we didn't stop now, I wouldn't stop at all."

"Who said I wanted to stop?" I said, flicking the belt aside and sliding his shirt out from the waist of his pants. When I did so, I marveled at the way his muscles had rippled beneath his skin.

When I glanced up, he was watching me like I was a thing to be devoured. He growled and the next thing I knew, we were a tangled mess of hands and clothes. He ripped the rest of my buttons off, slid my shirt down my arms, and threw it across the floor. I did the same with his.

I balanced myself off his lap on my knees, reaching down to undo his pants. He bucked off the sofa, resting on the curve of his back as he slid down his pants.

He then grabbed my waist and pulled me down against him, hard. I gasped as I felt his cock through his boxers, against my panties. His hands reached down in the space between us, and I felt the coldness of his skin seep through the wet warmth of my panties. He thrust his hips upwards and took me with him and shuffled around, and when we settled back into me straddling him and he moved away his hands, my eyes widened when I realized he had taken off his boxers.

Slowly, I got back to rest on my knees and leaned back, feeling for his cock with my hands. It was massive, harder than I had ever imagined. It throbbed under my touch, the veins pulsing sensationally. Never in a million years did I imagine what it would

feel like in reality.

I traced the shape of it with my fingers, feeling the length and girth explode in my hands. He groaned beneath me, his words a husky plea to take him.

"Fuck," he swore softly as I stroked him gently, feeling each vein that ran along the length of his shaft. "You have no idea what you do to me."

"Walk the talk, would you?" I challenged playfully and leaned forward to gently nib his lower lip as I continued to stroke his cock. Was it my imagination or was he getting larger in the cup of my hand?

The next thing I knew, he grabbed my hand and pulled it off his cock, the other gliding down to the small of my back and he quickly had me on my back, his body now towering above mine.

I whimpered as I watched his naked form above me, his eyes ravishing every inch of me.

He released my hand and went for my skirt.

With a swift flick, he had my skirt undone and thrown aside, leaving me naked from the waist down. He then reached down to my panties and slowly pulled them down with the same reverence as before. When they were halfway, he looked up at me for permission, and I nodded in assent.

His hands traced up and down my glistening thighs before reaching for my panties again and pulling them off completely. He tossed them aside like he did with my skirt, leaving me utterly naked.

He then lowered his head to my inner thighs, trailing kisses from one knee to another,

making sure to cover every inch of skin with his lips. His kisses—soft and loving—seemed to savor me inch by inch, but I was hungry for more. The energy rippling between my legs demanded to be satiated.

I placed my hands through his hair and pulled his head up. “Please,” I mouthed, desperate for him to stop teasing.

“Patience, Sweetheart,” he grinned.

But, he heard me because when his head went back down, I felt a flick of his tongue up the slit between my legs. It was warm, strong, and sent me reeling off the couch. His hand went straight for my stomach, gently guiding me back down.

“It’s just the beginning.” His voice ghosted over my skin before his tongue slid into me for a quick taste.

“Oh my god,” I mewled, nearly in tears from how good it felt. I had never had a man’s mouth on me before, and if it already felt this excruciatingly delightful, what would more feel like?

He continued to tease and pleurably torment me with every flick of his tongue, every soft kiss he planted, and every gentle suck he performed. My hips arched off the couch without my permission, completely at the mercy of his skilled mouth.

I clung onto his shoulders for support, my head back, eyes closed in pure bliss. My mouth held open in silent screams of pleasure as my body begged for more, my pussy dripping from pleasure. I was not sure how long it went on for, but deep down, I knew I didn’t want it to end. Yet, at the same time, I wanted to see what was coming next.

And the next outdid the present.

"Abe," I breathed out softly, barely able to speak through my heavy breaths. "Please," was all I could get out in between sighs and whimpers of pleasure.

His lips slowly left my skin, followed by his warm breath before they reached my ear. "You're all nice and wet now, Pippa. I could make you cum in ways you've never imagined." His fingers reached between my legs, flicked my clit, and sent a jolt of blinding sparks through me. His tongue swept across my lips, and I could taste myself on him. He pulled away, and his finger swept under my chin. "Which way do you want me to make you cum, Pippa?"

My eyes widened at his question, the look of shock causing me to lose focus for a moment. He was...asking me what I wanted? My body stilled, every nerve ending responding to the feeling of his finger tracing along my clit and the memories of Abe's skilled tongue.

"I-I don't know," I stammered, my voice barely audible above my whimpers. I was on the edge, one touch, one kiss away from shattering into a million pieces.

A smirk formed on his lips as he read my answer perfectly. "Well, I think you better tell me what you want right now," he said firmly. His eyes locked onto mine and I wanted to scream at him in rage against this pause in our plans. Couldn't he tell that he had all the power in the world to make that decision for me?

But something told me he would keep playing his games until I said exactly what I wanted. It was a battle of wills between us, and I felt like I was losing control.

His eyes glittered with amusement and hunger as he trailed his fingers up from my pussy, stopping to circle my dimpled hips. God, how I missed the feel of him down there. How my body hummed for more.

I was completely and utterly starved for this man.

"Fuck me," I blurted out suddenly, unable to contain my desperation any longer. My eyebrows furrowed, and a deep blush painted my cheeks at my own words.

Abe's eyes darkened at my words, his expression morphing into one of pure possession and raw hunger. In response, he gave me a quick kiss before he positioned the tip of his erection right at my entrance.

"Pippa," he whispered, one hand on my cheek. "We can stop anytime. Just say the word, okay?"

I knew he was worried about this being my first time. I had sensed it in every move he'd made. But here I was, writhing beneath him for more, and this conversation only delayed what I wanted most—him inside me.

"There isn't much to stop if you don't start now, is there?" I teased him.

His eyes widened with surprise. "Feisty," he grinned with approval and took the tip of his cock past my entrance, making me hungrier with every slow push forward, just enough to make me scream from desperation if he kept pushing like that.

"You want me to fuck you," he said lowly in a rumble that sent shivers down my spine. The way he looked at me made time stop still.

I nodded vigorously, unable to find my voice again past the dryness in my throat. His words had an effect on both of us, we knew it was for real now, and not all playful foreplay. This was serious, and I knew there was no going back from this point.

Not that either of us wanted to. I most certainly didn't.

I reached for his lower back and pulled him closer, thrusting my hip up just a little and feeling his cock slide in just a little further.

God, that stretch.

I mewled and threw back my head and Abe groaned as he held my gaze, making sure I was alright before inching in further.

I nodded at him, telling him to carry on. With a quick nod, Abe slid the rest of his length into me. I felt like I was being molded to another, and whatever pain it was bordered on such sweet pleasure, that I'd go through this sensation all over again. It was indescribable. My body wrapped around him so tightly, and he moaned, his eyes darkening, looking every bit like a man possessed.

"Pippa," he whispered, his breath hot and ragged in my ear. "You're so fucking gorgeous."

I sighed, enjoying the feeling of him inside me. His thrusts were slow and deliberate, building up the tension within me until I thought I couldn't take it anymore. But then he would pause, his hips counting down to the next push, and every time he pushed deeper, the sense of fullness grew stronger and stronger. It was maddening and wonderful all at once.

"Abe," I gasped out, my voice barely a whisper as he hit a particularly sensitive spot inside me. My hips bucked slightly, trying to encourage him to move faster, but he held back, maintaining his slow pace.

He leaned down to kiss me, his lips soft and warm against mine. His hand gripped my hip possessively as he moved inside me, coaxing me closer to the edge. I could feel his heart pounding against my chest, a rhythm just for me.

And then, he took his hands to the only piece of clothing I had on, my bra. Time stilled when he pulled it down, his eyes on my ample breasts as they spilled out under his gaze. I blushed, realizing I was finally, completely naked.

He reached over and flicked my nipple, before looking over at me. "Beautiful," he said, and he arched his hips, his cock hitting again at that one sweet spot we discovered today.

"Oh my god," I moaned and moved so my hips could meet his. With his hands caressing my breasts, his cock deep inside me, I could no longer hold back the dam threatening to spill over. A powerful source of pleasure began to ignite in my core.

I clutched onto Abe's muscular hips, wrapping my legs tighter around him as I urged him to keep going. The pleasure coursing through my body was now a burn that needed to be extinguished.

"I... Abe... I think I'm about to—"

I couldn't find the words to describe what I was feeling. His touch became frantic, his kisses wild as if trying to draw out the moment just as much as me.

"Cum for me," he growled into my ear, his breath hot against my skin. "Let go."

And with those words, I did just that. The emotions built up from weeks of sexual tension and desire for this man rushed through me like a torrential river, and I came hard against him. I closed my eyes as every muscle trembled and I lost control of every nerve, losing all sense of the world beyond this very moment.

The waves washed over me and I lay there limp, breathless, as I saw streaks of light in my vision from the pleasure soaring through me. He groaned into my ear, his shoulders tensing as his thrusts became harder, faster. His hips slapped against mine in a perfect rhythm, and I felt his cock twitch inside me.

"Ah, fuck..." he roared, burying his face in my neck as he lost over his own body. I felt his cock throb and his warmth seeping right into me. I ran my hands through his

hair, loving the feel of his thick, dark strands between my fingers.

As we came down from our shared high, reality slowly started to seep back in. I lay there, nestled against Abe's chest, listening to his heartbeat slow. My mind raced, trying to make sense of what had just happened.

Was this just a one-night stand? A moment of weakness born from adrenaline? Or was it something more?

I glanced up at Abe, expecting to see regret or dismissal in his eyes. Instead, I found him smiling down at me, utterly at peace. He brushed a stray curl from my face, his touch lingering on my cheek.

"What are you thinking?" he asked, his voice uncharacteristically gentle.

I bit my lip, unsure how to respond. "Nothing," I shook my head. "Just how glad I am you found me when you did tonight."

He kissed my forehead softly, and when I looked back up again, his eyes fluttered close as sleep overcame him. I felt guilty for lying.

But what other choice did I have? My emotions were a confused mess, and given that this was just a one-night stand, I felt no need to involve him in it.

All I knew was that the constant tension between us now felt foolish. After the way he had treated me so wonderfully that night, worshiped me in bed, and made love to me like I was some kind of treasure, I knew we could never go back to our bickering ways.

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

The first rays of sunlight crept through the blinds, and I stirred, my body aching in all the right places. Memories of last night with Pippa flooded my mind—her curves pressed against me, those gorgeous green eyes clouded with desire. Fuck. I hadn't felt the need to be this gentle with a woman... ever.

I rolled over, drinking in the sight of her sleeping form. Her light brown curls splayed across the cushion, full lips slightly parted. My chest tightened with an unfamiliar urge to stay, to protect.

But I needed to get an update. Information was the only leverage I had to truly keep her safe. Last night, I stopped Tony from killing her. But tomorrow, she could be someplace I might not reach in time. Yet as I dressed, every fiber of my being screamed at me not to leave her alone and my gaze kept drifting back to her.

"Get it together, Ustinov," I muttered, putting on my belt. She was safe here and I would only be gone for an hour or two max.

I checked my watch. My brothers were waiting. Before I left, I strode to the kitchen. I scrawled a note and placed it on the fridge, my handwriting uncharacteristically precise:

"Stay put. I mean it, Pippa. -A "

I paused at her door, hand hovering over the knob. Just one more look. To make sure she was okay

"Abe?" Her sleepy voice nearly undid me.

I cleared my throat, aiming for a soothing tone. "All okay, Pip. Go back to sleep."

She mumbled something unintelligible, already drifting off. I lingered a moment longer, observing the curve of her cheek, the slight pout of her lips. Christ, I was in trouble.

Forcing myself to turn away, I walked out and made my way to my car. I had a job to do. And keeping Pippa safe meant facing whatever shit storm was brewing head-on.

I strode into Ivan's office, the tension in the air palpable. My brothers' faces were grim, their postures rigid. My older brother Ivan, ever the picture of control, sat behind his massive desk, fingers steepled under his chin. Vlad paced by the window, his usual easygoing demeanor replaced by a tightly coiled energy.

"Nice of you to join us, Abe," Ivan drawled, his tone deceptively casual. "I trust your... lead... is secure?"

My blood boiled. "Pippa's not just a lead, Ivan. She's—"

"She's what, Abe?" Ivan cut in, his voice dangerously low. "A distraction?"

I bit back a retort, the muscle in my jaw twitching. But, I knew if I entered this argument, it would be a simple waste of time. "Pippa's safe and that's what matters. Now, what's the situation with our mystery man?"

Vlad turned from the window. "He's in the wind. Our contacts haven't picked up a trace."

"Fuck," I growled, slamming my fist on the desk. The impact sent a jolt of pain up

my arm, but I welcomed it. It was better than the growing knot of anxiety in my gut. "How the hell did he slip past our net?"

Ivan leaned back, his chair creaking. "That's what we need to figure out. And fast."

I ran a hand through my hair, frustration mounting. "Every second he's out there is a second he could be talking to the wrong people. If word gets out about how that succeeded at getting away from the casino and that Vlad Vadim's trusted employee was injured—"

"We know the stakes, Abe," Vlad cut in, shaking his head.

I paced the length of the office, my mind racing. The stranger knew too much, had seen too much. If he talked to anyone, enemies would become overconfident and come crawling to attack, believing that the Vadims were weakened.

Besides that, whoever he might have reported would know there was still one loose string in the picture.

... I couldn't shake the image of Pippa, vulnerable and alone at the safehouse. What if they found her? What if—

"Abe!" Ivan's voice snapped me back to reality. "Focus. We need that brain of yours working with us, not spiraling."

I took a deep breath, forcing my emotions back under control. "Right. Okay. We start by retracing his steps. Every camera, every witness, every scrap of evidence from the casino. Hack into the public cameras in the vicinity. We find this bastard, and we make sure he never talks."

The tension in the room shifted, a sense of purpose taking hold. As we dove into

planning the hack, I pushed thoughts of Pippa to the back of my mind. I had to stay sharp, had to neutralize this threat. Only then could I ensure that the Vadims and their star employee stayed safe.

I pulled up to the safehouse two hours later, my mind now turning back to Pippa. As I approached the front door, I heard a commotion inside. My heart rate spiked, and I instinctively reached for my gun.

But when I burst through the door, I was met with a sight that made me freeze in my tracks. Pippa was there, all rightfully dressed, and in her quest to get something out of her reach on a shelf, she had dropped a load of books on the floor.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" I demanded, my voice coming out harsher than I intended.

Pippa whirled around on that ridiculous chair she was standing on, her green eyes flashing with defiance. "What does it look like, Abe? I'm leaving and I had no cellphone battery to call a cab. So, I thought I'd use that to call one instead." She pointed at the receiver hidden away in a corner on the top of a bookshelf. "I can't stay cooped up in here forever, you know?"

I raised an eyebrow. Jesus. Even the morning after being nearly stabbed to death, this woman wanted to be in charge through and through. She was resourceful in finding that thing, for sure. My finger pointed at what she thought was a phone. "That," I said, "won't work. It's only to receive emergency messages. Not make calls."

"Oh," she frowned, looking endearingly disappointed, then stepped off the chair she had been standing on. "So..." she shuffles her weight from one foot to another. "Drop me home?"

I strode toward her, jaw clenched. "Hell no. It's not safe out there."

"I have a life, you know," she shot back, flicking her hair over her shoulder with more force than necessary. "A job. Responsibilities. I can't just disappear because you say so."

I ran a hand through my hair, frustration building. This woman was infuriating, but damn if her stubbornness didn't make something in my chest tighten. "Pippa, listen to me. You can't go. There are people out there who want to hurt you."

She paused, her lips pursing. "I appreciate your concern, Abe. Really. But I have a home to get back to. I swear I'll keep it locked, not let anyone in unless I know them. My apartment is pretty safe."

I stepped closer, close enough to catch the scent of her perfume. "You don't understand," I scoffed in her face. "Your apartment is child's play."

A flicker of uncertainty crossed her face. "But—" she began.

I clenched my fists, fighting the urge to shake some sense into her. "What you want right now doesn't matter if you end up dead, Sweetheart."

Pippa's green eyes flashed with fear.

I took a deep breath, trying to get my point across. "We have no leads. Tony could have had other men working with him at the casino. If there are more infiltrators in the Vadims ranks and they find out what went down between Tony and you, you'd be dead within seconds. Besides, there could be others coming. Others who won't hesitate to use you as leverage against the Vadims."

She faltered for a moment, her hands now clenched together. "The Vadims are like

family to me. I would never betray them."

"It's not about betrayal," I growled, closing the distance between us. "It's about them torturing you for information. It's about them hurting you to get to us. Can't you see that? Do you know what some of these assholes are capable of doing to a woman like you? How much harm they can cause you?"

Pippa's bottom lip trembled slightly, but her voice remained steady. "And what am I supposed to do? Hide away forever?"

I ran a hand down my face, the weight of the situation pressing down on me. "Not forever. Just until we neutralize the threat."

Pippa's lips pursed, but she nodded. "Fine. But I have work to do. The Vadims—"

"Can manage without you for a few days," I interjected. "Your safety comes first. Meanwhile, you can work remotely. Vlad Vadim would want that."

Pippa's eyes widened, and for a moment, I saw her resolve waver. I watched as Pippa's shoulders slumped, the fight slowly draining out of her. For a moment, I was struck by how young and vulnerable she looked, despite her fierce demeanor.

"I just... I can't stand feeling helpless," she murmured, her voice barely above a whisper. Then, she looked up at me and whispered, "So, where am I to go?"

I could sense the reluctance in her voice, the frustration of being cornered into a situation she didn't want. It was evident that Pippa did not take well to being pushed around—and I couldn't blame her for it. But there was no other choice.

Taking a step back, I let out a sigh, trying to calm the fierce protectiveness that surged through me. "You'll stay with me," I said finally, my tone firm. "At my house."

It's the safest place there is, with all the security we have in place."

Pippa's eyes widened in surprise, brows furrowing. "With you? Are you joking?" Her disbelief was palpable, mixed with a tint of defiance.

I moved closer. "It's not up for debate, Pippa. I need to watch over you, at least until we get to the bottom of this mess. Even the strongest of us need backup sometimes."

She looked up at me with a cocked eyebrow. "And you're my backup?"

"Whether you like it or not," I replied with a simple shrug.

Pippa rolled her eyes, but I caught the ghost of a smile on her lips. "God help me," she muttered.

"It's the only option you've got to avoid a potential torture chamber," I reiterated.

Her lips parted as if she wanted to argue further, but something must have made sense in her internal dialogue because she eventually relented, resignation settling in.

"Fine," Pippa said quietly. "But don't expect me to be happy about it."

For the first time that day, a grin spread across my face. "Wouldn't dream of it, Sweetheart. You're far too stubborn for that."

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I couldn't stop fidgeting with the hem of my skirt while Abe's sleek black car glided through the city streets. The leather seat felt too warm, too confining, as if it was trying to swallow me whole. My mind raced faster than the speedometer, grappling with the reality that I was about to move in with this man.

Move in!

"You're awfully quiet over there." Abe's deep voice cut through my spiraling thoughts. He looked over at me for a moment before returning to the road.

I forced a smile, hoping it didn't seem as strained as it felt. "Just... processing."

He nodded, his tattooed hands flexing on the steering wheel. "It's a big change, I know. But it's necessary."

Necessary. Right. Abe is only doing his duty to protect me. I tried to focus on that word, to remind myself that this was about safety, not... whatever had happened between us last night. The memory of our bodies naked, intertwined, sent a shiver down my spine that I desperately tried to suppress.

It was a one-night stand, nothing more. And now? I was moving in with the first and only man I'd ever slept with. It was as awkward a situation as could get.

What if, when we were together in his home, things got heated? What if I wasn't able to see through his real intentions? What if he only wanted to hook up with me again?

I swallowed hard, watching the familiar buildings of my neighborhood blur past the

window as I remembered how his eyes went dark when he thrust into me. He was so lost in me, and I in him, that the world had ceased to exist and nothing else mattered.

He had lost control and if he lost it while we lived together, I don't know what would come of it. I shuddered and turned to put on some music to distract myself.

The what-ifs existed, alright, but they served no purpose. Yes, I did not want to be confined in the same place as Abraham Ustinov. Yes, he needed me to live with him to protect me. Yes, last night was fun but only a one-night stand.

And everything else was conjecture. Anything else that could happen, would. And there was no point losing my mind over it.

This was about safety, I reminded myself. Just safety. Yet I couldn't help but wonder if we were both lying to ourselves about what this really meant.

I stepped into my apartment, the familiar scent of vanilla patchouli and old books hitting me like a bittersweet embrace. My eyes lingered on the countless memories scattered throughout the space—photos, trinkets, the worn-out armchair where I'd spent countless nights curled up with a good book.

"Just the essentials, Pippa," I muttered to myself, trying to shake off the melancholy.

My fingers traced the spine of my favorite novel, debating whether it qualified as essential. I tossed it into my bag anyway, along with a framed photo of my parents. Some things were too precious to leave behind.

As I packed, my gaze kept drifting to the window. Abe stood down below with his attention switching between my apartment and the surroundings, leaning against his

sleek black car. Even from this distance, I could see the tension in his shoulders, the way his eyes never stopped moving.

I found myself pausing, watching him. He pulled out his phone, brow furrowing as he typed rapidly. A moment later, he was scanning the street again, blue-gray eyes sharp and alert.

"Get a grip, Pippa," I chided myself, forcing my attention back to packing. "He's just doing his job."

But as I zipped up my bag, that same traitorous thought wormed its way into my mind. Was it really just a job to him? The way he'd touched me, looked at me... it felt like more.

I shook my head, dispelling the dangerous notion. This was Abraham Ustinov—notorious player, known for his charm and his brutality in equal measure. I couldn't afford to read too much into his actions.

Taking a deep breath, I cast one last look around my apartment. It felt like I was leaving more than just a space behind.

"It's temporary," I reminded myself firmly. "Just until this blows over."

With that, I squared my shoulders and headed for the door, trying to ignore the feeling that I was walking into something I wasn't prepared for.

I stepped out of my apartment building, the weight of my packed bag suddenly feeling much heavier than it should. Abe's eyes locked onto me immediately, his posture straightening as I approached. Without a word, he held out his hand for my

bag, our fingers brushing as he took it. A jolt of electricity shot through me at the contact, and I quickly pulled my hand away.

"All set?" Abe asked, his voice low and rough.

I nodded, not trusting myself to speak. The air between us felt thick with unspoken words and lingering tension from our earlier... encounter. Abe's piercing gaze roamed over me as if checking for any sign of distress.

"You okay, Pippa?" he prodded, a hint of concern creeping into his tone.

I forced a smile, aiming for nonchalance. "Just peachy. Nothing like an impromptu sleepover to spice up a girl's week, right?"

Abe's lips twitched, amusement briefly lightening his features. "That's one way to look at it. Come on, let's get you settled."

As we drove through the city, my mind raced with possibilities of what awaited me. I'd never been to Abe's home before, and my imagination conjured images of a stark, minimalist space—all sleek lines and cold surfaces, much like the man himself.

He looked like a lone wolf. All mysterious and dark. I expected his space to be the same.

"So, what's the house rules?" I asked, aiming for a light tone. "No shoes on the furniture? No touching the priceless art?"

Abe chuckled, the sound sending an unexpected warmth through me. "No rules, Pippa. *Mi casa es su casa*, as they say."

I raised an eyebrow. "Really? I find that hard to believe. The great Abraham Ustinov,

letting some poor thing run wild in his domain?"

His grip tightened on the steering wheel, jaw clenching slightly. "You're not some 'poor thing,' Pippa. You're..." he trailed off, leaving me hanging on his unfinished thought.

I'm what? I wanted to ask, but I remained quiet. Something told me he himself didn't have an answer to that quite as yet. And if he did, he wasn't going to give it to me.

As we pulled up to Abe's house, my jaw dropped. This wasn't the austere fortress I'd imagined. Instead, a charming craftsman-style home stood before me, its warm brick exterior and inviting porch so different from what I'd conjured in my mind.

"This is... yours?" I stammered, unable to hide my surprise.

Abe's lips quirked into a smirk. "Disappointed it's not a vampire's lair?"

I rolled my eyes, but couldn't help the smile tugging at my lips. "Just surprised, that's all."

As we stepped inside, the cozy interior enveloped me. Rich hardwood floors, plush area rugs, and walls adorned with what looked like family photos created an atmosphere that was decidedly... homey.

"Abe! You're finally home!" a cheerful voice called out, and I turned to see a tall man with shaggy light blonde hair and identical eyes as Abe striding toward us. It didn't take me long to put two and two together.

A member of The Unholy Trinity. I suddenly found myself nervous in their domain.

"And you must be Pippa," he said, extending his hand. "I'm Ivan, Abraham's older brother. He called ahead and mentioned you'd be our guest for the unforeseeable future."

I shook his hand and tried not to let my nervousness show. "Nice to meet you, Ivan."

A petite blonde-haired, blue-eyed woman with a radiant smile and the most gorgeous square face appeared beside him. "I'm Adley, Ivan's wife. Welcome to our home, Pippa. And please, you're welcome here for however long is needed."

Before I could respond, two more figures emerged from another door. The younger man bore a striking resemblance to Abe and Ivan, though his features were softer, less weathered by time and hardship.

"Vlad." He introduced himself with a nod. "And this is my wife, Emory."

Emory, a vibrant woman with the most beautiful, tanned skin, beamed at me. "We're so glad you're safe, Pippa! Last night must have been harrowing."

I blinked, caught off guard by their warmth. "I...I'm alright."

Abe cleared his throat, bringing the focus back to himself. "Let's get you settled in, shall we?"

As he ushered me toward the stairs, I couldn't help but feel a spark of curiosity. All this time, Abraham Ustinov has been living in a joint-family home?

Who would have thought?

I followed Abe up the stairs, thinking of what I had just witnessed. The family dynamic was so warm and loving, completely at odds with what I'd expected from the

infamous Holy Trinity.

We reached the top of the stairs, encompassed with the heavy silence that had now settled between us. Each step echoed loudly in the hallway until at last, we reached a door at the end of the corridor.

“Your room,” he said, his voice sounding oddly strained. I could feel his eyes on me, intense and unwavering as he opened the door for me.

I hesitated for a moment, feeling the weight of his gaze like a physical touch. The room was bathed in warm golden light filtering through the sheer curtains and was impeccably neat, with a large mahogany bed dominating the space and a cozy armchair by the window.

As we stood at the threshold, our proximity suddenly felt charged with an electric energy that made my heart race. I could practically hear the thudding of it in my ears as he cleared his throat and stepped aside, letting me pass.

I walked in and he followed, placing my bag on my bed.

“Thank you,” I said, turning to face him. “For... everything.”

“Anytime,” he nodded, giving me a small smile.

“So, you live with your family, huh?” I asked, trying to make any attempt at conversation. “That must be nice.”

“It is, until one of the kids has a tantrum,” he chuckled.

“The kids?” I asked, even more surprised at this new revelation.

Abe's smile softened at the mention of the kids. "Yeah, little terrors, but they're family. Keeps things interesting around here. Ivan and Adley have two little toddlers, and Vlad and Emory have the sweetest little baby boy." His expression turned wistful for a moment, a faraway look I couldn't decipher that made me realize there was a side to Abe I hadn't seen before.

"That's lovely, Abe," I said, and watched his attention flicker back to the present.

"Well," he started, rubbing the back of his neck in an uncharacteristically nervous gesture. "I'll leave you to settle in now. But would you like to join us for dinner tonight? The food's always good."

"Oh, Abe," I protested, suddenly feeling strange. "I don't want to intrude on your family time. I could just go out and grab a meal, or eat in my room."

"Go out and eat a meal?" He raised his eyebrow incredulously. "I'm supposed to be protecting you, remember?"

I groaned playfully and pretended to look disappointed.

"Come on," Abe encouraged me gently. "You've got to eat, and besides, it'll help take your mind off things. Not to mention, we're all pretty bored of listening to the same stories around the dinner table. I know that Adley and Emory would certainly be glad to have another woman for company."

I pondered his invitation, feeling a mix of apprehension and curiosity tugging at me. The idea of sitting down to dinner with the infamous Unholy Trinity and their wives felt like stepping into a lion's den. But there was an underlying sense of safety in Abe's presence, a feeling that maybe, just maybe, I could let my guard down for a moment in this warm, familial setting and perhaps even have a good time.

"Alright," I relented with a soft smile, giving in to his persistent charm. "I'll have dinner with you all."

Abe smiled, a flicker of joy crossing his features. "Great, I'll see you downstairs in an hour then."

He turned to leave but paused at the doorway, looking back at me.

"You can explore or rest if you want. Just... don't wander into Ivan's man cave unless you want to be scarred for life," he teased, a playful glint in his eyes.

"Oh, I wouldn't dare," I chuckled and watched him till he closed the door behind him.

I walked over to the bed and flipped down on my back, staring up at the ceiling with a small smile on my face. Never, in a million years, had I expected this to be Abe Ustinov's life away from work.

And tonight, I was dining with his family.

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An hour later, I poured my sisters-in-law a glass of wine each and got away with muttering the occasional observation, but the whole time, my eyes kept darting toward the door.

Where was Pippa? Should I have gone and invited her down herself? Was she lost?

Finally, I saw the door open and watched a hesitant Pippa enter the drawing room, her eyes darting around like a lost kitten in a thunderstorm.

"Oh, Pippa! So glad you could join us," Emory said, raising her glass in the air in welcome. My brothers and Adley turned to her with smiles, but she didn't take one step forward. She just stood there and smiled nervously.

Clearly, she needed help feeling comfortable.

"Settled into your room alright?" I asked, approaching her with what I hoped was a reassuring smile.

She nodded, her gorgeous green eyes meeting mine briefly before flitting away. "Yes, thank you. It's lovely."

I could practically feel the nervousness radiating off her in waves. Despite being our guest, she looked ready to bolt at any moment. Can't have that, can we?

"How about a drink?" I offered, gesturing to the bar. "Might help take the edge off."

A flicker of relief crossed her face. "That would be nice, actually."

As I poured her a glass of red wine, I couldn't help but admire the way her pencil skirt hugged her curves. Damn, this woman was trouble with a capital T.

"Here you go," I said, handing her the glass. Our fingers brushed, and I felt a jolt of electricity. What the hell was that?

Pippa took a sip, her red lipstick leaving a mark on the glass. "Thank you, Abe."

"There's a whole bottle waiting where that came from," I gave her a wink.

She gave a small smile, and I guided her to the couch where the rest of my family was gathered. As we sat down, I noticed how she smoothed her skirt, ever the picture of propriety.

The conversation flowed easily enough, with my brothers and their wives doing most of the talking. Pippa chimed in occasionally, her responses polite but reserved. I found myself wanting to draw her out more, to see what I knew lurked beneath that prim exterior.

Before I knew it, we were being called to dinner. As we made our way to the dining room, I placed my hand on the small of Pippa's back, guiding her. She stiffened slightly at the contact but didn't pull away.

Once seated at the table, Pippa's manners were impeccable as she complimented the food and decor.

"The roast is absolutely delicious, Adley," she said to my sister-in-law.

Adley beamed. "Oh, thank you, it's an old family recipe."

I watched as Pippa exchanged pleasantries with each member of my family, her

posture straight as a rod. It was like watching a perfectly choreographed dance.

Vlad leaned over to me, speaking low enough that only I could hear. "Christ, she's young, isn't she? Can't be more than what, 26? 27?"

I nodded, my eyes still on Pippa as she laughed politely at one of Ivan's jokes. "28, actually. But yeah, she's young."

Yes, Pippa was young, and yes, she was clearly out of her element—something Vlad didn't have to say, but I knew he implied. Yet there was a strength in her that I admired. She was holding her own in a room full of hardened people, and doing it with grace.

As the evening progressed, I noticed Pippa's shoulders gradually relaxing, her laughter becoming more genuine. My family had that effect on people—when we weren't busy being ruthless out there, we could be surprisingly charming.

"So, Pippa," Ivan said, leaning forward with a curious glint in his eye, "has our Abe been behaving himself?"

Pippa suddenly looked fresh, her naughty mind working overtime. "Have you ever seen him behave himself?" she replied with a nonchalance that made the whole room laugh.

"Well, at least someone's honest," Vlad said rather loudly with a grin, earning himself a swift kick under the table from me.

Pippa's lips twitched, fighting a smile. She had noticed. I swear, nothing missed her eye.

She opened her mouth to say something when suddenly, the dining room door burst

open.

Two small whirlwinds of energy came barreling in—my niece and nephew, still in their pajamas. "Daddy!" they shrieked, making a beeline for Ivan.

I expected Pippa to recoil from the sudden chaos, but to my surprise, her face lit up. "Well, hello there," she said softly as she got out of her chair and crouched on the ground to meet them at their level, her entire demeanor changing as she addressed the children.

My niece, ever the bold one, marched right up to Pippa. "Who you?" she demanded.

"I'm Pippa," she replied, her voice warm and gentle. "And who might you be?"

"Lily," she said rather cutely. She had just learned how to talk and could spring together two or three words at the time.

"Like the flower?" Pippa's eyes widened with joy, and Lily squealed happy agreements.

As I watched Pippa interact with the kids, her natural affinity for them was obvious. Gone was the prim woman, replaced by someone childlike in spirit. It was... unexpected. And oddly appealing.

Just as the kids were warming up to their new friend, the nanny appeared in the doorway, looking flustered. "I'm so sorry," she began, but Pippa shook her head.

"Oh I'm sad to see you go," Pippa said, giving the children one last hug before they were ushered out. "But I will see you tomorrow!"

As the door closed behind them, I caught a wistful look in her eye that made me

wonder what she had going on through that pretty little head of hers.

The moment passed quickly, but it left me with a new curiosity for Pippa Burrows. I also noticed that my siblings suddenly seemed more comfortable around her, as though her affinity for children made her easier to have as a house guest.

I couldn't tear my eyes away from Pippa as she seamlessly slipped back into conversation with my family. The way she laughed at Ivan's dry humor, the attentive nod she gave Adley's gardening anecdotes—it suddenly seemed like she'd known them for years, not hours.

"So, Pippa." Vlad leaned in, a mischievous glint in his eye. "Any embarrassing stories about our dear brother here?"

My jaw clenched. Vlad knew damn well Pippa and I barely knew each other. But before I could interject, Pippa's melodious laugh filled the air.

"Oh, I'm sure there are plenty," she said, those green eyes flickering to me. "But he's kind of in with my boss, so..." she shrugged.

"Hey, we're in with your boss, too," Vlad protested.

"True," Pippa nodded. "But I don't have to deal with you when I go back to work."

I smirked, oddly pleased by her quick thinking. But as I watched her easy banter with my brothers, a strange twist in my gut caught me off guard. Was I... jealous of this camaraderie between them? Ridiculous. I shook it off, focusing instead on the way her hands moved when she spoke of things that she was passionate about.

"Emory," Pippa suddenly exclaimed looking ahead at the shelf, "is that a first edition Austen on your bookshelf?"

My sister-in-law's face lit up. "You've got a good eye! Are you a fan?"

"Am I ever," Pippa gushed, her proper facade melting away. "I've read 'Pride and Prejudice' so many times, I practically have it memorized."

"Oh, don't get her started," I groaned playfully. "We'll be here all night listening to Emory wax poetic about Darcy and Elizabeth."

Pippa raised an eyebrow at me. "And what's wrong with that, Abraham Ustinov? The big, bad wolf is scared of a little romance?"

The table erupted in laughter, and I found myself chuckling along, captivated by the sparkle in Pippa's eyes. Who was this woman, and how had she managed to charm my entire family in one evening?

As the last of the plates were picked up by the housekeeper, I caught Pippa stifling a yawn. The evening had stretched on, and I could see the fatigue etching lines around her eyes. I stood, my chair scraping against the hardwood floor.

"I think it's time we call it a night," I announced, extending my hand to Pippa. "Let me show you to your room."

She hesitated for a moment, her green eyes searching mine before she placed her soft hand in my calloused one. The simple touch sent a jolt through me, and I had to resist the urge to pull her closer.

"Thank you all for a lovely evening," Pippa said, her voice warm as she addressed my family. "It's been... unexpected, but wonderful. You truly should have let me help you clear up."

“Nonsense!” Adley said and rose to kiss her on the cheek.

We said our goodnights, and I led Pippa out of the dining room, hyper-aware of her presence beside me as we climbed the stairs. The silence between us crackled with unspoken words and lingering glances.

"You surprised me tonight," I admitted as we reached the landing. "I've never seen anyone win over the Ustinovs so quickly."

Pippa's lips quirked into a small smile. "Is that a compliment, Abe? I didn't think you were capable of those."

I chuckled, shaking my head. "Don't get used to it, princess. I have a reputation to maintain."

We reached her door, and I found myself reluctant to let her go. My hand hovered near the small of her back, not quite touching but close enough to feel the heat radiating from her body.

"Well," Pippa said softly, her hand on the doorknob. "I suppose this is goodnight."

I swallowed hard, fighting the urge to invite her to my room. The need to have her close warred with my respect for her boundaries. "Sleep well, Pippa," I managed, my voice rougher than I intended. "If you need anything... I'm just down the hall."

Her eyes widened slightly, and for a moment, I thought I saw a flicker of yearning in their depths. But then she nodded, slipping into her room with a quiet "Goodnight, Abe."

As the door clicked shut, I leaned against the wall, running a hand through my hair. What the hell was happening to me? This woman had me tied in knots

I pushed off the wall, my mind reeling as I walked down the dimly lit hallway. The evening replayed in my head like a film reel, each frame focused on Pippa—her shy smile as she entered the drawing room, the way her eyes lit up when she laughed at Emory's jokes, how natural she looked hugging one of the toddlers.

Fuck. When had she become so important to me? I'd tried to keep her at arm's length, but somehow she'd wormed her way under my skin. She stirred something in me I'd long thought dormant, and I didn't yet have a word for it.

I was so lost in thought that I nearly collided with Vlad as I rounded the corner.

"Whoa there, Brother," he said, steadying me with a hand on my arm. His eyes narrowed as he took in my expression. "You look like you've seen a ghost. Everything alright?"

I grunted, trying to brush past him. "Fine. Just tired."

Vlad wasn't having it. He blocked my path, arms crossed over his chest. "Bullshit. This is about Pippa, isn't it?"

I tensed, my fists clenching at my sides. "What about her?"

"Come on, Abe," Vlad said, his voice softening. "I saw how you looked at her during dinner. What are your intentions with her?"

"My intentions?" I scoffed, but even to my own ears, it sounded weak. "She's just—"

"Just what?" Vlad pressed. "Because from where I'm standing, she's not 'just' anything to you anymore. You said you wanted to protect her? We have men capable of doing that. Hell, the Vadims could have her under watch every second of every day. It's more than that, isn't it?"

I ran a hand over my face, suddenly feeling every one of my forty-six years. "I don't know, alright? She's... different."

"Different?" He cocked a curious eyebrow in my direction.

I leaned against the wall, the cool surface grounding me as I struggled to find the right words. "She's not like anyone I've ever met," I admitted, my voice low. "She challenges me, calls me on my bullshit. And yet..."

Vlad raised an eyebrow. "And yet?"

"And yet she's got this softness to her. The way she was with the kids earlier..." I trailed off, remembering how Pippa's green eyes had lit up, her laughter mingling with the children's squeals. "It does something to me, seeing that side of her."

My brother's expression softened. "Sounds like you're in deep, Abe."

"Maybe I am," I conceded, surprising myself with the admission. "But she deserves better than me. I'm not exactly relationship material."

Vlad snorted. "And since when has that ever stopped you from going after what you want?"

His words hit home, and I felt a familiar resolve settling in my chest. Pippa might be different from any woman I'd known, but that didn't mean I couldn't rise to the challenge. If anything, it made me want to try harder.

"You're right," I said, straightening up. "She's important to me, Vlad. More than I thought possible. But until I figure out what I want, I just need to keep her around."

"You do that," he said. "But don't take too long deciding what you want. Good

women have a way of tiring from the wait.”

As Vlad clapped me on the shoulder and headed off to bed, I made my way back to my room, my mind whirling from his parting words.

Lying in bed, staring at the ceiling, I realized I had a lot to figure out. My feelings for Pippa, how to navigate this new territory of actually caring for someone beyond a fleeting attraction.

How the hell am I going to figure things out?

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

I stretched, feeling the stiffness in my muscles. I'd barely slept the last few days—too much uncertainty hanging over me like a fog I couldn't shake. My phone sat on the nightstand, taunting me. I half-expected a message from work, but I knew better. Abe had told Vlad Vadim what happened, and Vlad insisted I don't be bothered.

"Ugh," I groaned and shoved my face in the pillow. I'd been indoors for almost a week now and frankly? I was starting to feel batshit crazy.

"This is temporary," I muttered, and forced myself to lift my head off the pillow. "Just until things blow over."

But even as I said it, something in the pit of my stomach told me that accepting this current situation wasn't going to be that easy. The Vadims—my so-called family—were in danger, and here I was, tucked away in a mansion living with a man I barely knew. A man who made me alternately want to strangle him and kiss him. Great.

I let out a breath, pushing the gloom away. Time to make the best of this forced vacation. Might as well get to know the estate and find something to do to fill my days since I'd be stuck here for the foreseeable future.

I rummaged through my suitcase, avoiding my usual office attire—those pencil skirts and blouses that screamed: "I'm in charge." Today, I went for leggings and an oversized sweater. Comfort over style. Though I did feel kind of naked without any makeup and my signature red lipstick.

"You're not at the office, Pippa," I told myself, grabbing a brush and working

through the knots in my hair. “No need for war paint today.”

I took a deep breath, trying to steady myself. Then, with a soft sigh, I stepped into the hallway. My mind was already buzzing with curiosity. Down the corridor or down the stairs—which way should I go?

“Left it is,” I muttered, playing a quick game of eeny meeny miny moe and setting off toward the stairs.

The house felt strange—grand, but strange. Like I didn’t belong here. The walls were lined with photos of people I recognized and many I didn’t, and every corner had some kind of ornate vase, each piece whispering to me, you’re not supposed to be here . Yet, somehow, there was a warmth to the place too.

I trailed my fingers along the banister and reached the floor below. As I passed a cozy reading nook by the window, I couldn’t help but mutter to myself, “Well, if only I could find some books.”

A strange impulse came over me to find Abe. He could have told me if they had a library around here somewhere. But the thought of Abe... The one guy in this house I barely knew but somehow felt like I do know, took over my mind again. Where was he right now? Doing God knows what for the Bratva, probably. He left for work every morning and the hypocrisy of it didn’t escape me.

Sure, Tony had come after me. But Abe was the one who killed Tony, wasn’t he? He had way more enemies at his heels than I did, and yet he got to go out and work while I was stuck in his home, left to my own devices. Talk about double standards.

I sighed and made my way to the drawing room, sinking into a plush armchair and letting my head fall back. "You’re bored out of your mind, Pippa," I said, trying to shake off the restless feeling gnawing at me. Did I really have to be stuck watching

TV all day again?

I missed work. I missed the rhythm of my days, the constant ticking off of tasks. Hell, I even missed dealing with difficult patrons. At least it was something real to focus on.

"Well, well, what do we have here?" a cheerful voice broke through my brooding.

I looked up to see Adley and Emory saunter into the room.

"Oh dear," I said, straightening in my seat. "I hope I'm not intruding."

Emory waved her hand dismissively. "Nonsense! This house could use some fresh blood. It's been ages since we've had a new face around here."

"Seriously," Adley added, plonking down on the couch. "The house feels so quiet with the men gone and the kids down for a nap."

My heart leaped at the prospect of having company.

"I know," Emory said. "They've been gone for what, three days now?"

"The first day always feels like we finally have some peace and quiet around here," Adley laughed. "But then it gets harder not having them around."

I nodded, knowing exactly what they meant. During the first two nights here, we had all shared dinner together. Now, things were quieter, and the two women sitting in front of me had busy lives of their own.

I had come to understand that Adley helped with her family's business and managed her husband's finances, while Emory, a psychotherapist, still saw a handful of clients

each week. When they weren't immersed in their work, their children took up much of their time.

"How long do you think they'll be gone?" I asked, carefully.

The women exchanged loaded glances before Adley spoke up, "It's hard to say."

I saw a flicker of worry cross over Emory's face. I could only imagine how difficult this must be for them, to know what their husbands do on a daily basis, being aware of how unsafe their line of work could be.

I nodded and fidgeted with the hem of my sweater, unsure of what to do next. The silence in the room was a bit awkward until Emory's eyes lit up.

"Hey, why don't we show you around the estate?" she suggested with a warm smile. "It's quite big, and you've been cooped up here for days. It might be nice to stretch your legs and see more of the place."

Adley's face mirrored her enthusiasm, and I couldn't help but feel grateful for their company. "That sounds wonderful," I replied with a smile, feeling a flicker of excitement at the prospect of exploring beyond the confines of the mansion.

As we embarked on our impromptu tour, Emory and Adley shared stories about the history of the estate, pointing out hidden nooks and crannies that held special significance.

"You see that Gazebo there?" Emory pointed at a beautiful spot in the garden, surrounded by blooming roses and a bubbling fountain. "That's where Vlad gave a speech to a crowd of a hundred on our first wedding anniversary," she reminisced, a soft smile gracing her lips.

Adley chuckled, her eyes sparkling with mischief. "And I tripped over my own feet the first time Ivan brought me here. Graceful as ever."

I couldn't help but laugh along with them, feeling a sense of camaraderie growing between us as they continued to share snippets of their lives with me. It was refreshing to see this side of them, away from the shadows of their husbands' dangerous world.

Eventually, we sat down for a cup of tea in the garden, which the staff brought out.

"You know," Emory said. "You should have your friends over sometimes. Make the best of being stuck on these grounds."

A sense of wistfulness overcame me, and I felt a tight knot in my throat. Emory and Adley exchanged quick glances before Emory added. "Of course, it might be a little too soon right now. Whenever you're ready." She reached over and squeezed my hand.

Without even having had to say, Emory understood that this was all too much to explain. Her intelligence went deeper than I thought.

Just then, with her sweet way of helping me change my train of thought, Adley leaned in conspiratorially. "So, Pippa, ready for some Ustinov brothers gossip?"

I couldn't help but laugh. "I'm all ears."

"Well," Adley said, setting down a tray of steaming cups, "let me tell you about the time Ivan tried to surprise me with a romantic dinner."

I sipped my tea, relishing the warmth and company. Adley's eyes danced with mirth as she recounted, "He spent hours in the kitchen, determined to cook everything

himself. When I came home, the entire house was filled with smoke, and Ivan was standing there, covered in flour, holding a fire extinguisher."

We all burst into laughter, and I found myself relaxing for the first time in days.

Emory shook her head, grinning. "At least Ivan tries. Vlad's idea of romance is upgrading our home security system."

"Really?" I asked, intrigued by this glimpse into their lives.

"Oh yes," Emory nodded. "He's always been the serious one. But..." Her voice softened. "...He shows he cares in his own way."

The mood shifted slightly, and I noticed yet another flicker of concern in both women's eyes.

"It's not always easy," Adley admitted, her smile fading. "Knowing what they do, the dangers they face..."

Emory reached out, squeezing Adley's hand. "But we knew what we were getting into, right?"

I felt a knot form in my stomach, thinking of them out there, doing God knows what. "How do you cope with the worry?" I asked, my voice barely above a whisper.

They exchanged a knowing look before Adley replied, "We trust in their abilities, and in each other. It's all we can do."

There was a moment of somber silence before Emory perked up. "Speaking of the brothers," she said, a mischievous glint returning to her eye, "what's the deal with you and Abe?"

I nearly choked on my tea. "What? There's no... deal. He's just keeping me safe."

But even as the words left my mouth, I felt a twinge of doubt. Was it really just professional? The way my heart raced when he entered a room, how safe I felt in his presence... No, I couldn't go there. I shook my head, trying to clear my thoughts.

"Uh-huh," Adley smirked. "You know, in all the years we've known Abe, he's never brought a woman home before."

"Never?" I couldn't hide my surprise.

"Nope," Emory confirmed. "You must be pretty special, Pippa."

I felt my cheeks burning. "I'm sure it's not like that. He probably just feels responsible for me."

"If you say so, Honey." Adley winked, clearly unconvinced.

I changed the subject, desperate to steer the conversation away from Abe and the confusing emotions he stirred in me. We chatted for a while longer, until eventually, the women left to check in on the kids.

I decided to stay back and wander the garden. The fresh air was a welcome respite after being cooped up inside. I breathed deeply, savoring the scent of blooming roses and freshly cut grass.

I settled onto a wrought-iron bench, running my fingers along its intricate scrollwork. The sun warmed my face, and for the first time since arriving at the estate, I felt my shoulders relax. My conversation with Adley and Emory had left me feeling more at ease and less like an outsider.

The sudden crunch of gravel snapped me out of my quiet moment. My heart leaped into my throat as I heard the unmistakable sound of a car pulling up to the estate. I stood up, smoothing down my blouse with trembling hands. Were they back?

I moved toward the driveway, my legs moving fast. The sleek black SUV came to a stop, and I held my breath, waiting.

The driver's door swung open, and there he was. Abe stepped out all alone, his brothers nowhere in sight. My eyes widened as I took in the disheveled sight of him—his usually immaculate suit was rumpled, and there were dark stains of blood splattered across his white shirt.

"Oh my God, Abe!" I cried out, my feet carrying me toward him before I could even think. "Are you okay?"

His blue-gray eyes locked onto mine, and I saw him hesitate. "Pippa," he said, his voice gruff. "What are you doing out here?"

I reached him, my hands hovering uncertainly over his chest, afraid to touch him. "Never mind that. You're hurt! What happened? Who did this to you?"

He tried to step forward and stumbled, clutching his abdomen. Shit, he was putting on a show and injured worse than he's letting on.

"Pippa, I'll manage," Abram growled in frustration. "Go inside."

"I couldn't just sit around after seeing you like this," I retorted, my worry for him overriding any fear. "Come," I insisted, putting his hand over my shoulder. "We're going to head inside and take care of this."

He nodded, the pain evident in the grimace around his lips as I helped him inside. I

had so many questions that needed answers, but for now, all I could focus on was getting Abe patched up.

Adley and Emory appeared in the hallway, their expressions shifting from surprise to concern as they took in Abe's state. Without a word, Adley hurried ahead, ushering us into a well-lit room that seemed to double as a makeshift medical bay. I felt a strange sadness watching them because they understood Abe returned without his brothers. Right now, they must be shitting bricks wondering what happened and whether Ivan and Vlad were safe.

“I’ve got this, go,” I told them gently, knowing they needed to make calls, and even if they wished to stay, something in my expression must have told them to trust me. Without a word, they left the room. I sighed with relief that at least Abe was back home.

I turned back to him, my heart crushing beneath all the emotions running through me: Rage at whoever did to him, anger that he didn’t watch out for himself, and guilt for being so damn grateful he’s back safe when his brothers are still out doing god knows what.

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The sting of antiseptic bit into my wounds as I watched Pippa pace the medical room, her heels clicking a nervous rhythm on the tile floor in her attempt to collect more supplies. How the hell did I end up here?

I shifted on the chair, wincing as the movement pulled at my bruised ribs. Pippa's gaze snapped to me, worry etched across her pretty features. Even flustered, she was a sight to behold—all lush curves and warm eyes that seemed to see right through my bullshit.

"You should be in your room, not wearing a hole in the floor," I said, trying for a cocky grin. It probably looked more like a grimace.

She crossed her arms, red-painted lips pursing. "And you should have called ahead and called for a doctor since you were hurt instead of trying to sneak in like some kind of wounded alley cat."

I chuckled, then immediately regretted it as pain lanced through my side. "Meow?"

Pippa rolled her eyes, but I caught the hint of a smile. "This isn't funny, Abe. You could have internal bleeding or—"

"I'm fine," I interrupted, waving off her concern. "Nothing a bottle of vodka and a good night's sleep won't fix."

Her lips thinned, clearly unimpressed by my bravado. I sighed, remembering how I'd ended up in this predicament in the first place.

Just an hour ago, I'd been sitting in the back of my car, instructing my driver in no uncertain terms to keep his mouth shut about my condition.

"Not a word to anyone, Dmitri. I'll handle this myself," I'd growled, pressing a hand to my bleeding side. I had planned to sneak into my room.

"But sir," Dmitri had protested, eyes wide in the rearview mirror, "you need medical attention—"

"What I need," I'd cut him off, "is for you to do your damn job and drive. I'll slip into my room and patch myself up. No one needs to know about this little...incident."

I'd always prided myself on handling my own messes. As the muscle of the Unholy Trinity, it was my job to get my hands dirty. But this time, things had gotten a bit messier than anticipated. Still, no reason to worry the others. I had a reputation to uphold, after all.

As I stepped out of the car, wincing at the pain shooting through my side, I froze. There, standing in the driveway with her arms crossed and a worried frown on her face was Pippa. She rushed toward me, face etched with concern.

Before I could protest, she'd looped my arm around her shoulder, supporting my weight. I had to admit, I was impressed by her strength. For all her prim and proper appearance, Pippa was no delicate flower.

"Come on, you stubborn man," she muttered, leading me toward the house. "Let's get you cleaned up."

Back in the present, I watched as Pippa gently dabbed at a particularly nasty gash on my arm. Her touch was surprisingly tender, a stark contrast to her earlier brusqueness.

"You know," I drawled, trying to lighten the mood, "if I'd known getting beaten up was the way to get your hands on me, I'd have done it sooner."

Pippa rolled her eyes, but I caught the hint of a smile. "This isn't funny, Abe. You could have been hurt worse or—"

"I'm fine," I interrupted softly, not allowing her mind to go there.

Pippa's eyes flashed with annoyance as she pressed the antiseptic-soaked cloth against a particularly deep cut on my ribs. I hissed, more from surprise than pain.

"Damn it, Abe," she muttered, her eyes flickering to mine with concern. "What the hell happened out there?"

I leaned back slightly, giving her room to work as I recounted the events that led to my current sorry state. "Just a little scuffle with some unwanted guests," I replied nonchalantly, though inwardly, I cursed my luck. "We were on track to finding the man you saw with Tony when these goons tried to circumvent us."

"Someone was protecting him," she observed, with that keen eye of hers.

"I told Ivan and Vlad to hang back while I handled it," I explained, watching Pippa's expression shift from worry to curiosity. "You should've seen it, Doll. Five of them, thinking they could take me on. Man, I put on quite the show, you know? Had them begging for their lives, but then others joined in."

I leaned in closer, lowering my voice conspiratorially. "First guy came at me with a knife. Amateur move. I had him disarmed and on the ground before he knew what hit him."

As I recounted the fight, I could feel the adrenaline pumping through my veins again.

"The second and third, they tried to double-team me. But I'm not called the muscle of the Unholy Trinity for nothing."

I demonstrated a quick one-two punch, careful not to jostle Pippa as she worked. "Left hook to the jaw, right uppercut to the solar plexus. They went down like dominoes."

Pippa's hands stilled for a moment, her eyes wide. I couldn't tell if it was admiration or horror in her gaze, but I pressed on.

"The last two, well, they were the smart ones. Tried to run." I chuckled, then winced as the movement pulled at my injuries. "But not smart enough."

For a moment, I let the cocky grin slip, admitting, "Though I'll give them credit, that last big bastard got in a few good hits before I put him down."

I gestured to the gash Pippa was tending. "Hence the souvenir."

"Not much for a souvenir, is it now?" she hissed back. Was that fear and anger I heard in her voice?

I sat back while she continued to clean. "What happened then?" she asked.

"Well, Ivan and Vlad are on the heels of the second group that helped this bunch. We lost track of the man from the casino's whereabouts."

She sighed in disappointment. There truly wasn't much else to be said. The room fell silent as Pippa finished cleaning the last of my cuts. I watched her delicate fingers work, noticing how her brow furrowed in concentration. It struck me then how much trust I was placing in her—something I rarely did outside of my brothers and the Vadims.

After she was done bandaging my arm, she turned to me with a question burrowed in her brows.

“What?” I asked, out of curiosity.

“Why did you... let yourself get so involved when things turned south? You should have left the fight before...” She motioned at all my injuries.

I regarded Pippa for a moment. It wasn't often that someone questioned my actions, especially not with genuine concern like she was displaying now.

Leaning back against the medical room table, I let out a sigh. "I couldn't just walk away, Pippa. Loyalty means something in our world," I said, my voice quieter than before. "The Unholy Trinity, the Vadims... we've got each other's backs, no questions asked."

Pippa's green eyes met mine, a flicker of understanding passing between us. "I get that," she replied softly. "The Vadims... they're more than just employers to me."

I raised an eyebrow, curiosity piqued. "Oh yeah? How so?"

She hesitated, her fingers absently tracing the edge of a bandage on my arm. "My aunt and uncle... they weren't exactly the Brady Bunch," she said with a bitter laugh. "My aunt and uncle used me as their personal ATM. They treated me like I was nothing more than a burden."

My jaw clenched, a wave of anger surging through me at the thought of anyone mistreating her. "Sounds like they need a visit from the Unholy Trinity," I growled.

Pippa's lips curved into a small smile. "As tempting as that is, the Vadims already took care of it. They gave me a job, a purpose... a family." Her voice softened. "They

showed me what loyalty really means. Every Christmas, they thought of me. They know about my dreams, keep hiking up my pay. This one time, I was really sick and every single day, I had homemade food at my doorstep. When my family tried to emotionally blackmail me into giving them more money, it was Vlad Vadim and his wife that stopped me."

I nodded, understanding all too well. "Funny how the people society calls 'criminals' can be more stand-up than your own flesh and blood sometimes."

"Exactly," Pippa agreed, her eyes shining with a mixture of gratitude and fierce loyalty. "The Vadims saw something in me when no one else did. I'd do anything for them."

I nodded, my own mind rushing back to the past. "Where were your parents?" I asked, hoping to understand the true extent of her suffering.

She went quiet for a moment, lost in thought, before she sighed. "They died," she said, in a choked voice. "When I was only six. I barely remember them, just snippets of moments that seem like dreams now."

The pain flickered in her eyes. Now, I understood why she had those high walls around her, why she used them as armor.

"Oh, Pip," I murmured, the sadness heavy in the air. "I lost mine too, when I was young."

"Looks like we've got more in common than I thought," she whispered with a small smile. "And clearly, the Vadims are intent on picking up all the orphans they possibly can."

I found myself laughing at her attempt to lighten the mood, deeply admiring the

courage she just displayed. “We’re fighters, you know?” I said with a small smile, knowing she’d understand why I didn’t leave the fistfight when things got hard.

“Hopefully, the fight will end someday,” she said, stepping away from me. The conversation had turned heavier than I thought, and I could see her expressions mirroring my sentiments. Sometimes, just when everything is getting better, life has a tendency to remind us of our darkest moments.

“You’re all patched up,” she said, closing the first aid kit. “I recommend food and rest. Go on up. I’ll have the maids bring you some dinner.”

I cleared my throat, desperate to buy a few more minutes with her. “Thank you. I’ve got to say, Nurse Pippa, your bedside manner is much better than Ivan’s. Last time he patched me up, I thought he was trying to finish the job my opponents started.”

Pippa’s lips quirked into a smile, her green eyes sparkling with amusement. “I’ll be sure to let him know you prefer my gentle touch,” she teased, a hint of sass in her voice.

I chuckled, feeling the heaviness in the room dissipate. “Please do. Maybe he’ll finally admit defeat in at least one area.”

She shook her head, still smiling. “You Ustinovs and your competitive streak. It’s a wonder you haven’t turned the whole world into a battleground.”

“Who says we haven’t?” I winked, enjoying the easy banter between us.

As Pippa gathered the stuff to be thrown away, I found myself captivated by her movements. The way she tucked a stray curl behind her ear, the confident set of her shoulders—it all spoke of a strength I hadn’t fully appreciated before.

Without thinking, I reached out and gently caught her hand. The warmth of her skin against mine sent a jolt through my body. "Hey," I said softly, my usual bravado faltering. "Thank you. For this, and... for trusting me with your story."

Pippa's eyes widened slightly, her cheeks flushing a delicate pink. For a moment, we just looked at each other, a current of understanding passing between us. I felt the facade I'd built around myself had started to crack, just a little.

"You're welcome," she whispered, her fingers giving mine a slight squeeze before she pulled away.

As she headed for the door, I found myself already missing her presence. "Same time next week?" I called out, only half-joking.

Pippa turned back, her green eyes twinkling with mischief. "Let's hope not, Mr. Ustinov. I might have to start charging you for these services."

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

My heart pounded as I stepped through the glass doors of the Casino. It had been two weeks since I stepped foot through these doors, but the moment I heard the cacophony of slot machines and excited chatter, I immediately felt like I was back in my element. I smoothed down my pencil skirt, lifted my head up high, and walked into my playground.

However, it didn't take long for me to realize that the usual buzz of excitement that accompanied a night of high-stakes gambling was overshadowed by the increased security presence—hulking men in tailored suits positioned strategically around the room, their eyes constantly scanning for threats.

I nodded at one of the guards, a mountain of a man with a scar running down his left cheek. He returned the gesture, his face impassive.

It was unnerving, knowing that Abe and Vlad had all these men placed around the casino for my safety. Abe knew how bored I was getting at home, getting all listless and dull, and so decided my mental health mattered too.

It wasn't that I wasn't ungrateful. I truly was. But did we really need three dozen men tracking my every move?

I shook my head and weaved through the throng of patrons. When I crossed the blackjack table, Pete looked up and waved. "Pippa!" he yelled. "So good to have you back!"

I walked backward and gave him a small wave. "Good to see you, Pete!"

Behind me, a bartender tapped me on my shoulder. "Good to see you, miss!" he said, smiling from ear to ear. "The bar's been a mess with its stocking system since you left."

I rubbed my hands together in glee, the adrenaline to fix all these problems already running through my veins. "Don't you worry, Matt. It's all going to be sorted out today."

I was back.

After fixing the stocking system that someone had messed up, I approached the high-roller area to check in on the numbers to date when a familiar voice suddenly drawled from behind me, "Enjoying the view, Ms. Burrows?"

I whirled around, my heart leaping into my throat. There stood Abe, looking infuriatingly handsome in a tailored black suit, a knowing smirk playing on his lips.

"Jesus, Abe!" I hissed, pressing a hand to my chest. "Do you always have to sneak up on people like that?"

He chuckled with amusement. "Only the ones I like keeping on their toes."

I rolled my eyes, but couldn't stop the flush creeping up my neck. "Well, consider me thoroughly on my toes. Happy now?"

"Ecstatic," he replied, his gaze sweeping over me in a way that made my skin tingle. "You look lovely tonight, Pippa. Happy."

I smoothed down my pencil skirt, suddenly self-conscious. "I'm here to work, not

fishing for compliments."

"Can't it be both?" Abe asked, stepping closer. His presence was overwhelming, a mix of cologne and raw masculinity that made my head spin.

"Don't you have some important Unholy business to attend to?" I snapped, trying to regain my composure.

He shrugged, it was a casual gesture that somehow managed to highlight the breadth of his shoulders. "Nothing more important than ensuring the safety of my employees."

I snorted, unable to help myself. "Right, because I'm in such danger surrounded by slot machines and poker tables."

Abe's expression darkened slightly, reminding me of the very real threats that necessitated this increased security. "You'd be surprised, Pippa. The most dangerous predators often hide in plain sight. Remember Tony?"

Suddenly, my joy disappeared and I saw danger everywhere. Mission accomplished, I guess?

He gave some parting advice on staying safe, before sauntering away.

The next day passed in a blur of numbers, conversations, and keeping an eye on everything happening in the casino. The security presence didn't deter the high-rollers or the regulars, but it did create an air of tension that crackled beneath the surface.

Just as I was about to head to the break room for a much-needed coffee break, I heard

a commotion near the entrance. Curious, I made my way there and froze when I saw a woman berating one of the guards at the door.

"I don't care who you are! Let me in right now!" she demanded, her voice loud and shrill.

I was about to intervene when from the corner of my eye, I saw Abe push past me. "I'll handle it," he said as he crossed. I frowned, knowing then that he was doing that hovering thing he's so good at.

"What's the problem here?" he demanded. While the security didn't let her through because her new ID didn't have a clear picture, I suddenly remembered I recognized this woman as a regular. I hadn't earlier, but that tattoo and nose ring were too much of a coincidence.

I walked up to Abe and put myself between him and the woman. "I know her," I told him. "She comes often."

"See?" the woman said smugly, glaring Abe down.

"No clear ID. No Admission," Abe reiterated, his hand now on my arm. He turned back his neck and told the guard to see her out.

"Abe, but—"

"I can't keep you safe if you allow such concessions, Pippa," he said with a frustrated growl. "No one enters without a proper check. No one!"

I huffed, frustrated at his stubbornness. "I get it, Abe. But she's a regular. It's just a picture."

Abe's jaw clenched. "Rules are rules, Pippa. I won't risk your safety for anyone."

And that was that.

One evening, as I was making my way through the dimly lit corridors of the casino, I caught sight of Abe leaning against a pillar, his arms crossed over his chest. He looked like a brooding sentinel.

I approached him cautiously, unsure of what to expect. "What are you doing here?" I asked.

His gaze locked onto mine, unwavering and intense. "Making sure you're safe," he replied simply.

I rolled my eyes. "Abe, I'm fine. You don't need to babysit me all the time," I muttered, trying to sound exasperated but secretly enjoying the attention.

The truth was, I had noticed over the past few days how he was always there, watching over me. It pleased me to see him care.

But at the same time, something between us had changed. Since I moved to his place, he hasn't touched me like he did earlier. It was as though that one-night stand was the beginning and end of everything.

At the back of my mind, I knew that that was all it was, a one-night stand. But his hovering was so obvious, that I felt like I was getting mixed signals. He wouldn't have acted this way with anyone...right?

Deep down, I knew there had to be something more. So why wasn't he being

himself?

Lost in my thoughts, I didn't notice that Abe was watching me intently. "Penny for your thoughts?" I heard him ask, and his voice brought me back to the present.

I shook my head, for I had nothing to say. Sensing my troubled mind, Abe's hand came to rest on the small of my back, guiding me to the casino and telling me I needed a break. Despite my annoyance at him deciding whether I needed a break or not, I couldn't deny the thrill that shot through me at his touch.

We made our way to the bar, where Abe insisted on getting me a drink to welcome me back. As he turned to place our order, I found myself studying his profile, admiring the strong line of his jaw, the tattoo creeping up his neck, and the way his dark hair curled slightly at the nape.

Get a grip, Pippa, I scolded myself.

Just then, a statuesque blonde in a slinky red dress sidled up to Abe. "Well, if it isn't the king of the casino himself," she purred, placing a perfectly manicured hand on his arm.

I watched, a knot forming in my stomach, as Abe turned to her with a charming smile. "Natalia, always a pleasure," he said, his voice low and smooth.

The woman—Natalia—laughed at something he said, her hand lingering on his arm. I couldn't hear their conversation over the din of the casino, but the easy familiarity between them was unmistakable.

I gripped my drink tightly, a bitter taste forming in my mouth that had nothing to do with the alcohol. The flutter of attraction I'd felt earlier twisted into something uglier—jealousy, hot and sharp.

It's not like you have any claim on him, I reminded myself harshly. But as I watched Abe lean in close to whisper something in Natalia's ear, her tinkling laughter grating on my nerves, I couldn't shake the irrational surge of possessiveness that washed over me. Maybe this was why he wasn't touching me like he used to. Natalia and others like her.

I downed my drink in one gulp, the burn of alcohol a welcome distraction from the ache in my chest.

Abe turned toward me with a surprised look on his face.

"I have work to do," I pushed my way across him, ignoring his subtle protests. Time to focus on work and forget about Abe Ustinov and his infuriating charm. After all, I had a job to do, and I'd be damned if I let some schoolgirl crush get in the way of that.

I threw myself into work with a vengeance, determined to ignore the way my heart skipped every time Abe entered the room. Spreadsheets became my new best friends, and I buried myself in financial reports like they held the secrets to the universe.

"Pippa, I need those projections by—" Abe's deep voice cut through my concentration.

"On your desk in an hour," I interrupted, not bothering to look up from my computer screen. My fingers flew over the keyboard, the clacking of keys a soothing rhythm.

"Pippa, is everything—"

"If that's all, Abraham, I have quite a bit to get through." My tone was clipped,

professional to a fault.

I heard him sigh, and could almost feel the weight of his gaze on me. "Right. Carry on, then."

As his footsteps faded, I allowed myself a quick glance. Abe's broad shoulders were tense, his jaw clenched as he strode away. A small, petty part of me felt satisfied at his obvious frustration.

Days passed in a blur of numbers and charts. I was so focused on my work at the coffee shop that I didn't notice the casino had quietened until a large hand landed on my shoulder, making me jump.

"Jesus, Abe!" I yelped, spinning on the high stool to face him. "You scared the hell out of me."

He loomed over me, his blue-gray eyes stormy. "We need to talk."

I swallowed hard, suddenly very aware of how alone we were. "I'm busy."

"It's 2 AM, Pippa. You've been 'busy' for three days and leave for work before I wake up and return after I get home." His voice softened slightly. "What's going on with you?"

I stood, needing to feel less vulnerable. "Nothing's 'going on.' I'm just doing my job."

Abe's eyes narrowed. "Bullshit. You've been avoiding me like I'm carrying the plague. Did I do something to piss you off?"

My resolve wavered under his intense gaze. How could I tell him the truth without sounding like a jealous teenager?

Well, I better get out with it, because otherwise I'd come across as being petty and I certainly didn't want to gain an upper hand.

I took a deep breath, my pent-up emotions finally boiling over. "Fine, you want to know? I'm sick of watching you flirt with every woman who bats her eyelashes at you!" The words came out sharper than I intended, my voice trembling with anger. "That blonde at the bar? Real classy, Abe. Did you enjoy her fawning all over you?"

Abe's eyes widened for a moment before narrowing again, processing my outburst. To my surprise and irritation, a slow smile spread across his face. "Is that what this is about? You're jealous?"

His amusement only fueled my frustration. "Don't flatter yourself," I snapped, even as I felt a blush creeping up my neck. "I just think it's unprofessional. You're supposed to be running security, not hosting a dating show."

Abe's smile faded, replaced by a more serious expression. He took a step closer, and I resisted the urge to back away. "Pippa, listen to me," he said, his voice low and intense. "That woman at the bar? She's a regular. I was being friendly, nothing more. Hell, she's happily married with three kids."

I blinked, caught off guard by his explanation. "But... you were laughing, and she touched your arm..."

"Because she was telling me about her kid's latest science fair disaster," Abe said, a hint of exasperation in his voice. "Christ, Pippa, do you really think I'd be interested in anyone else when you're around?"

His words hit me like a punch to the gut. I stared at him, my anger faltering as I processed what he'd just said. "What... what do you mean?"

Abe ran a hand through his dark hair, looking uncharacteristically flustered. "I mean, you're the only woman who's been occupying my thoughts lately. And it's driving me fucking crazy."

I felt my heart racing, unsure how to respond. Part of me wanted to believe him, while another part screamed that this was too good to be true. "But... you're always surrounded by beautiful women," I said weakly, hating how insecure I sounded.

"And none of them hold a candle to you," Abe said firmly, his blue-gray eyes boring into mine. "You're smart, fierce, and sexy as hell. Why would I want anyone else?"

I stood there, speechless, as the sincerity of his words washed over me. My anger had evaporated, replaced by a mixture of confusion and hope. "I... I don't know what to say," I admitted, my voice barely above a whisper.

I took a deep breath, my bottle-green eyes meeting his intense gaze. "It's not just that, Abe," I confessed, my voice softening. "You've been keeping your distance, and I... I'm tired of it. This push and pull between us, it's exhausting. Since that night we kissed, you've always been around but never in the same way. No innocent kisses, no lingering touches. Nothing."

My words hung in the air, heavy with the weight of unspoken emotions. I watched as Abe's expression shifted, his usual arrogance giving way to something more vulnerable. He stepped closer, the scent of his cologne making my head spin.

"Pippa," he murmured, his voice low and rough. "I didn't mean to push you away. I thought..."

"You thought what?" I pressed, my heart hammering in my chest.

"I thought I should give you space," he admitted. "You moved into my house the

night after we slept together and I didn't want you to think I had any ulterior motives. I didn't want to put you in a position where you felt taken advantage of. I didn't want to cross any lines."

I couldn't help but let out a small, incredulous laugh. "Since when does Abraham Ustinov worry about crossing lines?"

A slow smile spread across his face, reminiscent of the cocky grin I'd grown accustomed to. "Since you, apparently."

"Since me?" my voice came out in a whimper, while my heart soared like a rocket.

Unbelievable. Abe Ustinov had been thinking of me this whole time. He'd been putting me first. Right about then, I was the happiest woman alive.

Before I could respond, Abe reached out, his fingers brushing against my cheek in a surprisingly tender gesture. I felt my breath hitch, my body instinctively leaning into his touch. The air between us crackled with tension, and I found myself hyper-aware of every detail—the warmth of his hand, the intensity in his eyes, the way his tattoos peeked out from beneath his crisp shirt sleeve.

"Abe," I whispered, my voice trembling slightly. "What are we doing?"

His thumb traced my jawline, sending shivers down my spine. "Something we should have done a long time ago," he murmured, his gaze dropping to my lips.

My heart raced as Abe closed the remaining distance between us with a determined stride. His hands cupped my face, rough calluses contrasting with the gentleness of his touch. I could feel the warmth of his breath on my skin as his lips hovered just above mine.

"Pippa," he murmured, his voice low and husky. "I promise you, I'll not be keeping my distance again. Not from you."

I swallowed hard, my eyes locked on his. "You better mean that, Ustinov," I managed to say, trying to inject some sass into my voice despite the tremor I couldn't quite hide.

A hint of his signature smirk played at the corner of his mouth. "Oh, I mean it, Sweetheart."

Before I could ask what that meant, Abe's lips crashed into mine. The kiss was everything I'd imagined and more —passionate, consuming, a culmination of all our pent-up emotions and unspoken desires. His hands slid into my hair, messing up the curls I'd spent an hour perfecting this morning, but I couldn't bring myself to care.

I gripped the lapels of his perfectly tailored suit, pulling him closer as I returned the kiss with equal fervor. The world around us faded away until there was nothing but Abe and the fire he ignited within me.

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I broke away from the kiss, my chest heaving while I struggled to catch my breath. All the sounds rushed back. My eyes, still hazy with desire, swept across the bustling casino floor.

Fuck. We were still in public.

I wanted nothing more than to pull her close and claim those luscious lips once more. Damn those prying eyes!

I grabbed Pippa's hand and leaned in close, whispering, "Not here," unable to keep the mischievous grin off my face. I needed to get her out of here, somewhere more private, to show her exactly what I meant when I said I wouldn't be giving her space anymore.

Pippa's eyebrow arched, a hint of sass in her voice as she murmured, "Oh? And where exactly did you have in mind, Mr. Ustinov?"

I chuckled, drinking in the sight of her flushed cheeks and the way her ample curves strained against that tantalizing pencil skirt. "Somewhere more... private. Unless you'd prefer to give these fine folks a show?"

Her green eyes widened, excitement flashing across her face. "You wouldn't dare," she challenged, but I could hear the breathless anticipation in her tone.

"Try me, Darlin'," I growled, my grip on her hand tightening slightly. The charged atmosphere between us was almost palpable, crackling with unresolved tension and desire.

She giggled and I tugged gently on her hand, leading her away from the crowded casino floor. "Come on," I urged, my voice low and husky, picking up the pace.

She laughed louder and we broke out into a run. The click of her heels against the marble floor echoed in my ears, matching the rapid beat of my heart. Neon lights flashed, slot machines chimed, but all I could focus on was the electricity coursing between us.

If it could have been channeled, it would have brought down thunder on our heads.

"Excuse us," I muttered, shouldering past a group of rowdy tourists. My eyes darted around, searching for the quickest route to my office. The anticipation was killing me, every second feeling like an eternity.

Pippa's breath hitched as I pulled her closer, navigating a particularly tight spot. "In a hurry, are we?" she teased, her voice barely audible over the casino's din.

I glanced back, a smirk playing on my lips. "You have no idea, Sweetheart."

Finally, we reached the corridor leading to my office. The sounds of the casino faded, replaced by the thundering of blood in my ears. With a swift motion, I yanked open the door, practically dragging Pippa inside.

The door slammed shut behind us with a resounding thud, courtesy of a well-placed kick. In an instant, I had one hand sliding to the nape of her neck, my lips against hers, and the other hand pressed firmly against her stomach as I walked her backward until her back hit the wall.

"God, you drive me crazy," I growled, recapturing her lips in a searing kiss. The taste of her, the softness of her skin beneath my calloused hands—it was intoxicating. I pressed closer, feeling the curves of her body molding against mine as I had her

pressed up against the wall.

Pippa responded with equal fervor, her fingers tangling in my hair. When we finally broke apart, both gasping for air, she looked up at me with those mesmerizing eyes. "Abe," she whispered, her voice husky with desire.

I couldn't help but wonder how I'd gotten to this point. Me, Abraham Ustinov, notorious player and hardened criminal, completely undone by this woman.

"You're driving me mad, Pippa," I warned while I proceeded to trail kisses down her soft, inviting neck.

She arched into me, her breasts squeezing against my chest and a flurry of sweet nothings escaped her lips. "Oh, I haven't even started."

I couldn't hold back a chuckle at her boldness. "Oh, you're calling for trouble, Sweetheart," I murmured against her skin.

"Maybe I like a little trouble," she whispered, arching her back to thrust her hip against mine suggestively.

My hands moved with fluid ease to peel away her layers of clothing. The dim light from the streetlights outside cast a soft sheen to her skin and I watched the smooth creamy expanse reveal itself with each layer that fell to the floor. First, her coat, below which she wore a sleeveless shirt. She raised her arms up, her breath hitching in her throat and I slowly slid off her shirt. There she stood before me, in her bra, her breasts spilling out beautifully.

I cupped her bra, flicked my thumbs over her skin and she jerked involuntarily. Fuck, "You're gorgeous," I proclaimed and within seconds, had her skirt on the floor.

Before me was a temptation I couldn't resist. My fingers danced along the edge of her panties, teasing, exploring.

"Abe," Pippa moaned, her arms wrapping around my neck. The sound of my name on her lips sent a jolt of electricity through me.

I let my hand glide over the curve of her ass, savoring the softness. "You're fucking perfect, you know that?"

Before I could react, Pippa pushed off the wall, wrapping her legs around my waist. The sudden move caught me off guard, but I recovered quickly, supporting her weight easily.

"Desk. Now," she demanded, her eyes dark with desire.

"Who am I to deny such a request?"

I carried her across the room, her warmth pressed against me, driving me to the brink of insanity. With one sweep of my arm, I cleared the desk, sending papers, pens, and God knows what else clattering to the floor.

Something shattered—probably that ugly paperweight Ivan had given me last Christmas—but I couldn't bring myself to care. Not when I had Pippa perched on the edge of my desk, a vision in lace and curves.

"You're so goddamn beautiful," I breathed, drinking in the sight of her. My hands found their way to her back, fingers working at the clasp of her bra. "I've been dreaming about this moment."

As the last barrier fell away and her breasts swung free, I couldn't help but marvel at the woman before me. How had I ever thought I could resist her, give her space?

Pippa's chest rose and fell, her breasts heaving with each ragged breath she took. I couldn't resist any longer. With a growl, I leaned in, taking a dusky nipple into my mouth. Her taste, a heady mix of vanilla and arousal, flooded my senses. I circled my tongue around her hardened peak, teasing, nipping, before moving on to the other one. Pippa moaned, her hands gripping the edge of the desk for dear life as she arched her back toward me, offering herself.

"Oh, fuck," she moaned, her nails digging into my shirt. Encouraged, I slid one hand south, exploring the softness of her stomach, further down to the damp lace that was the only thing separating us. I made quick work of the delicate fabric, revealing her glistening folds.

"God, you're so wet for me," I purred, my accent thickening with arousal. I dipped a finger inside her and dipped out.

"Abe, please," she whimpered, her hips writhing against my hand.

I smirked against her skin, enjoying the power I had over her. "Tell me what you want, Beautiful."

"I... I want... need..."

"Say it," I growled, my patience wearing thin.

"I need you inside me, right now," she panted, her cheeks flushed a wonderful shade of red.

Who was I to deny her that?

In one fluid motion, I laid her down on the desk, her legs dangling over the edge. With shaking hands, I parted her thighs, desperate to unveil the treasure beneath.

"Fuck, you 're soaked," I muttered with my head between her legs, inhaling her sweet scent. I couldn't wait any longer. Inching forward, I pressed my lips to her hot, wet core, my tongue lapping at her most sensitive spot.

"Oh, God, Abe!" she cried out, her hands fisting the edge of the desk. "Yes, right there!"

Taking it as an invitation, I slipped a finger inside her, then another, curling them in a way I knew would drive her wild. Pippa's cries of pleasure spurred me on, and I increased my pace, determined to make her come apart in my arms.

Her moans grew louder, her body tensing beneath me. "I'm... I'm... oh, fuck!"

"Go for it, Baby," my voice roared out, and then I took my mouth down to her clit. I felt her muscles clench around my fingers, crushing them as they did, and then her back lurched off the table as her entire body trembled. When she came, she brought with it the most beautiful sound echoing through the room.

With one last teasing swipe off my tongue, I stood, my own breath ragged, and stripped off my clothes in record time. Pippa's eyes widened when she laid eyes on me, and I couldn't blame her. I was rock hard, ready to claim what was mine.

"Say it," I growled as I positioned myself at her entrance, my voice hoarser than ever. "Say you want me to fuck you."

"I—I want you to fuck me, Abe," she panted, her cheeks flushing a delicious shade of pink.

That was all the invitation I needed. I leaned horizontally along her body, holding her wrists above her head as I slid inside her. Slowly, so fucking slowly, until I was fully seated, my cock nestled inside her warmth.

"Fuck, you feel better than I imagined," I groaned, my accent thick with raw need.

Pippa's pussy clenched around me, her inner muscles squeezing me in a vice-like grip. I started to move, my hips meeting hers in a primal rhythm. Inch by inch, I plunged into her heat, withdrawing only to thrust back in, harder and faster.

"God, Pippa, you're so tight," I groaned, losing myself in the moment.

Pippa's moans filled the room, her nails digging into the desk as she arched her back, trying to meet my thrusts. Her slickness coated my cock, making every stroke inside her a wet, heavenly slide.

"I don't know what I was thinking," I growled, lust swirling in my veins. "Depriving myself of this."

"Fucking selfish, wasn't it Abe?" she panted, her walls clenching around me.

I chuckled and pulled out, before ramming back into her punishingly. Pippa's scream filled the room as I filled her, marking her as mine in the most basic way possible.

She was close, I could feel it. And god knew it so was I, but I wanted to be in her deeper. Suddenly, an idea struck me.

I pulled out abruptly, ignoring Pippa's whimper of protest. "Change of plans, Darling."

She watched panting, with wide eyes, as I grabbed her hands and pulled her off the ledge, walking her toward the chair. I waited, let her pass by, and smacked her ass, the glorious red print making its mark.

Her entire body quivered and she turned back to me with a look of delighted surprise

and shock. I grinned and curved my hand around her waist, resting it on her ass, her body pressed against mine as I led her to the chair. First, I sat and watched her standing there naked before me, the image of perfection, before pulling her onto my lap with one directive: "I want to watch you ride me."

Pippa's eyes widened, but a wicked grin spread across her face. She straddled me, positioning herself over my aching cock.

"Like this?" she asked innocently, slowly sinking down onto me.

I groaned, overwhelmed by the sensation. "Fuck, yes. Just like that."

She started to move, setting a rhythm that had us both panting. I gripped her hips, guiding her movements, completely lost in the feel of her. I dipped my head, buried my face in her cleavage, and felt every part of her move.

My hands reached for her ass, and I helped her slide her wet pussy up and down my cock. But never let her off. Then I began thrusting off the chair, my cock at just the right angle. The floor creaked, our breaths mingled and we went on and on and on until I felt the familiar coil of tension build to near peak, causing my cock to ache for release.

"Abe," she gasped, throwing her head back. "I'm close. I'm going to—"

"Cum with me, Pippa," I commanded, dying for my own release. "Together."

Our cries mingled as we climaxed, Pippa's muscles milking me clean. I watched as I spilled into her, how her eyes closed shut, how her breaths came in short, raspy bursts, and then at the peak of my own, I saw little slivers of light in my line of sight. This feeling was the highest high I've ever felt and we clung to each other as waves of pleasure washed over us.

As we came down from our high, Pippa still seated on my lap, I felt a grave loss which is when a startling realization hit me. This wasn't just lust or a fleeting attraction. I was addicted to her—to her touch, her taste, the way she made me feel. Now that I'd fucked her, not fucking her felt like space.

The thought both thrilled and terrified me. I'd never felt this way about anyone before. The urge to protect her, to keep her safe, and most importantly, by my side, was overwhelming.

But with that desire came fear. Fear of the dangers that surrounded us, of the enemies who had her on their radar. Could I keep her safe?

As Pippa nuzzled into my neck, sighing contentedly, I felt like bringing her back to work was the dumbest fucking idea. What if something happened to her when I wasn't watching?

God. I needed to find that stranger Pippa saw and find him now. Gently, I helped Pippa off me, and by the time she picked up her clothes off the floor, I was already half-dressed.

As I buttoned up my shirt with rapid movements, my mind remained fixated on the stranger. The threat loomed large, casting a shadow over the afterglow of our encounter. I clenched my jaw, frustration bubbling up inside me. How dare anyone threaten what was mine?

I glanced at Pippa, her curves shifting beneath her blouse as she smoothed it down. The need to keep her safe consumed me, driving every thought, every action. My fingers reached for my phone, to set plans in motion.

"Abe?" Pippa's voice cut through my spiraling thoughts. "You look like you're about to punch a wall."

I forced a smile, trying to mask my tension. "Just thinking, Doll."

She stepped closer, her eyes searching my face. "Bullshit. I know that look. What's got you so wound up?"

I hesitated, torn between my instinct to shield her and the raw honesty she seemed to pull from me. "It's nothing you need to worry about."

"Try again," she said, her tone both soft and unyielding. "I'm not some fragile flower, Abe. Talk to me."

Her compassion, wrapped in that fierce determination, hit me like a punch to the gut. I ran a hand through my hair, sighing. "I can't help but feel worried that we haven't caught him yet."

There was no need to explain who the him in question was.

Pippa planted her hands on her hips, her curvy figure accentuated by the stance. "Abraham Ustinov, are you seriously working yourself into a frenzy over this?"

I bristled at her tone, my pride stinging. "This isn't a joke, Pippa. Your safety—"

"Is in the hands of one of the most dangerous men in the city." She cut me off, her voice softening. "You. The big, bad Bratva enforcer who's got half the underworld quaking in their boots."

Didn't she understand, it wasn't enough?

She stepped closer, reaching up to cup my face. The gentle touch sent a jolt of peace through me. "I'm serious, Abe. I know you'll keep me safe. But you can't let this consume you."

I wanted to argue, to tell her she didn't understand the depths of the danger. "It's not that simple," I muttered, leaning into her touch despite myself.

"Maybe not," she conceded, her thumb tracing my jawline. "But I trust you. And I need you present. Trust your brothers, your team, to do their jobs. You can't handle everything yourself. You're here, looking over the casino and me. You have to take care of what's happening outside or you'll stretch yourself thin."

Her words hit home, and I felt a reluctant smile tugging at my lips. This fiery, compassionate woman had a way of cutting through my defenses like no one else. "When did you get so wise?"

Pippa grinned, a mischievous glint in her eye. "I've always been wise. You're just finally starting to notice."

Pippa's eyes lit up with sudden inspiration. "You know what? We need to get out of here. Change of scenery, stat." She tugged at my hand, her enthusiasm infectious.

I raised an eyebrow, intrigued despite myself. "Oh? And where exactly are you planning to drag me, Pip?"

"Somewhere we can forget all about the lives we live today," she declared, her chin tilted in that stubborn way I was quickly coming to adore. "No phones, no business, no brooding. Just you, me, and maybe some good conversation to take us back to the basics."

I chuckled, taking her hand in mine. "Careful now, you're starting to sound like you actually enjoy my company."

"Don't let it go to your head," Pippa retorted, but her smile was warm. "So? What do you say? Trust me to take care of you for a change?"

The idea was tempting. More than tempting. I found myself nodding before I'd fully processed the decision. "Alright, Sweetheart. Lead the way."

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As we walked to his car, I could feel Abe's eyes on me, practically burning with questions. On reaching closer, I turned toward him. "Um, I was thinking I could drive today if that's okay?"

Surprise flashed across his face. "Sure, if you want. Where are we headed?"

I bit my lip, avoiding his curious stare. "You'll see."

I slid behind the wheel, my hands gripping the steering wheel tightly. The drive was quiet, peaceful. I could see Abe glancing at me from the corner of my eye, his brow furrowed in confusion.

"Everything okay, Pippa?" he finally asked, his voice gentle.

I nodded, not trusting myself to speak. My heart was racing, anxiety clawing at my chest. This was it. I was about to share a piece of myself I'd kept hidden for so long.

But what if he saw me differently? What if this changed everything between us? The thought made my stomach churn.

I took a deep breath, squaring my shoulders. No. Abe wasn't like that. He may be arrogant and blunt, but he'd shown me a softer side too. One that made me want to let down my walls, just a little for him.

As we neared our destination, I felt Abe tense beside me. "Pippa," he said slowly, realization dawning. "Are we going where I think we're going?"

I swallowed hard, turning onto the familiar winding road. "Yes," I whispered. "We're heading to the graveyard."

As I pulled into the graveyard's quiet parking lot, my hands trembled on the steering wheel. I cut the engine, but I couldn't bring myself to move. This moment pressed down on me, making it hard to breathe.

Abe's large hand covered mine, his touch unexpectedly gentle. "Take your time," he murmured softly.

I nodded, grateful for his patience. He had no idea why I brought him here, and yet, he doesn't need to know. In this moment, the space he's giving me is exactly what I need and for that, I realize I'm a lucky girl. After a deep breath, I pushed open the car door and stepped out on shaky legs. Abe was by my side in an instant, his solid presence both comforting and nerve-wracking.

"Actually, this might be a dumb idea. If you want to leave, we can" I said in a moment of weakness, fiddling with the hem of my blouse.

Abe's eyes met mine, surprisingly tender. "I have no idea why we're here, but trust me, I want to know."

A wave of relief went through my body and I looked up at him with a gingerly smile.

He took my hand and we walked side by side down the narrow path, gravel crunching beneath our feet. The graveyard was eerily beautiful, with ancient trees allowing the moonlight to filter in through their branches. Marble headstones stood in solemn rows, reminding us of how fleeting time and life can be.

At last, we reached our destination. I paused, my eyes fixed on the twin headstones. Standing before my parents' plot, a lump formed in my throat. Longing, sorrow, and grief came rattling through my soul.

"They would have liked you," I whispered, surprising myself with the admission. "Well, maybe not at first. Dad would've been suspicious of your tattoos."

"Your parents?" Abe whispered.

I nodded, in too much pain to speak.

Abe interlinked his fingers through mine. "And your mom?"

I smiled, remembering her warm laugh. "She would've charmed you in five minutes flat. You wouldn't have stood a chance."

He laughed. "So, you got that from her."

In that moment, I knew I had made the right decision to bring him there. I knelt down, tracing the engraved letters of their names with my fingertips. "Mom was a force of nature. She could light up a room just by walking in, you know? And Dad... he was the calm to her storm. They balanced each other perfectly."

Abe settled beside me, his shoulder brushing mine. "Tell me more," he encouraged softly.

I closed my eyes, letting the memories wash over me. "I was young when they passed, but I have certain memories. Or feelings, rather. Sunday mornings were sacred in our house. Dad would make these ridiculous pancakes—he'd try to shape them into animals, but they always ended up looking like blobs. Mom and I would laugh so hard, but we'd eat every last bite."

My voice cracked slightly, but I pressed on. "They taught me to be strong, but they also showed me how to be kind, how to love fiercely. They never meant to teach me that, but I learned it from how they loved one another."

I opened my eyes to find Abe watching me intently, his expression unreadable. "They sound like amazing people," he said quietly.

"They were," I whispered, wiping away a stray tear. "I miss them every day."

Abe was silent for a long moment, his jaw clenching and unclenching. When he finally spoke, his voice was low and raw. "My mother... she wasn't as lucky as yours."

I turned to face him, surprised by the vulnerability in his usually confident demeanor.

"Our father," he continued, his eyes fixed on the horizon, "he was a cruel man. Drunk most of the time, violent when he wasn't. My brothers and I... we learned to be quiet, to stay out of his way. But our mother, she bore the brunt of his rage to protect us."

My heart ached for the pain in his voice, plummeting to my stomach. I felt angry at his father, for having done that to a woman who raised such an amazing son. I reached out, hesitantly placing my hand over his. He didn't pull away.

"She tried to protect us, you know?" Abe's voice was barely above a whisper. "Even when she was bruised and broken, she'd smile and tell us everything was okay. But we knew. We always knew."

I squeezed Abe's hand gently, feeling the roughness of his calloused palm against my softer skin. The contrast was stark, much like the differences in our upbringings, yet in this moment, we were connected by shared pain and understanding of loss.

"Abe," I murmured, my voice catching slightly. "I'm so sorry you had to go through that."

He turned to me, his eyes intense with a mix of vulnerability and strength I'd never seen before. "It's why I am who I am today," he said, his thumb absently tracing circles on the back of my hand. "Why I fight so hard to protect those I care about. I couldn't save her, you know? One night, in a fit of rage, he shot her dead. I was watching them fight, but Ivan took me and Vlad away from the scene. I heard him kill her."

Tears welled in my eyes as I listened to his harrowing story, the unimaginable cruelty of his past hurting me in the present. Without a second thought, I wrapped my arms around Abe, offering whatever solace I could give. His frame stiffened at first, unaccustomed to such tenderness, but eventually, he melted into the embrace, his walls crumbling further with each hitched breath he took.

"I get it," I whispered. "After losing my parents and being raised by an aunt and uncle who pointed out every mistake I ever made, I threw myself into work, into being perfect. It was my way of protecting myself."

Abe nodded, a ghost of a smile playing on his lips. "We're quite the pair, aren't we?"

I couldn't help but laugh, the sound breaking the tension. "God, we really are."

For a long time, we held onto each other in that quiet corner of the graveyard, where the only sounds were those of the night.

The weeks that followed were a whirlwind of stolen moments and growing closeness. Movie nights where Abe's arm would casually drape over my shoulders, his fingers

playing with my curls. Coffee runs where he'd tease me about my elaborate order, but always remembered it perfectly.

There were quiet evenings in his office, where I'd catch him watching me over stacks of paperwork, his gaze soft and warm. A few mornings, I felt too sick. Got some food poisoning, perhaps? For those few days, he'd bring me breakfast in bed and insist I stay home. He covered for me at the casino.

One particularly memorable night, we found ourselves caught in a sudden downpour while we walked through his estate. Abe pulled me under an awning, both of us laughing as we shook water from our clothes. He reached out, gently tucking a wet strand of hair behind my ear. The touch sent shivers down my spine that had nothing to do with the cold rain.

With each passing day, I felt the walls I'd built around my heart slowly crumbling. Abe, in all his tattooed, pierced, suit-wearing glory, was becoming more than just my boss or even a friend. He was becoming someone I couldn't imagine my life without.

Three weeks later, as I sat at the breakfast table at his house all alone, with everyone having had an early start to the day, I rubbed my temples for what felt like the hundredth time that morning. The dull throb behind my eyes had been persistent for days, but I'd chalked it up to eye strain from late nights working. I blinked hard, trying to focus on the newspaper in front of me.

"You okay there, Pippa?" Abe's deep voice startled me. I hadn't heard him approach. "We're going to run late for work."

I looked up to see him fully dressed, leaning at the doorway, and then realized I was still in my pajamas.

“Oh shit,” I gasped, rising to my feet. A wave of dizziness came over me, and I sat back down. “What time is it?”

My voice was weak, but I plastered on a smile when he rushed over to my side, his hands reaching out to check if I was okay.

"I'm fine. This new hiring cycle has been tiring, that's all."

Abe's eyes narrowed, his gaze sweeping over me. "You're pale. And you've barely touched your coffee."

I waved him off. "It's nothing. I'm just tired."

He leaned against the table, arms folded across his broad chest. "Pippa," he said, his tone softening, "you don't have to put on a brave face for me."

I sighed, my resolve crumbling under his concern. "I've been feeling a bit off lately. Probably just a bug going around."

In an instant, Abe was crouching beside my chair, his hand on my forehead. "Thank god, no fever. But why didn't you say something sooner? Could it be that what we mistook for food poisoning was something else?"

"I didn't want to make a fuss," I admitted, suddenly feeling small under his intense gaze. "And yeah. Could have been a bug."

Abe's jaw clenched, but his touch remained gentle as he helped me to my feet. "That's it. You're staying home to rest, and I'm taking care of you."

"But we have a dozen interviews—"

"Can wait. I'll call the office and have them rescheduled." He finished firmly.
"You're more important."

As he led me to my bedroom, his arm protectively around my waist, I couldn't help but lean into his solid warmth. Despite my protests, a part of me relished in his care, in feeling looked after for the first time in years.

The sharp trill of Abe's phone shattered the quiet of my bedroom. I watched his brow furrow as he answered, his voice low and tense. After a brief exchange, he turned to me, conflict etched across his face.

"I have to go," he said, running a hand through his dark hair. "There's an... issue that needs my immediate attention."

I nodded and gave him a smile. "Of course. Go, I'll be fine."

Abe hesitated. "You're sure?"

"Positive," I assured him in a chirpy voice. "I'm a big girl, Abe. I can handle a little bug."

He made way for the door but turned back before leaving. "I'll be back as soon as I can. Rest, okay? If you need anything, call me."

He made me promise before he left.

As the door clicked shut behind him, the silence of the apartment engulfed me. I sank deeper into the bed, my mind racing. The nausea, the fatigue, the dizziness—I'd been chalking it up to stress. Now, with Abe wondering if it was a bug, my mind began to

spin.

Had I truly been sick, the symptoms wouldn't have come and gone only to return in such a random manner now, would it? Some days, I threw up. On other days, I had headaches coming and going. The fatigue hit worst in the afternoons, but I had energy in the mornings.

It just didn't make any sense. It couldn't have been a bug. And I had faced a lot more stress in the past.

Was I...?

I picked up my phone and quickly looked at my menstrual app. Suddenly, the pieces fell into place like a cruel jigsaw puzzle completing a painful picture. Panic surged in my chest as I realized the truth that had been lurking beneath the surface of denial. The symptoms, the timing, the endless sex with Abe—it all pointed to one undeniable conclusion. I'd been so busy, I hadn't noticed that I missed my last period.

I peeked down the hallway, before rushing back to my room, clutching the purse where I tucked away a pregnancy test I stole from the medical room. Must have been Emory's or Adley's, but I hoped none of them would notice.

With trembling hands, I retrieved the test, staring at the innocuous pink box. My heart pounded as I made my way to the bathroom, each step feeling like a march toward a life-altering moment.

The wait was excruciating. I paced, chewing my nails, my mind a whirlwind of 'what ifs'. When the timer on my phone chimed, I nearly jumped out of my skin.

Taking a deep breath, I picked up the test. Two pink lines stared back at me, unmistakable and earth-shattering.

"Oh, God," I whispered, sinking to the cold tile floor. Tears pricked at my eyes as a maelstrom of emotions washed over me—shock, fear, and buried beneath it all, a tiny spark of joy I wasn't ready to acknowledge. This was one of the things I wanted most. Someone to call family, having been deprived of one at such a young age.

My heart hammered in my chest as I pressed a hand to my still-flat stomach, my mind reeling. How would Abe react? What would this mean for us, for my career, for everything?

As I sat there, the test clutched in my shaking hand, I realized my life had irrevocably changed in the span of three minutes. And I had no idea what to do next.

The pink lines blurred as more tears welled in my eyes. I blinked them away, my mind racing with a thousand thoughts at once. Abe's face flashed before me—his sharp jawline, those piercing blue-gray eyes that could melt me with a glance. But now, they seemed to hold an accusation I couldn't shake.

"What have we done?" I whispered to the empty bathroom.

This situationship we shared was still so new, so fragile. We'd only just started to peel back the layers of our pasts, to truly see each other. We had never discussed a relationship or love. I didn't even know if he wanted a baby. And now this. A baby. The word felt foreign, terrifying.

I hauled myself up from the cold tile, catching my reflection in the mirror. My eyes were wide with shock, my light brown curls a mess.

"Get it together, Pippa," I muttered, wiping away my tears and standing straighter.

But the facade crumbled as quickly as I'd tried to erect it. How would Abe react? He was 45, set in his ways, with a life entrenched in the Bratva. Did he even want children? The thought of his rejection sent a chill through me.

I made my way to my bedroom, collapsing onto the bed. My hand unconsciously drifted to my stomach again. "What am I going to do with you, little one?" I whispered.

The silence of the room pressed in on me. I reached for my phone, my finger hovering over Abe's name. One call and everything would change. But I couldn't do it. Not yet. I needed time to process, to plan. I needed to figure out if he even wanted a future with me. For all I knew, he might not want anything more. He might remain with me while he protected me, before moving on to his next mission.

I put down my phone and the future stretched out before me, filled with uncertainty. But as I sat there, a tiny part of me—the part I was trying desperately to ignore—whispered of possibility. Of a future I'd never dared to imagine.

I closed my eyes, took a deep breath, and made a silent promise to the life growing inside me. "Whatever happens, we'll face it together and you'll always have me."

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I slammed my fist on the mahogany table, the sharp crack echoing through the dimly lit room. My brothers, Ivan and Vlad, didn't flinch. They were used to my outbursts by now.

"We've been chasing the wrong fucking tails for months," I growled, running a hand through my dark hair. "All this time, we thought it was the Petrovs muscling in on our territory, but it's been these new Italian upstarts?"

Ivan leaned back in his chair, his face a mask of calm. "It seems that way, Abe. Our intel was... flawed."

I snorted. "Flawed? That's putting it mildly, Brother. We've wasted time, resources, and blood on the wrong fucking crew."

Vlad raised his hands. "What's done is done. This new mob thought there was no better way to put their names on everyone's radar than by coming after what belongs to the Vadims. The question is, what do we do now?"

I paced the room, my mind racing. The implications of this new information were staggering. A new Italian mob group, the Amatos. as they called themselves, operating right under our noses, bold enough to encroach on Vadim territory. It was a slap in the face of the Vadims, and by extension, The Unholy Trinity.

"We send a message," I said, my voice low and deadly. "A crystal-clear fucking message that no one, Italian, Russian, or otherwise, crosses the Vadims without consequences."

What I didn't say was that after we're done, they'd never dare mutter Pippa's name behind closed doors. They're the reason she was stabbed, the reason her life has had to come to a standstill and that stops now.

I could feel the familiar rush of adrenaline coursing through my veins, the thrill of the hunt awakening. This is what I lived for—the chance to prove why I was the muscle of the Unholy Trinity, why I always came out on top in any fight.

"These fuckers think they can waltz into our city, take what's ours?" I turned to face my brothers, a wolfish grin spreading across my face. "We'll show them exactly why that's a fatal mistake."

I leaned over the map spread across the mahogany table, my tattooed fingers tracing potential routes. "We hit them here," I said, tapping a warehouse near the docks. "Our intel suggests it's their main distribution center."

Ivan nodded, his analytical mind already churning. "We'll need to cut off their escape routes. I can have our tech team disable the security systems."

"Good," I growled, feeling the familiar rush of pre-battle excitement. "Vlad, I want you to position snipers here and here." I indicated two nearby rooftops. "We'll funnel them right into our trap."

The tension in the room was palpable, crackling like electricity. I thrived on it, my confidence growing with each passing moment.

"Remember," I said, my voice carrying the weight of command, "we're not just taking them down. We're sending a message. Make it bloody, make it brutal. Make sure they never cross us again."

As night fell, we moved into position. The warehouse loomed before us, a hulking shadow against the starless sky. I adjusted my earpiece, checked for the Glock against my hip.

"Now," Ivan directed through the network.

All hell broke loose. The night erupted in a cacophony of gunfire and shattering glass. I charged forward, my brothers at my sides, our men flooding in behind us.

The Italians were caught off guard, but they recovered quickly. Bullets whizzed past my ear as I dove behind a stack of crates, my heart pounding with exhilaration.

"Ivan, on your left!" I shouted, squeezing off three rapid shots. An enemy gunman dropped, clutching his chest.

The fight was chaotic, brutal, but we had the upper hand. I moved like a force of nature, my fists and bullets finding their marks with deadly precision. Blood spattered my crisp white shirt, but I barely noticed.

Then, from the corner of my eye, I saw him. The man Pippa described as the one she saw at the casino. Bald, with a scar on his face. It's because of him that Tony stabbed her.

I watched as one of my men chased after him, and with a roar, I ran as fast as I could, moving past my man. "He's mine," I bellowed, overtaking him.

The man turned to check the status of his chaser and recoiled in terror as I approached, his eyes widening in fear. I caught a glimmer of recognition in them before he turned to run.

My boots crunched on broken glass as I pursued him, adrenaline igniting my body

like wildfire. A burst of flame lit up the night sky—a bullet whizzed past me, dangerously close. I didn't falter.

The man turned, a gun pointed at me. He shot while he ran and I turned my head right, letting the bullet pass. All I felt was the soft gush of wind. What a weak shooter.

He reached a dead end and I was now mere feet away. I jumped one foot forward onto a barrel, kicked off, and landed right in front of him.

He raised his gun, but it was too late. I had already closed the gap between us, my fist connecting with his jaw before he could react. His head snapped back and he stumbled to the ground, the gun falling inches away. He reached for the gun but I put one foot on his hand and kicked away the gun with the other.

The sound of his wrist snapping was satisfying, and the scream that adjoined sweet. I pulled out a knife and bent on one knee, taking it to his throat.

“You and Tony should never have put her in danger,” I said, before slicing open his throat and watching every last drop of blood splutter out of the gash until the last of life left his eyes.

I stumbled through the front door of my house, every muscle in my body screaming in protest. The adrenaline had long since faded, leaving me feeling like I'd gone ten rounds with a freight train. But beneath the exhaustion, a sense of grim satisfaction burned in my chest.

"We showed those Italian fuckers," I muttered to myself, wincing as I shrugged off my blood-stained jacket.

I made my way to the bar, pouring myself two fingers of whiskey. It burned a path down my throat, momentarily dulling the ache in my bruised knuckles.

I needed rest. I trudged toward my bedroom, my feet heavy on the plush carpet. The thought of a hot shower and my king-sized bed was the only thing keeping me upright at this point.

I was just about to collapse onto the bed when I heard the soft click of the door. I caught a whiff of that familiar vanilla and jasmine scent. Pippa.

She padded across the room, her curves silhouetted by the dim light. Without a word, she slipped under the covers and pressed her soft, warm body against mine. I felt the tension in my muscles start to melt away as she wrapped her arms around me.

"Rough night?" she murmured, her breath tickling my ear. "I thought I heard you come back. Wanted to check."

I grunted in response, burying my face in her light brown curls. Pippa knew better than to push for details, and that's one of the things I loved about her. She was always there, a silent pillar of support, never demanding more than I could give.

With her in my arms, I slept better than I had ever after a battle.

As the first rays of sunlight began to creep through the windows, I found myself tracing lazy circles on Pippa's hip. Her bottle-green eyes fluttered open, a small smile playing on her lips.

“Good morning,” she said sleepily and nestled herself into my chest.

“Morning,” my voice came out hoarse and I pulled her in, giving her a kiss on her forehead. She smiled at me, her eyes still droopy from sleep.

“What happened last night?” she murmured with a hint of worry in her voice. “You look tired... and bruised.”

"We got him," I said with pride. "He belonged to a new Italian mob who wanted to show their power by going head-to-head with the Vadims.”

“What?” she said, suddenly serious as she sat and pulled the covers around her. “You got him? Are you okay? You didn't get hurt bad, did you?”

“He was a nobody. Those Italian bastards won't be causing any more trouble. And I'm fine, Pip. Just a scratch or two.”

Pippa's eyebrows shot up. "And what about this mob? Won't this cause more trouble?”

I nodded, a smirk tugging at the corner of my mouth. "Let's just say they won't be underestimating the Vadims or the Unholy Trinity again. In fact, they don't have enough people to come at us again. We killed as many as we could.”

Pippa shook her head, her beautiful eyelashes fluttering as though she was trying to clear her head. Her gaze settled on me at last, wide-eyed. "You killed them?" she asked, her voice barely above a whisper. "All of them?"

“Whoever was at their stakeout,” I said carefully, knowing that the truth might hurt, but she deserved to know it. The truth was, even after everything we'd been through together, it still gave me an uneasy feeling to see Pippa's reaction

This was my job, my life—and yet I couldn't shake the feeling that she didn't really understand what it entailed. "The Vadims and the Unholy Trinity don't take kindly to anyone trying to undermine us, especially not some small mob thinking they're David and we're Goliath."

I watched Pippa's face carefully as she processed the news. Her brow furrowed, and a flicker of something—worry? Fear?—passed through her eyes. She bit her lower lip, a habit I'd come to recognize as a sign of internal conflict.

"That's... good," she said hesitantly, her voice lacking its usual enthusiasm. "I'm glad you're safe, Abe."

I frowned, sensing there was more she wasn't saying. "But...?"

Pippa shook her head, forcing a smile that didn't quite reach her eyes. "But the guys you were protecting me from have been taken care of, haven't they?"

"That's right," I nodded, trying to read her expression. She looked so... pale. Was it because of the news about the Italian mob? Or was it something else? "They won't be causing any trouble anymore."

She nodded, looking down at her hands as if they were a foreign object to her. "Okay."

But there was a hint of sadness in her eyes, like she was holding back tears.

"Pip...?" I started, reaching out to grab her hand. Her skin felt surprisingly cold. "What's wrong?"

She looked up, her eyes rimmed with unshed tears. "I need to leave," she whispered, her voice barely audible.

The weight of her words hung in the air between us, and I felt a sudden, inexplicable tightness in my chest. Something was coming, something big, and for the first time in a long while, I felt unprepared.

She stepped out of bed, started putting on her clothes, and I just sat there like I'd been hit by a truck of bricks.

I remained quiet for a whole minute while she dressed, certain I'd misheard. "What?"

She didn't answer my question. Instead, she was fumbling around the side table, looking for something. It was as though she didn't hear me, or perhaps, didn't want to.

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I slipped on my shoes, the slide of it against the wood echoing in the quiet room. Abe sat on the other side of the bed, watching me.

I heard him when he asked why, but the truth is I didn't know what to say. My head was spinning and my heart felt like lead in my chest. The threat was gone now. I was safe. And that meant...this was over.

My fingers trembled as I buttoned my shirt. How had I let myself fall for him? Abe Ustinov—arrogant, cocky, criminal, infuriating Abe. The man who'd protected me, challenged me, set my world on fire.

I stood slowly, willing my legs not to shake. Abe didn't move, didn't even seem to notice. Of course he didn't. To him, I was just another conquest. Another notch on his bedpost. This was exactly why I needed to leave. With a child on the way, I'd only have tied him down from a sense of duty. That is, if he would ever have chosen to be a part of this next journey.

My eyes burned as I gazed at his profile. The sharp line of his jaw, the curve of his lips that I'd memorized with my own. God, I loved him. The realization hit me like a punch to the gut. I loved this maddening, beautiful man with every fiber of my being.

But Abe would never love me back. Not really. Oh, he might care for me in his way. Might even miss me for a while. But a man like Abe—with his power, his wealth, his devastating good looks—he'd never truly want someone like me. Curvy, stubborn, damaged, pregnant me.

I took a shaky breath, squaring my shoulders. It was better this way. Leave now,

before he could break my heart completely. Before I lost myself entirely to a man who could never be mine.

"Goodbye, Abe," I whispered, my voice barely audible.

As I turned to go, a single tear slipped down my cheek. I didn't bother to wipe it away.

Suddenly, the bed creaked behind me. I froze, my hand on the doorknob.

"What the hell are you doing?" Abe's voice was low, dangerous.

I turned slowly, my heart pounding. Abe was on his feet, his muscular form taut with tension. His blue-gray eyes, usually so warm when they looked at me, had turned to ice.

"I..." My voice cracked. I swallowed hard, trying to summon my resolve. "I told you I'm leaving."

Abe's jaw clenched. "Like hell you are." He took a step toward me, and I instinctively backed up against the door. "Explain. Now."

I lifted my chin, calling on every ounce of strength I possessed. "The threat's gone, Abe. You don't need to protect me anymore. So I'm going home."

A flash of hurt crossed his face. "Is that all this was to you?" He pointed at the space around him. "Were you... using me until your troubles were behind you?"

A flash of anger surged through my veins at the unfair accusation and I crossed my arms in front of me.

"I was never using you, Abe," I shot back, my voice steadier now, laced with indignation. "I care about you. More than I ever thought possible."

He took another step closer, his gaze piercing into mine as he yelled in my face. "Then why run? Why give up on us when we haven't even begun?"

"When we haven't even begun?" I scoffed, getting even more upset. "You've had ample opportunity to talk about what this is." My hand motioned between his chest and mine. "How was I to know there was something to begin with when we've never had a real fucking conversation? As of now, we were just a fling. Nothing more."

Abe flinched as if I'd slapped him. His eyes darkened, a storm brewing in those icy depths. "That's all you think this is? You think I've been playing you, using you for some cheap thrill?" His voice was low, dangerous, the kind of tone that usually sent chills down my spine. "I've been there for you through thick and thin, Pippa! I sat by your side when you told me about your parents, I told you how my father killed my mother in front of my eyes. What did you think that was? An attempt at a quick fling? There are easier ways to have a fling, Sweetheart."

The timing of his declaration wasn't lost on me. He wasn't some love-sick schoolboy afraid of manning up for a conversation about what we were. He simply never thought about it because it wasn't a priority. Until then. Just when I was ready to walk out.

I held my ground, refusing to back down from anger, even though at the back of my head a small voice told me how fucked it was of me to insinuate what I did. "What else am I supposed to think, Abe? You never let me in. You never told me how you felt. It was always about protection, about control. You never once spoke about what this is we are doing. Am I to go assuming you wanted more? I can't live like that, assume you're both feet in when you aren't."

Abe's hands clenched into fists by his sides, the tendons standing out against his skin. He took a deep breath, visibly struggling to control his temper. Moments passed and he didn't speak. I felt the anger draining out of me, leaving behind a strange fatigue and acceptance that scared me more than any confrontation ever could. He had nothing to say to me. He could have still fought, still proven me wrong, but he was just standing there, saying nothing, when he had ample time to tell me I was wrong.

"I... I think it's still best I leave. Maybe we need some space to clear our heads," I said, my chest racing in my heart, threatening to burst. I needed to get out of here for some fresh air.

"That's right," he scoffed in my face. "You're running away, thinking only of yourself. How typical. How selfish."

"You're just saying that," I whispered, hating how small and vulnerable my voice sounded. "You don't mean it."

"Oh. So now you can read my mind?" Abe's hands clenched into fists at his sides. "When I show you I care, you believe I don't because I never discussed it. When I tell you you're being selfish, you decide I don't mean it. Which one is it, Pippa? Words or action?"

I opened my mouth to argue, but nothing came out. He was right. For all his faults, Abe had always been brutally honest with me. So why was it so hard to believe him now?

"I can't stay," I said, more to convince myself than him. "I won't be your charity case or your temporary distraction."

Abe moved with lightning speed, closing the distance between us. His large hands gripped my shoulders, not painfully, but firmly enough to keep me in place.

"Look at me," he demanded, his blue-gray eyes boring into mine. "Does this look like charity to you?"

I couldn't look away, trapped by the intensity of his gaze. My resolve was crumbling, and I hated myself for it. "Abe, please," I whispered, unsure if I was asking him to let me go or to never let me leave.

His grip loosened, but he didn't step back. "Stay," he said, his voice low and rough. "Just... stay, Pippa. We can figure this out."

I felt tears prickling at the corners of my eyes. "I'm scared," I admitted, the words slipping out before I could stop them. I took a deep breath and turned away from him, my heart shattering with each inch of distance I put between us. The silence in the room was deafening, thick with all the things we'd left unsaid. I could feel Abe's eyes burning into my back, but I forced myself not to look at him. If I did, I knew I'd crumble.

Besides, he did nothing to ease my fear. This fight he was putting on? He himself didn't know what he was fighting for. He simply didn't know how to cope with me leaving because he'd probably never had a woman leave him before.

That thought crawled its way into my head, solidifying what I had intuitively believed to be true: It wasn't that he had wanted me. It was that he hadn't managed to conquer me the way he knew best. I hadn't given him the chance to break my heart.

I knew then that I was doing the right thing by leaving to protect myself and my child.

My hand trembled as I reached for the doorknob. "Goodbye, Abe," I whispered, my voice barely audible.

I stepped into the hallway, my legs feeling like lead. I had ten minutes to pack and call a cab before it got too late. Back in my room, I quickly shoved things into my suitcase. Each moment was a battle against my own desires, my mind screaming at me to turn back, to run into Abe's arms and never leave. But I kept going, one foot in front of the other.

As I reached for the front door, I caught a glimpse of myself in the hallway mirror.

"You're doing the right thing," I told my reflection, trying to ignore the doubt gnawing at my insides. "He'll forget about you in a week. It's better this way."

Yet even as I walked away from Abe's house, my broken heart already aching for him, a small voice in the back of my mind whispered, "What if you're wrong?"

I got into the waiting cab, unable to stop myself from glancing back at the imposing house. Through the large bay window, I caught a glimpse of Abe. His towering figure stood motionless, his broad shoulders slumped in a way I'd never seen before. The sight of him looking so... defeated made my chest tighten.

"Dammit, Abe," I whispered, my voice catching. "Why couldn't this have been easier?"

As if he'd heard me, Abe's head snapped up, his piercing blue-gray eyes locking with mine. Even from this distance, I could see the storm of emotions raging within them. Anger, confusion, and fear.

I watched as he lifted a hand, pressing it against the glass. The gesture was so uncharacteristically vulnerable that it made my breath catch. For a moment, I could almost imagine the warmth of his touch, the feeling of safety I'd come to associate with his presence.

But then his expression hardened. He turned away abruptly, disappearing from view.

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I paced my room like a caged animal, my phone clutched in my hand. I dialed Pippa's number for the dozenth time. The call went unanswered, yet again.

"Damn it, Pippa. Pick up," I growled. When she didn't, I threw the phone on the couch.

Minutes later, my eyes darted to the screen, hoping for a miracle—a missed call, a text, anything. But there was nothing. Just like the void she'd left in my chest when she'd walked away.

Why the hell didn't I stop her? I was too shocked, too confused. I didn't know what to say. I was afraid of saying the wrong thing and making it worse and so I chose silence. Stupid, stupid me. I should have run down, thrown myself in front of the car, and truly told her how I felt. I should have stopped the guards from letting her leave until she understood she had this all wrong. The scenarios gnawed at me, twisting my gut into knots. I'd let her slip through my fingers, and now... now she was gone.

"Fuck this," I muttered, grabbing my keys.

The drive to Pippa's apartment was a blur of neon lights and honking horns. My knuckles were white on the steering wheel as I weaved through traffic, my mind racing faster than the car.

What would I say when I saw her? The words tumbled through my head: I'm sorry. I was an idiot. Please give me another chance. But none of them seemed right. None of them could capture the desperation clawing at my chest.

As I pulled up to her building, a new determination settled over me. I'd make her listen. I'd make her understand. Because the thought of losing her—of never seeing those gorgeous eyes flash with anger or soften with laughter—was more than I could bear.

I took the elevator up to her floor, my heart pounding. This was it. No more games. No more walls. Just us, face to face, with everything laid bare.

My fist raised, ready to knock, when a chilling thought stopped me cold. What if she wasn't there? What if she'd already decided I wasn't worth the trouble?

"No," I growled, pushing the doubt aside. "She has to be here. She has to listen."

I knocked, the sound echoing in the empty hallway. And I waited, praying to a God I'd long since stopped believing in that she'd open the door.

I knocked again, harder this time, my knuckles stinging against the wood. Silence. The kind of silence that feels like a punch to the gut.

"Pippa?" I called out, my voice rough with tension. "It's Abe. We need to talk."

Nothing. Not even the faintest sound of movement from inside. A cold dread started to seep into my bones.

I tried the handle, finding it unlocked. The door swung open to reveal... emptiness. The apartment was bare, stripped of all personality. No cushions or photo frames. No stacks of papers on the coffee table. No sign of Pippa at all.

"Fuck," I muttered, running a hand through my hair. "Fuck, fuck, fuck!"

I stalked through the vacant rooms as if I could conjure her presence by sheer force of

will. But the truth was undeniable. She was gone. Moved out without a word, without a trace.

The realization hit me like a physical blow. I'd screwed up. I'd pushed her away, and now she was slipping through my fingers like smoke.

The next morning, I drove to the casino in a daze, my mind churning with possibilities. I hadn't slept well all night. Where could she have gone? Why hadn't she told me she was going to move out of her own place?

As I strode across the casino floor, my eyes scanned the crowd automatically. And then, like a mirage in the desert, I saw her.

Pippa stood near the high-stakes tables, her light brown curls cascading over her shoulders. She wore one of those pencil skirts that hugged her curves in all the right ways, paired with a crisp blouse. Even from a distance, I could see the familiar flash of red on her lips.

My heart rate kicked up a notch. She was here. She came in to work. I could still talk to her. A wave of relief passed through my nerves.

I cut through the sea of gamblers and cocktail waitresses, my eyes locked on Pippa like a heat-seeking missile. She hadn't spotted me yet, thank god. I know if she had, she would be walking away right about now.

As I closed in, I saw her smile at something a colleague said. That smile—the one that lit up her whole face and made her eyes sparkle—was like a knife twisting in my gut. Because I knew, deep down, that I might never see it directed at me again.

But I had to try. I had to make this right.

"Pippa," I called out, my voice carrying over the din of slot machines and excited chatter.

She turned, those bottle-green eyes widening as they met mine.

Her smile faltered for a split second before she regained her composure. She straightened her spine and stared at me, that smile no longer on her pretty face.

"Mr. Ustinov," she said, her voice cool and professional. "Is there something I can help you with?"

The formality stung, but I wasn't about to let her see how much. "Cut the crap, Pippa. We need to talk."

Her eyes darted around, probably looking for an escape route. "I'm working, Abe. This isn't the time or place."

I stepped closer, lowering my voice. "Then when is? You've been dodging my calls all night and morning."

A flicker of guilt crossed her face, quickly replaced by determination. "I've been busy."

"Busy moving apartments without telling me?" I couldn't keep the accusation out of my voice.

Pippa's eyes flashed. "I wasn't aware I needed your permission to make personal decisions."

My frustration boiled over. "Dammit, Pippa. That's not what this is about and you know it."

She took a deep breath, her fingers fidgeting with the hem of her blouse. "I'm not running, Abe. I'm... prioritizing."

"Prioritizing what?"

"My safety. My independence." Her voice was steady, but I caught the slight tremor in her hands. "I'm taking it into my own hands. I thought it was better to find a new address, you know, just in case someone's still looking."

The words hit me like a sucker punch. Did I really not deserve to know that? "I thought... I thought you would have said something about that, Pippa. I would have helped you do that."

Her expression softened for a moment, and I saw a glimpse of the vulnerability she usually kept hidden. "I'm staying with a friend for now. She'll help me find a new place."

I wanted to argue, to tell her that I could be simple for her. But the words caught in my throat.

Pippa glanced at her watch, her green eyes widening in mock surprise. "Oh, would you look at the time? I've got a meeting in five minutes." She took a step back, already half-turning away.

I clenched my jaw, seeing right through her flimsy excuse. But what could I do? Drag her back? Force her to talk to me? That wasn't my style, no matter how much I wanted answers.

"Sure," I growled, the word tasting bitter on my tongue. "Wouldn't want to keep whoever it is waiting."

She nodded and I watched her walk away, her curvy figure accentuated by that damn pencil skirt she loved so much. My fists clenched at my sides, a cocktail of anger and helplessness churning in my gut. How had I, Abraham fucking Ustinov, become this pathetic? Pining after a woman who couldn't get away from me fast enough?

The next few weeks were torture. Pippa was everywhere and nowhere at once. I'd catch glimpses of her across the casino floor. But the moment I'd try to approach, she'd vanish like smoke.

One day, I cornered her by the elevators. "Pippa, we need to talk."

"Sorry, Abe," she said, not meeting my eyes. "I'm swamped with paperwork." The doors dinged open and she slipped inside.

Another time, I found her in the break room. "Got a minute?"

She grabbed her coffee and headed for the door. "Not now. The quarter-end reports are killing me."

Each encounter left me more frustrated, more determined.

One night late, I'd finally had enough. This game of cat and mouse was ending today.

I spotted Pippa heading toward the high-roller room, her green eyes focused on the tablet in her hands. Without hesitation, I strode across the casino floor, my jaw clenched tight. The crowd parted before me—they always did.

Just as Pippa reached for the door handle, I caught her wrist. "We need to talk. Now."

Her eyes widened, defiance flashing across her face. "Abe, I—"

I didn't give her a chance to argue. I pulled her into a nearby private lounge, the door clicking shut behind us.

Pippa yanked her arm free, her cheeks flushed. "What the hell do you think you're doing?"

"What am I doing?" I scoffed, running a hand through my hair. "I'm trying to have a goddamn conversation with you. Something you've been avoiding for weeks."

She crossed her arms, her curves accentuated by her fitted blouse. "I've been busy. Some of us actually have work to do around here."

"Bullshit," I spat. "You've been running from me, and we both know it. Why?"

Pippa's eyes narrowed. "Maybe because you're an arrogant ass who thinks he can just snap his fingers and get whatever he wants?"

I stepped closer, towering over her. "And maybe you're a stubborn brat who's too scared to admit what she really wants."

"Oh, please." She rolled her eyes. "Enlighten me, Abe. What exactly do I want?"

The air crackled between us. I could smell her perfume, sweet and intoxicating. It was making it hard to think straight. "You want me," I growled. "Just as much as I want you."

"But you don't want me," she said angrily.

"Bullshit," I growled. "Try again."

Her carefully constructed walls began to crumble when she realized that there was no escape. "What do you want me to say?" she whispered. "That I'm scared? That I know you'll get bored of me eventually? That I can't bear to watch you realize I'm not enough?"

My eyes widened and I reached out without thinking, cupping her cheeks in my hand. Did she really just say that? "You can't be serious!" I said in protest.

"I'm not one of your perfect, stick-thin supermodels, Abe. I'm just... me. Curvy, stubborn, workaholic me. And sooner or later, you're going to wake up and wonder what the hell you're doing with someone like me."

Fury ran through my veins, my voice rising to a thunderous roar. "Are you fucking kidding me, Pippa? You think I give a damn about some skinny model type?" I raked a hand through my hair in frustration. "Christ, woman, have you been blind this whole time?"

She flinched at my anger and fought back hard. "Blind to what, Abe? Your reputation? The way women throw themselves at you wherever we go?" Her voice dripped with sarcasm. "Oh, I've seen plenty."

"Then you've seen everything except what matters!" I stepped closer, towering over her. "You think I'd risk everything—my time away from work, my family's privacy—for just anyone?"

"Your precious Bratva," she spat and then flinched, surprised by the venom in her own voice. "That's all that really matters to you, isn't it?"

My eyes flashed dangerously. "Don't you dare," I growled, taking her wrist for she didn't give me her hand. "You have no idea what I've sacrificed to keep you safe."

"I never asked for your protection!" she shouted, her composure shattering completely. "I was fine on my own before you came along with your arrogance and your stupid, perfect face!"

"Perfect face?" I barked out a harsh laugh. "That's rich coming from the woman who's had me wrapped around her little finger since day one."

She blinked, momentarily thrown off balance. "What are you talking about?"

"You," I snarled, jabbing a finger at her. "With your curves and your sass and that damn red lipstick. You think I could ever get bored of you? You drive me fucking crazy, Pippa!"

Pippa's eyes widened at my outburst, her chest rising and falling rapidly. "Crazy... in what way?" Her voice came out in a small, uncertain whisper.

I let out a frustrated growl, my fingers itching to pull her closer. "In every way possible, Pippa. You're all I can think about, dream about. Do you have any idea how much you consume me?"

She took a hesitant step forward, and the silence between us fell so loud that I swear I could hear the air heat between us. Before she could say another word to ruin the moment, I closed the distance between us, and cupped the nape of her neck, my lips crashing onto hers in a desperate kiss.

Pippa gasped, her body tensing for a split second before melting into me. Her lips yielded to me, those same lips that were on fire the last time we spoke. I cupped her face, my fingers tangling in her hair as I deepened the kiss.

Pippa's hands found their way to my chest, her nails digging into my shirt. I couldn't tell if she was trying to push me away or pull me closer. It didn't matter. All that

mattered was the taste of her, the feel of her curves pressed against me.

I broke the kiss, both of us panting. "Tell me you don't want this," I challenged, my voice husky.

Her eyes were dark with desire, her lips swollen from our kiss. "I... we shouldn't," she whispered, but her body betrayed her words as she leaned into me.

"Fuck shouldn't," I growled, lifting her effortlessly. Her legs wrapped around my waist as I carried her across the room, my lips never leaving hers. I needed more. Needed all of her.

I gently threw her on the couch, scattering cushions to the floor, and jumped on top of her. My hands reached for her shirt, ripping off the buttons and pulling down her bra, the sight of her bare breasts hitting me right in the cock and she clumsily went for my belt. Fabric tore, buttons flew, and our clothes littered the room as if caught in a storm. Every touch was electric, every kiss ignited a wildfire between us. Pippa's nails scored lines down my back, urging me on as I trailed hot kisses along her jawline.

Her breath hitched with each of my touches, her body arching into mine when I parted her legs and flicked my tongue across her slit.

She was ready, fucking desperate for me, and I was going to give her everything she wanted and more. Leaning down, I began to lick her folds, starting gently and increasing the pressure as she cried out in pleasure below me. Her moans spurred me on, driving me wild with desire.

Her hands tangled in my hair, pulling me closer with every thrust of my tongue. I could sense her walls trembling under my touch, her entire body quivering in anticipation as she neared climax. When I felt her muscles clenching around my

tongue, I knew she was close.

Easing back just a bit, I looked into her eyes. They were filled with such hunger.

I kicked off my boxers and positioned myself above her, my cock hitting her entrance. She was still trembling and I was so fucking hot for her, that I wanted her to finish her previous orgasm on my cock. Without warning, I rammed into her.

“Abe!” she squealed like the sexiest thing alive, throwing back her head, her breasts rising in the air. My cock stretched her out and god, she felt like a fucking glove I never wanted to take off.

Her pleased cries only drove me further, my thrusts became faster and harder. Each slap of my hips against her ass echoed through the room. I could feel her walls constricting around me, egging me on. It was too much.

Yet, not enough.

My hands roamed her body, memorizing every curve, every dip, until it rested on her waist. I squeezed her tight, pulled out, and rammed back into her. The couch jerked back an inch from how hard I did.

I was lost in the heat of the moment; I couldn't stop myself from going rough. She never complained. Our skin slapped together in a rhythm that matched our beating hearts. I needed to take control, take her hard, take her all.

I pulled back, drinking in the sight of her. Flushed cheeks, mussed hair, lips parted in anticipation. She was fucking beautiful, and she was mine. At least for this moment.

Pippa's eyes never wavered, never faltered, even as I gripped her hips and started slamming into her wet core with brutal force. She met my eyes, and there it

was—hunger, need.

It filled me with this unbelievable sense of power, knowing she wanted this as much as I did.

"Tell me you want this," I demanded, needing to hear the words.

"I want you," she moaned through raspy breaths. "God help me, but I do."

"Fuck, Pippa," relief flooded through me like a powerful wave. "It was hell without you."

She moaned as I tilted my hips, hitting the right spot. Her hands reached for my chest, her fingers digging into the skin and her lips parted as she took in small gasps of air.

"Oh my god, Abe," she growled. "I might cum."

"Cum for me, Pippa. Cum, Baby," I urged, my cock throbbing so damn hard I was afraid it might burst. I too, was on the edge.

Suddenly, Pippa's hand pressed against my chest, gently but firmly pushing me back. Her bottle-green eyes, usually so guarded, now brimmed with vulnerability.

"Abe," she breathed, her voice trembling slightly. "What is this? What are we doing?"

I froze, my heart hammering against my ribs. Fuck. I wasn't prepared for this. Give me a physical fight any day, but emotions? That was unfamiliar territory.

"We're... connecting," I managed, my voice gruff. I tried to lean in for another kiss and gently slide my cock back into her, but Pippa held me at bay.

"No, I mean..." She bit her lip, hesitating. "What am I to you? Is this just... physical?"

The tension in the room thickened. I could feel my palms starting to sweat. How the hell was I supposed to answer that? While we were having sex. Really? I'd never been in this situation before. Women came and went, no strings attached. But Pippa... she was different. Special. And that terrified me.

There were no words to explain how I felt. They would all fall short.

"I ... need you to tell me what I want to hear, Abe. Don't you understand?"

Of course I understood. I needed her to tell me what I wanted to, and she always did.

"Sweetheart," I gently rolled my hips against hers and despite the strangeness of the moment, she thrust to meet me halfway. "Can't you see how much I fucking want you? Can't you see that I need you? Can't you feel the wildfire in my touch, hear the desperate heat in my voice? When you're not around, all I want is to fucking hunt you down, pull you into a corner, rip off those pesky clothes. I need you, Pippa, like I need the very air I breathe."

I watched as disappointment flickered across her face, her shoulders sagging slightly. Shit. That wasn't the right answer, was it?

"I see," Pippa murmured, her voice soft but laced with a determination that made my stomach clench. She gently pushed me off, and of course, I didn't fight it.

"Wait," I said, reaching for her. "Where are you going? We're not done here."

Pippa stepped back, just out of my reach. The fire in her eyes had dimmed, replaced by a resolute coolness that made me feel like I'd just lost something precious.

"I think we are, Abe," she said, her chin lifted defiantly. "I need more than just physical desire. I need... I deserve more than that."

I stood there, dumbstruck, and watched her put on her clothes in a haphazard rush.

I stood there, frozen in place, my mind reeling. "Pippa, let's just talk it out," I tried to tell her.

My fists clenched at my sides, frustration and regret coursing through me. She was already halfway to the door.

At the sound of my voice, she paused, turning to face me. Her green eyes, usually so warm, now held a steely resolve that made my chest tighten.

"Don't," she said, her voice firm but tinged with sadness. "Just... don't, Abe."

I took a step toward her, my hand outstretched. "Can we talk about this? I didn't mean to—"

"To what?" Pippa interrupted, her tone sharp. "To make me feel like I'm just another conquest? Another notch on your belt? Just a nice fuck?"

Her words hit me like a punch to the gut. Is that really what she thought? Is that what I'd made her feel like?

"That's not what this is," I insisted, taking another step closer. "I didn't mean for this to come across like that."

Pippa held up a hand, stopping me in my tracks. "I told you not to touch me anymore, Abe. I meant it."

I dropped my hand, feeling utterly helpless. This wasn't how things were supposed to go. Standing there, watching Pippa's retreating form, I realized I'd never wanted anything—or anyone—more than I wanted her.

And I'd fucked it all up.

I watched her walk away, straightening her blouse and running a hand through her tousled hair, I felt a surge of panic. I wanted to call out, to stop her, to say something—anything—to make her stay. But the words wouldn't come. I stood there, silent and conflicted, as the door closed behind her with a soft click.

Fuck. What had I done?

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

I stared at the resignation letter on my kitchen table, torn on what to do. I had written it up on an impulse, when the pain of knowing Abe couldn't give what I wanted most became a little too much.

My eyes filled with tears, blurring the carefully crafted words before me. This had been the toughest letter I had ever written. The thought of leaving the Vadims, the only real family I'd known since losing my parents, made my chest tighten.

But what other choice did I have? I loved Abe. He didn't love me back. His addiction to me was exactly what it was—an addiction to his desires. It all came down to sex, and when he'd lost interest, it would all be over.

The heartbreak hurts now. But to consider bringing a baby into this chaos, and to know Abe might someday walk away from us both when I was no longer a novelty was not a risk I could take. My child didn't deserve that.

"Come on, Pippa," I let out a choked sob. "You can do this. It's just a job. You'll find another."

But it wasn't just a job, was it? The casino had been my lifeline, my security blanket in a world that had been so cruel.

"Think of the baby," I whispered, my hand instinctively moving to my still-flat stomach. The realization hit me like a ton of bricks—I was going to be a mother. Alone.

Fear gripped me, its icy tendrils wrapping around my heart. How could I raise a child

on my own? The Vadims had always provided for me, sheltered me from the harsh realities of the world. Without them, without the casino, what did I have?

"You have yourself," I said firmly, straightening my spine. "And that's enough."

But was it? The doubt crept in, insidious and persistent. I pushed it away, focusing instead on the practicalities. I couldn't tell anyone about the baby, not yet. It would complicate things, raise questions I wasn't ready to answer.

"One step at a time." I tried to encourage myself, grabbing the envelope to put the paper back in. "First, finish writing the letter. Then, you figure out the rest. For today, just get your ass to work."

I had just finished putting on my shoes when a sharp knock at the door shattered my concentration, making me jump. My heart raced as I stared at the entrance, wondering who could be calling this early in the day. I hesitated, my hand hovering over the doorknob before I opened it.

"Pippa!" Two familiar voices chorused in unison.

I blinked, taken aback by the sight of Adley and Emory standing on my doorstep, their faces etched with concern. My initial apprehension melted away, replaced by a wave of relief so strong it nearly knocked me off my feet.

"What are you two doing here?" I asked, realizing I was actually happy to see them. Even if they were Abe's sisters-in-law.

Emory's brow furrowed. "We've been worried sick about you! You disappeared without a word."

"Can we come in?" Adley added, her eyes scanning my face as if searching for clues.

I nodded, stepping aside to let them enter. "Of course, sorry. I'm just... surprised to see you."

After they walked in, they both gave me hugs. Warm, genuine hugs. A lump formed in my throat at the thought that with Abe no longer in my life, they wouldn't be around much either.

"How have you been, Pippa?" Emory asked, her voice soft with genuine concern.

I closed the door, buying myself a moment to compose my features. When I turned back, I managed a smile that I hoped looked more convincing than it felt.

"I'm fine," I lied, gesturing for them to sit on the couch. "Really. Just needed some time to myself, that's all."

Adley's eyes narrowed, clearly not buying it. "You look pale. Are you eating enough?"

I laughed, the sound brittle even to my own ears. "Always the mother hen, aren't you, Ad?"

"Someone has to be," she shot back, but her tone was gentle.

As I settled into the armchair across from them, I felt a flicker of warmth in my chest. Despite everything, despite the secrets I was keeping, it felt good to have them here. To know that someone cared enough to check on me.

"I appreciate you coming," I said softly, meaning every word. "I really do."

Emory leaned forward, her brow furrowed. "We've been worried sick, Pip. You just... vanished. No calls, no texts. What happened?"

I swallowed hard, my hand instinctively moving to my still-flat stomach before I caught myself. They didn't know I was pregnant, and I didn't plan to tell them. If I did, Abe would know. "I'm sorry for worrying you. I just needed some space to think things through."

Adley's sharp eyes caught the movement. But to my relief, she didn't register it. Instead, she said, "We miss you at the house. It's not the same without you."

I forced a laugh, trying to keep things light. "I'm sure Abe's enjoying the peace and quiet without me nagging him all the time."

The moment I said his name, I saw Adley and Emory exchange a quick glance. My heart rate picked up.

"Actually," Emory began hesitantly, "Abe's been... different since you left."

I raised an eyebrow, aiming for nonchalance even as my pulse quickened. "Different how?"

Adley sighed, running a hand through her hair. "He's drinking more, for one. And he's been in a foul mood. Snapping at everyone, even Ivan and Vlad."

"He broke a glass the other day," Emory added quietly. "Just crushed it in his hand when someone mentioned your name."

I felt my eyes widen, a mix of emotions swirling in my chest. Concern, confusion, and something else I couldn't quite name. "That doesn't sound like Abe," I murmured, more to myself than to them.

"It's not," Adley confirmed, her voice soft but firm. "He's not himself, Pippa. And I think... I think it has everything to do with you leaving."

As Adley's words sank in, I felt my world tilt on its axis. My mind raced, replaying every interaction I'd had with Abe over the past few months. The long glances I'd brushed off as nothing. The way his touch seemed to linger whenever we were close. The fierce protectiveness that went beyond his usual bravado.

"I... I don't understand," I said, my voice barely above a whisper. "Abe's never been serious about anyone. He's a player, a womanizer. Why would he..."

I trailed off, unable to finish the thought. Emory reached out, squeezing my hand gently. "Maybe you're different, Pippa. Maybe you've always been different to him. Like I said, he's never brought a girl back home before, let alone let us meet one."

My heart thundered in my chest as I considered the possibility. Abe Ustinov, the man who could have any woman he wanted, actually caring about me? It seemed impossible. And yet...

"Remember that night at the casino you told me about when you came home after working overtime?" Adley prompted, her eyes searching mine. "When that drunk tried to grab you?"

I nodded, recalling how Abe had appeared out of nowhere, his eyes blazing with a fury I'd never seen before. He'd nearly broken the man's arm.

"I thought he was just being protective of an employee," I said weakly, but even as the words left my mouth, I knew they weren't true. He didn't do that when anyone else was in trouble.

"Pippa," Emory said gently, "I've never seen Abe look at anyone the way he looks at

you. It's like... like you're the only person in the room."

I felt tears prick at the corners of my eyes, overwhelmed by the implications. "But he never said anything. He never tried to..."

"What if he doesn't know how to?" Adley asked, raising an eyebrow. "What if he never learned? Never saw what love looks like."

I flinched, knowing she was right. I'd spent so long convincing myself that Abe could never see me as more than a convenient fling, I'd missed all the signs that pointed to something deeper.

"Oh God," I whispered, pressing a hand to my stomach where our child grew. "What have I done?"

I opened my mouth, ready to confide in my friends, when a sudden, deafening crash echoed from outside. We all jumped, startled by the unexpected noise.

"What the hell was that?" Adley exclaimed, her eyes wide with alarm.

My heart began to race, adrenaline coursing through my veins. "I don't know," I replied, already moving toward the window. Years of working for the Vadims had honed my instincts, and right now, they were screaming danger.

I peered out cautiously, my fingers gripping the curtain so tightly my knuckles turned white. The street below was shrouded in shadows, but I could make out movement—quick, furtive shapes darting between parked vans.

"Pippa?" Emory's voice quavered slightly. "What do you see?"

I turned back to face them, noting the worry etched on their faces. "I'm not sure, but

something's not right," I said, trying to keep my voice steady. "We need to—"

Another crash, closer this time, cut me off mid-sentence. My heart leaped into my throat as I instinctively moved away from the window, my mind racing through possible escape routes.

"Ladies," I said, surprised by the calm in my voice, "I think we might have some unwelcome visitors. We need to move, now."

Adley and Emory exchanged anxious glances, the tension in the room palpable. I could see the fear in their eyes, but there was trust there too—trust in me to get us out of this mess.

I took a deep breath, pushing aside my own fears. I had more than just myself to protect now, and I'd be damned if I let anything happen to my friends or my unborn child.

My eyes darted around the apartment, searching for anything we could use as a weapon. I grabbed a heavy brass lamp from the side table, my fingers curling around its cool metal base.

"Adley, Emory," I said, my voice low and urgent. "I need you to go to the bedroom and open my window. I'm going to barricade the door."

Emory's eyes widened. "But what about you?"

I forced a smile, hoping it looked more confident than I felt. "I'll be right behind you. Just need to make sure we can buy ourselves some time."

As they hurried to the bedroom, I could hear the sound of heavy footsteps on the stairs outside. My heart pounded in my chest, but I pushed down the fear.

I quickly placed a chair under the door handle and locked the door.

"Pippa!" Adley hissed as I slipped inside. "What's the plan?"

I helped them push the dresser in front of the door, my muscles straining with the effort. "We're getting out of here," I said, moving to the window. "Fire escape. It's not ideal, but it's our best shot."

As I showed Adley and Emory the way to the fire escape from my room, I could hear the main door of the apartment being kicked in. The sound sent a chill down my spine, but I forced myself to focus on the task at hand.

"Ladies," I said, gesturing to the now-open window, "after you. And whatever you do, don't look down. Go straight to the roof and then take the stairs down. Press random elevator buttons. Throw them off our tracks and listen, do not look down. Do not wait. Each one of us should go separate ways once we get up there."

The metal of the fire escape creaked under our weight as Adley and Emory clambered out. I cast a frantic glance over my shoulder, hearing the intruders tearing through my apartment. My hand instinctively went to my stomach, a fierce protectiveness surging through me.

"Go, go!" I urged, my voice barely above a whisper. "Up and then take the stairs down."

As Emory's feet disappeared above me, I swung one leg out the window. The cool night air hit my face, carrying with it the faint smell of garbage from the alley below.

Just as I was about to pull myself fully out, I noticed someone trying to open the doors to my balcony. If anyone saw us out here, we would all be caught.

"Shit," I muttered, my heart racing. I had to buy Adley and Emory more time.

In a split-second decision, I ducked back inside, grabbing the heaviest object I could find—a ceramic lamp from my bedside table. With a silent prayer, I hurled it at the door.

The hammering at the door paused momentarily. "She's inside!" a gruff voice shouted. I heard footsteps come away from the balcony and the pushing against my bedroom door got fiercer. Adley and Emory would be safe.

I darted to look out the window and saw that the path was clear. Good. By now, they should be on the roof. This is my chance to head up now, while they're trying to open the goddamn bedroom door.

I scrambled onto the fire escape, my hands trembling as I pulled the window closed behind me. The metal grating swayed slightly under my feet as I turned, my breath coming in short gasps.

Suddenly, the bedroom door burst open with a thunderous crash. I froze, my body pressed against the brick wall of the building.

"Where is she?" someone growled.

I held my breath, willing myself to become invisible. The fire escape creaked softly, and I silently cursed its betrayal. The shock wore off and I realized, I needed to run now.

I grabbed onto the railing, prepared to rush up when a face appeared at the window.

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The shrill ring of my phone pierced through the quiet of my study. Adley's name flashed on the screen, and I answered with a grin. "What's my brother done now? Told you that you were too good for him."

Her panicked voice wiped the grin off my face. "Abe! We're under attack at Pippa's new apartment. We're on the roof and—" The line went dead.

My blood ran cold. Pippa. Adley. I'm guessing Emory is with them too. They're under attack. The words ricocheted in my mind as I leaped to my feet, knocking over my chair. I felt terrified but there was no time for that shit.

I burst out of my study, bellowing, "Ivan! Vlad! We've got trouble!"

My brothers appeared in seconds, concern etched on their faces. I filled them in rapidly, my words clipped and urgent. "Adley called. Attack at Pippa's. Line cut off."

Understanding dawned in their eyes. We'd been through this drill before, but never with so much at stake. Pippa's face flashed in my mind, and I clenched my fists. If anyone touched a hair on her head...

"I'll grab the gear," Vlad said, already moving.

Ivan nodded. "I'll get our men and set up mobile tracking."

I grunted my approval. This was why we were the Unholy Trinity. No words were needed, just action.

We moved in perfect sync, gathering weapons and tech.

"We'll find them, Abe," Ivan said quietly, catching my eye as we headed for the garage.

I nodded, jaw clenched. "Damn right, we will. We'll get our girls back home safe. And whoever's responsible? They'll wish they'd never been born."

The car tore through the city streets. Red lights. Meaningless. Horns blared. Irrelevant. My knuckles whitened on the wheel.

"ETA five minutes," Ivan clipped.

Vlad's voice was tense. "Weapons check complete."

My mind raced. Pippa. Soft curves. Sharp wit. In danger. Blood pounded in my ears.

"If they've hurt her—"

"We'll handle it," Ivan cut in.

I nodded, jaw clenched. Focus, Abraham.

Screeching tires. We arrived. Immediately, Ivan rushed to the roof while Vlad and I went straight to her apartment to see if any of their attackers were still there. On entering, I stopped in my tracks. The place was in chaos. Shattered glass. Overturned furniture. No sign of life. My heart hammered.

"Roof." Vlad pointed.

We sprinted up and found Ivan gently talking to Adley and Emory who were huddled together in a corner, pale-faced and shaking.

"Where's Pippa?" I demanded, scanning frantically.

Ivan and Emory exchanged quick glances and Adley's voice cracked. "They... they took her."

My blood turned to ice at Adley's words. They took her. Pippa was out there, in the hands of god knows who. I felt my knees buck under me but Vlad squeezed my shoulder and helped me back to the present.

With Adley's words, my entire world had tilted.

"Who?" I growled, fists clenching.

Emory shook her head, tears streaking her face. "We don't know. It happened so fast. We noticed strange sounds from outside and Pippa peeped out. There were masked men, downstairs pouring out of vans, outside her apartment. By the dozens. She blocked the door and bought us time. We were escaping to come up here via the fire escape from her bedroom, and Pippa was right behind us. She told us not to look back, but when we got here, she wasn't there."

Fear clawed at my throat, quickly replaced by a cold, seething rage. I turned to my brothers, seeing my own determination mirrored in their eyes.

"We find her," I said, voice low and deadly. "Whatever it takes."

They nodded in unison. The Unholy Trinity, united in purpose.

"We need to move," Ivan stated firmly, his eyes scanning the horizon as though

willing Pippa to appear.

I nodded, my mind already racing through our options. "Vlad, track them down. Fast. Adley, what kind of vehicles were they?"

"Grey vans. Nearly black. No plates. They all looked the same. We saw them from the roof.

I nodded, my mind already racing. "Ivan, Vlad—"

"On it," Ivan said, pulling out his laptop. Vlad was already on his phone, barking orders to our tech team.

I paced the roof, my body thrumming with pent-up energy. "How long ago?"

"Twenty minutes, maybe?" Emory offered.

Twenty minutes. An eternity. My fists clenched.

Ivan's fingers flew across the keyboard. "Accessing traffic cams... Got it. Three vans heading east on 42nd."

I leaned over his shoulder, eyes scanning the grainy footage.

Vlad joined us, his face grim. "I've got our guys tracking the van's route. We're closing in, Abe."

I nodded, a cold determination settling over me. "Good. Because when we find them..." I trailed off, the threat implicit.

Ivan glanced up, his eyes mirroring my own resolve. "We'll get her back, Brother."

"Damn right we will," I growled. I turned back to the city skyline, my voice dropping to a whisper.

"Look, look here," Vlad said excitedly.

I watched as the laptop screen flickered during a download that revealed a grainy image of the vans pulling into an abandoned warehouse. Ivan's voice cut through my racing thoughts.

"Abe, we've got them. It's the Amatos. The warehouse is theirs"

"The fucking Amatos?" I snarled, my blood boiling. I thought the new Italian mob had learned their lesson, but kidnapping Pippa? That was a death wish.

Vlad's eyes narrowed. "Looks like they're trying to make a statement."

"Oh, I'll give them a statement," I growled, cracking my knuckles. "Written in their blood."

The abandoned warehouse loomed before us, a decrepit monument to rust and neglect. My heart pounded, not from fear, but from the raw anticipation of what lay ahead. Pippa was in there, and nothing would stop me from getting her back.

Besides, the revenge would be sweet.

"Ivan, you're up," I whispered into my comm.

A moment later, his voice crackled back. "Security's down. You're clear. They won't see your team approaching."

I nodded to Vlad, who melted into the shadows. When my unit entered, men would come as backup. Vlad and his guys would handle that.

As we approached the main entrance, I couldn't help but smirk. These Amato idiots had no idea what was coming. I motioned at my men to crouch low.

The door gave way with a satisfying crunch under my boot. Inside, chaos erupted instantly. A dozen men rose, weapons raised right at me. I kicked out and fell to the ground, my hand outstretched, and shot at the first leg I saw. My men entered and chaos erupted. Screams and shouting filled the echoing warehouse, bodies colliding with one another.

I broke free from my roll on the floor, intent on measuring the distance between me and my target. I sprang up and dove forward, tackling a man to the ground as my unit dealt with the others. This was our territory now—no fear, just determination.

The Amato men were not prepared for our surprise attack; it showed in their faces.

On reaching my target, I jumped back to my feet and kicked out till he spun to hit his head against the wall, holding it for support. I pinned the man in place, his panting breaths hot against my cheek. "Tell me your boss's name," I growled, cold and merciless. "And where I can find him."

He hesitated for a fraction of a second before answering. "Leo Amato. He... he's upstairs with the girl."

"Why?" I hissed.

"He...he said he wanted her to show our strength. He didn't mean to hurt her."

"I thought we killed you all," I said, coldly.

“There were another s...small group we j...joined forces with,” he cried as my gun reached for his temple. “Please...forgive me. My boss told me I had to do this for Leo. I didn’t know what we were doing.”

I let my hand fall, taking in this new information. “You’re not one of the Amatos?”

He gulped and shook his head. “I’m from the small group. We’re the... the Rossis. Please, Amato forced us. Said he’d take us all out if we didn’t.”

I looked around and saw a dozen dead bodies on the floor. Some of which had it coming. Some, I realized, did what they had to in order to survive. I let the man go.

“Run,” I glared at him. “Get the Rossi guys out of here. Anyone still here will be killed. Mess with us again, you’ll be killed. Stay in your fucking lane, you hear me?”

“Th...thank you,” he gushed in relief and scattered. I watched him run right out with four other men at his heels.

"Abe!" Vlad's voice rang in my ear. "Second floor, east wing. That's where they're holding her."

“Done. Vlad, listen. Some of these guys belong to a smaller group. Let the survivors off with a warning. Kill any of Leo’s men.”

“Why?”

“I’ll explain later.”

“Done. I’ll pass the orders,” he barked.

I moved swiftly, my body on autopilot as I dispatched anyone foolish enough to get

in my way. The sound of gunfire echoed from other parts of the building—Ivan and Vlad doing their part.

As I reached the top of the stairs, a burly man with a thick Italian accent bellowed, "Stop right there, you Russian piece of shit!"

I turned slowly, sizing him up. "You are?"

"The man who brought you down." He laughed in my face.

"You must be Leo Amato. Gotta say, I'm not impressed. Why ever did you think we were down?"

His face contorted with rage as he lunged at me. But I was ready. I sidestepped and let him pass, then grabbed his lapels to hold him in place.

"You took something that belongs to me," I growled, landing a vicious uppercut that sent Leo staggering.

He spat blood, glaring at me. "The girl? She's nothing. This is about territory, you fool."

Something snapped inside me. In a blur of motion, I had him pinned against the wall, my forearm crushing his windpipe. "She's everything," I snarled.

The light faded from Leo's eyes as I applied more pressure. Part of me wanted to drag it out, to make him suffer for daring to touch Pippa. But I had more important things to do.

With a final, sickening crack, Leo Amato slumped to the floor. I didn't spare him another glance as I raced down the hall.

"Pippa!" I called out, my voice echoing through the empty corridors. "Pippa, where are you?"

A muffled sound caught my attention. I kicked down the door, my heart in my throat.

And there she was. Bound to a chair, her light brown curls in disarray, but alive. Those bottle-green eyes I'd been dreaming about widened as they met mine. I quickly strode over and pulled the rag out of her mouth.

"Abe," she whispered, her voice hoarse but filled with relief. "You came."

My hands shook as I worked to untie her bonds. "Of course I came," I said, trying to keep my voice steady. "I'll always come for you."

As the ropes fell away, I noticed a small, wiry man cowering in the corner without a weapon in sight. How juvenile. I now needed to explain to him what I needed to tell my brother.

"You," I barked, pointing at him. "Stand up."

He scrambled to his feet, trembling. I could smell the fear radiating off him.

"Listen carefully," I said, my voice low and dangerous. "You're going to deliver a message for me. Tell everyone what happened here today. Tell them how the Unholy Trinity wiped out the Amato family. And tell them that anyone who even thinks about touching what's mine will suffer the same fate."

I stepped closer, looming over him. "Do you understand?"

He nodded frantically, his eyes darting between me and the door.

"Good," I growled. "Now get out of my sight before I change my mind about letting you live."

He bolted from the room, and I turned back to Pippa. The adrenaline that had been fueling me suddenly drained away, leaving me exhausted. But as I looked at her—disheveled, a bruise forming on her cheek, but alive—a wave of relief washed over me.

"Are you okay?" I asked softly, reaching out to touch her face.

Pippa leaned into my hand, her eyes glistening with unshed tears. "I am now," she whispered.

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As we pulled up to the sprawling Ustinov estate, I let out a sigh. It was a sigh that spoke volumes—how I never imagined being back here, how good it felt, how confusing and relieving it was to see Abe come to my rescue.

The iron gates swung open, and Abe guided the sleek black SUV up the winding driveway. My eyes drank in the fortress of safety after the hellish day I'd endured.

"We're here." Abe parked smoothly in front of the grand entrance.

I nodded weakly, my limbs feeling like lead as I fumbled with the seatbelt. Before I could open the door, Abe was there, offering his hand. I took it gratefully, my legs wobbling as I stepped out.

"Easy there, Pip," he murmured, steadying me with a firm grip on my elbow.

His pet name for me, Pip, sent a flutter through my chest despite my exhaustion. I smoothed down my rumpled blouse, suddenly aware of how disheveled I must look.

Then I chided myself for caring.

Abe guided me inside to safety. The tension in my shoulders began to ease, replaced by bone-deep weariness.

"You need to rest," Abe said, his tone brooking no argument as he steered me toward my old bedroom.

"I'm fine," I protested weakly, even as my body sank gratefully into the bed.

Abe raised an eyebrow. "Pippa, you look ready to keel over. Let me take care of you for once, da?"

I bit back a retort, too tired to argue. Abe disappeared for a while, returning with a soft throw blanket and a maid who carried with her a tray. He draped the blanket over me with surprising gentleness for such a formidable man, then had the tray put beside me before dismissing the maid.

"Tea?" he asked, hovering near me with an almost endearing awkwardness.

I nodded, touched by his attentiveness. "That would be lovely, thank you."

As Abe busied himself with the tea service, I closed my eyes, letting the feeling of this bed wash over me. For the first time today, I felt like I could breathe again.

As I sank deeper into the bed, my mind whirled with everything that had happened over the past few days. The change in living arrangements, the fight, the kidnapping. I opened my eyes, watching him prepare the tea with meticulous care.

"You're staring," Abe said, a hint of amusement in his voice as he passed me the tea.

I felt heat rise to my cheeks. "Just... lost in thought."

He sat on the bed beside me, his face suddenly level with mine. "What troubles you?" His hand reached out, brushing a stray curl from my forehead. The tender gesture made my breath catch.

How could I tell him the truth behind what troubled me? How could I tell him that I wished he loved me? That if I slipped up, I'd never be able to leave. How could I tell him about the dreadful nights I've cried myself to sleep since I left here, missing him with every fiber in my body?

So instead, I lied. "It's nothing," my fingers instinctively curled around the warmth of the teacup. "I'm just tired. Today was terrifying."

The memories rushed back. How that man grabbed my leg and pulled me back down with such force off the fire escape that I thought he'd let me fall to my death. How he punched me when I fought back. How I stopped fighting back in fear he'd kick my stomach and I could lose my child?

In that moment, I was reliving the past events and I felt as though I was being kidnapped all over again. My hands trembled so hard and I heard Abe rush to reach for the cup as the pain in my chest grew worse. I struggled for air, gasping.

"Shh," Abe said, his hands gently caressing my hair. "Shh. You're safe, Pip."

There were a million things I shouldn't have done, but I turned to him wide-eyed, terrified, and begged him to not leave me alone tonight.

Abe's expression softened. Quietly, without saying a word, he put down the cup and walked to the other side of the bed, getting in. He laid out an arm on the bedrest behind us, giving me an opening.

I scuttled over. I needed touch. I needed comfort. I needed sleep. And I hadn't slept much without him. I nestled into his chest as the tears fell down my face.

"You're not alone, Pip. I'm right here," he murmured, his voice a soothing balm to my frayed nerves. "You just get some rest now. I'm not going anywhere."

I clung to him as tears pricked my eyes, unable to contain the flood of emotions that threatened to overwhelm me. How good it felt to be in his arms again, how wrong it felt to enjoy this. I cried myself to sleep and he just held me, never asking for more than I could give.

The next morning, I woke to the sound of the door banging shut. I sat up with a gasp, thinking I was in danger. To my surprise, it was Abe with a sheepish look on his face, his arms heavy with a laden tray.

“Sorry,” he said softly. “I didn’t mean to kick it close that hard.”

He moved his forearms, showing his hands were busy.

I nodded and pulled the covers up tighter, realizing he’d brought me breakfast in bed.

“I thought you’d be hungry,” he said, and put the tray on the bed beside me.

“My god,” I said, looking at it. “You cooked for a dozen?”

There was coffee, croissants, a bowl of fruits, eggs of three different kinds, pancakes, toast, a smoothie bowl, hummus, crackers, cheese, honey, and was that... quiche and a sausage bun?

It was the strangest, most eclectic breakfast I’d ever seen. I couldn’t help the giggle from escaping my lips.

Immediately, my eyes reached for his, which looked surprised at my expression of joy. Suddenly, I felt guilty for putting him in this spot. For grasping for little signs of approval.

“Come,” I said, patting the empty space on the bed. “I couldn’t eat all this alone and after all the fighting you did yesterday, you must be famished too.”

Abe's lips twitched, and he settled on the bed beside me, creating a comfortable space

between us. I poured two cups of coffee, passing him one with a smile. Then, I realized I shouldn't drink the coffee. I was pregnant.

I was pregnant and he didn't know. How long could I keep up this charade?

A strange silence fell over us for a while, yet none of us moved to touch the food.

At last, Abe's large hand enveloped mine. "Pippa," he said softly, "you should move back in. Please, trust me."

The intimacy of the moment, his unexpected gentleness, made my resolve waver. I wanted to tell him everything, to share this burden. But fear held me back. What if he was only doing all this, offering me our old life back, because he felt guilty?

Guilt about what, Pippa? a small voice counter-argued in my head.

About how he couldn't tell me what I needed to hear, about how he couldn't give me what I wanted, about how I got kidnapped when he thought he had the problem solved?

But don't you have anything to feel guilty about, Pippa? That voice came back, sharper than before. You're carrying his child, and you've already decided on a future without him—without even giving him a chance to choose. You heard Emory and Adley, telling you he's suffering, yet you're still choosing to believe what you want, not what his own family has told you: that he cares for you. You saw it when he rescued you—the relief on his face, the joy at seeing you safe.

I groaned and put my head in my hands, utterly exhausted.

"Pippa?" Abe asked, worried as he leaned over and gently held my hand.

God. I was so done with this battle I had raging in my head. I was so done choosing for us. This was no way to live, second-guessing myself every step of the way. Perhaps I needed to let go of all expectations and lay my heart bare. Whatever might happen, would happen.

Fate, as they say, chooses its own path.

And right now, I needed to let go. This was it, my one shot to see if Abe truly didn't know how to tell me how he felt, or if he really didn't give a damn.

He deserved the truth about everything, starting with the baby, and then I'd never be left reeling this way again. Then, I'd know, for sure.

At this moment, I realized that knowing would always be better than holding on to the what-ifs, better than all this self-doubt.

I sat up, feeling incredibly brave, and looked at the man who would decide what my future would hold. And for the first time ever, I felt no fear.

"Abe, I..." I started, then faltered. My mind raced. Pregnant. I'm pregnant. Two simple words that would change everything. My courage wavered.

"What is it?" he prompted gently, his brows furrowed with worry.

I bit my lip, buying time. How would he react? Would he be angry? Excited? Indifferent? The uncertainty was paralyzing.

Yet, so was not knowing.

I took a deep breath, my heart pounding so hard I was sure Abe could hear it. My secret pressed down on me, demanding to be released. I couldn't keep this from him

any longer.

"Abe, there's something I need to tell you," I said, my voice barely above a whisper. I forced myself to meet his eyes. "I'm... I'm pregnant."

The words hung in the air between us, heavy and irreversible. My eyes remained glued to his, and I watched his pupils blast open just as shock rippled across his face. His grip on my hand tightened almost painfully.

"Pregnant?" he repeated, his voice hoarse. "You're sure?"

I nodded, unable to look away from the tumult of emotions playing across his features. Shock gave way to disbelief, then a flicker of something that looked almost like... hope? Or was I imagining things? Projecting my own hope onto him?

Abe nodded slowly as though registering what I said now, his eyes never leaving mine. I could almost see the gears turning in his head, processing this new reality.

"And the baby... it's..." he started, then swallowed hard.

"Yours," I finished for him, my voice stronger now. "There's no question about that."

He let go of my hand and raked through his hair. "How long have you known?" he asked, his tone carefully controlled.

"Not long," I admitted, feeling a lump form in my throat. "I found out just before... you told me you had killed the guy from the casino. I didn't know whether I should..." I trailed off, gesturing helplessly.

I held my breath, studying Abe's face for any clue to his thoughts. The ticking of a nearby clock seemed deafening in the quiet room.

Finally, Abe broke the silence, his voice husky and raw as he rubbed a hand over his stubble. "Christ, Pippa," he muttered, shaking his head. "I don't even know what to say. I'm not... I've never..." His words faltered, and he exhaled sharply, frustrated. "I'm not exactly father material, am I? The things I've done, the life I lead..."

I felt my heart clench at the hurt and confusion in his tone. To see him so unsettled was jarring.

"I didn't plan this either, Abe," I said softly. "But it's happening, and I thought you deserved to know. I know it's not ideal," I tried to reassure him. "And I won't pressure you to be a part of this journey. You're free to do as you wish. I can raise this baby just fine on my own. You're not obliged to hold my hand through this."

Abe's gaze snapped up to mine, his eyes dark with anger. "Pressure me? Obligated?" he said, his voice cruel to the ear. "Pippa, do you really think that's what this is about?"

I shifted uncomfortably under the intensity of his stare. "Are you angry about something?"

He raised his brows and looked at me like I was daft. "Of course I'm fucking angry," he said in a louder-than-usual tone. "But more than that, I'm fucking hurt."

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"What's this about? What did I do to make you so angry and hurt, Abe?" Pippa asked softly, her eyes flashing with confusion. She leaned toward me, her mouth pursed with frustration.

"You want to know why I'm mad?" I growled, my voice raw and unguarded. "Because you suggested I didn't have to be involved with our child. Like it was a fucking option."

The words hung in the air between us, heavy and charged. I watched as shock rippled across Pippa's face, her perfectly arched eyebrows shooting up. Fuck. I hated seeing her upset. But the words I needed to say were all looped up in my head, unable to be deciphered.

"I just thought, when you said you didn't know anything about being a father—" she started.

"You never let me finish talking!" I cut her off with a bellow. Shock crossed her face as she leaned back against the bed, waiting for me to finish.

Something came over me. That same anger, that same hurt when she said I was free to do what I wanted. On impulse, I stepped off the bed and stood before her, my eyes glued to hers.

How could I explain that her casual suggestion about our child had shaken me to my core? That the thought of not being involved in our baby's life terrified me more than any enemy I'd faced?

Well, I had to try.

I forced myself to speak calmly. "Yes, it's true. I don't know the first thing about being a father. But god damn it, I'm going to try fucking hard to be the best father to our baby."

Pippa's eyes widened and she sat up straighter, surprise flickering across her eyes. She blinked and took a shaky breath before speaking softly. "Is that why you were so angry? Because I thought you didn't want this burden?"

I shook my head, feeling a mix of frustration and love swelling inside me. "A burden? You think having a family with you is a burden?"

"Abe, I—"

"No, let me finish," I cut her off again, gazing at her intensely. "I'm terrified. But the thought of you doing this alone... it doesn't sit right with me."

Her breath caught in her throat. "What are you saying?"

I paced the length of the room, trying to make sense of the jumbled thoughts inside me. "I'm saying I don't want you to handle this alone. I'm saying I'm sad you felt you couldn't tell me immediately. I'm hurt you thought I wouldn't want to be a part of this. I'm saying... fuck, I don't know what I'm saying."

She watched me and my heart hammered against my ribs. I felt utterly lost. This was as out of my element as I've ever been.

"We don't have to figure everything out right now," she offered softly.

I stopped abruptly, spinning to face Pippa. "No, we don't. But I need you to know that

I'm not walking away from this. From you. Pippa, don't you understand? I want this, us, together. I love you, Pippa. Don't you understand? I fucking love you."

The words came out as naturally as water flowing down a stream, and they felt right. Yet still, the admission felt like jumping off a cliff, exhilarating and terrifying all at once. After all, I'd never said those three words before.

I held my breath, watching Pippa's reaction intently.

Her eyes widened, and I saw her breath catch. Good. She needed to understand the gravity of this moment. Her hand drifted to her stomach, still flat beneath her blouse, and I felt a surge of protectiveness so strong it nearly knocked me off my feet.

"I didn't realize," she whispered, her voice barely audible.

For a moment, my heart stopped, fear gripping me. Had I misread everything?

But then, slowly, a smile spread across her face. It was soft, tentative, but unmistakably there. Her hand, which had been resting on her stomach, reached out toward me and I sat on the edge of the bed, taking it into my own.

"Abe," she whispered, her voice thick with emotion. "I... I never thought..."

I watched as joy bloomed across her features, her smile growing wider. My own heart swelled in response, a warmth spreading through my chest that I'd never experienced before.

"You love me?" Pippa asked, her voice wondrously full of joy.

I nodded, unable to look away from her radiant face. "Yeah, I do. God help me, but I do."

"Abe," she said, her voice steady despite the emotion I could see swirling in her eyes. "I love you too. God help me, but I do."

For a moment, I couldn't breathe. "You... You do?" I asked, still in disbelief.

"Yes, you big oaf. Of course I love you."

The words I'd longed to hear, yet never dared to hope for, hung in the air between us. I laughed with delight and reached out, cupping her face in my hands. My calloused fingers brushed against her soft skin, and I marveled at the contrast. How could someone so gentle, so pure, love someone like me?

How could I have been such a fool as to not have said it earlier? How could I not have realized I've been in love with this maddening woman for so damn long, but not known it?

"I love you, Pippa," I said again, my voice gruff from all the emotions roaring through me. "I was a fool to not have told you earlier. A fool to have let you walk away. Please, forgive me for not knowing how to find the words to express the only truth I know."

Tears welled up in Pippa's eyes as she gazed back at me, her expression filled with love and understanding. She reached up, cupping my cheek with her hand, her touch grounding me in a way I never thought possible.

"There's nothing to forgive, Abe," she whispered, her voice barely above a breath. "You found the words when it truly mattered. And right now... right now is all that matters."

Her words washed over me like a soothing balm, easing the turmoil in my heart. I leaned forward and pressed my forehead against hers, watching those beautiful lashes

flutter against her cute, sweet cheeks. She sighed and took my hand, placing it on her stomach.

And in that moment, my entire life felt as though this was what it was always meant to lead up to.

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My hands trembled as I folded my favorite red blouse, tucking it carefully into my suitcase. The butterflies in my stomach were doing somersaults, and I couldn't help but smile at my reflection in the mirror. Me, Pippa Burrows, moving in with Abraham Ustinov permanently. If someone had told me this would happen six months ago, I'd have laughed in their face.

I lose myself in that moment for a while. He took me out for dinner after the twelve-week scan yesterday to celebrate that the pregnancy was coming along wonderfully well. To my surprise, dinner was on a gorgeous boat out in the Hudson! It was as we were gazing up at the stars that he put his hand around my waist and told me he didn't want to waste a single second away from me. How could I have said anything but yes when he asked me to move in? When I felt the exact same way?

I ran my fingers through my curled hair, adjusting a stray strand. "Get it together, girl," I muttered, applying a fresh coat of red lipstick. Every cell was buzzing with excitement and a hint of nervousness.

As I zipped up my suitcase, my mind raced with questions. Would Abe and I redecorate his room? Would there be room for my extensive collection of clothes? And most importantly, how would it feel to wake up next to him every morning?

The doorbell rang, jolting me from my thoughts. I smoothed down my blouse and took a deep breath before opening the door.

Abe stood there, looking devastatingly handsome in a crisp white shirt and dark jeans. His blue-gray eyes twinkled with amusement as he took in my flushed appearance.

"Ready to go, Sweetheart?" he asked, his deep voice sending shivers down my spine.

I nodded, trying to appear calm and collected. "As ready as I'll ever be."

He chuckled, heading in past me and returning with my suitcase in hand. "Let's get you home then."

The car ride was a blur of anticipation and curiosity. I couldn't stop myself from firing questions at Abe, my excitement bubbling over.

"Do you think we can create some room for my books? Oh, and please tell me we can arrange for a decent-sized closet! Also, I hope everyone back home knows this is permanent."

While I loved Abe's family, I was also nervous about cramping their style. Back when I lived there, I was a guest. Now, I'd be a forever addition. I wanted things to start off on the right foot.

"Wait," I said, nearly jumping in my seat to face him as a worried thought crossed my mind. "Do you have a spare room we can convert into a nursery for the baby?"

Abe's lips quirked into a smirk as he kept his eyes on the road. "Slow down, firecracker. You'll have all the answers soon enough."

I huffed, crossing my arms over my chest. "Come on, Abe. Give me something to work with here!"

He glanced at me, his expression softening. "Let's just say it's a place where we can build our future together. That's all you need to know for now."

His words made my heart skip a beat, and I found myself falling silent, lost in the

warmth of his promise. As we drove on, I knew this was the beginning of something truly special.

The car slowed to a stop, and I blinked in confusion. Wait. I was so engrossed in my thoughts, I hadn't noticed we were nowhere close to the compound.

We were parked in front of a large empty lot with nothing but a small shed in the middle, overgrown with weeds and surrounded by a chain-link fence. My heart skipped a beat as I tried to make sense of our surroundings.

"Abe?" I turned to him, my brow furrowed. "Where are we?"

He met my gaze, excitement and nervousness dancing in his misty eyes. "Trust me, Pippa."

As he helped me out of the car, my mind raced. What was he up to?

"I don't understand," I said, unable to keep the edge from my voice. "Is this... are we in the right place?"

Abe's large hand found the small of my back, guiding me forward. "Patience, Sweetheart. I've got something to show you."

I could feel the tension in his body as he and I ducked under the chain fence and he led me toward the center of the lot. His usual confident stride had a hint of hesitancy, and I noticed his free hand clenching and unclenching at his side.

"Abe Ustinov, if this is your idea of a prank, I swear—"

"No prank." He cut me off, a rare vulnerability in his voice. "This is... well, it's our future. If you want it."

My breath caught in my throat as we came to a stop in the middle of the overgrown grass. Abe's eyes were intense as they locked with mine, a mixture of hope and uncertainty swirling in their depths.

"What do you mean, our future?" I whispered, my heart pounding so loudly I was sure he could hear it.

Abe's lips curved into a smile. He reached into his jacket, pulling out a roll of papers. With a dramatic flourish that was so quintessentially Abe, he unfurled them before me.

My eyes widened as I took in the intricate sketches. It was a house—no, a home. I saw the client's name on top. Our names.

This was our home. I gasped, my fingers tracing the lines of a sprawling kitchen with an island big enough for my baking experiments. There was a cozy reading nook by a bay window, just like I'd always dreamed of having.

"Is this..." I couldn't finish the sentence, my voice catching.

"It's us, Pippa," Abe said, his voice uncharacteristically soft. "Every detail, every room—it's built around what you've told me you've always wanted."

I blinked rapidly, fighting back tears as I saw the master bathroom with the clawfoot tub I'd once mentioned in passing. How had he remembered all of this?

"But that's not all," Abe continued, flipping to another page. "Look here."

My heart nearly stopped as I saw the sketch of a nursery, complete with a rocking chair and stuffed animals. The implications hit me like a tidal wave, and I felt my knees go weak.

"Abe," I breathed, looking up at him in disbelief. "You... you want all of this? With me?"

His blue-gray eyes, usually so guarded, were open and vulnerable as he nodded. "Every bit of it, Sweetheart. You, me, our baby, this home—our future."

I couldn't hold back the tears anymore. They spilled down my cheeks as I threw my arms around his neck, burying my face in his chest. His strong arms wrapped around me, holding me close as if he never wanted to let go.

Abe's arms tightened around me as he spoke, his deep voice rumbling against my ear. "I know I'm not the easiest man to love, Pippa. I find it hard to say how I feel, have a real temper, and God knows I can be a real bastard sometimes." He chuckled softly, the sound vibrating through his chest. "But with you, I want to be better. I want to build something lasting."

I pulled back slightly, looking up into his face. The vulnerability in his eyes was startling, so different from how I'd come to know him. My heart swelled, and I found myself reaching up to trace the line of his jaw, my fingers brushing against the stubble there.

"You're not just talking about the house, are you?" I asked, my voice barely above a whisper.

He shook his head, a small smile playing at the corners of his mouth. "No, Sweetheart. I'm talking about us. A life together. A family in every way possible, if that's what you want."

He stepped back and took my hands in his, his calloused fingers tracing gentle patterns on my skin.

"Pippa," he began, his usually confident voice tinged with an unfamiliar nervousness.

My heart began to race, the realization of what was happening hitting me like a freight train. I swallowed hard, my eyes locked on his face.

"I never thought I'd be doing this. Hell, I never thought I'd want to. But you... you've changed everything. Pippa Burrows," he said, his voice dropping to a husky whisper as he slowly lowered himself to one knee and pulled something out of his pocket. "Will you marry me?"

The world seemed to stop. My breath caught in my throat, and for a moment, I couldn't speak. He opened the box and it dazzled in the light. This man, this infuriating, passionate, protective man, wanted me to be his wife. Me, with all my tendencies to overthink and sass and workaholic tendencies.

"Yes," I finally managed to choke out, tears of joy spilling down my cheeks as he took my hand and placed the heaviest rock I'd ever seen upon my finger. "Yes, you impossible man. Of course I'll marry you."

The moment the "yes" left my lips, Abe's face transformed. The tension in his jaw melted away, replaced by a smile so genuine it made my heart skip.

"You mean it?" he asked, looking up at me, his voice husky with emotion.

I nodded and bent to the ground to be at his level, cupping his cheeks in my hands, unable to stop the grin spreading across my face. "I do. God help me, I do."

Abe surged to his feet, pulling me up with him and straight into his arms with such force I let out a surprised squeak. His large hands cupped my face, thumbs gently wiping away my tears as he pressed his forehead to mine.

"You have no idea how happy you've made me, love of my life," he murmured, his accent thicker than usual.

I couldn't help but tease, even as my heart soared. "The big, bad Bratva man, getting all mushy? Who would've thought?"

He chuckled, the sound rumbling through his chest. "Only for you, Pippa. Only ever for you."

His lips found mine then, and the world fell away. The kiss was different from our others—deeper, more intense. It felt like a promise, a seal on the commitment we'd just made. My hands fisted in his crisp shirt, pulling him closer as the passion between us ignited. Above us, the sun beat down on us. Around us, birds chirped. The soft wind ruffled our clothes and our hair.

In every darned way, this was perfect.

Abe's hands slid down to my waist, gripping tightly as he lifted me. Instinctively, I wrapped my legs around him, our lips never parting. He took a few steps, pressing my back against something. I turned to see it was the shed.

"Here?" I gasped when we finally came up for air, my cheeks flushing at the thought.

Abe's eyes were dark with desire, a smirk playing on his lips. "Why not? It's our lot now, isn't it?"

"I couldn't argue with that logic," I giggled. As his lips found my neck, I tilted my head back, losing myself in the sensation.

I felt every nerve in my body come alive as Abe's lips trailed a path of fire down my neck, his warm breath sending shivers down my spine. With a sudden surge of

boldness, Abe's hands squeezed into my ass, his touch setting my skin ablaze.

The next thing I knew, his mouth was on my buttons. "Abe!" I chided as he ripped one out with his teeth. His eyes burned as he gazed into eyes and went down to rip off the next one. My shirt popped open and his eyes went toward what he put out on display for himself.

I felt my cheeks turn red when I saw the hunger in his eyes before he squeezed my ass again.

"Hold tight," he instructed and, without question, I clenched my legs tighter around his hips as he raised a leg and kicked. The next thing I knew, I heard the door to the shed bang open and we were inside. He kicked it close before walking me to the middle of the barren shed and gently placing me back down to my feet.

Slowly, his eyes followed his fingers as he unbuttoned the rest of my blouse, peeling it over my shoulders until it rested halfway down my arms. His hands cupped my waist and thumbs flicked inwards, toward the bottom of my bra.

I shivered and his eyes came back up to meet mine. He smiled devilishly as he removed my shirt in its entirety.

"Take off your skirt," he said softly as he quickly removed his belt and let his trousers fall to the ground.

I trembled as I bent down to slide my skirt off while he stepped out of his boxers and made quick work of his shirt.

Every inch of my skin was on fire as he stood naked before me and took in the sight of my naked body, his eyes leaving a waking burn across my neck, my breasts, the curve of my stomach, the dip of my hips, and the length of my calves.

It felt overwhelming, to have him look at me like this. It was insane, to know that this chiseled, tall, tattooed, and gorgeous man was mine as I took in the planes of his chest.

And yet, there was no room left for uncertainty or doubt in his gaze. With practiced grace, Abe dropped to one knee, his hands skimming up my legs as he pressed a trail of kisses along the sensitive skin of my inner thighs. With a teasing glint in his eye, he looked up at me, his breath hot against my core before he slid off my panties.

"You're beautiful," Abe whispered, looking up at me with nothing less than devotion. "So fucking beautiful, Pippa."

I melted at his words, my own hands exploring the back of his neck and running through his hair. "And you're mine," I breathed, still hardly believing it.

"Always," he promised, voice husky with emotion, before he parted my legs and slid his tongue into me. I gasped and my body lurched off the floor on my toes from the sensation of his tongue.

He pulled out and stabbed his tongue into me again. Fuck.

I moaned his name, my eyes fluttering shut as his hands, big and strong, gripped my hips as he continued to lap me up. I closed my eyes and let the feel of his tongue against my folds take over control. My legs began to tremble with every move he made, his tongue now moving in figure eights, covering every inch.

Suddenly, I felt him release a grip from my hip and his nimble fingers traveled up my legs. His tongue swiped up one final time before settling on my clit. The next thing I knew, he curved his finger right into me, causing the start of a tension coiling into itself and growling larger.

“Abe!” I squealed his name and my hands shot up to grip the wooden beams overhead. His finger flicked at my sweet spot again, and I let out a needy groan. My legs threatened to give out, so I leaned on the beams and pulled myself up by them. I could feel my wetness drip down my legs, feel the orgasm dying to be released.

His finger now moved in rhythmic motion and he pulled his face back, looking up at me with eyes now glowing with passion. "Keep holding on, Pippa," he urged, his voice deep and gravelly. "I won't let go."

I nodded, closing my eyes and focusing on the pleasurable sensation building up within me. My heart raced with anticipation as I felt the climax edging closer. Suddenly, Abe's teeth gently bit down on my clit.

"Abe!" I cried out, a sharp pain mingling with the building pleasure. The unexpected sensation sent me spiraling over the edge, waves of ecstasy crashing into me in rapid succession. My hands shook from the intensity of it all as I held onto the wooden beams, my legs weak and shaky from pleasure.

Abe gripped my hip tighter, while I continued riding his other until the last of my waves passed. As I came down from my orgasmic high, Abe slowly pulled away from the space between my legs and gave me his hand. I took it and tumbled down on the floor beside him, spent and exhausted.

I lay there beside him as he trailed a finger up from the landing of my pussy, up my stomach, circling my breasts in teasing motions. Where his fingers once were, lay a wake of fire.

The minute I caught my breath, he grabbed my hips and flipped me around until I had my back to him. He gently took my shoulder and slid one hand down my spine, wordlessly directing me to my knees and arms.

I complied, feeling vulnerable yet strangely turned on as I felt his cock against my entrance, knowing he could see all my curves.

He traced a path from the small of my back up my spine, sending shivers down me. "You're so beautiful," he whispered again, and I could feel the sincerity in his voice.

With expert precision, he slid an inch into me from behind, his chest grazing my back as he leaned over me.

I moaned for more.

"Greedy, are we?"

"Mm-hmm," I mumbled and turned my head back to look at him. His eyes were taking in the view, a deep gnarly hunger in them and I blushed.

I watched as he gripped my hips and pulled out, before moving my hips toward him and his cock toward me, ramming into me. Fuck. That stretch. I sighed as pleasure swept through my core, my soul.

His eyes were on the curves of my ass, watching them bounce with each thrust.

He slid deeper into me and kissed my neck, his breath hot and heavy against my skin.

"Pip," he whispered, "you feel so good."

I moaned, my head falling back onto his shoulder as he continued to stroke into me. The feeling of his cock inside me was something I would never get enough of.

His hands gripped my hips tighter as he thrust faster. "You're mine," he growled. "Mine and only mine."

I shuddered at his words, the heat in my core growing with each thrust.

"Yours," I moaned, my nails digging into the floor as he picked up the pace and I threw back my hips, matching his.

"Harder," I begged, and he didn't disappoint. His hips slammed into mine, each roll of his hips sending waves of pleasure crashing against the walls of my core.

His fingers dug into my waist and ass, his cock deep inside me. He leaned down, his weight pressing me into the hard floor, and his teeth nipped at my earlobe.

"That's it, Baby," he whispered in a throaty growl. "Take me."

I let out a strangled cry, feeling the walls of my pussy contracting around his thickness as I neared the edge. I looked at him from the corner of my eyes, begging for more, urging him to push me over the edge.

I parted my legs a little further and he went deeper and deeper, till I was so full of him I could feel his balls squeezing against me. I closed my eyes, breathless, knowing it was only a matter of seconds.

"Abe," my voice came out raspy, in nearly a cry. "I'm close..."

He took my words as a challenge and sped up even more, his hips wild and unhinged. "I like that," he grunted. "I love you, Pippa. You're mine."

I was his and he had every intention of showing me just how much I belonged to him.

His thrusts pounded into me, the force of them causing me to grip the floor even harder. I felt my orgasm building again, a tsunami that threatened to swallow everything in its wake.

"Yes!" I screamed out his name as he pounded into me, relentless and remorseless. His hands gripped my hips tightly, holding me flush against him as my inner muscles started to clench once more, setting off an earthquake within me.

"Abe!" His name echoed in the room as I was swept away by the roaring intensity of my climax. He groaned and thrust harder into me, his own release swiftly approaching.

"Yes," he growled, his hand on the nape of my neck as he chased his own peak and spilled out within me, his cock throbbing and matching the pounding of my heart. As we came down from our high, we froze in our positions momentarily, gripping each other as we caught our breaths.

Slowly, he pulled out of me and helped me turn on my back, nestling me into his chest as we lay there on the floor. I listened to the steady thrum of his heartbeat, feeling more content than I ever had in my life.

"What are you thinking about?" Abe asked, his fingers lazily tracing patterns on my bare shoulder after we both caught our breaths.

I smiled, snuggling closer. "Just... how happy I am. How excited I am for our future."

He pressed a kiss to the top of my head. "Me too, Sweetheart. Me too."

I traced my fingers along Abe's chest, a contented sigh escaping my lips. "So, tell me more about this dream home of ours," I murmured, curiosity getting the better of me. "And where are going to live until it's done?"

Abe chuckled, the sound rumbling through his chest. "Impatient as always, my little firecracker."

I propped myself up on an elbow, arching an eyebrow at him. "Can you blame me? You've dangled this tantalizing piece of our future in front of me. It's only fair I get some details."

His eyes sparkled with amusement. "Well, I was thinking about a library for you. Floor-to-ceiling bookshelves, a cozy window seat..."

My heart skipped a beat. "Really?"

"Of course," he said softly, tucking a stray curl behind my ear. "Anything you want, Pippa. And in the meantime, we'll stay at my family home. Both places will belong to us, in their own special way."

I sighed with contentment and looked up at him with a smile. "I can't wait."

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There she stood, my Pippa, a vision in white lace that hugged her beautiful curves. Her eyes locked with mine, shimmering with unshed tears of joy. My heart thundered in my chest, a feeling I'd never experienced before meeting her. Truth is, she rendered me speechless.

"I, Pippa, take you, Abraham..." Her voice trembled slightly as she began her vows.

I couldn't tear my gaze away from her glowing face, framed by those light brown curls I loved to run my fingers through. Her seven-month baby bump, proudly on display in her form-fitting gown, only made her more radiant. Fuck, how did I get so lucky?

When it was my turn, I cleared my throat, pushing past the unexpected lump of emotion. "I, Abraham, take you, Pippa, to be my wife. I promise to protect you, cherish you, and love you fiercely for all of our days." My voice softened as I continued, "You've shown me a life far more beautiful than what I imagined possible. With you, I've found a home I never knew existed for the likes of me."

Pippa's eyes widened and she tilted her head at my uncharacteristic display of vulnerability, a sweet smile playing on her soft, pink-painted lips. I wanted nothing more than to kiss her right then and there.

As if reading my mind, the officiant declared, "You may now kiss the bride."

I didn't need to be told twice. I cupped Pippa's face in my hands and claimed her lips with a passion that probably wasn't entirely appropriate for a church. But hey, I'd never been one to play by the rules.

The church erupted in applause and cheers. I reluctantly broke the kiss, keeping an arm wrapped possessively around Pippa's waist as we turned to face our guests.

My brothers, Vlad and Ivan, were on their feet, whooping like we were at a boxing match instead of a wedding. Their wives, Adley and Emory, looked on with amused and joyful expressions, no doubt used to their husbands' antics by now.

As we made our way down the aisle, I leaned in close to Pippa's ear. "You look fucking gorgeous, pip," I murmured. "I can't wait to get you alone later."

Pippa's elbow connected with my ribs, but her eyes sparkled with mischief. "Behave yourself, Mr. Ustinov. We have guests to entertain."

I grinned, already plotting ways to steal her away during the reception. After all, what was the point of being a feared member of the Unholy Trinity if I couldn't bend the rules at my own wedding?

The reception hall buzzed with laughter and chatter as Pippa and I made our rounds. I kept my hand on the small of her back, feeling the warmth of her skin through the delicate lace of her gown.

"Congratulations, you two!" Vlad Vadim's booming voice cut through the noise as he approached us, Mariana on his arm. "And to you especially, my dear Pippa. You're positively glowing."

I couldn't help but puff up with pride. "Thanks, Vlad. We're pretty damn happy."

Pippa leaned into me, her hand resting on her swollen belly. "Thank you both for being here. It means the world to us."

Mariana embraced Pippa gently. "We wouldn't miss it for anything. You're family."

As they moved on, I caught sight of Nikolai and Giselle Vadim headed our way. "Incoming," I muttered to Pippa. "Brace yourself for Giselle's enthusiasm."

Pippa giggled. "Be nice. She means well."

"Pippa!" Giselle practically squealed, engulfing my wife in a careful hug. "You look absolutely stunning! And Abe, I never thought I'd see the day you'd settle down. Miracles do happen!"

I raised an eyebrow. "Thanks for the vote of confidence, Giselle."

Nikolai clapped me on the shoulder. "She's not wrong, Brother. But we're all thrilled for you both. Sorry, most of the family couldn't make it except us. Billie's pregnant and on the last stretch, and Pietro is with her. The rest are out of town."

"How is Billie doing?" Pippa asked warmly. "I really wanted to compare pregnancy notes." She winked at Giselle.

Giselle chuckled. "Last I saw, she was demolishing the dessert table. Pregnancy cravings are no joke."

Pippa's eyes lit up. "Oh! I too should check out the dessert table. For the baby, of course."

"Of course," I agreed, amused as we said our goodbyes to the couple and made our way toward the sweets. "Just save some for the rest of us, yeah?"

On the way, I caught Ivan's eye across the room. He raised his glass in a silent toast, a knowing smirk on his face. I nodded back, feeling a surge of contentment. This was my family now—chaotic, dangerous, and utterly perfect.

The opening strains of a slow song filled the air, and I instinctively reached for Pippa's hand. "May I have this dance, Mrs. Ustinov?"

Her green eyes sparkled as she placed her hand in mine. "Always, Mr. Ustinov."

I led her to the dance floor, my heart swelling as I took in her radiant beauty. The soft curves of her body, accentuated by her flowing wedding gown, fit perfectly against my frame.

"You're staring," Pippa murmured, a blush creeping across her cheeks.

I grinned, unapologetic. "Can you blame me? My fierce, gorgeous wife is carrying our child. I'm the luckiest bastard alive."

She rolled her eyes, but I caught the pleased smile tugging at her lips. "Such a charmer. Who would've thought the great Abraham Ustinov would turn into such a sap?"

"Only for you, Love," I whispered, pulling her closer. "Only for you."

As we danced, the world seemed to fade away. The lively chatter and laughter of our guests became a distant hum. All I could focus on was the feel of Pippa in my arms, the gentle swell of her belly pressing against me, a tangible reminder of our future.

"Abe," Pippa said softly, her eyes meeting mine. "I never thought I'd have this. A family, I mean. After my parents..."

I brushed a curl from her face, my throat tight with emotion. "You'll never be alone again, Pippa. I swear it."

The music swelled, and around us, the reception continued in full swing. I could see Ivan twirling Adley, both of them laughing. Vlad and Emory were engaged in what looked like an intense dance-off, much to the amusement of the surrounding guests.

"Look at them all," Pippa mused, following my gaze.

I chuckled, pressing a kiss to her forehead. "Why look at them when we can show these amateurs how it's really done?"

Pippa's eyes widened. "Abe, don't you dare—"

But it was too late. With a wink, I spun her out, then pulled her back in, dipping her low, but not too low. Her surprised laugh, clear and bright, rang out just as people around us began to whoop, filling my heart with warmth.

When the music shifted to a slower tempo, I caught Pippa's eye. A spark of mischief lit up on her face and she gave me a subtle nod. Without a word, I knew exactly what she was thinking. I leaned forward, my heart racing with anticipation.

"Ready to make our great escape, Mrs. Ustinov?" I murmured, my lips brushing her ear.

Pippa's cheeks flushed prettily. "Lead the way, Mr. Ustinov."

With practiced ease, we slipped away from the dance floor, our fingers intertwined. I guided her through the crowd, nodding and smiling at guests as we passed, but never slowing our pace. The moment we cleared the reception hall, I pulled Pippa into a secluded alcove, hidden from prying eyes.

"Well, well," I drawled, pressing her gently against the wall. "Looks like I've got you

all to myself now."

Pippa rolled her eyes, but her smile was radiant. "You're incorrigible, you know that?"

I grinned, tracing the curve of her cheek with my thumb. "You love it."

"Maybe," she teased, her hands sliding up my chest. "But what will our guests think, us sneaking off like this?"

I chuckled, leaning in close. "They'll think I'm a smart man getting to steal a moment alone with my gorgeous wife."

Pippa's laugh was music to my ears. "Smooth talker. But what about the baby? I'm not exactly light on my feet these days."

"Please," I scoffed playfully. "The way you're glowing, I wouldn't be surprised if we end up with Irish twins."

Her eyes widened comically. "Abraham Ustinov! Don't you dare joke about that. One pregnancy is quite enough, thank you very much."

I couldn't help but laugh, pulling her close and reveling in the warmth of her body against mine. "Alright, alright. But you can't blame a man for dreaming, can you?"

"I guess I can't," she said, and we both met halfway for a kiss, leaving the rest of the world behind.

THE END