



Secret Bratva Twins (Sharov Bratva #7)

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Category: Urban

Description: A Bratva beast shattered my world... but not before leaving me pregnant with his children.

For four years, I hid our twins, hoping he'd never discover the truth.

I tried to build a life far from his reach, far from the chaos he brings.

But now, fate has forced me back into his domain, and he's found out everything.

The moment he learns what I kept hidden, he claims me, locking me away in his mansion.

He says he won't let me go—not this time, not ever.

I fight, I run, but he drags me back every time, determined to remind me exactly who's in control.

His hold is as relentless as his revenge, breaking down every wall I try to build.

His touch ignites every scar he left, every wound still raw beneath the surface.

My heart battles the desire he's reignited, and my mind resists the way he commands my body.

But no amount of distance or fury could weaken my cravings for the man I once tried to kill.

And now he knows about our children, his blood, his legacy. Will he crush me all over again?

Or will he bind us together in a way I can't escape?

Total Pages (Source): 26

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:10 pm

The music on the yacht is deafening, a hypnotic mix of deep bass and upbeat tempos designed to keep the crowd in high spirits. The yacht itself is massive, a gleaming white palace on water, complete with tiers of decks and an open bar stocked with every high-end liquor imaginable. Monaco's glittering skyline twinkles in the distance, blending with the shimmering waves. The scent of saltwater and expensive cologne is heavy in the air.

I swirl the amber liquid in my glass as I stand at the edge of the upper deck, watching the revelry below. Roman, my right-hand man and most trusted confidant, leans casually against the railing beside me. His sharp, watchful eyes scan the crowd like a predator assessing potential prey.

"Not a bad way to celebrate," he says, tipping his glass toward the bustling party. "The meeting went well, and now we've got new partners. Feels like a win."

I nod, sipping my whiskey. It does feel like a win, but I'm not the type to get drunk on success—or anything else for that matter. Roman knows this and doesn't push. He's the kind of man who thrives in chaos, and as much as I trust him, I've learned to keep an eye on him. He's loyal, sure, but he also loves a good time.

A sudden flicker of movement catches my attention. My gaze locks on to a familiar figure descending the stairs from the upper deck, and the air around me seems to shift. Chiara Vinci.

It takes a moment for my brain to process the sight of her. Her dark hair is swept back in loose waves, and she's wearing a sleek, emerald-green dress that clings to her curves in a way that turns heads. She looks... regal, almost untouchable. Except I've

touched her world in the most brutal way possible.

“Isn’t that...?” Roman trails off, following my gaze. His voice drops, taking on a note of caution. “Chiara Vinci?”

“Looks like it,” I say, my tone deliberately casual.

The Vinci family name is one I’ve heard whispered since I was old enough to understand what it meant to hold power. They ruled Chicago’s underworld for years, their influence spreading like wildfire. Until three years ago.

My eldest brother, Maxim, made sure their reign ended when he killed their father, Don Fernando Vinci. It wasn’t clean, and it wasn’t quiet, but it was effective. The Vinci empire collapsed almost overnight, forcing what was left of their family to retreat to Italy. Word was they focused on rebuilding their businesses from a distance, biding their time. Lorenzo Vinci, her brother, now runs their operations.

Then there was Chiara. She wasn’t just a pawn in their game; she was a player in her own right. She held power in her family, though how much, I wasn’t certain. What I did know was that she wasn’t someone to underestimate.

Roman glances at me. “What’s she doing here? Think it’s coincidence?”

I smirk, setting my glass down on a nearby table. “With her? Never.”

Without another word, I step away from the railing and descend the stairs. The party swirls around me—laughter, clinking glasses, bodies moving in rhythm to the music—but my focus is singular. Chiara hasn’t noticed me yet, or if she has, she’s doing an excellent job of ignoring me.

She’s speaking with a man I don’t recognize, her smile polite but distant. Her posture

is relaxed, yet I can sense the tension in her shoulders, the careful control she exerts over every movement.

As I approach, her eyes flick to mine. For a split second, something flares in her expression—annoyance, anger, maybe both—but it's gone as quickly as it appears. She straightens, her smile sharpening like a blade.

“Serge Sharov,” she says, her tone laced with thinly veiled disdain. “To what do I owe the pleasure?”

I stop a few feet away, letting my gaze sweep over her, taking in every detail. She's a masterpiece of poise, but I've learned to read between the lines. She doesn't want me here. Good.

“Pleasure? Let's not get ahead of ourselves,” I reply, my own smile matching hers in its insincerity. “I didn't expect to see you here, Chiara. Monaco seems... far from home.”

Her smile doesn't falter, but her eyes narrow slightly. “I could say the same about you. What brings you to this corner of the world?”

“Business,” I say simply. “The kind that pays well.”

Her companion clears his throat, sensing the tension, and excuses himself. Good timing. Now it's just the two of us, the crowd fading into background noise.

“Do you always crash parties where you're not welcome?” she asks, tilting her head.

I chuckle, stepping closer. “It's a habit of mine. You'd know that if you kept up with current events.”

Her jaw tightens, but she doesn't take the bait. Chiara Vinci isn't the type to break under pressure, and that's what makes this so much fun. She might hate me—hell, she probably dreams of putting a bullet between my eyes—but she won't give me the satisfaction of seeing her lose control.

I lean in slightly, lowering my voice. "We should catch up. It's been too long."

Her eyes flash, a dangerous glint sparking in them. "I don't think we have anything to catch up on, Serge."

"Oh, I think we do," I murmur, the corners of my mouth curling upward. "You just don't know it yet."

The hum of conversation and the rhythmic pulse of the music fades into the background as Chiara meets my gaze, her green eyes blazing with equal parts challenge and amusement. She raises a single brow, tilting her head in curiosity. "You're still here, Serge? Should I be flattered or concerned?"

I smirk, stepping closer to where she stands, a drink in one hand and an air of control in the other. "Neither. I'd call it intrigued. You have a way of drawing attention, Chiara."

She laughs softly, the sound sharp like the edge of a blade. "Funny, I was going to say the same about you. Though I'd argue it's more because of your tendency to irritate than intrigue."

I chuckle, unbothered by the jab. "You know, it's a shame your brother doesn't send you to negotiate more often. Lorenzo's predictable. You, on the other hand... you make things interesting."

She narrows her eyes, her lips curling into a sly smile. "What exactly is it you find so

interesting?”

I take a sip of my whiskey, letting her question linger in the air for a moment. Then I meet her gaze again, my grin widening. “Why don’t we find out? Let’s play a game.”

Her brow furrows slightly, her interest piqued. “A game?”

“Poker.” I set my glass down on a nearby table and gesture toward the lounge area, where a group is gathered around a green-felt table. “If you win, you can ask me for anything you want. If I win... the rest of your evening is mine.”

Chiara laughs again, the sound dripping with mockery. “You think you can buy my time with a card game?”

“No,” I say, shrugging. “I think you can’t resist a challenge.”

Her lips press together, and for a moment, she seems to weigh her options. Then she lifts her chin, her smile sharp and daring. “Fine. Don’t cry when you lose.”

As we approach the table, a man steps forward from the shadows, his dark eyes scanning me with suspicion. Dante. Chiara’s loyal lieutenant. He was her father’s right hand before his death, and now he serves her with the same blind devotion. I don’t like him.

“Chiara,” Dante says, his voice low and even. “This isn’t necessary. You don’t need to waste your time with him.”

Her eyes flick to Dante briefly before returning to me. “Relax, Dante. It’s just a game.”

He doesn’t look convinced, but he steps back, his jaw tight. Good. The last thing I

need is his interference.

We sit at the table, and the dealer shuffles the cards. The game begins slowly, the first few rounds more about testing the waters than making bold moves. But as the night wears on, the tension between us grows.

Chiara is good. I'll give her that. She plays with a calculating edge, her eyes betraying nothing as she places her bets. But I'm better. Years of navigating high-stakes deals and life-or-death negotiations have made me a master at reading people. Chiara is all tells and no substance.

The final hand comes down to just the two of us. She places her bet, sliding her chips forward with a smirk. "Your move, Sharov."

I glance at my cards, then at her. Slowly, I match her bet and raise it. "All in."

Her eyes narrow, but she doesn't falter. She matches my raise, and the cards are revealed.

A royal flush. My victory.

The room erupts into murmurs and laughter, and someone from the crowd—a Russian, judging by his accent—quips, "Not the first time Vinci is losing to a Sharov."

Chiara's smile tightens, but she doesn't lose her composure. Instead, she leans back in her chair and crosses her arms, her gaze locked on mine. "Congratulations, Serge. It seems you've won. What now?"

I lean forward, resting my elbows on the table. "Now, you keep your end of the deal. The rest of your evening belongs to me."

Dante steps forward again, his expression dark. “This isn’t a good idea, Chiara.”

She waves him off, standing gracefully. “Relax, Dante. It’s just an evening.”

The words are meant to sound casual, but I can see the tension in her shoulders, the way her hands curl into fists at her sides. She’s daring, but she’s not invincible. That’s what makes this game so much fun.

Chiara turns to face me fully, her chin lifting in defiance as if daring me to say something more. Her poise is admirable, a carefully constructed shield meant to hide any cracks in her armor. It’s a game we’re both well-versed in, but tonight, I’m determined to gain the upper hand.

Dante remains rooted nearby, his gaze darting between us, frustration simmering beneath his controlled demeanor. “One evening,” he mutters, his voice low but laced with warning. “Don’t forget who you’re dealing with, Sharov.”

I don’t bother to hide my smirk. “Trust me, Dante, I’m well aware.”

Chiara steps closer, her heels clicking softly against the polished deck of the yacht. “If you’re so eager for my company, Serge,” she says smoothly, “then let’s make this worth my while. What do you propose for our illustrious evening?”

There it is—that spark. She’s baiting me, trying to assert control over the situation. It’s almost endearing how hard she tries. Almost.

“I have a few ideas,” I reply, my voice calm, measured. “First, let’s enjoy the moment. Monaco’s charm is fleeting, after all.”

Her eyes narrow slightly, skepticism flashing across her face before she schools her expression into one of detached amusement. “Then lead the way, Maestro. Let’s see

if you can deliver.”

Dante’s displeasure is palpable, but Chiara ignores him, her focus entirely on me. I offer her my arm, a mockingly polite gesture, and she hesitates for only a fraction of a second before taking it. Her touch is light, cautious, as if she’s testing the waters.

“Enjoy your evening, Dante,” I say over my shoulder, my tone dripping with condescension. His jaw tightens, but he stays put, his loyalty to Chiara keeping him from making a scene. It’s almost too easy to rile him up, but I save that for another time. Tonight, my focus is solely on her.

As we move through the glittering crowd, the weight of curious stares follows us. The Vinci heiress and the youngest Sharov brother—a pairing no one saw coming. I can feel the whispers trailing in our wake, the unspoken questions about what could possibly bring two feuding families together.

Chiara, ever the performer, plays her role perfectly. Her smile is charming but calculated, her laughter light but controlled. She leans into me just enough to make it convincing, but not so much that anyone could mistake this for anything other than a strategic alliance.

It’s intoxicating, watching her maneuver through the room with such precision. She’s a masterpiece of contradictions—bold yet cautious, fiery yet restrained. I can’t decide if I want to dismantle her defenses or admire them from afar.

As the night deepens, I catch her stealing a glance at me, her eyes flickering with something I can’t quite place. Curiosity? Wariness? Perhaps both. It’s a reminder that this isn’t just a game of power—it’s a battle of wills.

I fully intend to win.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:10 pm

The delicate clink of fine silverware against porcelain fills the intimate room, mingling with the soft hum of conversation in the restaurant. I sit across from Serge Sharov, his sharp blue eyes fixed on me, their piercing intensity making it hard to look away. The private dining room of this Michelin-starred restaurant was undoubtedly his idea. He thrives on control, and this setting is no exception.

I reach for my wine glass, swirling the rich red liquid before taking a sip. “You know, Serge, you could’ve just taken me to a café like a normal person. This feels... excessive.”

His smirk is faint but unmistakable. “You’re not exactly a normal person, Chiara. Excess suits you.”

I roll my eyes, setting the glass down with a soft thud. “Flattery doesn’t suit you, Sharov. Let’s cut the small talk. What is it that you want?”

“Straight to the point.” His voice is calm, teasing even. He leans back in his chair, exuding a confidence that’s both infuriating and magnetic. “We’ll get there. Eventually.”

I let out an exasperated sigh. “You dragged me here for a reason, didn’t you? Or is this just your way of gloating about winning a card game?”

His grin widens. “That was satisfying, I won’t lie, but no. There’s more to this.”

“Then spit it out.” I narrow my eyes, tapping my fingers lightly against the table. “Sharovs don’t do anything without a motive. So, what is yours?”

He doesn't answer right away, instead taking his time to sip his drink. It's deliberate, calculated, like he wants me to stew in the silence. Finally, he sets his glass down and leans forward, his elbows resting on the table.

"Expansion," he says simply, the word hanging in the air like a challenge.

I raise an eyebrow. "Expansion?"

Serge nods. "The Bratva is expanding its resorts business in Europe. We already have key locations in several countries, but Italy... Italy is a different beast. It requires finesse, local connections, someone who understands the landscape. Someone like you."

I laugh, the sound sharp and incredulous. "You think I'm just going to hand over my family's interests to the Sharovs? You really are bold."

"I prefer to think of it as practical." His tone is casual, but his eyes hold a glint of something more. "Hear me out. Bratva will invest sixty percent, but we'll take fifty-five of the profit. Your family business gets five percent more profit than if you went solo. It's a good deal, Chiara."

I stare at him, trying to gauge his intentions. "Why Italy? You could've picked anywhere else."

"Italy is lucrative, and your family still holds influence there despite everything. Besides"—he leans in closer, his voice lowering—"I like the idea of us working together."

My chest tightens, a mix of annoyance and something I can't quite name. "So, this isn't just about business, is it?"

“Everything is about business,” he says smoothly, though the faint curve of his lips suggests otherwise.

I take another sip of wine, needing a moment to think. The offer is undeniably good. My family could use the boost, and aligning with the Bratva—while risky—might actually stabilize our operations. But it’s Serge Sharov. Partnering with him means playing a dangerous game, and I’m not sure if I’m ready to lose again.

“What’s in it for you?” I ask finally, my voice steady.

He tilts his head, studying me. “I already told you. Expansion. Profits. A foothold in Italy. It’s mutually beneficial, Chiara. You win, I win.”

I narrow my eyes. “You don’t do anything mutually beneficial. What’s the catch?”

His grin is wolfish, sending a shiver down my spine. “The catch is you’ll have to deal with me. Think you can handle that?”

I resist the urge to roll my eyes again, though my irritation is palpable. “You’re insufferable.”

“Yet, here you are,” he counters, his smirk unwavering.

“It’s a good deal,” I say, forcing a smile to mask the rising tension inside me. “Except for one small detail—you know, your older brother murdering my father. Doesn’t exactly make you the ideal business partner, does it?”

His smirk vanishes, replaced by a hardened expression that sends a chill through me. The change in his demeanor is swift, almost frightening, and yet I hold his gaze, refusing to back down.

Serge leans forward, his elbows resting on the table, his blue eyes colder than ever. “Let’s not rewrite history, Chiara,” he says, his voice low and edged with steel. “Your father wasn’t exactly innocent. Or did you forget that he murdered my uncle in cold blood?”

My chest tightens, but I manage to keep my composure. This is what it always comes back to—the bloody history between our families, the endless cycle of revenge and loss. “I didn’t forget,” I say evenly, though the memory stings. “My father is dead now, thanks to you Sharovs. I guess you’d call that progress?”

He straightens, the corner of his mouth twitching into a grim smile. “The war is over, Chiara. What matters now is what comes next. Progress, as you said. I didn’t invite you to dinner to rehash old grievances. I came here with an opportunity. Take it or don’t. Your choice.”

I feel a flicker of anger at his dismissive tone, but I swallow it down. “If I don’t?” I challenge. “What happens then?”

His gaze locks on to mine, unyielding. “Then nothing changes for me. The Bratva will move forward with or without you. The only difference is whether the Vinci name gets to stand alongside us—or fade further into obscurity.”

His words sting, not because of their sharpness but because there’s truth to them. Ever since my family’s downfall, we’ve been clawing our way back to relevance, and the road has been anything but easy. Aligning with the Sharovs could secure our place again, but at what cost?

“Progress,” I repeat, the word bitter on my tongue. “That’s all you care about?”

His jaw tightens slightly, though his expression remains impassive. “It’s what I’ve been taught to care about. Survival depends on it.”

For a moment, neither of us speaks, the weight of our shared history hanging heavy in the air. Finally, I lean back, folding my arms across my chest. “You’re ruthless, you know that?”

His lips curl into a faint smirk, though it doesn’t reach his eyes. “So are you. That’s why this could work.”

The audacity of his confidence almost makes me laugh, but instead, I shake my head. “I’ll think about it,” I repeat, this time with more finality.

“You do that.” He reaches for his glass, lifting it in a casual toast. “Just don’t take too long. Progress waits for no one.”

As I watch him take a sip, I can’t shake the feeling that I’m being pulled into a game where the rules are his and the stakes are higher than I’d like to admit.

The air between us shifts as Serge’s gaze lingers on me, sharp and assessing. He’s entirely too comfortable in his own skin, too confident in the way he speaks as if everything he says is absolute. It’s infuriating and yet... I can’t deny the magnetic pull of his presence.

I lean back slightly, letting the silence stretch, trying to regain some semblance of control. “You talk about progress like it’s a religion. Is that all this is to you, Serge, just business?”

His smirk deepens, a flicker of something darker dancing in his eyes. “Business, family, power—they’re all intertwined. I’m a realist, Chiara. Sentiment doesn’t build empires.”

The jab is subtle, but it lands, twisting something inside me. He’s the embodiment of everything I hate about the Sharovs—their cold, calculated nature, their ability to

destroy lives with a single decision. Yet here I am, seated across from him, listening to his every word like it's a challenge I can't walk away from.

"You're relentless," I say, my tone lighter than I feel. "Is that supposed to impress me?"

He chuckles, low and rough. "I think it does. Otherwise, you wouldn't still be here."

My jaw tightens, but I force a calm smile. "Or maybe I'm here because I want to understand what makes you tick. Sharovs are such fascinating creatures, after all."

He leans forward slightly, resting his forearms on the table. The movement is casual, but the intensity in his gaze isn't. "Careful, Chiara. Curiosity killed the cat."

"Satisfaction brought it back," I retort, matching his tone.

He laughs, a genuine sound that takes me off guard. For a fleeting moment, he seems almost... human. Not the calculated Sharov prince, not the enemy of my family, but a man. Just a man.

"I like your fire," he admits, his voice dropping an octave. "It's rare to meet someone who doesn't wilt under pressure."

"I'll take that as a compliment," I reply, though my guard remains firmly in place. "Don't mistake fire for recklessness. I know what I'm doing."

His grin returns, sharp and predatory. "Do you? Because it feels like you're still deciding whether to play this game with me."

"It's not a game," I snap, the words slipping out before I can stop them. His eyebrows lift, amused by my sudden outburst. I take a breath, steadying myself. "Not for me,

anyway.”

“Then what is it for you?” he asks, his tone genuinely curious.

The question catches me off guard. I don’t have an answer—at least not one I’m willing to share. He must see the hesitation in my eyes because he leans back, giving me space to collect myself.

“Think about it,” he says, his voice softer now, almost inviting. “What do you really want, Chiara? Not just for your family, but for yourself?”

I freeze, his words hitting closer to home than I’d like. It’s a question I’ve avoided for years, burying it under the weight of duty and revenge. But Serge doesn’t wait for an answer. He finishes his drink, sets the glass down with a deliberate clink, and stands.

“Progress waits for no one,” he repeats, giving me one last lingering look before turning to leave.

I sit there long after he’s gone, the echo of his words ringing in my ears. The room feels colder, emptier without his presence, but my resolve hardens.

If Serge thinks he can manipulate me into playing his game, he’s mistaken. I’ll play, but by my rules. This isn’t just about progress. It’s about survival—and in the end, only one of us will come out on top.

Two hours later, the door to my hotel room clicks shut, and the silence presses in immediately. My heels echo against the polished floor as I stride toward the window, the glittering lights of Monaco mocking me with their carefree brilliance. Every nerve in my body feels like it’s on fire, rage bubbling beneath the surface.

I drop my purse on the desk and notice a small glass figurine—one of those complimentary ornaments hotels think adds charm. My fingers curl around it, trembling.

His voice echoes in my head.

Progress waits for no one.

The image of Serge's calm, smug expression flashes before me, and the dam breaks. With a guttural cry, I fling the figurine across the room. It collides with the mirror above the dresser, shattering the glass into a thousand sharp fragments that rain onto the floor. My chest heaves as I grip the edge of the desk, my vision blurred with fury and tears.

"Bastards," I mutter under my breath. "Every last one of them."

The sound of rushed footsteps reaches my ears, and the door swings open. Dante strides in, his eyes scanning the room before landing on me.

"What the hell happened?" he demands, his voice low but firm as he shuts the door behind him.

I turn to him, my breathing uneven. "I can't do this," I snap, gesturing to the broken mirror. "They took everything from me, Dante. My father. My family's legacy. And now Serge Sharov has the audacity to talk about progress as if it absolves them of their crimes?"

Dante approaches cautiously, his gaze softening as he takes in my state. "Chiara," he says gently, "you need to calm down."

"Don't tell me to calm down!" I shout, my voice cracking. "They think they've won."

That they can control everything, everyone. Well, I won't let them. I won't."

Dante closes the distance between us, his hands resting on my shoulders to steady me. "Listen to me," he says, his voice steady. "I understand your anger. I feel it too, but this?" He gestures to the shattered glass. "This won't bring him back."

Tears prick my eyes, but I force them back, refusing to let them fall. "I hate them, Dante," I whisper. "I hate them so much."

"I know," he murmurs. "And that's why you need to think strategically."

I frown, my chest still tight. "Strategically?"

Dante steps back, crossing his arms. "This could be your opportunity," he says, his tone deliberate. "You're right. The Sharovs have done unforgivable things to our family. This deal Serge is offering? It's a chance to get close to him. To gain his trust."

I stiffen, my mind racing as his meaning sinks in. "Then what?"

He tilts his head, his eyes hardening. "Then you do what they did to us. An eye for an eye, Chiara. A life for a life."

The words hang in the air, heavy and sharp. I feel my breath hitch as I consider them. The idea of Serge Sharov paying for my father's death is tempting, almost intoxicating. The thought of getting close to him, of playing his game, makes my stomach churn.

"What if it doesn't work?" I ask quietly.

Dante's gaze doesn't waver. "Then we adapt. You're the only one who can get close

enough to make it happen. You have the strength, Chiara, and you have me. I'll be with you every step of the way."

I glance at the shattered mirror, the jagged pieces reflecting distorted fragments of myself. The fury, the pain, the grief—it's all there, staring back at me. Slowly, I straighten, the fire in my chest no longer threatening to consume me but sharpening into something cold and focused.

"Fine," I say, my voice steady. "I'll play his game. I'll give him the partnership he wants."

Dante nods, a flicker of pride in his eyes.

"I'll be the one who decides when it ends," I add, my tone deadly. "And how."

A small, satisfied smile spreads across Dante's face. "That's my girl."

As he moves to clean up the mess, I step closer to the window, staring out at the twinkling city. The Sharovs think they've won, that they've broken the Vincis. They have no idea what's coming for them.

I'll make sure Serge Sharov learns that the hard way.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:10 pm

Roman sits across from me, flipping through a thick file with a bored expression. “She went to private school in Florence, graduated top of her class, spent a year at some Ivy League school before transferring back to Italy. She speaks four languages fluently—”

“Enough of that,” I cut him off, leaning back in my chair. “I don’t need her resume. Tell me something unique. Something... interesting.”

Roman frowns, clearly puzzled. “Unique?” He pauses, flipping another page. “Uh, she’s lactose intolerant?”

I laugh, the sound sharp and humorless. “Lactose intolerant,” I repeat. “Fascinating.”

Roman shakes his head, setting the file down. “You’re the one who asked.”

The corners of my mouth twitch upward as I glance out the floor-to-ceiling windows of my Chicago office. The skyline stretches endlessly, a stark contrast to the turmoil brewing beneath it. “I’ve called her here,” I say casually, drumming my fingers on the desk.

Roman narrows his eyes. “Chiara Vinci. To Chicago.”

“Yes,” I confirm, enjoying the look of surprise on his face. “It’s time to push this business partnership forward.”

His brows furrow, and he leans forward slightly. “I know why you’re doing this.”

“Do you?” I arch an eyebrow, genuinely curious about his interpretation.

“She reminds you of Anthony, doesn’t she?” Roman’s voice softens, but his gaze remains steady. “You couldn’t save him, so now you feel obligated to save her. Make things right. It’s guilt.”

The mention of Anthony is like a small knife twisting in my chest, but I don’t let it show. Roman always had a way of cutting through the noise, but this time, he’s wrong. I chuckle, a low, dark sound that fills the room. “You think I have a heart that soft?”

Roman leans back, skepticism etched across his face. “Don’t you?”

“Come on, Roman.” I shake my head, smirking. “I thought you knew me better than that by now.”

I get up and walk to the minibar, pouring myself a drink. The amber liquid swirls in the glass as I turn back to face him. “Chiara Vinci is sharp, I’ll give her that. She’s built her family back up after we left them in ruins; but she’s young. She’s emotional. And because of that, she’s easy to manipulate.”

Roman exhales through his nose, his disapproval clear. “You’re planning to use her.”

“Use her? Roman, you make it sound so crude.” I sip my drink, savoring the burn. “She’s my gateway to power. If we cut her brother Lorenzo out of the picture, Chiara becomes the sole heir to the Vinci fortune.”

Roman’s eyes darken. “Then what? You expect her to just hand it over?”

“No.” My grin widens, wicked and deliberate. “It will belong to her. And she will belong to me.”

Roman's jaw tightens. He picks up the file, slamming it shut. "You're playing a dangerous game."

"Danger is what we do," I remind him, setting my glass down with a quiet clink .
"The Vinci family was once a powerhouse, and with her, it can be that again. Only this time, under my control."

Roman shakes his head. "She's not going to trust you."

"She doesn't need to trust me," I reply coolly. "She just needs to think she's in control."

Roman stands, gathering his things. "I hope you know what you're doing."

I watch him leave, the office door clicking shut behind him. Turning back to the window, I allow myself a rare moment of silence. Chiara Vinci is a wildcard, and I love nothing more than a game where the stakes are high.

I lean against the edge of my desk, my mind circling back to Chiara Vinci. It isn't just her position in the Vinci family that intrigues me. She's gorgeous—stunning in a way that's impossible to ignore. I've always known that, but I never let myself think about it beyond surface-level acknowledgment. Not until recently.

There's something about her fire, her sharp tongue, her refusal to back down even when the odds are against her. It makes her a challenge, and I've never been one to turn away from those. The thought of her submitting to me, willingly or otherwise, sends a thrill through my veins. I don't just want to control her for the power she represents—I want her.

The door swings open, and Roman strides back in, his face a mask of frustration. "I had one more thing to say," he mutters, dropping a file onto the desk. "You need to

be careful with her.”

I arch an eyebrow, crossing my arms. “Careful?”

“She’s still a Vinci,” Roman says pointedly, his voice low but firm. “They might be licking their wounds now, but that doesn’t mean they’ve lost their edge. No one in that family has mercy in their blood.”

I chuckle, the sound dark and amused. “Oh, I know.” I push off the desk, pacing toward the window. The Chicago skyline sprawls out before me, glittering under the night sky. “That’s what makes it fun.”

Roman’s sigh is heavy with exasperation. “You’re playing with fire.”

“I like the heat,” I counter, glancing at him over my shoulder. “You know that.”

He shakes his head, his tone sharp. “This isn’t just business, is it? You’re letting yourself get distracted.”

“I’m not distracted,” I say, my voice edged with steel. “I’m focused. I know exactly what I’m doing.”

Roman steps closer, his expression serious. “Do you? Because it seems to me like you’re getting caught up in something personal.”

“Why not both?” I flash him a grin, but it fades quickly as I turn back to the window. “Chiara Vinci is ambitious, cunning, and fiercely loyal to her family’s legacy. That’s exactly why I want her. She’s going to fight me every step of the way, and when I win, it’ll be that much more satisfying.”

Roman crosses his arms, his voice low and warning. “You’re underestimating her.

She might look like she's playing along, but don't forget who she is. If you push her too far, she'll come at you with everything she has."

I nod slowly, my grin returning. "Good. I wouldn't want her to make it easy."

Roman curses under his breath, rubbing a hand over his face. "You're insane."

"I prefer determined." I turn back to him, my expression serious now. "She's not the only one with something to gain here. She wants revenge. I want power. We both have motives, and that makes this a fair game."

"What if you lose?" Roman challenges, his eyes narrowing.

"I don't lose," I say simply, my tone final.

Roman sighs, his frustration clear, but he doesn't argue further. As he leaves, I lean against the window, my mind returning to Chiara. Her defiance, her beauty, her fire—it all fuels something in me I didn't expect. I know she's dangerous, and I know she has her own agenda. That only makes me want her more.

Roman clears his throat and stands. "I'll leave you to it, Boss."

I stare out at the city skyline as he leaves, the lights stretching endlessly before me. Roman's footsteps fade, leaving me alone with my thoughts. Or more accurately, my distractions. Because no matter how hard I try to focus, my mind keeps drifting back to her.

Chiara Vinci.

That name alone is a contradiction—a sharp reminder of the fire she carries, matched only by the icy control she wields when it suits her. Her long dark hair, always

perfectly in place, frames a face that could disarm anyone: sharp cheekbones, piercing dark eyes, and lips that somehow manage to look both soft and unyielding. She's slender, her figure deceptively delicate, but there's strength in the way she carries herself. I've seen it. That quiet power that lies just beneath the surface.

That dress she wore last night....

I shake my head, irritated with myself for letting my thoughts veer so far off track. There's no point in fantasizing about her. She's dangerous. Treacherous. Still, the memory of her smirk, the way she tilted her chin in defiance—it all lingers, gnawing at my focus. The attraction feels as inevitable as it is infuriating.

My phone buzzes on the desk, snapping me out of my reverie. I grab it, glancing at the caller ID.

Makar.

I swipe to answer, leaning back in my chair. "Cousin," I greet, my voice sharp with impatience.

"Serge," he replies smoothly. His tone, as always, carries that slight edge of superiority. Makar has always been the one with the polished manners, the diplomatic veneer. I prefer a more direct approach. "I trust business is going well in Chicago?"

"It's moving," I say curtly. "What do you want, Makar?"

He chuckles softly, the sound grating. "Straight to the point. I admire that. I heard about your little venture in Monaco. The Vinci girl. Bold move."

His mention of Chiara tightens something in my chest. I hate how easily her name seems to entangle itself in my affairs. "Is there a point to this call, or are you just

bored?”

Makar sighs, feigning exasperation. “Always so prickly. I called to remind you that the Vinci family isn’t what it used to be. They may be a shadow of their former selves, but shadows have a way of creeping in unnoticed.”

“I know what I’m doing,” I reply sharply, irritation bubbling to the surface. “I don’t need your advice.”

“Of course not,” Makar replies smoothly. “Just remember, Serge, our enemies aren’t always obvious. Sometimes, they’re the ones who smile the most.”

I clench my jaw, hating the insinuation. “If that’s all, I have work to do.”

“One more thing,” he says before I can hang up. “I trust you’ll be at the family gathering next week?”

The thought of mingling with relatives, pretending to care about their trivial problems, is almost enough to make me hang up right then. “I’ll be there.”

“Good. It’s important we present a united front. Until then, Serge.”

He hangs up before I can reply, leaving me with a growing sense of irritation. Makar always has a way of needling at me, but this time, it’s the truth behind his words that stings.

Chiara isn’t just a distraction. She’s a threat. A beautiful, dangerous threat that I can’t seem to stay away from.

I toss the phone onto the desk, leaning back and scrubbing a hand over my face. My inbox is overflowing with reports that need my attention, but all I can think about is

the way Chiara looked at me last night—defiant, daring, utterly intoxicating.

For the first time in a long time, I'm not just playing the game. I'm invested. That's a dangerous place to be.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:10 pm

The steady hum of the jet fills the cabin, blending with the occasional clink of glass as I swirl the wine in my hand. The deep red liquid catches the dim light overhead, shimmering like liquid fire.

My gaze drifts to the endless expanse of clouds outside the window, but my mind isn't as tranquil as the view. Dante sits across from me, his expression calm but his eyes sharp. He's been quiet for a while, watching, waiting. I can feel the weight of his judgment, though he hasn't voiced it yet.

When he finally clears his throat, it cuts through the cabin's quiet like a knife. "What do you think Lorenzo would say if he finds out about this little... arrangement?"

His voice carries the exact note of disapproval I expected, but it still grates on my nerves. I glance at him, arching a brow as I set the glass down on the table between us. "Lorenzo doesn't care about me, Dante. Why should I care what he thinks?"

Dante leans back slightly, folding his arms across his chest. "He's still your brother. The Vinci name rests on both of your shoulders. No matter how much distance you put between yourselves, your father's legacy ties you together."

My fingers curl around the edge of the table, the pressure grounding me. Lorenzo and I have always been oil and water. As my half brother, he inherited everything that mattered in our family—the power, the loyalty of our father's closest allies, the weight of expectations. He's never believed in my capabilities. No matter how many deals I close, no matter how many risks I take to rebuild what we lost, he always sees me as a liability rather than an asset. To him, I'm just Chiara.

“I don’t need his approval,” I say finally, my voice steady despite the anger simmering beneath the surface. “Lorenzo is busy building his empire in Italy. I’m doing what I need to do—for myself and for our family’s honor. If he finds out about this deal, then so be it. Let him deal with it however he wants.”

Dante studies me for a long moment, his dark eyes unreadable. “So this is still about revenge?”

“Of course, it is.” My response comes out sharper than I intended. I push the wine glass aside, the clink louder than I wanted. “The Sharovs didn’t just kill my father. They dismantled everything we had in Chicago. They humiliated us, destroyed us. I’m not here for some petty grudge, Dante. This isn’t just about revenge. It’s justice.”

His expression softens slightly, but his voice remains firm. “And Serge? What’s your plan with him?”

The corner of my mouth lifts into a faint, humorless smile. “Serge Sharov thinks he can use me. Manipulate me. I’ll let him believe that for now. Eventually, I’ll find his weak spot. Everyone has one.”

Dante doesn’t look convinced, but he leans forward, resting his forearms on his knees. “Word is, he lost his best friend about a year ago. A man named Anthony. Suicide.”

That catches my attention. I tilt my head, narrowing my eyes. “Suicide... what happened?”

“No one knows the full story,” Dante replies. “People say Serge took it hard. Anthony wasn’t just a friend. They were like brothers. If there’s a crack in Serge’s armor, that might be it.”

I nod slowly, the wheels in my mind already turning. A personal loss like that leaves scars. No matter how cold or calculating Serge pretends to be, grief always finds a way to linger. If I can uncover what really happened with Anthony, it could be the key to breaking him down.

“Good to know,” I say finally, my tone measured. “Anything else?”

Dante’s jaw tightens. “Just that you need to be careful, Chiara. Serge is dangerous. The Sharovs are dangerous. You might think you’re in control, but they don’t play by anyone’s rules but their own.”

I meet his gaze, unflinching. “I know exactly what I’m doing, Dante. I’m not afraid of Serge Sharov.”

“You should be,” he says, his voice low. “Because if you make one wrong move, he’ll destroy you.”

His words hang in the air between us, heavy and foreboding. I refuse to let them shake me. I’ve been underestimated my entire life—by my father, by Lorenzo, by every man who’s ever looked at me and seen nothing but a pretty face. Serge Sharov will be no different. Let him think I’m just another pawn in his game. By the time he realizes I’m not, it’ll be too late.

As the jet begins its descent, the Chicago skyline comes into view, glittering against the sky. This city was once ours, a symbol of the Vinci family’s power and influence. The Sharovs stole it from us, and I’ll do whatever it takes to claim it back. For now, Serge is my key. Whether he realizes it or not, he’s already a piece on my board.

I just have to make my next move.

The wheels of the jet touch down on the Chicago tarmac, jolting me slightly in my seat. The city's skyline looms in the distance, just as striking and formidable as I remember. The steel and glass glint under the sun, stark reminders of a place that once felt like home. My father used to say Chicago was our kingdom, a city built on power, loyalty, and blood. Now, it feels like enemy territory. The sight is enough to make my stomach churn, but I refuse to let the emotions show. I've grown good at masking my feelings.

"Back in the lion's den," Dante mutters from across the aisle, his sharp eyes scanning the ground crew through the window. He's on high alert, as always, though I know his wariness is for my sake.

I unbuckle my seat belt, straightening my back. "It's not their den anymore," I reply. "They took it from us, and I intend to take something back."

Dante leans forward, his expression skeptical. "Is that the mission, then. Revenge dressed up as business?"

I glance at him, my lips curving into a faint smile. "It's called multitasking."

He doesn't look convinced, but he doesn't argue. He knows better than to push me when my mind is made up.

We descend the steps of the jet, the crisp Chicago air hitting me like a slap to the face. It's colder than I expected, and I pull my coat tighter around me as we cross to the waiting car. The driver opens the door, and I slide inside, the familiar hum of the city starting to settle around me. It's been years since I was last here, yet every street, every turn feels etched into my bones. My father's voice echoes in my mind, recounting the early days of building his empire here.

"Do you want to stop at the apartment first?" Dante asks as the car pulls into traffic.

“No,” I say firmly. “Take me to the Sharov offices.”

He raises an eyebrow but doesn’t protest. I know he’s silently cataloging every potential risk, every contingency plan, but I can’t afford to delay. The quicker I meet with Serge, the quicker I can start weaving my plan.

The car ride is quiet, but my mind is anything but. My father’s name, the legacy he built, the way it was dismantled piece by piece—it all fuels my resolve. I’ll make them pay. I’ll make Serge Sharov pay.

The Sharov headquarters is an imposing structure, sleek and modern, with reflective glass windows that seem to stretch endlessly upward. It’s a sharp contrast to the old-world elegance my family favored. As I step out of the car, the sight of their name etched into the building’s facade makes my blood boil. My family’s blood built this city. The Sharovs stole it and claimed it as their own.

Inside, the lobby is all polished marble and muted tones, the air humming with quiet efficiency. The receptionist greets me with a professional smile, but I can see the flicker of recognition in her eyes when I give her my name. My reputation precedes me, it seems.

“I have a meeting with Serge Sharov,” I say, my voice steady.

“Top floor,” she replies, gesturing toward the elevators. “They’re expecting you.”

The ride to the top floor is both excruciatingly long and unnervingly short. The mirrored walls reflect my composed expression, though inside, I feel the weight of the moment pressing down on me. When the doors slide open, I step into a corridor that leads to a large conference room.

The room is already bustling when I enter, filled with men in tailored suits who pause

their conversations to glance my way. Serge stands at the head of the table, his presence commanding even among a sea of powerful figures. His sharp blue eyes lock on to mine, and for a moment, the air between us seems to thrum with unspoken tension.

“Miss Vinci,” he says, his tone smooth and polite. “Welcome.”

“Mr. Sharov,” I reply, inclining my head. My voice is neutral, giving nothing away.

I take my seat at the table, my back straight, my hands resting lightly on the notepad in front of me. The meeting begins with the usual pleasantries and updates—financial projections, partnership terms, and expansion plans. I stay focused, responding when necessary, my answers measured and precise.

I can feel Serge’s gaze on me throughout. It’s not just a glance; it’s a steady, assessing look that feels like a challenge. I refuse to let it rattle me. When our eyes meet, I hold his stare, unwilling to back down. His lips curl into a faint smirk, as though he’s amused by my defiance. It only makes me more determined to prove myself.

“Miss Vinci,” Serge says during a pause in the discussion, his voice drawing the attention of everyone in the room. “What’s your perspective on the proposed expansion timeline?”

The question catches me slightly off guard, but I recover quickly. “It’s ambitious but achievable. With the right resources and strategic partnerships, I believe the timeline is feasible.”

He leans back in his chair, his gaze unwavering. “Ambition is admirable,” he says. “It tends to yield extraordinary results.”

“Ambition is also a necessity,” I reply, my tone calm but firm. “Without it, there are no results.”

His smirk deepens, but he doesn’t press further. The meeting continues, though the intensity in the room remains. By the time it concludes, I’m both relieved and drained. As the others begin to leave, Serge approaches me, his expression unreadable.

“Impressive input,” he says casually. “I look forward to seeing how this partnership develops.”

I meet his gaze, my voice steady. “So do I.”

Serge’s smirk deepens, and I feel the weight of his gaze like a carefully aimed blow. He’s testing me, prodding for weakness, but I refuse to give him the satisfaction.

“I hope your actions match your confidence,” he says, his tone laced with a hint of mockery. “This city tends to weed out those who overestimate themselves.”

“I’m not concerned,” I reply smoothly, my chin lifting slightly. “We Vinci women have a habit of thriving where others fail.”

His laugh is soft, more of a rumble that seems to resonate in the space between us. “Bold words. I hope you’re ready to prove them.”

“That’s why I’m here, isn’t it?” I tilt my head, matching his energy. “Or did you invite me just to trade barbs?”

“Perhaps I enjoy the banter,” he admits, his gaze flickering with amusement. “Though I suspect you do too.”

“Don’t flatter yourself,” I say, though I can’t entirely hide the quirk of a smile tugging at my lips. His charm, while infuriating, is undeniably effective, and it’s taking every ounce of control not to fall into his rhythm.

As the last of the other attendees file out of the room, the space feels charged, the air thicker. Serge steps closer, his presence commanding, his sharp blue eyes studying me intently.

“You handled yourself well in there,” he says, his voice softer but no less powerful. “Not everyone can sit across from me and keep their composure.”

I arch an eyebrow. “You’re not as intimidating as you think.”

“Careful, Chiara,” he warns, though there’s a hint of a grin playing on his lips. “You’re already walking a fine line.”

I cross my arms, leaning casually against the edge of the conference table. “I thought you appreciated ambition.”

“I do,” he says, taking another step closer. “But I also appreciate knowing when to push and when to pull back.”

“Good thing I’m not looking for your approval,” I counter.

His grin turns predatory, and I can feel the intensity of his energy crackling between us. “We’ll see about that.”

I refuse to let my resolve falter under his gaze, though my pulse quickens. He has a way of making every interaction feel like a game of chess, each word a calculated move. I’ve always been good at this kind of game, but Serge Sharov plays on a level I’ve never encountered before.

After a beat of silence, he steps back, the shift in his posture signaling a change in tone. “You’ll want to settle into your apartment before the work really begins.”

I nod, not entirely trusting where this conversation is heading. “That’s the plan.”

His eyes remain fixed on me, an unreadable expression on his face. “Once you’ve settled in, let’s discuss this partnership further. Over dinner.”

I blink, surprised by the sudden shift. “Dinner?”

“Yes,” he says, as if it’s the most natural thing in the world. “Tomorrow evening. I’ll have a car pick you up.”

“I’m capable of finding my own way,” I reply, my voice sharp. “I don’t need you to chauffeur me around.”

“It’s not about what you need,” he counters, his tone firm. “It’s about what I want.”

I narrow my eyes, trying to gauge his intentions, but his expression gives nothing away. “Fine. Where?”

“My penthouse,” he says with a casual shrug. “I’ll send you the details. I assume you’ll want to make an impression.”

“I always do,” I reply, refusing to let him think he has the upper hand.

“Good.” His gaze lingers on me for a moment longer before he steps aside, gesturing toward the door. “Until tomorrow, then.”

I walk out of the room with my head held high, refusing to look back. The moment the door closes behind me, I let out a breath I hadn’t realized I was holding. Serge

Sharov is a formidable opponent, but he underestimates me if he thinks I'll be easy to manipulate.

This partnership might be his game, but I intend to play it my way.

In the car ride back to the apartment, Dante sits across from me, his arms crossed and his gaze heavy. I can feel the weight of his disapproval without even looking at him. He's been uncharacteristically quiet since the meeting ended, but I know he won't stay that way for long.

"You're playing with fire, Chiara," he finally says, his tone low and measured.

"I thought you said this could be an opportunity," I reply, keeping my focus out the window. The Chicago skyline glitters in the distance, a stark reminder of how far I've come—and how dangerous this city can be.

"There's a difference between seizing an opportunity and walking into a trap," Dante says, his voice sharp now. "Serge Sharov isn't just another businessman. He's calculating, ruthless, and he never does anything without a reason."

"Neither do I," I counter, turning to face him. "I know exactly what I'm doing."

Dante leans forward, his expression hard. "Do you? Because from where I'm sitting, he's already got you on the defensive. He invited you to dinner, Chiara. That's not business—that's personal."

"Everything in our world is personal," I shoot back. "That's what makes us who we are."

He exhales, clearly frustrated. "Just remember, he's not someone you can trust."

“I don’t trust him,” I say firmly. “That doesn’t mean I can’t use him.”

Dante shakes his head, leaning back into his seat. “Just be careful. The last thing we need is for you to get too close to the flames.”

I nod, but I don’t respond. My thoughts are already miles ahead, focusing on tomorrow night. Dante doesn’t understand—this isn’t just about business or revenge. This is about proving to Serge, to Lorenzo, and to myself that I can play this game and win.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:10 pm

The dining room is a picture of refinement, every detail meticulously arranged to create the perfect setting. Crystal glasses sparkle under the soft glow of the chandelier, white roses arranged elegantly in a silver vase serve as the centerpiece, and the faint hum of classical music fills the air. It's not my usual preference for dinner, but Chiara Vinci isn't just any guest. Tonight is about making an impression, about control, and about setting the tone for what lies ahead.

Chiara sits across from me, her posture flawless, her sharp eyes missing nothing. She's a vision of sophistication in a sleek black dress that clings to her slender frame, her hair falling in loose waves over her shoulders. The candlelight catches the gold flecks in her brown eyes, making them seem even more piercing. Her very presence commands attention, and it's no wonder she's become a force in her family's fractured empire.

"This is exceptional," she says, cutting into her filet mignon with a grace that seems effortless. "Better than anything I've had in Italy or Monaco, for that matter."

"I'd hope so," I reply smoothly. "I told the chef to spare no effort. It's not every day I entertain someone like you."

Her brow lifts slightly, the corners of her lips curling into a faint smile. "Someone like me; you mean someone from a family you've been at war with for decades?"

I lean back in my chair, the ghost of a smirk tugging at my lips. "A powerful, intelligent businesswoman, actually. The Vinci name is just a bonus."

She lets out a small, amused breath. "Flattery. How predictable."

“Flattery is only predictable when it’s undeserved,” I counter, watching as her smile falters briefly, replaced by a more thoughtful expression.

Her fork hovers over her plate as she studies me. “You have a way with words, Serge. I can see why people follow you.”

“Words are just tools,” I say, shrugging. “It’s what you do with them that matters.”

The room falls silent for a moment, charged with an undercurrent of tension. I notice how her hand tightens ever so slightly around her wine glass before she sets it down. She’s holding something back, but I don’t press. Not yet.

“You know,” she says, breaking the silence, “I wasn’t expecting this.”

“Expecting what?”

She gestures vaguely at the room. “Dinner in a penthouse, food prepared by a Michelin-starred chef. It’s all very... civilized.”

I chuckle, raising my glass. “What did you expect, Chiara, a backroom with a bare bulb swinging from the ceiling?”

Her laughter is soft, but genuine. It catches me off guard. “Something like that. Your reputation precedes you, Serge. This level of refinement wasn’t part of the story.”

I lean forward, resting my elbows on the table. “Refinement has its place. Sometimes, it’s more effective than brute force.”

Her gaze sharpens. “What are you using on me tonight; refinement or force?”

“Wouldn’t you like to know?” My tone is teasing, but there’s an edge to it.

“I would,” she replies, her voice low, almost challenging.

We continue eating, our conversation shifting to lighter topics—her favorite parts of Italy, my own connection to Chicago. She speaks of vineyards and Florence, her descriptions painting vivid pictures in my mind. I tell her about the city that shaped me, the skyline, the energy, the grit. She listens, her focus unwavering, and for a moment, it’s easy to forget the long-standing animosity between our families.

“You really love this city,” she observes, her tone more curious than accusatory.

“It’s in my blood,” I say simply. “No matter where I go, Chicago always pulls me back. What about Italy? Do you feel that way about it?”

Her expression clouds briefly before she forces a smile. “Sometimes. It’s complicated.”

“Complications tend to be,” I say, watching her carefully.

She doesn’t elaborate, and I don’t push. Instead, I pour her another glass of wine, which she declines in favor of water. The shift doesn’t escape me, but I file it away for later.

By the time dessert is served—a decadent tiramisu—there’s a storm rumbling outside. Lightning flashes, lighting up the floor-to-ceiling windows as thunder rolls in the distance.

As the meal winds down, she turns her attention to the view behind me, the city lights glittering like stars, barely peeking through the storm clouds. She stands, walking toward the glass, her silhouette framed against the glow of the city.

“It’s beautiful,” she murmurs, her voice soft.

I join her, standing close enough to catch the faintest hint of her perfume. “Chicago has its moments.”

She glances at me, her eyes meeting mine with a challenge. “Was this one of its moments?”

I smirk. “I’d say so.”

For a brief moment, we stand in silence, the tension between us as palpable as the city’s hum below. When she finally turns to face me fully, there’s a flicker of something in her expression—curiosity, amusement, maybe even respect.

“Thank you for dinner,” she says, her tone genuine. “It was... unexpected.”

“Good unexpected, I hope,” I say, smirking.

Her lips twitch, but she doesn’t give me the satisfaction of a full smile. “I’ll let you decide.”

The storm outside intensifies, thunder rumbling in the distance as rain pelts against the windows. I glance at Chiara, her hand hovering near her purse as if she’s debating whether to brave the storm. Her lips press into a thin line, betraying her frustration.

“Driving in this weather would be dangerous,” I say, my tone calm but firm. “Stay the night.”

Her brow arches, a flicker of skepticism crossing her face. “What would we do, Serge? Stare at the rain until it stops?”

I let out a low chuckle and walk to the bar, pouring two glasses of whiskey. “We’ll talk,” I say, turning back to her with a smirk. “I find your company... engaging.”

Her eyes narrow, but there's no malice in her gaze. She hesitates for a moment before slipping her coat off and settling onto the leather sofa. "Fine. Just for the record, I'm not the type to chat idly."

"Good," I reply, sitting beside her and handing her the drink. "Neither am I."

The whiskey is smooth, warming my chest as I take a sip. She does the same, her movements graceful yet deliberate, her gaze flitting to the storm outside. The silence between us is charged, heavy with unspoken words. When she finally looks at me, there's a challenge in her eyes.

"So, Serge," she says, her voice low and teasing, "is this your idea of hospitality? Inviting your rivals over for whiskey and... what, polite conversation?"

"You're not a rival anymore, Chiara," I say, leaning closer. "At least, not tonight."

She doesn't flinch, but her breathing deepens, her chest rising and falling in rhythm with the storm outside. "You're dangerously charming, you know that?"

"I do," I reply, my voice dropping. "You don't seem the type to be easily swayed."

Her lips part slightly, and for a brief moment, the world outside ceases to exist. I can feel the heat radiating off her, the tension between us so taut it feels like it might snap at any moment. Her eyes flicker to my lips, just for a second, but it's enough.

I set my glass down and lean in, my hand brushing against her cheek. "Tell me to stop," I murmur.

She doesn't. Instead, her breath hitches, and when I press my lips to hers, she meets me halfway. The kiss is slow at first, a tentative exploration that quickly deepens. Her hands move to my shoulders, her nails grazing my skin through the fabric of my shirt.

I pull her closer, one hand slipping to the small of her back as the other tangles in her hair. Her taste is intoxicating, the perfect blend of whiskey and something uniquely her. She doesn't pull away, doesn't hesitate, and that only spurs me on.

The storm rages outside, but here, in this moment, everything else fades. When we finally break apart, her cheeks are flushed, her lips slightly swollen.

The moment hangs heavy between us, the charged air thick with tension. Her laugh fades, and our eyes lock, a silent challenge passing between us. I lean in again, capturing her lips with mine, this time with more force, more intent. She gasps softly against my mouth, her hesitation melting into something bolder as she kisses me back with equal fervor.

I slide my hand down to her waist, pulling her closer until there's no space left between us. Her fingers curl into my hair, tugging just enough to spur me on. The kiss grows hungrier, deeper, as if we're testing each other's limits. I push her back slightly, watching the way her chest rises and falls with each rapid breath.

"You taste even better when you're not trying to argue with me," I murmur, my voice low and teasing.

Her lips curve into a smirk. "You're even more insufferable when you think you've won."

I laugh, the sound dark and rough. "Oh, Chiara," I say, my grip on her tightening as I guide her toward the bedroom. "I always win."

Before she can respond, I sweep her up into my arms. Her eyes widen in surprise, but she doesn't protest. She wraps her arms around my neck as I carry her through the doorway, kicking it shut behind us. The storm outside feels like it's mirrored in here, the tension crackling with each step I take.

I set her down on the bed, but instead of sinking into it, she plants her hands behind her, propping herself up as she regards me with a raised brow. “Is this where I’m supposed to swoon?”

I chuckle, unbuttoning the top of my shirt, my gaze never leaving hers. “That depends. Are you planning to make this difficult?”

She shrugs, her smirk widening. “Maybe. I like to keep things interesting.”

I lean down, my hands on either side of her hips, caging her in. “I can handle interesting,” I say, my voice a rough whisper. “Don’t forget who’s in charge here.”

Her smirk falters for a moment, replaced by something else—curiosity, maybe, or anticipation. She shifts slightly, her body brushing against mine, and it takes everything in me not to pin her down right then and there.

“I don’t submit easily,” she says, her tone defiant.

“Good,” I reply, my hand trailing up her thigh. “I like a challenge.”

I tug her closer, one swift motion that has her flat against the mattress. Her laughter turns into a soft gasp as I press my body against hers, pinning her wrists above her head. My cock strains against my pants as I unzip, and it springs free. Thick and long, it lays against Chiara’s inner thigh.

She arches beneath me, her breathing quickening as my lips trail down her neck, leaving a path of heat in their wake. When I enter her, she lets out a strangled sound so delicious, I could devour her.

“Still think I’m insufferable?” I murmur against her skin.

“Absolutely,” she breathes, though her voice is shaky.

I grin, my teeth grazing the delicate curve of her shoulder. “You’re going to regret saying that.”

She lets out a soft laugh, though it’s cut off by a sharp intake of breath as I begin to thrust. Her body reacts to mine, her defiance giving way to something deeper, something primal. She doesn’t submit easily, no, but she doesn’t need to. I fuck her hard, hands tightening around her wrists as I pin her helplessly and fuck, it’s the hottest thing I’ve ever seen.

“You like this,” I say, my voice a dark whisper. “Don’t you?”

She doesn’t answer, but the way her walls clench around me is all the confirmation I need. I release her wrists, trailing my hands down her sides as I claim her mouth again, my kiss bruising and possessive. She matches my intensity, her fingers tangling in my hair and pulling me closer.

The storm outside howls, but it’s nothing compared to the one inside this room. She comes with a cry, body arching before going still. It’s enough to make me unravel, spilling inside of her. Thick, hot come leaks from her hole as I finally collapse at her side.

By the time we’re both out of breath, lying tangled in the sheets, I can’t help but grin at the sight of her. Chiara Vinci, a woman who doesn’t submit easily, lying beside me with her hair a mess and her lips swollen from my kisses.

“You’re trouble,” she says, her voice soft but edged with amusement.

“I’m not done with you yet.”

Her eyes narrow as she props herself up on one elbow, her hair cascading over her bare shoulder. “I need a minute,” she says, her tone firm. “You don’t get to boss me around, Sharov.”

I lean closer, a teasing grin tugging at the corners of my mouth. “Don’t I? You’re in my bed, in my house, Chiara. You’ll do as I say.”

Her jaw tightens, and for a moment, I think she might lash out, but instead, she fixes me with a glare sharp enough to cut through steel. “I’m not your toy,” she snaps. “I don’t belong to you.”

The fire in her voice is enough to make my pulse quicken. God, she’s infuriating, but it only makes me want her more. I sit back, crossing my arms over my chest as I regard her, my grin widening. “You don’t belong to me yet,” I say, my voice low and deliberate. “Still, let’s not pretend you don’t enjoy this as much as I do.”

She rolls her eyes, pulling the sheets higher around her chest as if shielding herself from me. “I don’t need your permission to enjoy myself,” she retorts.

“Clearly,” I say, the smirk still firmly in place. “Don’t think for a second you can resist me when you want this just as much as I do.”

Her lips press into a thin line, and she looks away, as though gathering her composure. She’s strong, but I can see the cracks in her armor, the way her chest rises and falls with each measured breath. It’s not submission; it’s restraint. Damn it, if it doesn’t make me respect her even more.

“Fine,” I say after a moment, leaning back against the headboard. “Take your minute, Chiara. Rest if you must. I’ll allow it—this time.”

Her eyes snap back to mine, and she raises a brow. “How generous of you,” she says,

sarcasm dripping from every word.

I chuckle, shaking my head. “You’re something else, you know that?”

“I’ve been told,” she replies coolly, sitting up and running her fingers through her hair. She doesn’t look at me, her focus on smoothing out the tangle of emotions in her expression.

I can’t help but admire the view—her long, slender frame, the way her skin glows in the dim light. She’s captivating in every sense of the word, and it’s not just her body that holds my attention. It’s her mind, her fire, her refusal to let anyone—including me—dictate who she is or what she does.

“You’re not like anyone I’ve met before,” I admit, the words slipping out before I can stop them.

Her gaze flickers to me, surprise flashing in her eyes before she smirks. “Don’t get all sentimental on me now, Sharov. You’ll ruin your reputation.”

I laugh, leaning in just enough to brush my lips against hers, soft and teasing. “Don’t worry, Chiara. My reputation is the least of my concerns.”

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:10 pm

The cold, crisp air of Chicago's fall wraps around me as I stand before my father's grave. The polished marble headstone gleams in the fading afternoon light, his name etched boldly across its surface. Fernando Vinci. A name that once commanded respect and fear in equal measure, now reduced to a slab of stone and memories that burn too brightly.

I kneel, placing a bouquet of white lilies at the base. They were his favorite. He always said they symbolized purity, though purity was the last thing associated with his legacy. "Ciao, Papa," I whisper, my voice barely audible. "I haven't forgotten. I promise."

The promise is what keeps me going, the one thing that grounds me when my resolve begins to falter. Like now. The past month has been a distraction, one I hadn't anticipated. Serge Sharov. The name alone stirs a tumult of emotions—desire, anger, confusion. I hate that he's in my head, his smirk haunting me at every turn. I hate that I let myself get close to him, forgetting, even for a moment, why I'm here.

My fingers tighten around the stems of the lilies as the conflicting emotions bubble up inside me. A part of me feels something for him. The way he looks at me, the way he touches me—there's a pull there, undeniable and maddening. Then there's the other part, the one that reminds me of my father lying lifeless in a pool of his own blood. The one that whispers Serge deserves the same fate.

The crunch of gravel behind me pulls me from my spiraling thoughts. I tense, instinctively reaching for the small blade hidden beneath my coat.

"I figured you'd be here," a deep, familiar voice says, smooth and self-assured.

I stand, turning slowly. Serge is standing a few feet away, his hands in the pockets of his tailored coat. His piercing blue eyes are locked on me, a flicker of something unreadable in their depths. He looks effortlessly composed, as always, but there's a tension in his jaw that tells me he's not here for pleasantries.

"What are you doing here?" My voice comes out colder than I intended.

"I could ask you the same thing," he counters, taking a step closer. "You've been avoiding me. For days, weeks even. I don't like being ignored, Chiara."

I fold my arms, standing my ground. "Maybe I just needed some space."

He arches a brow, a hint of amusement curving his lips. "Space. Interesting choice of words for someone who seems determined to occupy my every thought."

His words throw me off-balance for a moment, but I quickly recover. "I'm not here to talk about us, Serge."

"No," he says, his tone hardening as he glances at the grave. "You're here for him."

I stiffen, the mention of my father bringing a fresh wave of anger to the surface. "You have no right to be here."

He doesn't flinch at my words, stepping even closer until there's barely any space between us. "You're wrong," he says quietly. "I have every right. You're here, Chiara. Whether you like it or not, that makes it my business."

I glare at him, hating how easily he dismantles my defenses. "This has nothing to do with you."

He studies me for a long moment, his gaze intense and searching. "Doesn't it?"

The question hangs in the air, heavy and unspoken truths lingering between us. I hate that he's right, hate that he's inserted himself into every corner of my life, my thoughts, my plans.

"I don't owe you an explanation," I snap, turning away from him.

He catches my wrist, his grip firm but not harsh. "Don't do that."

"Do what?"

"Run." His voice is low, almost a plea. "You've been running since the day I met you."

My heart pounds as I pull my hand free, the weight of his words sinking in. He's not wrong, but I can't admit that. Not now. Not ever.

"I'm not running," I lie, my voice steadier than I feel. "I just don't want to be around you."

"Liar," he says, his tone softer now, almost teasing.

I don't respond, my gaze fixed on the lilies at the base of the grave. Focus on the mission, I remind myself. Don't let him get to you.

He steps back, giving me space, but his presence is still overwhelming. "You think standing here, visiting his grave, changes anything?" His voice is measured, but there's an edge to it. "It doesn't bring him back. It doesn't fix what's broken."

My head snaps up, anger flaring in my chest. "Don't pretend to understand my grief."

"I don't have to pretend," he says, his eyes locking on to mine. "I've lived it."

The raw honesty in his voice catches me off guard, but I push it aside. He's trying to get into my head, and I can't let him.

"This is your last warning, Serge," I say, my voice cold. "Stay out of my way."

He smirks, the defiance in my tone seemingly amusing him. "You don't want me to do that, Chiara. Whether you admit it or not, you need me."

The audacity of his words leaves me speechless, and before I can respond, he turns and walks away, leaving me alone with my swirling emotions and the haunting echo of his presence.

Serge insists on driving me home despite my protests. The stormy tension from the cemetery lingers between us as his sleek car cuts through the streets. He says little, his jaw tight and his hands firm on the wheel. I stare out the window, pretending to ignore him, though every glance at his profile sends a strange warmth through my chest.

When we arrive, I undo my seat belt and reach for the door handle, but something stops me. I hesitate, then glance at him. I'm staying in a nice hotel, though I doubt it's nearly as nice as what Serge is used to.

Despite my better judgment, I speak. "Do you want to come in for a drink?"

His sharp gaze shifts to me, searching for something. "Are you sure that's a good idea?"

"It's never a good idea with you," I murmur, half to myself. "I'm inviting you anyway."

He doesn't reply, just nods, and we step out of the car. As I unlock the door, my heart pounds. I know this won't end with a casual drink. It never does with Serge. The tension between us is a living thing, suffocating and intoxicating all at once.

The moment the door closes behind us, Serge's frustration erupts. He presses me against the wall, his hands on my hips, his mouth claiming mine. His kiss is demanding, filled with the intensity that he carries in everything he does.

It's dizzying, the way he pulls me under his spell so effortlessly. I grip his shoulders, torn between wanting to melt into him and shoving him away. The taste of him is addicting, the heat of his body pressed against mine sending sparks down my spine.

Then the anger creeps in. The reminder of why this is such a terrible idea. I press my hands against his chest and push, breaking the kiss. "No," I say breathlessly.

His brows knit together, a storm brewing in his eyes. He steps back sharply, his frustration evident in the way his jaw clenches. "Right. I'll go." His voice is low, a mix of anger and something else I can't place.

As he turns to leave, my heart stammers. Panic grips me, and before I can think better of it, I reach out, wrapping my arms around him from behind. "Don't go," I whisper, my face pressed against his back. "Can you stay for a while?"

He stills under my touch, his broad shoulders rising and falling with his heavy breaths. After a moment, he turns around, his hands gently cupping my face. His gaze softens in a way I've rarely seen, and it makes my chest ache.

"I'll stay," he says quietly.

I fight the urge to cry, hating the vulnerability I feel in this moment. "This is a bad idea," I murmur, my voice trembling.

“Maybe,” he says, brushing a strand of hair from my face. “You’re not the only one fighting this, Chiara.”

His words break through the walls I’ve tried to keep up. I lean into his touch, torn between the war raging in my head and the undeniable pull between us. For now, I let myself give in. Just for a while.

The storm outside rages on, thunder rumbling in the distance as we sit together on the couch. Serge pours us both another drink, the amber liquid swirling in the crystal glasses like liquid fire. I take a cautious sip, the burn warming me from the inside.

Despite the weather, the room feels far from cold. The air between us is thick, charged with something I can’t quite define.

He leans back, one arm draped over the couch, the picture of ease. Except I know better. His posture is relaxed, but his eyes tell a different story. They’re distant, calculating—like he’s a thousand miles away.

“What’s on your mind?” I ask, my voice softer than I intended.

He smirks, but it’s faint. “You’d be surprised how much is always on my mind.”

“That’s not an answer,” I say, narrowing my eyes.

He swirls the drink in his glass, staring at the liquid as if it holds the answers to the universe. “Do you ever feel like nothing you do will ever be enough?” he asks suddenly, his voice quieter than I’ve ever heard it.

The question catches me off guard. For a moment, I just look at him, unsure of how to respond. “I think everyone feels that way sometimes,” I offer cautiously. “Even you, apparently.”

He chuckles, but it's devoid of humor. "Even me."

There's something about the way he says it that makes my chest tighten. Serge Sharov, the man who always seems in control, is sitting here admitting to... what? Doubt? Guilt?

"Anthony used to say the same thing," he says after a moment, his tone distant.

I stiffen slightly. Anthony. I've heard that name before, in hushed conversations and stray comments. His best friend, the one who died under mysterious circumstances. I've never asked about it, never thought it was my place.

"What happened to him?" The question escapes me before I can stop it.

He glances at me, his expression unreadable. For a moment, I think he's going to deflect, maybe make a sarcastic comment and move on. Then he sets his glass down on the coffee table, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees.

"I suppose I'll never know."

The words hit me like a slap. My breath catches, my fingers tightening around my glass as I struggle to process what he just said. "What do you mean?"

He nods, his gaze steady. "He was a traitor. He sold us out to our enemies—your father, actually. He'd been working with the Vincis for months, feeding them information. I didn't want to believe it at first. He was like a brother to me."

My stomach churns. My father. Of course, it all comes back to him. I don't know whether to feel anger or guilt. Maybe both.

"So someone killed him?" I ask, my voice barely above a whisper.

He sits back again, his expression hardening. “No, I don’t think so. Lots of people said I should have had him killed, but he was my best friend. I never could have done it, and nobody would have dared do it behind my back.”

There’s something about the way he says it that sends a chill down my spine. It’s not just the words; it’s the conviction behind them.

I take another sip of my drink, the liquid burning my throat as I swallow. “That must’ve been hard,” I say finally.

“It was,” he replies, his tone flat. “It was ruled suicide, though I know I’ll never know what really happened.”

I nod, unsure of what else to say. A part of me wants to pry further, to ask him how it felt, to lose someone like that. Another part of me is terrified of the answers.

We sit in silence for a while, the storm outside providing a steady soundtrack to our thoughts. The tension in the room is palpable, but neither of us seems willing to break it. It’s like we’re both waiting for the other to make the next move.

“You’re quieter than usual,” he says after a while, his voice breaking the silence.

“I’m just... processing,” I admit, my gaze fixed on the rain streaking down the windows. “That’s a lot to take in.”

He chuckles again, this time with a hint of self-deprecation. “You’re telling me.”

I glance at him, studying his profile in the dim light. There’s something almost vulnerable about him in this moment, like the weight of his actions is finally catching up to him. It’s a side of Serge I’ve never seen before, and it makes him feel more human. More real.

“You don’t seem like the type to regret much,” I say, testing the waters.

He looks at me then, his blue eyes piercing. “Regret doesn’t change anything. It’s a waste of time.”

“Maybe,” I say softly. “That doesn’t mean it doesn’t exist.”

For a moment, he doesn’t respond. He just watches me, his expression unreadable. Then he picks up his glass again, draining the rest of his drink in one smooth motion. “You’re full of surprises, you know that?” he says, his tone lighter now.

“So are you,” I counter, my lips quirking into a faint smile.

The storm outside shows no signs of letting up, and I can’t help but feel like it’s a reflection of the chaos swirling inside me. Serge Sharov is a storm, unpredictable and dangerous, and I’m caught right in the middle of it.

Even so, I can’t let him distract me. I’m here for revenge, after all.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:10 pm

The sunlight streaming through the windows wakes me. It's too bright for my liking, but the absence of Chiara next to me is even more glaring. The sheets are cool where she should be, the room eerily quiet without her usual sharp wit cutting through the morning stillness. I sit up, rubbing the sleep from my eyes, my body still sluggish from last night.

After pulling on a shirt, I head downstairs, the faint aroma of something sweet drawing me toward the dining room. On the table sits a plate of perfectly golden French toast, soaked in milk and sprinkled with just the right amount of powdered sugar. Beside it, a note rests on the edge of the plate.

Hey,

I'm off for a morning run to clear my mind. I made you some breakfast—hope you enjoy it.

Chiara.

A faint smile tugs at the corners of my mouth. Milk-soaked French toast. My favorite. She couldn't have known that—I've never mentioned it. Maybe it's coincidence, or maybe she's been paying more attention than I thought. Either way, it's endearing in a way I don't entirely want to admit.

I pick up the fork and cut into the toast, the crispy edges giving way to a soft, custardy center. The first bite is heavenly, the flavors perfectly balanced. She's good at this—too good. As I chew, my mind drifts to her. I can picture her running, her dark hair tied back, her legs carrying her through the quiet streets.

My fork hovers over the plate, ready for another bite when something clicks in my mind. Roman's voice echoes faintly, a conversation from weeks ago. "She's lactose intolerant."

I freeze.

If she can't have milk, why does she have it in the fridge? The thought slams into me like a fist. My eyes dart back to the plate, to the note, to the toast that now feels more like a weapon than a meal.

A chill runs down my spine, the hair on the back of my neck standing on end. I set the fork down and grab my phone, my movements sharp and deliberate. Roman picks up on the second ring.

"Roman," I bark, the unease in my voice unmistakable, "get over here now."

"Everything okay?" His voice is alert, professional.

"Just get here. Something's wrong."

A sudden wave of nausea grips me, a sharp twist in my stomach that makes me clutch the edge of the table for support. My vision blurs for a second, black spots dancing at the corners. The realization hits me like a sledgehammer.

I've been poisoned.

The phone slips from my hand, clattering onto the table as I stagger to my feet. My knees buckle, the room spinning violently. Every muscle in my body feels like it's turning to lead, my heartbeat pounding in my ears.

"Roman!" I shout, though I don't know if he can still hear me. My voice sounds

distant, like it's coming from underwater.

I stumble toward the door, gripping the wall for balance. My mind races, replaying every moment with Chiara, every look, every touch, every carefully chosen word. She planned this. The thought slices through me, sharper than the pain gripping my stomach.

The last thing I see before the world goes dark is the untouched plate of French toast sitting innocently on the table.

When I hit the floor, the cold tiles offer no solace. Only betrayal.

The rhythmic beeping of a heart monitor pulls me out of the darkness. My body feels heavy, every limb weighed down like it's encased in concrete. Blinking against the harsh fluorescent lights above me, I try to sit up, but a sharp pain in my stomach keeps me pinned to the hospital bed.

"Take it easy," Roman's voice cuts through the fog. He's seated by my side, his elbows resting on his knees, looking at me with a mix of relief and frustration. "You're lucky to be alive."

I ignore his concern, my throat dry as sandpaper. "Where is she?" My voice is hoarse, rough from disuse. It's the only question that matters.

Roman leans back, exhaling slowly. "Gone."

The single word is like a punch to the gut. I grit my teeth, forcing myself to sit up despite the sharp protest from my body. The effort leaves me breathless, but I don't care. "What do you mean, gone?"

“The moment you blacked out, I got you here. I left the men to track her down, but....” He hesitates, glancing at the doorway like he expects someone to walk in and save him from the rest of the explanation. “She vanished. So did Dante.”

A bitter laugh escapes me, one that sounds more like a growl. Of course, she did. She planned this too well. Every smile, every look, every kiss—it was all part of her game. She got to me before I could get to her.

Roman shakes his head, his voice low but edged with incredulity. “Can’t decide if she’s smart or just cruel.”

The doctor steps in, a clipboard in hand, interrupting us. “You ingested a controlled toxin,” he explains. “It was laced into your food. Small doses wouldn’t have been lethal, but if you’d eaten more, you wouldn’t have made it here. You’re lucky your men acted fast.”

Lucky. The word tastes foul in my mouth. Luck has nothing to do with this. I was played.

As the doctor leaves, Roman studies me closely. “She’s clever, I’ll give her that. She knew exactly how to strike.”

I swing my legs over the side of the bed, ignoring the wave of dizziness that washes over me. “Clever doesn’t mean untouchable.” My voice is cold, laced with a fury I can barely contain. “I’ll find her.”

Roman places a steadying hand on my shoulder. “You need to recover first. She’s not worth dying over.”

My glare silences him. “She made it personal. She thought she could humiliate me and walk away.” My fists clench, my nails digging into my palms. “She’s wrong.”

Roman hesitates, then nods. “What’s the plan?”

The plan? Right now, all I can think about is the taste of betrayal, the memory of her soft smile as she provided me my favorite breakfast. Every detail sharpens the blade of my anger. The woman I let into my life, into my bed, tried to kill me.

I’m not letting her get away with it.

“I don’t care how long it takes,” I say through gritted teeth. “I’ll track her to the ends of the earth if I have to. She’ll regret the day she crossed me.”

Roman doesn’t argue, his expression hardening. He knows me well enough to understand that there’s no point. Once I’ve decided on something, there’s no going back.

The thought of Chiara—her golden hair, the fire in her eyes, the way she kissed me like she hated me and needed me all at once—burns in my mind. Anger and hate churn in my chest, boiling over into something darker. She played me, used me, and now she’s running.

She thinks she’s safe.

She thinks she won.

The corner of my mouth curls into a grim smile, one that doesn’t reach my eyes. “Let her run,” I mutter. “It’ll only make it sweeter when I catch her.”

The doctor returns, leans over me with practiced efficiency, adjusting the IV in my arm and checking the monitors that beep steadily beside the hospital bed. His expression is calm, detached—he’s used to treating people like me. People who have private rooms in exclusive hospitals, shielded from the public eye. I hate it.

“Your vitals are stable,” he says, not bothering to meet my gaze. “You’ll need a few days to recover fully. Rest is critical.”

“I don’t have time for rest.” My voice is low, tight with frustration. The weak ache in my stomach only fuels my anger.

Roman stands in the corner, arms crossed, his sharp suit impeccable despite the chaos of the past day. He’s watching me closely, like he’s expecting me to ignore the doctor’s orders and rip the IV out of my arm. He wouldn’t be wrong.

“You nearly died, Serge,” Roman says, his tone heavy with disapproval. “Let the man do his job.”

The doctor glances between us but wisely doesn’t comment, focusing on scribbling notes in his clipboard. He presses a button to lower the bed slightly, and the movement makes me bristle. I hate this—being confined, being tended to like I’m fragile. I’m not fragile. I’m Serge Sharov.

Roman steps forward, his voice quieter now. “I’ve already got people looking for her. You don’t need to do anything except recover.”

“Recovering is a waste of time.” I push myself upright despite the wave of nausea that follows. The doctor mutters something about taking it slow, but I ignore him. “The longer I’m stuck here, the farther she gets.”

Roman sighs, pinching the bridge of his nose. “You’re not going to catch her if you keel over before you leave this damn hospital. Use your head.”

He’s right, and I hate that he’s right. The thought of Chiara out there, slipping further from my grasp with each passing hour, gnaws at me. The anger that surges every time I think of her face, her smile, the trust I let myself feel—it all pushes against the

edges of my control.

The doctor finishes his checks, leaving the room with instructions for me to rest. Roman watches him go before turning his attention back to me. “We’ll find her, Serge. I swear. Just don’t do anything stupid.”

I grunt in response, lying back against the pillows. The moment I’m discharged, I’ll handle this myself. No matter how long it takes, I’ll make sure she pays.

By the time I’m discharged, the anger hasn’t lessened. If anything, it’s grown sharper, honed by every second I spent in that sterile room. Roman drives me home in silence, the tension between us thick but familiar. He knows better than to push me right now.

The house is eerily quiet when I step inside. No trace of her scent lingers in the air. The living room looks untouched, as if no one had ever been here but me. I move through the space slowly, every step heightening the sense of emptiness.

Her clothes, her perfume, the stray hairpins I’d catch on the bathroom counter—all gone. The closet is bare except for my suits. The dresser holds only my belongings. It’s as if Chiara Vinci never existed.

Roman follows me inside, lingering near the door. “She covered her tracks well,” he says, his voice neutral. “There’s nothing left.”

I don’t respond, walking into the kitchen. Even the mug she always used for her morning coffee is gone. The fury bubbling in my chest feels like it might explode. She didn’t just leave—she erased herself.

Roman leans against the counter, watching me carefully. “We’ll find her.”

I grip the edge of the countertop, my knuckles white. “I don’t want promises. I want results.”

“We’ll get results.” Roman’s voice hardens. “But you need to focus, Serge. She’s not worth losing your head over.”

I let out a bitter laugh, the sound harsh in the empty kitchen. “She’s worth every ounce of my anger. She made sure of that.”

Roman nods once, standing straight. “I’ll leave you to it, then. Call if you need anything.”

As he steps out, the silence returns, oppressive and suffocating. I move through the house, checking every room, every corner, as if some small piece of her might still remain. There’s nothing. No evidence of her touch, her presence. It’s like she was a ghost.

I stop in the bedroom, staring at the bed we shared. The sheets are freshly changed—Roman must have arranged it—but it feels wrong. Her warmth, her scent, the way she’d curl up on her side—it’s all gone.

I sit on the edge of the bed, my hands resting on my knees. The anger inside me simmers, a dangerous promise. Chiara might think she’s won, that she’s escaped me. She’s wrong.

She’ll learn soon enough that no one crosses Serge Sharov and walks away unscathed.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:10 pm

The Montana sun dips low over the horizon, casting a golden glow across the fields that stretch endlessly beyond the farmhouse. This place, quiet and tucked away from the chaos of the outside world, has been my sanctuary for the past four years. I never imagined my life would turn out like this—raising twins in a rural town, pretending the past never happened, hoping it never finds me.

I step out onto the porch, holding a basket of fresh laundry. The twins are playing in the yard, their laughter filling the air. Leo, with his bright blue eyes and unruly blond hair, is chasing after Alyssa, who inherited my darker features but somehow still carries an undeniable resemblance to Serge. They're a blend of both of us, each a living reminder of the man I left behind.

I can't let my mind linger there for long. Serge can't find us. He can never know about them. The thought makes my chest tighten as I watch Leo trip over a rock, landing on the grass with a surprised yelp. Alyssa is at his side in an instant, helping him up like the little caretaker she is.

"Are you okay, baby?" I call out, setting the basket on the porch.

"I'm fine, Mama!" Leo shouts back, brushing off his overalls.

It amazes me how resilient they are, how full of life. They have no idea what kind of world they were born into or the danger that still lingers. That's the way I need to keep it.

I head back inside, the farmhouse cozy and warm with its worn wooden floors and mismatched furniture. It's not the luxurious life I once knew, but it's ours. It's safe. I

glance at the clock—dinnertime is nearing, and the kids will be hungry after all their running around.

As I prep a simple meal, my mind drifts to the choices that brought me here. I failed to kill Serge, or so Dante says. Staying would have meant exposing my children to his world—a world of danger, violence, and power struggles. I couldn't do that to them, no matter how much it hurt to walk away.

The twins come barreling into the kitchen, dirt on their hands and grass stains on their clothes. "Wash up!" I scold gently, pointing them toward the sink.

They scramble to obey, their giggles echoing through the house. As I watch them, I can't help but feel a pang of fear. What would Serge do if he found us? Would he try to take them from me? Would he use them against me? The thought is unbearable.

Later that evening, after the twins are tucked into bed, I sit by the window with a cup of tea, staring out at the moonlit fields. The night is quiet, but my mind isn't. Every shadow feels like a threat, every distant sound like a warning.

I've done everything to cover my tracks, to make sure Serge could never find me. I left behind every trace of my old life, fled to this town where no one knows me. It's a far cry from the bustling cities I once knew, but it's exactly what I need—a place where I can raise my children without fear.

Still, the paranoia lingers. Serge isn't the kind of man who lets go easily. I know that better than anyone. Even though four years have passed, I can't shake the feeling that he's out there, looking for me.

The thought terrifies me, not for my sake, but for Leo and Alyssa. They're innocent

in all of this. They don't deserve to be caught in the crossfire of a war they never asked to be part of.

I glance at a photo on the mantel—a candid shot of the twins laughing together, their faces lit up with pure joy. They're my world now, my reason for everything. No matter what happens, I'll protect them. I'll keep them safe from Serge and anyone else who threatens to disrupt this fragile peace we've built.

As the tea cools in my hands, I let out a shaky breath. Life here is simple, almost monotonous, but I prefer it that way. Monotony means safety. It means no surprises, no threats, no past creeping back to haunt me.

Lorenzo crosses my mind briefly. My half brother always underestimated me, dismissing me as nothing more than a liability. Maybe that's why I didn't run to him after I left Serge. Lorenzo would have seen my situation as leverage, a way to strengthen his position. And I couldn't trust him to protect my children.

Out here, in this quiet corner of Montana, I've managed to create a life for us. It's not perfect, and it's far from easy, but it's ours.

The shrill ringtone cuts through the morning stillness, and I groggily reach for my phone, careful not to wake the twins. Dante's name flashes across the screen. As I answer, I hear a small shuffle from down the hall, followed by the unmistakable thudding of tiny feet.

"Dante," I whisper, propping myself up against the headboard.

"Good morning, Chiara. How are things over there?" His voice is calm, steady—the way it always is when I need it to be.

Before I can respond, the bedroom door bursts open, and two little whirlwinds storm in. “Uncle Dante!” Alyssa squeals, climbing onto the bed as Leo scrambles up beside her.

I chuckle, holding the phone out to put the call on speaker. “You’re popular this morning.”

“Well, buongiorno to my favorite little ones!” Dante’s warm greeting makes both of them giggle. “What mischief are you two causing for your mama?”

“I’m not causing mischief,” Leo declares, puffing out his chest. “I’m a good boy.”

“He’s the one who cheats at hide and seek,” Alyssa retorts, pointing an accusatory finger at her brother.

“I do not!” Leo shouts, and I rub my temple, already feeling the day’s chaos brewing.

“Sounds like your hands are full,” Dante teases.

“Always,” I reply, smoothing Alyssa’s wild curls. “But it keeps things interesting.”

He laughs softly, but his tone shifts as he speaks again. “How are you holding up, Chiara, really?”

The sincerity in his voice sends a pang through me. Dante is the only person who truly knows what I’m dealing with. He’s been my lifeline, my anchor in a world that constantly feels like it’s slipping away.

“I’m fine,” I say, a little too quickly. “Everything’s quiet here.”

He doesn’t push, but I know he’s not convinced. “I’ll check in soon. Be careful,

Chiara. Kiss those troublemakers for me.”

“Will do,” I reply, ending the call and placing the phone on the nightstand.

I hang up, and send the kids upstairs to get ready. It’s a slow morning, Leo complaining loudly while Alyssa refuses to bathe.

As I wrangle the twins into their play clothes for the day, the doorbell rings. It’s Hannah, their babysitter, right on time.

“Hey, Ms. Chiara!” she chirps, stepping inside and slipping off her sneakers. Her bright smile and natural warmth instantly fill the room.

“Hi, Hannah,” I greet her, passing over the twins’ favorite snacks. “Thanks for coming. I’ve got a few errands to run, so I’ll be gone for a couple of hours.”

“No problem at all,” she says, crouching down to the twins’ level. “What’s the plan today, you two?”

“Hide and seek!” Leo shouts.

“Again?” Hannah feigns shock. “Alright, but I’m warning you—I’m the best hider in this house.”

The twins erupt into giggles as she leads them toward the living room. I grab my keys and turn back to them. “Be good for Hannah, okay? I’ll be back soon.”

They nod enthusiastically, already distracted by the prospect of their game. As I step outside, a cool breeze greets me, and for a brief moment, I let myself relax.

The drive into town is uneventful, the open road a stark contrast to the buzzing

energy back home. My first stop is the small grocery store, where I stock up on essentials. As I push my cart down the aisle, I can't help but think about how different my life is now. The quiet, the anonymity—it's what I always wanted, but it comes at a cost.

By the time I load the groceries into the car and head to the hardware store, my mind is already racing through the rest of my to-do list. There's always something to fix or replace on the farm. Today, it's the barn door, thanks to Leo's overzealous slam last week.

The store owner greets me warmly, chatting about the upcoming town fair. Everyone here knows me as Chiara DeLeo, the reserved woman who keeps to herself. They don't pry, and I don't offer much. It's a fragile peace, one I'm desperate to preserve.

When I pull into the driveway, I'm greeted by the sound of laughter. Leo and Alyssa are running around the yard, Hannah close behind, laughing as she tries to catch them.

"How'd it go?" I ask as I step out, juggling grocery bags.

"Great," Hannah replies, slightly out of breath. "They've got way more energy than I expected, but we had fun."

"Thank you," I say sincerely, handing her a bag of snacks as a small token of appreciation. "I don't know what I'd do without you."

She waves me off with a smile. "Anytime. They're good kids, Ms. Chiara. You're doing great."

Her words stick with me as I watch her drive away. For all the fear and uncertainty, I've built a good life here. The twins are happy, and that's all that matters.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:10 pm

The conference room is set in a pristine high-rise overlooking downtown Chicago. It's far too polished for the blood-soaked history that brought us here.

Lorenzo Vinci, a man I never expected to see on my turf, sits across from me. His tailored suit screams wealth, but there's something off about his composure. He's too eager, too tense. This meeting isn't just about business; it's about desperation.

Roman stands near the door, arms crossed and eyes scanning for any sign of betrayal. His silent presence is a comfort. I turn my attention back to Lorenzo, who flashes me a tight smile.

"I appreciate you taking the time to meet, Mr. Sharov," he begins, his voice steady, but his hands fidget slightly with his watch. "We both know that despite past... incidents, there's potential here."

"Potential," I echo, leaning back in my chair. My tone is clipped, and I let the weight of my disinterest settle over him. "You're going to have to be more specific than that."

He nods, shifting slightly in his seat. "Four years ago, Chiara began laying the groundwork for a partnership between our families. It was ambitious. Joint ventures in luxury development, both here and in Europe. We'd both profit immensely. Unfortunately, circumstances derailed those plans."

Circumstances. The word almost makes me laugh. As if Chiara poisoning me and vanishing into thin air were merely a scheduling hiccup.

“Your point?” I ask, my tone sharp enough to make Roman glance over.

“I’m here to propose a continuation of that partnership,” Lorenzo says. “We both stand to gain significantly.”

I study him for a moment, the gears in my mind turning. This is about more than business. It always is. “What makes you think I’d agree?”

Lorenzo smirks faintly, but there’s no confidence behind it. “Because I know where Chiara is.”

My body stills, and for the first time since entering this meeting, he has my undivided attention. He leans forward, emboldened by my silence.

“She’s been lying low, hiding like a coward,” he continues. “She’s still a threat to me, though. Too many people in our circle are loyal to her, hoping she’ll return and... reclaim what’s hers.”

“So you want me to deal with her,” I say flatly. “Clean up your family mess.”

“It benefits us both,” Lorenzo replies. “I get rid of a rival, and you get what you’ve been hunting for years.”

I arch a brow, feigning disinterest even as my blood simmers beneath the surface. “Why would I trust you?”

Lorenzo leans back, exuding a calculated calm. “Because I don’t care about her. Chiara was an illegitimate child. My father tolerated her, but she was never truly part of the family. She’s a loose end, one I want tied off permanently.”

There it is—the resentment, the insecurity that oozes from every word he speaks. It’s

not just business to him; it's personal. He wants Chiara gone not just because she's a threat, but because she's everything he isn't: capable, beloved, and fearless.

"I'll need proof," I say, keeping my voice steady. "I don't deal in vague promises."

"I expected nothing less," Lorenzo replies. "You'll have her location by the end of the week. I want assurances that when this is done, our partnership moves forward."

I glance at Roman, who gives a barely perceptible nod. Turning back to Lorenzo, I allow a slow, calculated grin to form. "If you deliver, we'll talk."

The tension in the room shifts as Lorenzo rises, extending a hand. "Then we have a deal."

I don't shake it. Instead, I stand, my towering frame forcing him to look up. "We'll see if you're as good as your word, Vinci. Don't waste my time."

His hand drops awkwardly, and he nods before excusing himself. As soon as the door closes, Roman steps forward.

"What do you think?" he asks.

"I think he's scared," I say, moving toward the window. The city stretches out below, a reminder of the power I wield here. "He knows Chiara's a better leader than he'll ever be. He doesn't want a partnership; he wants an execution."

Roman grunts in agreement. "So you're going to give him one?"

A dark chuckle escapes me. "Oh, I'll deal with her, but not in the way he thinks." My gaze hardens as I stare out at the skyline. "Chiara will pay for what she did. On my terms."

The restaurant is a masterpiece of luxury, its quiet elegance a perfect mask for the Bratva's darker dealings. The golden glow from the chandeliers reflects off polished marble floors, and the murmurs of wealthy patrons fill the air. Every table is a stage for a different play—some genuine, some far from it. At my table, the act is particularly precarious.

Lorenzo Vinci sits across from me, stiff and trying too hard to appear unbothered. His fingers tap against his wine glass, the faint tremor betraying his nerves. He's a man out of his depth, attempting to negotiate with a shark in open water.

I take a slow sip of whiskey, letting the silence stretch just long enough to make him squirm. Finally, I lean back and set the glass down with deliberate care. "You said you had her whereabouts," I say, my voice low and controlled. "I'm listening."

Lorenzo clears his throat, his gaze darting to the side before meeting mine. "She's in Montana. A small, rural town, far from any major cities. Quiet. Secluded."

I narrow my eyes, searching his face for any sign of deceit. "Did she tell you that herself?"

He shakes his head quickly. "No. We tracked Dante. He's been making trips to a little town there. It wasn't hard to connect the dots. Chiara doesn't trust many people, but Dante... he's always been her shadow. Wherever she goes, he follows."

The mention of Dante sparks fresh irritation. That loyal dog of hers has been a thorn in my side for years, always one step ahead, always protecting her from the consequences of her actions. My jaw tightens as I consider the implications.

"Dante," I repeat, my tone sharp enough to make Lorenzo flinch. "He's been

shielding her all this time. You call that irrelevant?”

Lorenzo raises a hand in a placating gesture. “I’m not saying he’s irrelevant. Just that the focus should be on Chiara. Dante is a symptom. She’s the disease.”

The corner of my mouth twitches in a humorless smirk. “That’s where you’re wrong, Vinci. Dante’s not a symptom; he’s a problem. I solve problems.”

Lorenzo swallows hard, shifting in his seat. He’s afraid of me, and he should be. He presses on, desperate to secure his deal. “The important thing is, she’s been found. I’ve done my part. Now it’s your turn to hold up your end of the bargain.”

I chuckle, leaning forward and fixing him with an unblinking stare. “You’ll get what you want, Lorenzo. The partnership will move forward. Consider it a token of my appreciation for finally delivering something useful.”

He nods, though his unease is palpable. “Good. I expect results.”

I take another sip of whiskey, the glass cool against my fingertips. “You’ll get them,” I say smoothly, watching as he stands and straightens his jacket. He hesitates for a moment, then walks away, disappearing into the crowd of diners.

As soon as he’s gone, I pull out my phone and dial Roman. He picks up on the second ring. “What’s the word?” he asks, his tone as steady as ever.

“Ready the jet,” I reply, my voice cold and clipped. “We’re taking a trip to Montana.”

There’s a pause, and then Roman speaks again, his tone carrying a hint of curiosity. “You’ve got her location?”

“I do,” I say, my fingers tightening around the phone. “I’m done waiting.”

Roman doesn't ask any more questions. He knows better. "I'll have everything ready within the hour."

"Good," I say, ending the call and slipping the phone back into my pocket.

I rise from the table, my movements deliberate and controlled. As I make my way through the restaurant, I pass diners engaged in their own conversations, blissfully unaware of the storm brewing in my mind. The opulence around me feels hollow, a facade that barely masks the darkness beneath.

Chiara thought she could run. Thought she could hide in some forgotten corner of the world. Thought she could poison me and disappear without a trace.

I step out into the crisp night air, the city lights casting a faint glow against the dark sky. My lips curl into a predatory smile. She underestimated me. They all do.

Roman is waiting by the car when I arrive, his expression as calm and composed as always. He opens the door for me without a word, and I slide into the backseat, the leather cool against my skin.

"She's in Montana?" Roman asks as he gets into the driver's seat and starts the car.

"Some rural town. Dante's been going back and forth, and that's all the confirmation I need."

Roman glances at me in the rearview mirror. "You sure you're ready for this? It's been four years. She might not even be the same person anymore."

I let out a low chuckle, the sound devoid of humor. "Oh, I'm counting on that. People don't change, Roman. Not really. They just become better at hiding their true selves. Chiara? She's still my little prey, whether she wants to admit it or not."

Roman doesn't respond, his focus shifting back to the road. The silence between us is heavy, but it's not uncomfortable. He knows me well enough to understand when I'm not in the mood for small talk.

As we drive through the city, my thoughts drift to Montana. To Chiara. To the reckoning that awaits her. She thought she could outsmart me, that she could escape the consequences of her actions.

The hunt is over.

Page 10

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:10 pm

The hum of the engine fills the quiet of the car as I drive along the familiar winding roads leading back to my farmhouse. The sun is dipping lower in the sky, casting a warm orange glow over the Montana countryside. It's peaceful here, and most days, I let myself believe that peace will last.

The kids were particularly energetic this morning, and as much as I adore them, it's exhausting. Two nearly four-year-olds are no easy feat, especially when they both decide to team up against me with their relentless curiosity and endless questions.

Leo's determined little frown when he tries to build with his blocks, and Alyssa's giggles as she chases butterflies in the backyard—they're the highlights of my day. Still, there are moments when I wish for just a little more time to myself, to breathe and remember who I am outside of being their mother.

Groceries sit in the back seat, a hodgepodge of fresh produce, snacks for the kids, and a bottle of wine I'll likely never get to drink. My errands stretched longer than expected, as usual. Living in a small town means nothing is close by. It also means safety—or so I thought.

My phone buzzes on the passenger seat. I glance at it briefly before reaching over to answer, the name "Dante" flashing on the screen. A knot of unease forms in my stomach. Dante never calls unless it's important.

"Dante?" I say, pressing the phone to my ear. My tone is casual, but I grip the wheel tighter, already bracing myself for bad news.

His voice is steady but urgent. "Chiara, listen carefully. I've been watching things

closely, and it seems Lorenzo has been keeping tabs on me. I think he knows.”

The air in the car feels heavier. “Knows what?” I ask, my voice sharper than I intended.

“About you,” he replies without hesitation. “I can’t be certain, but there’s a strong chance he’s discovered where you are.”

The blood drains from my face. My grip on the wheel tightens until my knuckles turn white. “Why would Lorenzo care about my whereabouts? He’s been content ruling his empire in Italy and ignoring me for years.”

Dante sighs, and the sound only adds to the growing weight in my chest. “I’m not sure, but I overheard something concerning. He had a meeting with Serge today.”

My heart stops for a beat, then thunders back to life. “Serge?” I echo, barely able to get the word out.

“Yes.” Dante’s tone is grim. “Whatever Lorenzo is planning, it can’t be good. If he’s aligned himself with Serge, it’s a problem.”

“Why would Lorenzo meet with Serge?” I demand, my voice trembling. “He has no reason to....”

My words trail off as realization dawns. Lorenzo doesn’t care about me—not in the way a brother should. But he does care about power. And if Serge offers him leverage, there’s no doubt he’d sell me out in a heartbeat.

“He’s scared of you,” Dante continues, cutting through my thoughts. “Even from thousands of miles away, your presence is a threat to him. People in the Vinci empire still see you as a legitimate heir, Chiara. If you ever returned, you could challenge

him. That's enough for him to want you gone."

The bitterness in my laugh surprises even me. "Challenge him? I have two kids to raise, Dante. I'm not interested in his games or his empire."

"It doesn't matter what you want," Dante says firmly. "It matters what he thinks you want. If he's working with Serge—"

I don't let him finish the thought. I know where it's going, and I don't want to hear it. "Serge has no reason to care about me anymore," I say, though the words feel hollow. "It's been four years. He probably moved on the moment I left."

Dante's silence says otherwise.

"Dante," I press, needing him to say something, anything, that doesn't feed into my worst fears.

"Serge isn't the kind of man to let things go," Dante finally says, his voice low. "You know that better than anyone."

A chill runs down my spine. Memories of Serge flash through my mind—his intense eyes, the way he could command a room with a single glance, the rare moments of tenderness that always left me conflicted. I've spent the last four years trying to erase him from my life, but no matter how hard I try, he's always there, lurking in the shadows of my mind.

"If Lorenzo's meeting with Serge was about me..." My voice breaks, and I take a shaky breath. "What do I do, Dante?"

"You need to be prepared," he says, his tone softening. "If they come for you, you can't let them catch you off guard. I'll do everything I can to keep you safe, but you

need to be ready to act if it comes to that.”

I glance in the rearview mirror, as if expecting to see Serge’s car behind me. The countryside stretches out around me, vast and empty, but it suddenly feels suffocating.

“I can’t let them find me,” I whisper, more to myself than to Dante.

“You won’t,” he assures me. “We’ve stayed ahead of them this long. We’ll figure it out.”

I nod, even though he can’t see me. “Thanks, Dante.”

“Stay safe, Chiara,” he says before hanging up.

The phone slips from my fingers and lands on the passenger seat with a dull thud. Dante’s warning plays over and over in my head like a sinister mantra. My heart pounds, my throat tight, as I glance into the rearview mirror. The sight of a black SUV catches my eye. It’s been trailing me for too long. Coincidence doesn’t stretch this far.

The logical part of me wants to dismiss the worry. Maybe they’re just heading in the same direction. People drive all the time. It’s Montana—long roads, few stops, sparse towns. But something about the way the SUV moves keeps my pulse racing. Every turn I make, they’re there. Every adjustment in my speed, they match. The knot of unease in my chest hardens. I press my foot down on the accelerator, testing my theory. My small car surges forward. The SUV does too.

There’s no denying it anymore. They’ve found me.

I grip the steering wheel tighter, panic settling like ice in my veins. My twins—what

will happen to my babies if they catch me? The thought fuels a wave of desperation. I make a sharp turn down a narrow side road lined with dense trees. Gravel sprays up behind my tires as I speed along the uneven path. The SUV follows relentlessly, its dark presence looming closer and closer.

My mind races for options. If I can lose them in the trees, maybe I'll have a chance. The road curves sharply, and I yank the wheel to follow, my tires skidding dangerously close to the edge of a ditch. I can't slow down—not now. The trees blur past, my vision focused on the road ahead, on escaping.

I glance at the mirror again. They're still there, their black vehicle cutting through the dust cloud my car leaves behind. My breath comes in ragged gasps as I hit the highway. I merge into traffic, swerving into the far-left lane. Cars honk and flash their lights as I cut them off, but I don't care. All that matters is putting as much distance as I can between me and the SUV.

The highway stretches endlessly ahead of me. My speedometer climbs past eighty, then ninety, the car shaking under the strain. My chest tightens as I weave between vehicles, narrowly avoiding a collision with a massive truck. A quick glance in the mirror shows the SUV gaining on me again. How are they so fast?

The wind howls through a cracked window, the sound amplifying the chaos in my mind. My heart races, my hands trembling on the wheel. Up ahead, two more black SUVs idle near an exit ramp. My breath catches in my throat. Serge's men. There's no mistaking it now. This is a coordinated trap, and I've driven straight into it.

Panic surges, cold and overwhelming. I dart toward the right lane, searching for an opening. If I can just make it past them, I might have a chance. One of the SUVs accelerates, cutting me off. My pulse thunders in my ears as I yank the wheel to avoid a collision, my tires screeching in protest. The car fishtails wildly, and I lose control.

Time slows to a crawl. The world tilts, and the car veers off the road. Gravel turns to grass as the vehicle skids across the shoulder and slams into a shallow ditch. My hands grip the wheel desperately, but there's no stopping the momentum. The car flips.

The sound is deafening—metal crunching, glass shattering, the shriek of tearing rubber. My body is tossed violently within the confines of the car, the seat belt digging painfully into my chest and abdomen. The airbag deploys with a loud pop, the impact knocking the air from my lungs.

The car finally comes to a halt, upside down. Everything is eerily quiet except for the faint creak of metal settling into place. Smoke curls from the hood, mingling with the acrid stench of burned rubber and gasoline. My head throbs, my vision blurred as I hang suspended by the seat belt. Pain radiates through my ribs and shoulders, sharp and relentless.

I try to move, but every shift sends fresh waves of agony through my body. Blinking against the haze, I look around. The world outside is a blur of muted greens and browns. Footsteps crunch on gravel, slow and deliberate.

My heart lurches. They're coming. I'm out of options, out of time.

I try to unbuckle my seat belt, my fingers fumbling against the latch. Pain lances through my side as I drop free, sharp enough to draw a strangled gasp from my throat. Blood trickles down my temple, warm and sticky, stinging as sweat enters an abrasion. My vision wavers, and for a moment, the world tilts dangerously.

I grit my teeth, reaching down to push open the crumpled door. It resists, groaning under the weight of bent metal. With a surge of desperation, I slam my shoulder against it. A scream escapes as pain erupts in my leg, sharp and blinding. Something's wrong. My left leg feels stiff, heavy—almost unresponsive. Is it broken?

Voices echo in the distance, muffled by the ringing in my ears. I crane my neck, my movements sluggish. Through the shattered glass of the window, I spot a figure approaching. My chest tightens. Roman. His broad frame is unmistakable as he strides toward the wreckage with grim determination. Behind him, Serge appears, his sharp, chiseled features shadowed by the fading light.

My pulse races as Serge kneels by the shattered window, his ice-cold gaze locking with mine. There's no sympathy there, no concern—only a chilling sense of triumph that twists my stomach. His voice is low, almost soft, but the words hit like a blade.

“You really thought you could run from me forever?”

The venom in his tone freezes me. I want to spit back, to tell him I wasn't running, but the ache in my leg and the haze of pain sap my strength. I can't move. I can't fight. All I can do is watch as Serge surveys me with an expression that borders on cruelty.

Sirens wail in the distance, their haunting sound slicing through the thick tension. For a fleeting moment, hope flickers to life. Maybe it's an ambulance. Maybe they'll take me somewhere safe, somewhere Serge can't reach me.

As if reading my thoughts, Serge's lips curl into a dark smile. “Don't get your hopes up. You're not going to any hospital.”

Panic bubbles in my chest, threatening to spill over. My breathing quickens, each shallow gasp sending searing pain through my ribs. Roman appears beside Serge, his expression unreadable as he peers inside the wreckage.

“She's hurt,” Roman mutters, glancing at Serge.

“Get her out,” Serge orders, his voice devoid of any warmth.

Roman moves to the other side of the car, prying open the door with practiced efficiency. He reaches for me, and I flinch, the movement jarring my injured leg. The world spins as strong arms lift me from the wreckage, and I bite back a cry as pain flares in every limb.

The last thing I hear before darkness claims me is Serge's voice, low and unyielding. "You're mine now, Chiara. Don't forget it."

When I wake, the first thing I notice is the softness of the bed beneath me. The second is the blinding pain in my leg. A groan escapes as I try to shift, but my body protests with every movement. My head feels heavy, my vision blurred as I take in the unfamiliar surroundings.

The room is lavish, with sleek, modern furnishings and large windows that let in streams of muted light. The scent of antiseptic lingers in the air, mingling with the faint aroma of expensive cologne. My leg is elevated, wrapped tightly in a pristine white cast. My arms are bandaged, the cuts from the crash meticulously cleaned and dressed. Whoever patched me up knew what they were doing.

A soft knock at the door startles me. For a moment, I consider pretending to be asleep, but curiosity wins. "Come in," I croak, my voice weak.

No one enters. Instead, I hear the faint sound of footsteps retreating. The knot of anxiety in my chest tightens. Whoever it was, they didn't need to come inside to remind me of where I am—or who brought me here.

Pushing aside the covers, I swing my legs over the edge of the bed, grimacing as pain shoots through my injured one. With slow, deliberate movements, I rise to my feet, steadying myself against the bedpost. The windows draw my attention, and I limp

toward them, each step an agonizing reminder of the crash.

The view outside is breathtaking. A sprawling estate stretches as far as the eye can see, with manicured gardens, a glittering pool, and guards stationed at various posts. There's no mistaking it now. I'm in Serge's world—a world I fought so hard to escape, now wrapped around me like a vise.

I press my forehead against the cool glass, my fingers trembling against the frame. My reflection stares back, pale and weary, but defiant. Serge may have brought me here, but this isn't over. Not yet.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:10 pm

The room is dimly lit, shadows pooling in the corners and casting eerie shapes on the walls. The chill in the air bites at my skin as I push the heavy door open, stepping inside. Chiara sits in the far corner, her posture tense, every line of her body screaming defiance. Her hair falls loose around her shoulders, a stark contrast to the pale bandage wrapped around her arm—a memento of her failed escape.

I close the door behind me, the click of the latch reverberating in the silence. Her eyes snap up to meet mine, burning with a fire that refuses to be extinguished. Even here, in the depths of my territory, she holds herself like a queen. The corner of my mouth lifts in a smirk as I take a step closer.

“Comfortable?” I ask, my tone laced with sarcasm. “I hope the accommodations meet your standards.”

Her jaw tightens, and she crosses her arms over her chest. “A little drafty, but I’ll manage.”

I chuckle, dragging a chair across the floor and positioning it directly in front of her. I lower myself into it, leaning back with an air of casual dominance. “Always so witty, even now. You don’t seem to grasp the reality of your situation.”

Her lips curve into a bitter smile. “Oh, I grasp it just fine, Serge. I’m at your mercy. Isn’t that how you like it?”

Her words are a challenge, daring me to rise to her bait. Instead, I study her, letting the silence stretch between us until she shifts uncomfortably.

“You tried to kill me,” I say finally, my voice low but sharp. “You poisoned me and left me to die.”

She sits up straighter, meeting my gaze head-on. “You’ve done worse. Don’t act like you’re innocent in this. We both know what you are.”

I lean forward, resting my elbows on my knees. “What I am doesn’t excuse what you did.”

She lets out a bitter laugh, the sound grating against my nerves. “I did what I had to do. What would you have done in my place? Oh wait—don’t answer that. You don’t need hypotheticals. You used me, Serge. From the very beginning, I was just a pawn in your game. A means to an end.”

The accusation stings, not because it’s untrue, but because of how plainly she states it. I don’t bother denying it. “You’re right,” I say, my voice steady. “I did intend to use you. You were leverage, Chiara. A tool to gain power, influence, everything I’ve worked for.”

She flinches, her mask slipping for the briefest moment. “So, how does that make you any better than me? At least I admit what I’ve done.”

Her words cut deeper than I want to admit. I straighten in my chair, dragging a hand through my hair as I gather my thoughts. “I wouldn’t have killed you,” I say eventually, the words almost a growl. “I grew fond of you, Chiara. Against my better judgment, I cared for you.”

Her eyes widen slightly, but she quickly masks her surprise. “Fond of me?” she scoffs. “Is that what you call it? Playing games, lying, manipulating—none of that feels like fondness to me.”

My jaw clenches, anger bubbling beneath the surface. “You think I’m lying?”

“I think you don’t know what you want,” she shoots back, her voice rising. “You can’t decide if you want to use me or destroy me.”

I rise from the chair abruptly, towering over her as I close the distance between us. She doesn’t flinch, her chin tilting upward in defiance as I stare her down. “You made that decision for me when you poisoned me,” I say coldly. “You chose war, Chiara.”

Her expression falters, and for a moment, something like regret flickers in her eyes. “What about you, Serge? What did you choose when you decided I was just another piece on your chessboard?”

The question hangs in the air, heavy and suffocating. I want to shout, to argue, to deny it all. Instead, I step back, turning away from her and running a hand over my face. She’s right. I did choose to use her, but it’s more complicated than that. She’s more complicated than that.

I glance over my shoulder, meeting her gaze once more. “I don’t hate you, Chiara,” I admit, my voice quieter now. “I should, but I don’t. I hate what you did, but not you.”

Her lips part, but she says nothing, the fire in her eyes dimming slightly. For the first time since stepping into this room, I see something other than anger in her expression. She looks tired, conflicted, as if she’s fighting a war within herself.

“You don’t know me,” she says finally, her voice barely above a whisper.

I take a step closer, my gaze unwavering. “I know enough.”

The tension between us is a living, breathing thing, crackling in the dimly lit room

like a storm waiting to break. I can feel Chiara's eyes on me, defiant as ever, even as she sits perched on the edge of the chair, her shoulders taut with barely concealed anger. It's maddening how she still refuses to bow, even after everything.

"Say it," I demand, my voice sharp as a blade. "Admit that you lost."

She leans back, crossing her arms over her chest with a smirk that both infuriates and intrigues me. "You think this is over, Serge? You think dragging me back to Chicago in chains makes you victorious?"

I take a step closer, my gaze narrowing. "You really don't know when to shut up, do you?"

"Why should I?" she snaps, her chin lifting in defiance. "What more can you do to me, Serge, kill me? Go ahead. At least I'd be free of you."

Her words ignite something primal in me, a fire I can't contain. In two strides, I'm towering over her, my hand shooting out to grab her throat. Her eyes widen, but not in fear. There's something else there—something darker, more challenging. It only fuels my rage.

"You want me to kill you?" I hiss, tightening my grip just enough to make her gasp. "Don't tempt me, Chiara. You won't die that easily. Not until I'm done with you."

Her hands fly up to claw at my wrist, but she doesn't break eye contact. Even as her breaths grow shallow, she glares at me like she's daring me to go further. My grip slackens slightly, and I lean in, my voice dropping to a dangerous whisper. "You don't get to decide when this ends. I do."

I release her suddenly, and she slumps forward, coughing as she drags air into her lungs. She looks up at me through tear-filled eyes, and for a moment, I think I've

broken her. But then she speaks, her voice hoarse but steady.

“You’re just like the rest of them,” she says. “Cruel. Power-hungry. Pathetic.”

My jaw clenches, and I grab the back of the chair, forcing myself to rein in my temper. “Cruel? Maybe, but pathetic? That would be your brother, snitching on his own blood just to save his position. Did you know he practically begged me to take you off his hands?”

Her face pales, the impact of my words hitting her like a physical blow. “You’re lying.”

I let out a humorless laugh, leaning closer. “Am I? He came to me, Chiara. Offered you up on a silver platter because he’s afraid of you. Afraid that you’ll outshine him. It isn’t often a man like him feels threatened.”

The pain in her eyes is unmistakable, but she quickly masks it with anger. “That’s not true. Lorenzo wouldn’t—”

“Wouldn’t he?” I cut her off, my tone laced with mockery. “Face it, Chiara. The only person you’ve ever been able to trust is Dante. And where is he now?”

She flinches, her fists clenching in her lap. “You’re a monster,” she whispers, her voice trembling with emotion.

I step back, my smirk fading as her words sink in. “Maybe I am,” I admit, my voice cold. “I’m the monster who holds your life in his hands. Remember that.”

The room falls silent, the weight of our words hanging heavily in the air. I glance out the window at the dense forest surrounding the rented house bathed in moonlight. It’s the perfect place to keep her hidden until I can get her back to Chicago.

She shifts in her chair, her gaze dropping to her lap, as if she's finally run out of things to say. For a brief moment, I almost feel a twinge of guilt. Almost.

"Why are you doing this?" she asks softly, breaking the silence. "You already have everything. What could you possibly gain by keeping me here?"

I take a deep breath, my fingers drumming against the back of the chair. "Revenge," I say simply. "You tried to kill me, Chiara. You betrayed me. You don't get to walk away from that."

Her head snaps up, her eyes blazing once more. "Do you think dragging me back to Chicago will fix everything; you think it'll make you feel whole again?"

"It's not about feeling whole," I reply, my voice hard. "It's about making sure you never forget who holds the power."

She lets out a bitter laugh, shaking her head. "Power. That's all you care about, isn't it?"

I don't answer. Instead, I turn and walk toward the door, pausing with my hand on the handle. "Get some rest," I say without looking back. "Tomorrow, we're leaving for Chicago."

Her sharp intake of breath tells me she wasn't expecting that, but she doesn't protest. As I step out into the hallway, I can't shake the feeling that this is far from over. Chiara Vinci may be under my control for now, but I know better than to underestimate her.

The war between us has only just begun.

The door closes behind me with a heavy click, cutting off the tension of the room and

Chiara's searing gaze. The house is silent apart from the faint hum of the central heating, but I know Roman is waiting for me down the hall. His shadow stretches across the wall as I approach, his expression carefully blank.

"You look like hell," Roman says, pushing off the wall to stand straighter. "Didn't expect her to put up that much of a fight."

I shoot him a glare, the memory of her defiance still fresh in my mind. "She's lucky she's still breathing."

Roman grunts, folding his arms over his chest. "You've got to get her leg checked, Serge."

"Not here. Not until we're back in Chicago."

Roman frowns, his concern obvious. "You can't wait that long. That cut could get infected. We've got a guy in town—"

"I said no." My voice cuts through the hallway like a whip, and Roman snaps his mouth shut, though the tension in his shoulders remains. "I don't trust anyone here. Not with this."

Roman parts his lips to answer, and I snap, "Shut up. Chiara could overhear this, and I don't need her knowing more than she has to."

Roman stares at me for a long moment, his jaw tightening. "You're playing with fire, Serge. I hope you know what you're doing."

I step closer, lowering my voice to a dangerous whisper. "I know exactly what I'm doing. Now drop it."

He exhales sharply but nods, the argument dying on his lips. “Fine, but at least let me take another look at her before we go.”

I nod curtly, leaning against the wall as Roman disappears into another room.

My thoughts drift to Chiara as I wait. Her defiance, her fire—even when she’s backed into a corner, she refuses to break. It’s infuriating and captivating all at once.

Roman returns with a small first aid kit in hand, his steps deliberate. “She’s lucky she didn’t shatter her leg entirely,” he mutters, shaking his head as he sets the kit down on a side table. “It’s not broken, but I should make sure she’s fit for travel.”

“Fine,” I snap, “so long as she can walk on it, she’s good.”

Roman’s eyes narrow slightly, his frustration evident. “You’re playing a dangerous game, Serge. She needs proper treatment. What happens if it gets worse?”

I push off the wall, stepping closer to him. “She’s not leaving my sight, Roman. Not for any reason. The second we’re back, we’ll handle it. Until then, we keep her here. No outside interference.”

Roman exhales sharply, muttering something under his breath as he opens the kit. “Fine. Don’t blame me if her condition worsens.”

I let his comment slide, focusing instead on the faint sounds coming from her room. She’s awake, likely stewing in her own thoughts. Maybe in pain. I push down the flicker of concern that tries to surface. This isn’t about compassion. It’s about control.

“She’ll keep,” I say, mostly to myself. Roman glances at me, his expression unreadable.

“You should at least check on her,” he says finally, his voice low but pointed. “She’s not going anywhere on that leg, but if you’re serious about dragging her back to Chicago in one piece, you’ll need to keep her alive.”

I smirk, the coldness in my expression intentional. “Let me take a look at her.”

I push open the door to her room without knocking, the heavy creak cutting through the silence. Chiara is propped up on the bed, her leg stretched out in front of her. Her eyes snap to mine, wary and sharp, but she doesn’t say anything.

“How’s the leg?” I ask, my tone bordering on mocking.

She tilts her chin up, defiance etched into every line of her face. “Hurts like hell. Thanks for asking.”

I step closer, my gaze dropping to the poorly wrapped bandage around her thigh. The improvised job Roman had done in the car earlier is holding, but it’s far from sufficient. “You should be grateful it’s still attached.”

Her lips curve into a cold smile. “Grateful... should I also thank you for running me off the road?”

I crouch beside the bed, my eyes locking on to hers. “You can thank me by staying alive long enough to regret your choices.”

She glares at me, her defiance unshaken even in her vulnerable state. “You don’t scare me, Serge.”

“Liar.” My voice is soft but cutting. “I can see it in your eyes, Chiara. You know

exactly what I'm capable of."

She doesn't respond, her jaw tightening as she looks away. I reach for the first aid kit I brought with me, pulling out fresh bandages and antiseptic. "Hold still," I command, my voice leaving no room for argument.

To my surprise, she complies, though her body is tense as I remove the old bandage. The wound beneath is swollen and angry, the deep gash a stark reminder of how close she came to losing more than her pride.

"Doesn't look good," I mutter, dabbing antiseptic onto a cotton swab. She hisses as it makes contact, her fists clenching against the sheets. "You're lucky it wasn't worse."

"Lucky," she echoes bitterly. "That's one word for it."

I glance up at her, my hand stilling for a moment. "Why, Chiara?" The question slips out before I can stop it, the edge of curiosity laced with something darker. "Why go through all this... was it worth it?"

Her gaze meets mine, unflinching. "You wouldn't understand."

I lean closer, the proximity intentional. "Try me."

For a moment, I think she might answer, but she stays silent, her lips pressing into a thin line. I finish wrapping her leg, tightening the bandage just enough to draw a sharp intake of breath from her.

"Rest," I say, standing and towering over her. "You'll need it for the trip tomorrow."

Her eyes widen slightly, panic flashing across her face. "Right. Chicago." She shakes her head, trying to sit up straighter despite the pain. "You can't do this—"

“I can and I will,” I interrupt, my tone leaving no room for argument. “You’re done running, Chiara.”

Her expression hardens, but there’s a flicker of something else in her eyes—fear, maybe, or resignation. I turn on my heel, heading for the door. Roman is waiting for me in the hallway, his arms crossed and his expression grim.

“She doesn’t look good,” he says, nodding toward the room. “You sure about this?”

“She’ll live,” I reply coldly. “That’s all that matters.”

Roman exhales sharply, his disapproval clear, but he doesn’t push the issue. “I hope you know what you’re doing, Serge.”

“So do I,” I mutter under my breath, the weight of the situation settling over me as I walk away.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:10 pm

The silence in the room is oppressive, broken only by the faint rustle of the trees outside the window. I sit on the edge of the bed, my leg throbbing in time with my heartbeat. The faint light of dawn seeps through the blinds, casting long shadows across the cold, empty room. I haven't slept. How could I? Every time I close my eyes, I see Serge's face—cold, angry, unyielding.

The sunrise is dull, muted by thick gray clouds rolling in over the horizon. It matches my mood perfectly. I've spent hours trying to piece together my next move, but the pain and fatigue make it hard to think straight. My stomach twists uncomfortably, not just from hunger but from the gnawing anxiety clawing at me. My children. I have no idea where they are or if they're safe. I can only hope Hannah followed the plan.

A creak in the hallway snaps me out of my thoughts. Roman steps into the room, a tray in his hands. The smell of eggs and toast wafts toward me, and my stomach growls involuntarily. He sets the tray down on the small table by the window without a word, his expression as unreadable as ever.

"Finally decided to feed me?" My voice is hoarse from disuse, but I manage to lace it with as much sarcasm as I can muster.

Roman doesn't rise to the bait. "Eat," he says simply, leaning against the wall with his arms crossed.

I hobble over to the table, every step sending a fresh wave of pain up my leg. It takes all my strength not to let him see how much it hurts. I sit down and pick up the fork, eyeing him warily.

“You’re watching me like I’m going to attack you with a piece of toast,” I say dryly.

He smirks faintly but says nothing. I take a bite, the food warm and surprisingly good. For a moment, I let myself enjoy it, but the reprieve doesn’t last long. I set the fork down and meet his gaze.

“Do you have them?” My voice is quiet, but there’s steel behind it. “The children.”

Roman’s expression flickers, just for a second, but it’s enough to confirm my suspicions. He knows something.

“They’re not here,” he says finally.

Relief washes over me, so intense that it leaves me dizzy. “Good,” I mutter under my breath, gripping the edge of the table to steady myself.

Roman tilts his head slightly, watching me with something akin to curiosity. “You seem awfully calm for someone in your position.”

I shrug, forcing a smirk. “Maybe I’m just better at playing the game than you think.”

He doesn’t respond, but his silence speaks volumes. Roman might be Serge’s loyal lieutenant, but he’s not entirely unfeeling. He knows I’m a mother, and somewhere deep down, that must mean something to him.

“Where are they?” he asks, his tone almost casual, though I can hear the undercurrent of tension.

I raise an eyebrow, feigning innocence. “You think I’d tell you?”

Roman lets out a soft laugh, shaking his head. “Of course not. I thought I’d give you

the chance.”

I pick up the fork again, taking another bite of the eggs. They’re cold now, but I barely notice. My thoughts are spinning, trying to figure out how much Roman knows and how much of it is a bluff.

“You don’t need to worry about them,” I say finally, my voice steady. “She knows what to do”

His eyes narrow slightly. “She?”

“Not that it’s any of your business,” I say, leaning back in the chair, “but she’s their babysitter. She knows enough to keep them safe but not enough to be a threat. It’s called planning, Roman. You should try it sometime.”

He doesn’t rise to the provocation, but his jaw tightens ever so slightly. “You’re awfully confident for someone who’s spent the night under Serge’s roof.”

My smile is sharp, brittle. “You think Serge scares me?”

Roman pushes off the wall, stepping closer. His gaze is piercing, unrelenting. “He should.”

I hold his gaze, refusing to back down, even though my heart is pounding in my chest. “If he had them, he would have told me by now,” I say quietly. “That means they’re out of his reach. As long as they’re safe, I can handle whatever he throws at me.”

Roman studies me for a long moment before stepping back. “You’re playing a dangerous game, Chiara.”

“Then we have that in common,” I shoot back, picking up the toast and taking a defiant bite.

He shakes his head, a faint smirk tugging at the corner of his lips. “Enjoy your breakfast. You’ll need the strength.”

With that, he turns and leaves, the door clicking shut behind him. I let out a shaky breath, my shoulders sagging as the tension drains out of me. My leg throbs dully, a constant reminder of how close I came to losing everything.

I glance at the window, the dreary morning light casting long shadows across the room. Somewhere out there, my children are safe. I cling to that thought like a lifeline, even as the walls close in around me.

I pick at the eggs for a while longer, chewing mechanically as my thoughts churn. Roman’s words replay in my mind, but I push them aside. At least for now, I know my twins are safe. That’s the one solace I have in this twisted situation. I clear the plate, leaving no scraps, because who knows when Serge might decide I don’t deserve another meal.

The door creaks open, and my heart lurches. Serge steps inside, his presence commanding as always. He leans against the doorframe, his sharp eyes scanning the room before settling on me.

“Finished?” His voice is calm, but there’s an edge to it.

I nod, pushing the tray aside. “I guess you’re not here to bring dessert.”

His lips curve into a faint smirk. “Not quite. I thought you might want to clean up. There’s a bathroom across the hall.”

I hesitate, glancing at him warily. “You’re just going to let me wander around unsupervised?”

He arches a brow. “I’ll be outside the door. Don’t get any ideas.”

Of course. I’m a prisoner, not a guest. I rise slowly, my leg still aching, and follow him out into the hallway. He stops in front of a door and gestures for me to enter.

“You’ve got ten minutes,” he says, his tone leaving no room for negotiation.

Ten minutes. That’s hardly enough time to scrub away the grime of the last twenty-four hours, but I’ll take what I can get. I step inside and shut the door, locking it behind me. The bathroom is small but clean, with a sleek, modern design that seems out of place in this rustic house.

I turn on the shower, letting the water run until steam begins to fill the room. Stripping off my clothes, I step under the hot spray, a sigh escaping my lips as the warmth soothes my sore muscles. The water cascades over me, washing away the dirt, the fear, and the tension that have clung to me like a second skin.

For a moment, I let myself relax, closing my eyes and tilting my head back. The steam envelops me, softening the sharp edges of reality. I lather my skin with the bar of soap provided, scrubbing harder than necessary as if I can erase the events of the last few days. My fingers linger on the bruises forming around my wrist and leg, reminders of my crash and Serge’s hold over me.

A sharp knock on the door jolts me back to reality. “Time’s up,” Serge calls out, his voice muffled but firm.

“Give me five more minutes,” I shout back, my tone sharper than I intended.

There's a pause, then a low chuckle. "Three."

I roll my eyes but savor the remaining moments, rinsing off and wrapping myself in a fluffy towel. My hair drips down my back as I step out of the shower, my skin pink from the heat. I glance around and spot a neatly folded shirt on the counter. It's Serge's. My own clothes are crumpled and dirty, unsuitable to wear again. With a resigned sigh, I pull on the oversized shirt and my jeans, leaving my wet hair wrapped in the towel.

When I open the door, Serge is leaning against the wall, his arms crossed over his broad chest. His gaze sweeps over me, lingering on the shirt.

"You look good," he says, his tone low and deliberate. "Better than I expected."

I glare at him, my cheeks heating despite myself. "It's your shirt, you couldn't even get me something that fits?"

He smirks, pushing off the wall and stepping closer. His height and presence make the hallway feel smaller. "I like seeing you in my clothes."

I cross my arms, trying to ignore the way his eyes linger on my bare legs where the shirt doesn't quite cover. "Well, enjoy the view. It's all you're getting."

His smirk widens, but he doesn't respond. Instead, he steps aside and gestures for me to follow him. "Come on. You're not done answering my questions yet."

With a sigh, I trail after him, the damp towel still perched atop my head. Whatever Serge has planned, I can't let him see how much he affects me. Not now. Not ever.

We walk down the hallway, the sound of my bare feet soft against the wooden floor. Serge leads the way, his stride confident and unhurried, but I can feel the tension

radiating off him. It's in the set of his shoulders, the sharpness of his profile when he glances back to make sure I'm following.

When we reach the small sitting room, he motions for me to take a seat. I lower myself onto the couch cautiously, keeping my towel-wrapped hair in place as I sit back. Serge leans against the doorframe, his piercing gaze fixed on me.

"You've been quiet since the crash," he says, his tone casual but laced with something darker. "No schemes, no attempts to run? That's not like you."

"Maybe I've learned my lesson," I reply, keeping my voice steady. "Or maybe I'm just tired of fighting."

His brows lift in mock surprise. "You, tired of fighting? That's hard to believe."

I shrug, ignoring the flutter of nerves in my chest. "Maybe I know when I'm outmatched."

For a brief moment, something flickers in his expression—an emotion I can't quite place. It's gone as quickly as it appeared, replaced by his usual smirk.

"Good," he says, stepping closer. "Because you are."

I don't respond, holding his gaze despite the chill his words send down my spine. Serge studies me for a moment longer, then turns toward the door.

"Get some rest," he says over his shoulder. "Tomorrow, we leave for Chicago."

As he walks away, I lean back against the couch, my fingers twisting the hem of his oversized shirt. The fear is there, simmering beneath the surface, but so is something else. Something I can't name, and something I wish I didn't feel.

Page 13

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:10 pm

The engine purrs softly as I drive aimlessly, the empty roads ahead a faint blur. The early morning sky is painted with muted tones, clouds hanging low like my mood. I grip the steering wheel tighter, frustration simmering just below the surface. She's mine now—caught, cornered—but the satisfaction I expected isn't there.

I should hate her. After all, she nearly killed me. Poisoned me, left me for dead, and ran with my bloodline in tow. She did it with no hesitation. Yet here I am, unable to bring myself to end her the way I've ended countless others who've crossed me. Why? Why does her betrayal feel different?

My fingers drum on the leather wheel as I replay every moment of the past few days. Her defiance, her fire, the way she stood her ground even when she was at my mercy—it all fuels something in me I can't fully understand.

The sharp buzz of her phone interrupts my thoughts. I glance at the screen. Hannah.

I let it ring once, twice, before answering, pressing the phone to my ear. Silence stretches as I wait, not speaking, letting the caller make the first move.

“Chiara, it's Hannah,” a woman's voice says, breathless and urgent. “The kids are waiting for you at Davey Avenue. Everything's set, just like we planned. Don't worry—they're safe.”

Her words hit me like a punch to the gut. The kids. My children.

I end the call abruptly, tossing the phone onto the passenger seat. My jaw tightens as I turn the car around, the address seared into my memory.

The house is modest, a far cry from the luxury Chiara grew up in. It's tucked away in a quiet neighborhood, the kind of place designed to disappear. I park across the street and step out, taking a moment to steady myself before walking up the driveway.

I ring the bell, the sound sharp and hollow in the stillness. The door creaks open, and a young woman peers out. She's slight but composed, her eyes widening when she sees me. This must be Hannah.

"Who are you?" she demands, her voice trembling despite her bravado.

Before I can answer, two small heads peek out from behind her. A boy and a girl. They freeze when they see me, their wide eyes filled with curiosity and confusion.

"Is that Mommy?" the girl asks, her small voice tentative.

"No, sweetheart," Hannah says quickly, her hand instinctively moving to block their path. "Stay back."

The boy steps forward, his face lighting up with hope, but then he stops short, realizing I'm not who he expected. His small frame stiffens, and he grabs the girl's hand, pulling her close.

"Who are you?" Hannah repeats, her tone sharper now. She tries to mask her fear, but I can see it clearly.

"I'm here for Chiara," I say, my voice cold and deliberate.

Her expression falters, and she looks from me to the children and back again. "You can't be serious."

“Oh, I’m very serious,” I reply, stepping closer. “Now, step aside.”

“Leo, Alyssa, go inside.” Hannah doesn’t move, her chin lifting defiantly. “Chiara isn’t here, and her children-”

“These are her children?”

Hannah’s face goes pale. She grips the door in a white-knuckle grip, eyes wide. “I don’t, you-”

I look at the children. They’re barely older than toddlers, three or four, perhaps. Anger rolls in my gut as I realize... the timeline works. Either Chiara was fucking somebody else, or...

Or those two kids are mine.

Somehow, I know the truth.

The kids cling to Hannah, their little faces a mix of fear and confusion. It’s a sight I wasn’t prepared for, and it twists something deep inside me. I didn’t come here for sentimentality, but seeing them—so small, so vulnerable—makes this personal in a way I hadn’t anticipated.

“Hannah,” I say, lowering my tone but keeping the edge. “I’m taking my children. Move, or I’ll move you myself.”

Her resolve wavers, and for a moment, I think she might resist. Then she steps aside, her face pale and tight with worry.

“Leo, Alyssa,” I say, crouching to their level. They don’t move, their wide eyes locked on mine. “Come here.”

Leo tightens his grip on Alyssa's hand, and they both press closer to Hannah. I rise, exhaling sharply. This isn't how I envisioned this moment.

"Get them ready," I order Hannah. "We're leaving."

"You're making a mistake," she says quietly, but she does as I command, her hands trembling as she gathers their things.

The room feels eerily quiet except for the occasional snuffle from the children clinging to Hannah. My eyes sweep over the modest living room, taking in its simplicity. It's nothing like the places Chiara would have grown up in, yet it feels like her. Warm, inviting, understated. My gaze halts on a picture hanging on the wall. A framed photograph.

Chiara stands in the middle, smiling—a real smile, not the calculated ones I've grown accustomed to. On either side of her are two children, their small hands clutching her. A boy and a girl, no more than four or five. They have the same bright blonde hair and piercing blue eyes. Sharov eyes.

It's impossible to miss.

Leo, the boy, is a spitting image of me. My jaw, my cheekbones, my eyes. It's like looking at a photograph of myself as a child. The girl, Alyssa, has Chiara's delicate features, but those eyes... they're unmistakably mine. The realization settles over me, heavy and inescapable. These are my children .

For a moment, everything else fades. The betrayal, the lies, the years apart. None of it matters when faced with this undeniable truth. My kids. Mine .

I step closer to the photo, my fingers itching to touch it, to hold this tangible proof of their existence. Hannah shifts uneasily behind me, and I hear her whisper something

to the children. My focus snaps back, the moment shattered.

“What did you just say?” I demand, turning to her, my voice like ice.

Hannah pulls the children closer, her defiance flickering even as fear flashes in her eyes. “Nothing.”

“Don’t lie to me.” My voice drops, dangerously low. In two strides, I’m in front of her. I grab her by the arm, spinning her toward the wall and pinning her there. My hand tangles in her hair, yanking just enough to make her wince. “What. Did. You. Say?”

Her breath comes in shaky gasps as the children’s cries grow louder, filling the room with panicked wails. Leo clutches Alyssa’s hand, his small face streaked with tears. I see him watching, trying to be brave, but the sight only fuels my frustration.

“I told them it would be okay!” Hannah blurts out, her voice cracking. “That’s all! I swear!”

Her words hang in the air as I study her, searching for any sign of deception. My grip tightens for a moment, my anger still simmering, but then I release her. She stumbles back, pressing her hand to her head where my fingers had tangled in her hair.

“You’re lucky I believe you,” I hiss. “Make no mistake, Hannah. If you tell anyone I was here, or if you so much as think about calling the authorities, I’ll make sure you regret it.”

Her face pales, but she nods quickly, her trembling hands resting on the children’s shoulders. “I won’t. Please... just leave them here. They’re safe with me.”

I scoff, shaking my head. “They’re not safe anywhere but with me. Pack their things.

Now.”

Hannah hesitates, looking at the children, who are still crying softly. Her protective instincts flare, and I can see her debating whether to fight me further.

“I said, pack their stuff .” My voice cuts through the tension like a blade.

Slowly, she nods and moves toward a small closet. The kids watch her, their faces full of fear and confusion, and it makes my chest tighten in a way I don’t like. They’re too young to understand what’s happening, too innocent to be caught in the middle of this mess. Yet here we are. Chiara did this. She kept them from me, lied to me, and forced my hand.

While Hannah hurriedly gathers their belongings, I glance down at the kids. Alyssa’s tear-streaked face is buried in her brother’s shoulder, and Leo stares up at me, his blue eyes wide and searching. My heart stirs uncomfortably.

“Hey,” I say, crouching to their level. My voice softens, though the effort feels foreign. “It’s going to be okay. I promise.”

Leo doesn’t respond, but his small hand tightens around Alyssa’s. I don’t miss the way he steps in front of her slightly, as if to shield her. The gesture pulls at something deep inside me. Protective, just like me.

Hannah shoves a small duffel bag into my hands, her expression tense and wary. “That’s everything. Please don’t hurt them.”

“I don’t hurt what’s mine,” I say flatly, slinging the bag over my shoulder.

Her lips part as if to argue, but she snaps them shut, wisely staying silent. I motion for the children to follow me, but they hesitate, clinging to Hannah’s legs.

“It’s okay,” she murmurs, crouching down to their level. “Go with him. Your mommy will come back for you.”

Her reassurance does little to calm their fears, but after a long pause, Leo takes Alyssa’s hand and steps forward. I reach for them, my chest tightening again as their small hands slip into mine.

As we step out into the cool Montana air, the gravity of the situation settles fully on my shoulders. They’re mine. No matter what it takes, I’ll keep them safe. From Chiara. From the world. Even from myself, if I have to.

The air feels heavy as I open the car door and gesture for the children to climb in. Alyssa hesitates, her tiny frame trembling as she clings to Leo’s arm. He doesn’t move right away, his wide blue eyes darting between me and the car’s dark interior. Their fear is palpable, and it settles in my chest like a weight I can’t shake.

“Get in,” I say, my tone firm but not harsh. I crouch down slightly, trying to make myself seem less intimidating. “It’s just a car ride.”

Leo swallows hard, his jaw tightening in that way children do when they’re trying to be brave. Slowly, he leads Alyssa forward, helping her climb into the backseat before following her. She immediately presses herself into the corner, her small body curling up like she’s trying to make herself disappear. Leo stays close to her, his hand wrapped protectively around hers.

I belt them in and close the door gently, then move to the driver’s side and slide into the seat. As I start the engine, the sound makes Alyssa flinch. The silence between us is suffocating, broken only by their uneven breaths. I glance at them in the rearview mirror, their faces pale and full of fear.

“You don’t have to be scared,” I say, keeping my voice as calm as I can manage. It

feels foreign, trying to soothe someone. “We’re going home. To your new home.”

They don’t respond. Alyssa stares out the window, while Leo watches me with round eyes.

I clear my throat, gripping the wheel tightly. “Do you want to see your mommy?”

Leo’s expression shifts, the faintest flicker of hope crossing his face. He nods, his grip on Alyssa’s hand tightening.

“Then be good,” I say simply. “She’ll be happy to see you too.”

Alyssa manages a smile, and her little shoulders relax. They’re warming to me.

The road stretches out ahead of us, long and empty. I keep one eye on the rearview mirror, watching their reflections. They’re so small, so fragile, yet there’s something about them that feels unbreakable. It’s in the way they hold on to each other, an unspoken bond that nothing—not even me—can sever.

I focus on the road, pushing down the strange mix of emotions swirling in my chest. They’re mine. My blood. Whether they know it yet or not, I’ll protect them. Even if that means keeping them away from their mother. For now.

The engine hums steadily as the Montana landscape blurs past. The children remain silent, their fear hanging in the air like a storm waiting to break.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:10 pm

Roman escorts me from the suffocating darkness of the room, his hand firmly gripping my arm as he leads me down the hall. The change in environment is stark, the living room bathed in muted sunlight spilling through drawn curtains. My mind races, a thousand scenarios flashing before me. Are they taking me away? Ending this once and for all? I can't decide which option frightens me more.

I glance at Roman, his face unreadable as ever. His silence only amplifies the dread curling in my chest. My breath hitches when the front door opens, the heavy sound of boots signaling Serge's arrival. He steps into the room, his presence commanding and cold as usual.

Then I see them.

Leo and Alyssa, standing just behind him. My heart stops, a mixture of relief and terror rushing through me like a tidal wave. They're here, they're safe. Before I can fully process it, Leo's eyes light up, and both children dart toward me.

"Mommy!"

I drop to my knees, pulling them into my arms, holding them so tightly I can feel their little hearts beating against mine. Tears burn in my eyes as I bury my face in their soft hair, whispering their names over and over. "Oh, my babies. My babies."

Their chatter is a blur of words and laughter as they cling to me. I smooth back Alyssa's blonde curls, kissing the top of her head, before cupping Leo's face, checking for any signs of harm. They're unharmed, thank God.

Then Leo looks at me with those wide blue eyes—the ones that mirror Serge’s so perfectly—and says something that freezes the breath in my lungs.

“Mommy, why didn’t you ever introduce us to our dad?”

I blink, staring at him, my brain struggling to catch up. “What?”

Leo grins, nodding enthusiastically toward Serge, who stands behind them, his hands tucked into his pockets. Alyssa pipes up, her voice cheerful and sweet. “I wasn’t sure at first, but he’s so nice, Mommy! He drove us here and everything.”

My gaze snaps to Serge, confusion and anger bubbling to the surface. His expression is infuriatingly calm, but there’s something else in his eyes. Something softer, more human, as he watches the twins. I don’t know whether to scream at him or collapse into tears.

“Serge,” I manage, my voice trembling with barely contained fury. “What is this? What are you doing?”

He doesn’t answer immediately. Instead, he steps closer, his towering frame casting a shadow over the three of us. Leo looks up at him with pure admiration, as though Serge is some kind of hero, while Alyssa clings to my side, smiling shyly.

“They’re mine,” Serge says finally, his voice low and resolute. “You can’t deny it. Look at them.”

I shake my head, holding my children closer. “You had no right to—”

“No right?” His tone sharpens, his eyes narrowing. “You kept them from me. My own blood. You think you’re the victim here, Chiara?”

“They’re children,” I snap, my voice cracking. “They don’t deserve this life. Your life.”

“Yet,” he says, crouching slightly to meet my gaze, “they deserve to know who they are. Where they come from.”

His words land with the weight of a gavel, but before I can respond, Alyssa tugs on my sleeve. “Mommy, can we stay with him? He’s really nice. He let us listen to music in the car.”

My chest tightens painfully. She’s too young to understand the implications, the danger. To her, Serge is just a tall, strong man who let her pick the songs on the radio. She doesn’t know the darkness that surrounds him, the blood on his hands.

I glance at Leo, who’s watching Serge with the same awe. He doesn’t speak, but his silence is louder than any words.

Serge straightens, towering over us once more. “We’ll talk later, Chiara. For now, let them enjoy this moment.”

His calmness only infuriates me further. My children are clinging to me, blissfully unaware of the storm brewing in my mind, and Serge acts like he holds all the cards. Maybe he does.

“Come on, kids,” I say, my voice softer now as I pull them to their feet. “Let’s sit down for a bit.”

They nod, eager and trusting, as I lead them to the couch. Serge watches, his gaze unreadable, before turning to Roman. A brief, silent exchange passes between them before Serge steps out of the room, leaving me with my children and a thousand unanswered questions.

Serge leans against the doorframe, arms crossed, his sharp blue eyes softening slightly as they rest on Alyssa. She's chattering happily, oblivious to the tension in the room. When she glances up at him with her bright, trusting smile, something shifts in his expression. It's not the usual smirk or cold amusement. It's... genuine. A real, unguarded smile.

It catches me off guard, and for a fleeting moment, I wonder if he's capable of something other than cruelty and calculated control. Then he straightens, his focus flicking between the twins before settling on me.

"Now that I've found you," he says, his voice calm but carrying an unmissable edge of authority, "we can live as one happy family."

His words are like a slap, and I can't stop the dry laugh that escapes me. "Happy?" I scoff, standing from the couch, shielding the twins instinctively. "You think this is going to be happy? That's hilarious, Serge. Absolutely hilarious."

Alyssa looks up at me, confused by the sharpness in my tone. "Mommy?"

I take a steadying breath, crouching down to meet her gaze. "It's okay, sweetheart. Why don't you and Leo go play in the other room for a bit? I need to talk to—" My words falter, the term your father sticking in my throat. "—Serge."

Alyssa hesitates, but Leo tugs on her hand, leading her toward the adjacent room. "Come on, Aly," he says, his tone bright but tentative. "Let's see what's in there."

Once the door closes behind them, the room falls into a tense silence. Serge doesn't move, his gaze locked on mine, unreadable as ever.

"Do you honestly think," I say, my voice low and trembling with anger, "that you can walk in here, uproot our lives, and call it a happy family? You're delusional."

“I think,” he replies, his tone calm and infuriatingly even, “that they deserve to know their father. To live with the security and privilege they’re entitled to.”

“Security?” I laugh again, the sound bitter. “You think dragging them into your world of crime and bloodshed is secure? You’re out of your mind.”

His jaw tightens, but he doesn’t lash out like I expect. Instead, he steps closer, his towering frame casting a shadow over me. “What’s out of my mind is the fact that you kept them from me. My own children. You don’t get to lecture me about what’s right or wrong when you stole four years of their lives from me.”

“I stole their lives?” I step forward, meeting his glare with one of my own. “I protected them. From you. From your family. From everything you represent.”

“Except,” he says, his voice dropping dangerously low, “here they are. Right where they belong. With me.”

His calm, unflinching confidence is maddening. “You don’t know the first thing about what they need. You can’t just barge into their lives and expect—”

“I can,” he interrupts, his voice sharp. “I will. You had your time to run, Chiara. It’s over.”

My fists clench at my sides, the frustration boiling over. “You’re impossible.”

“You’re stubborn,” he counters, his lips twitching into a smirk. “Maybe that’s why this works.”

“Works?” I echo, incredulous. “This doesn’t work. This is a disaster.”

“Disaster or not,” he says, his tone softening slightly, “it’s reality now. I’m here.

They're mine, and you're not taking them anywhere."

His words hang heavy in the air, and for a moment, neither of us speaks. The tension is palpable, a mix of anger, fear, and something else entirely—something I refuse to name. Finally, I exhale, forcing myself to stay calm.

"What do you want from me, Serge?" I ask quietly. "What's your endgame here?"

He steps closer, his eyes narrowing as they search mine. "What I want," he says, his voice steady, "is simple. I want my children in my life. I want them to have the best of everything. Whether you like it or not, that includes me."

"And me?" I ask, my voice barely above a whisper.

His smirk returns, but there's a flicker of something deeper in his gaze. "You, Chiara, are a bonus."

I shake my head, biting back the retort on the tip of my tongue. Before I can say more, the door to the other room creaks open, and Alyssa peeks out, clutching a stuffed animal to her chest.

"Mommy?" she says hesitantly. "Are you mad?"

The innocence in her voice cuts through the tension like a blade. I force a smile, crouching down to her level. "No, sweetheart. I'm not mad."

"Promise?" she asks, her big blue eyes searching mine.

"Promise," I say, reaching out to smooth her curls.

Serge watches the exchange silently, his expression unreadable. For a moment, I

wonder if he's capable of understanding the depth of what he's done—of the chaos he's brought into our lives.

“Go back inside, Aly,” I say gently. “I’ll be there in a minute.”

She nods, disappearing back into the room. As the door clicks shut, I turn to Serge, my resolve hardening. “If you want to play house, fine, but don’t think for a second that I’ll make this easy for you.”

His smirk widens, and for the first time, I see a flicker of amusement in his eyes. “I wouldn’t expect anything less.”

The moment Serge leaves, the tension in the room lingers like a storm that hasn’t quite passed. His footsteps fade down the hall, but I know better than to think I’m free. There’s no freedom here—just a gilded cage with guards at every corner. I glance toward the door and let out a slow breath, my shoulders sagging as the reality of my situation settles over me like a heavy blanket.

With measured steps, I walk to the door, cracking it open just enough to peek out. Sure enough, a hulking figure stands stationed by the wall across the hallway. One of Serge’s men, no doubt, with a cold stare that makes it clear he’s not there to chat. I close the door quietly, my stomach twisting as I turn back to the small living room where my kids wait.

“Mommy?” Alyssa’s voice pulls me from my thoughts. She’s sitting on the plush couch, her stuffed bunny clutched tightly to her chest. Her wide blue eyes—Serge’s eyes—search mine, filled with curiosity and the faintest hint of worry.

“Hi, baby,” I say softly, forcing a smile as I crouch down to her level. “How are you doing?”

She shrugs, her curls bouncing. “Okay, I guess. Is that man our daddy?”

The question hits me like a punch to the gut. I glance at Leo, who’s busy inspecting a toy car he found on the floor, seemingly uninterested in the conversation. “He says he is,” Alyssa adds, her voice quiet.

I sit down next to her, pulling her into my lap. “He is,” I admit, my voice steady despite the turmoil swirling inside me. “He’s your daddy. Everything’s a little... complicated right now.”

“Why?” she asks, tilting her head. “Is he mad at you?”

I laugh lightly, though there’s no humor in it. “You could say that.”

Leo finally looks up, his little face serious. “He seems nice. He said he’d take us to a park someday. Will he, Mommy?”

I swallow hard, smoothing Alyssa’s curls. “We’ll see,” I say vaguely, not knowing how to explain that Serge doesn’t exactly do normal family outings. The thought of him taking them to a park—a place filled with laughing children and unsuspecting parents—feels absurd. Yet, the way they’ve already warmed to him sends a chill down my spine.

“Does he live with us now?” Alyssa asks, her voice small.

“No, sweetheart. He doesn’t live here. He’s just visiting... for now,” I lie and hold her close, trying to reassure myself as much as her. “Don’t worry. Mommy’s here. Always.”

The door opens slightly, and one of the guards steps in, his gaze cold and detached. “Dinner will be brought up soon,” he says curtly before stepping out and closing the

door behind him.

The intrusion grates at me, a harsh reminder that nothing about this is normal. I press a kiss to Alyssa's forehead and then to Leo's, fighting the growing knot of fear in my chest. My children don't deserve this—they don't deserve him.

Alyssa fidgets with her bunny's ears. "Mommy, can we play a game?"

"Of course," I say, trying to sound cheerful. "What do you want to play?"

"Hide and seek!" she exclaims, her smile lighting up her face.

I hesitate, glancing at the door. "Okay, but just in here, alright? No running out into the hall."

"Okay!" she chirps, hopping off my lap. Leo joins her, his toy car forgotten as they begin counting to ten. I hide behind the couch, trying to lose myself in their laughter, even as my mind races.

What's Serge doing now? Plotting his next move? Deciding how to further entangle us in his web? The thought makes me sick, but I can't let it show. Not now. Not in front of them.

"Found you!" Alyssa's giggle cuts through my thoughts as she peeks around the couch, her smile wide and triumphant.

"You're too good at this," I say, pulling her into a hug.

Leo tugs on my sleeve. "Can we play again?"

"Of course," I reply, my heart aching as I watch their innocence. For now, this is

enough. For now, I can shield them from the storm outside the door.

As they count again, I glance toward the window, watching the sun dip below the horizon. Time feels like it's slipping away, every moment dragging us closer to whatever Serge has planned. My resolve hardens. I'll do whatever it takes to protect them, even if it means facing Serge head-on. He may think he's won, but this game isn't over yet.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:10 pm

The cabin is quiet save for the low hum of the jet engines. Outside, clouds stretch endlessly, their calm contrast to the tension crackling in the air. Across from me, Chiara sits stiffly, cradling Leo in her lap. His small hand rests against her chest, his face relaxed in sleep, completely unaware of the chaos surrounding him. Alyssa, seated in a leather chair nearby, swings her legs absently, glancing at me every so often. There's curiosity in her gaze, but also wariness.

Chiara avoids my eyes, her focus pinned on the window as if the endless horizon holds all the answers she needs. It doesn't. The answers are here, with me.

I break the silence, my voice low and deliberate. "When exactly were you going to tell me?"

Her head turns slightly, just enough to show the faint tightening of her jaw. "Tell you what?" she asks, her tone carefully guarded.

My fingers drum on the armrest, each tap echoing louder in the confined space. "Don't insult me by playing dumb. About them. My children."

She exhales slowly, her fingers brushing absently through Leo's blond curls, her protective gesture igniting a mix of frustration and something deeper in me. "By the time I knew I was pregnant, it was too late to go back," she says softly.

"Too late to go back?" I repeat, my voice sharper. "You mean too late to face me."

Her hand stills on Leo's head. "You would have destroyed everything," she says, finally looking at me. Her voice quivers just slightly, but her gaze is steady. "Do you

think I didn't know what you'd do? You'd take them, twist them into something—"

"Something like me," I finish for her, leaning forward.

Her silence speaks volumes.

"You had no right," I say, my tone rising despite my effort to keep it measured. "No right to make that decision for me. You stole years from me, Chiara. From them."

Her lips press together as her fingers curl around Leo's hand. "You would have stolen them from me."

The accusation hangs heavy in the air, and for a moment, we're locked in a silent battle of wills. Then her voice rises, breaking the tension with a sharp edge.

"What do you even plan to do now, Serge?" she snaps. "Take them away from me, or keep them like trophies to prove some twisted point?"

I smirk, leaning back. "They're my blood. My legacy. They'll be raised by my side, under my protection. That's non-negotiable."

Her grip on Leo tightens as her eyes narrow. "What about me, am I just your prisoner now... part of the package deal?"

I study her for a moment, letting the question hang. "I won't kill you," I say finally, my voice calm. "It's against our tradition to harm the mothers of our children."

Her laugh is bitter. "Oh, how noble of you, Serge. Should I thank you for your mercy?"

"It's not mercy," I say, leaning forward again, my elbows resting on my knees. "It's

respect for bloodlines. For family. Something you should understand.”

She glares at me, her vulnerability stark against her defiance. For the first time, I see her weakness—not in her words or actions, but in the way her fingers cling to Leo as if letting go would break her. Her children are her Achilles’ heel. And now I know it.

“They’re all I have,” she says, her voice barely above a whisper. “Don’t take them from me.”

I lean back, my expression softening just slightly. “You’ll stay with me,” I command, leaving no room for argument. “That’s how this works.”

Her head shakes, the defiance returning. “You can’t just decide that. I have a life, Serge. They have a life.”

“Now that life is with me,” I say simply.

Her eyes dart to Alyssa, who’s now dozing in her seat, her head tilted at an awkward angle. “What kind of life will that be?” she asks, her voice cracking. “A gilded cage. A constant reminder of your power.”

I don’t answer immediately. Instead, I glance at Leo, at the way his features mirror my own. His existence should make me angrier, more resentful. It doesn’t. The anger that simmers in me isn’t aimed at him or Alyssa. It’s aimed at her. At her betrayal. At how easily she hid them from me.

“I don’t care what you think,” I say finally, my voice cold. “The first thing we do when we land is get married.”

Her head jerks up, her eyes wide with disbelief. “What?”

“You heard me.”

She shakes her head, a small laugh escaping her. “You’re insane. That’s not happening.”

“It is,” I say firmly. “Unlike the Italians, we don’t welcome illegitimate children. My children will be viewed as equals, as Sharovs. That means you will be my wife.”

Her face pales, the fight momentarily draining from her. “You can’t force me into this,” she whispers.

“You don’t have a choice,” I reply, my voice softer but no less resolute.

The hum of the jet continues to fill the cabin as I settle back into my seat, my eyes locked on Chiara. She’s not looking at me. She hasn’t since I told her we’d be getting married the moment we land. Her jaw is tight, and her hand absently strokes Leo’s hair as he sleeps against her. She’s furious, but beneath that fury is something more—resignation.

There’s a strange satisfaction in seeing her like this. She thought she could escape me, hide my children from me, and erase me from her life. Now, every move she makes is tethered to my control. It’s exactly how it should be.

Yet, there’s something else. A nagging thought I can’t shake as I watch her. It’s not just control that drives me. I’ve dealt with betrayal before. I’ve exacted punishment countless times. This feels... different.

Chiara isn’t like anyone else I’ve encountered. She doesn’t crumble under pressure. Even now, when I’ve stripped her of her plans and shattered her illusions of freedom,

she holds on to that defiance. It's infuriating. Fascinating. No one challenges me the way she does, and I don't know whether I want to crush her spirit completely or see how far she'll go before she breaks.

Her head turns slightly, her gaze drifting out the window. The sunlight filters through, casting a soft glow on her face. She looks vulnerable like this. Tired, yes, but still breathtaking. My chest tightens, and I clench my fists, irritated by my own thoughts. This isn't the time for weakness.

The plane jolts slightly as it begins its descent. I glance toward Roman, seated a few rows behind us. He catches my eye and immediately comes forward, his expression guarded.

"Everything ready?" I ask.

Roman hesitates, his brows furrowing. "The marriage license is prepared. The venue will be ready within an hour. Are you sure about this?"

I raise an eyebrow, my tone sharp. "Do you doubt me?"

"It's not that," Roman replies carefully. "She's unpredictable. Are you sure she won't fight you on this?"

"She doesn't have a choice," I say flatly. "Roman, let me make one thing clear—there's no room for mistakes. Handle everything."

He nods, retreating to the back of the cabin to make the necessary calls.

Chiara hasn't moved, though I see her shoulders stiffen. She heard every word, but she won't acknowledge it. I lean forward, resting my elbows on my knees. "You can keep pretending this isn't happening," I say, my voice low. "It is, and it's happening

today.”

She finally turns to me, her glare sharp enough to cut glass. “You think forcing me into a marriage will make you a father? A husband?”

“No,” I say, meeting her fire with a calm smirk. “It will ensure my children have the name and status they deserve. Whether you like it or not.”

Her lip curls, but she doesn’t respond. She shifts her focus back to the window, her silence speaking volumes.

The skyline of Chicago comes into view, sprawling and vibrant against the backdrop of the lake. For a moment, I see the faintest flicker of something in her expression—nostalgia, maybe, or dread.

I lean back in my seat, satisfied.

As the plane touches down, I stand and adjust my cuff links, signaling Roman to ensure the car is ready.

“Time to go,” I say, my voice carrying an air of finality.

Chiara remains seated, her hand still cradling Leo’s head. Alyssa stirs in her seat, rubbing her eyes sleepily. Chiara gently nudges her, helping her to her feet before standing herself.

She looks at me then, her eyes full of venom and something else I can’t quite place. “This isn’t over, Serge,” she says quietly.

I smirk, stepping closer until there’s only a breath of space between us. “Oh, I know,” I reply. “It’s only just beginning.”

Alyssa tugs on her mother's sleeve. "Are we staying in that big shiny city, Mommy?"

Chiara's voice softens for her daughter, the first trace of warmth I've heard in hours. "For a little while, sweetheart."

Alyssa frowns. "What about the animals?"

"You don't need pets," I cut in before Chiara can respond. "You'll like it here better," I say. Alyssa glances at me, wide-eyed, unsure how to respond. I offer her a rare smile. "There's plenty to explore."

Chiara shoots me a look, her eyes narrowing in warning. I ignore it.

Roman appears to assist. I stretch, then walk over to where Chiara is struggling to untangle herself from Leo's sleepy grip. She's careful not to let our hands touch as she shifts him into a more comfortable position. Alyssa hops down from her seat, brimming with energy.

"Come on, let's go," I say, placing a hand on Chiara's lower back as she moves toward the exit. She tenses but doesn't pull away, likely mindful of the kids' watchful eyes. I lean in, letting my voice drop low. "Welcome home."

She doesn't respond, but her jaw tightens.

The sleek black SUV waits in the parking lot after we go through security. Roman is already behind the wheel, and I guide Chiara and the children inside. Alyssa climbs in eagerly, but Leo clings to his mother, still groggy.

"Do we get to see your house now?" Alyssa asks as I settle into the seat across from

her.

“You do,” I reply. “It’s big. You’ll like it.”

She beams, and Chiara’s shoulders tighten. She knows this isn’t a vacation, but the children are blissfully ignorant. It’s better this way. Let them adjust without fear while I sort out everything else.

As the car moves through Chicago’s bustling streets, Alyssa peppers me with questions. “Do you have a dog? Mommy said no dogs.”

“Not yet,” I admit. “But maybe we’ll get one.”

Her eyes light up, and Chiara’s mouth twitches like she’s suppressing a retort.

Leo stirs in her lap, blinking up at her. “Where are we going, Mommy?”

“Somewhere new, sweetheart,” she says softly, stroking his hair. “You’ll see.”

I study her as she speaks to him. For all her fury and rebellion, her love for these children is disarmingly genuine. It’s the one weakness I know I can exploit—and the one I hate myself for wanting to.

When we reach the mansion, the gates open silently, and Alyssa gasps. “It’s so big!” she exclaims, pressing her hands to the glass.

“Bigger than a castle!” Leo adds, now wide awake.

The car pulls up to the grand entrance, where staff are already waiting. Roman parks, and I step out first, holding a hand out for Alyssa. She takes it without hesitation, hopping onto the driveway with excitement. Chiara exits carefully, still cradling Leo,

her eyes darting around warily.

Inside, the kids' awe grows. The vaulted ceilings, crystal chandeliers, and sweeping staircase elicit wide-eyed stares from both of them. Alyssa runs ahead, her laughter echoing through the expansive space, while Leo clings to Chiara, shyly taking it all in.

"Where's our room, Mommy?" Alyssa calls out, spinning in circles beneath the chandelier.

"I'll show you," I say, cutting in before Chiara can respond. "Come with me."

Alyssa immediately skips toward me, and I lead her and Leo to the grand staircase. Chiara follows reluctantly, her steps heavy. I glance over my shoulder at her. "You'll all have everything you need here. I'll make sure of it."

Her silence speaks volumes. She knows what I mean—that her life, and their lives, are mine now. She doesn't have to like it. She just has to accept it.

The children's room is at the end of the second-floor hallway, its door painted a soft cream that stands out against the dark wood paneling. I push it open, stepping aside to let Alyssa dart inside. She gasps the moment she sees it, her excitement spilling over like water breaking through a dam.

"It's huge!" she squeals, spinning in the middle of the room. The hardwood floor gleams beneath her feet, and the soft blue walls are bathed in sunlight streaming through oversized windows. A canopy bed, draped with delicate gauze, dominates one side of the room, while a bunk bed with dark wood and navy comforters sits tucked against the far wall for Leo. Shelves already lined with books and toys fill the space, carefully curated to appear welcoming but not overbearing.

Chiara hangs back in the doorway, her arms wrapped protectively around Leo. She doesn't move, but I feel her watching every detail, her sharp gaze cutting through my carefully crafted display of hospitality.

Alyssa races toward the bed, bouncing on it before darting to the bookshelf. "Look, Mommy! They have all the princess books!" She pulls one down and hugs it to her chest. "Can I read this before bed?"

"You can read anything you want," I say, my tone lighter than usual. Alyssa grins up at me, and for a moment, I see the unguarded joy of a child.

Chiara finally steps inside, but only far enough to let the door close behind her. Her hold on Leo shifts as he squirms, reaching toward the bunk bed. "Is that mine?" he murmurs, his voice soft but curious.

"It is," I answer before Chiara can. "Come on, try it out."

Chiara hesitates, her body stiffening as if anticipating a trap. Slowly, she lowers Leo to the floor, letting him wander toward the bed. He climbs onto the lower bunk, his little hands clutching the plush comforter, and lets out a small laugh as he bounces.

Alyssa joins him, climbing onto the smaller bed to inspect the pillows. "It's like a sleepover, Mommy!"

Chiara stands frozen, her eyes darting between the two of them and then to me. I meet her stare, holding it steady. I can see the war playing out in her mind—her relief that the children are happy, her fear of what strings might be attached.

"You don't trust me," I say quietly, my words for her alone.

Her lips press together. "Should I?"

I step closer, keeping my movements deliberate. “They’ll have everything they could ever need here. They’ll be safe, cared for, and happy.” My gaze drops to where Leo is now cuddling a stuffed bear he’s found on the bed. “Isn’t that what you want?”

“What I want is for them to be free,” she says, her voice sharp and low.

“They are,” I counter, my tone firm. “This is their home now. This is their life.”

Chiara doesn’t respond. She turns back to the children, her expression softening as Alyssa whispers something to Leo that makes him giggle. Despite her defiance, I see the faintest crack in her armor.

She doesn’t trust me yet, but she will.

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:10 pm

The room is brighter than I expected. Sunlight pours in from the oversized windows, catching the light blue walls and the soft white of the canopy bed Alyssa immediately claimed as hers. She's already tossing the throw pillows onto the floor, her laughter bouncing off the walls as Leo giggles from his smaller bed nearby.

I linger near the door, my arms crossed tightly over my chest. The knot in my stomach won't ease, no matter how innocent this setup appears. It's a beautiful room—too beautiful. Everything about it screams perfection, from the carefully chosen books to the plush, oversized stuffed animals arranged neatly in the corner.

How did Serge pull this off?

It's hard to imagine him bothering with things like this. A child-themed room, so perfectly suited for them, couldn't have been a coincidence. My fingers twitch as my gaze sweeps over the thoughtful details. A small shelf of art supplies sits against the far wall—colored pencils, sketchbooks, even jars of glitter and glue. Alyssa will love it.

I hate how much it fits. I hate how easily he's won them over.

Leo calls out, holding a stuffed bear tightly against his chest. "Mommy, it's so soft!" He rubs his cheek against the bear's fuzzy ear, his delight pulling at my heart.

I crouch down beside him, smoothing his blond curls. "Do you like it?"

He nods, his smile wide and innocent. "Can I keep it?"

“Of course, sweetheart. It’s yours now.”

The words feel strange in my mouth. How much of this is really theirs? How much of it can I trust?

Behind me, Serge’s presence looms. He stands near the window, watching us with an unreadable expression. For once, he’s silent. Not issuing commands or reminding me how little control I have.

Instead, he looks... patient.

I shake the thought off and focus on the children. Alyssa is already climbing under the gauzy canopy, arranging the blankets to her liking. Leo watches her, then looks back at me with wide eyes. “Is it bedtime, Mommy?”

“Not yet,” I say, pulling him into a hug. “You can play for a while first. Explore your new room.”

“They love it,” Serge says quietly.

I glance over my shoulder, my expression guarded. “You’ve made it hard not to.”

He steps closer, his hands in his pockets, and for a moment, I feel trapped between him and the children. “I told you they’d have everything they need here.”

My jaw tightens, but I don’t respond. He doesn’t push me further, just nods toward the door. “I’ll leave you to get them settled. Roman will stay outside if you need anything.”

With that, he turns and strides out, leaving the door open behind him.

I exhale slowly, the tension in my shoulders easing slightly. Alone is better, even if Roman's shadow lingers just beyond the threshold. At least Serge had the decency to give us space, for now.

"Mommy, what's that?" Alyssa's voice pulls me back to the room. She's pointing to a small play table near the corner, its surface covered with puzzles and toys.

I help Leo down from his bed and lead them both over. "Why don't we find out?"

The next hour passes in a blur of squeals and laughter. Alyssa discovers a tea set, and before long, we're all seated at the tiny table, pretending to sip imaginary tea while Leo insists his bear join the party.

I find myself smiling despite everything. For now, they're happy. For now, this feels normal.

Still, the weight of Serge's involvement lingers. As much as I hate to admit it, he's thought of everything. This room, this space—it's not something he could have thrown together last minute. It's too detailed, too perfect for them.

I hate him for it. I also can't ignore what it says about him.

He cares about them.

The thought twists uncomfortably in my chest. I don't want to see him as anything other than the man who ripped us away from our lives. Yet here he is, showing more effort in a day than their father has in years.

"Mommy, are we staying here forever?" Alyssa asks suddenly, breaking through my thoughts.

I pause, unsure how to answer. “We’ll see,” I say finally, brushing her hair back from her face.

Her brow furrows. “What about our old house? And school, and my friends?”

Leo looks up at me, clutching his bear tighter. “My old toys?”

I kneel down between them, my hands resting on their small shoulders. “I know it’s a lot to get used to, but for now, this is our home. We’ll figure out everything else later, okay?”

Alyssa doesn’t look convinced, but she nods, leaning into my touch. Leo mirrors her, pressing his cheek against my arm.

Their trust is unwavering, and it breaks something in me. How do I protect them from this when I barely know how to protect myself?

A knock at the door startles me, and I glance up to see Roman’s silhouette through the frosted glass.

“Everything okay in there?” he calls, his voice muffled.

I swallow the irritation rising in my throat and force a reply. “We’re fine.”

The shadow lingers a moment longer before moving away, and I release a breath I didn’t realize I was holding.

“Are you okay, Mommy?” Alyssa’s voice is soft, her little hand resting on mine.

I nod, forcing another smile. “Of course, sweetheart. Let’s keep playing.”

As they dive back into their toys, I sit back and watch them. Despite everything, they're still my bright, beautiful children. They haven't lost their light. Not yet.

I'll do whatever it takes to make sure they don't.

The laughter of the children fills the room, their joy contagious even as I sit off to the side, my hands resting limply in my lap. Alyssa and Leo are engrossed in a tower of blocks they're building on the play table. Every few minutes, Alyssa pauses to explain the "rules" to Leo, her tone serious in a way that only an almost four-year-old can manage.

I watch them, my heart twisting. A part of me wishes Serge had never found us. We were safe before. Simple. Unremarkable. I could manage our lives, shield them from his world, keep the shadows that follow him at bay.

Now we're here, in this gilded cage of his design, and for all my fear and anger, there's another part of me—a quieter, treacherous part—that feels... relieved.

Alyssa's laughter rings out as Leo knocks over the tower, and she claps her hands, encouraging him to try again. I glance at the door, half expecting Serge to barge in and disrupt this fragile peace. Instead, I hear faint footsteps retreating down the hall. Roman, no doubt, ensuring we don't so much as breathe out of line.

My gaze shifts to the children again, and my stomach tightens when I remember how easily they've taken to their father. The way Alyssa giggles when Serge humors her with answers to her endless questions. The way Leo looks up at him, unsure but curious, as if trying to piece together who this larger-than-life figure really is.

He's their father, and I can't deny the importance of that, even if it pains me to admit. A father's love matters. I know that. I've seen what it looks like when it's absent.

Serge... is this real for him? Or is it all about control?

I'm shaken from my thoughts by a soft knock on the door. I stand, my body tensing instinctively, and when the door creaks open, a woman in a crisp black-and-white maid's uniform steps inside. She carries a garment bag draped carefully over her arm.

"Ma'am," she says, her voice polite but firm, "Mr. Sharov asked me to bring this to you. He requests that you check the fit."

My throat tightens as I catch the gleam of white through the clear plastic.

"What's that?" Alyssa's voice is bright with curiosity as she abandons the blocks and rushes over. Her eyes widen when she sees the delicate lace peeking from the garment bag. "Mommy, it's a dress!"

"It's a wedding dress," the maid explains, smiling as she holds it up. "You'll want to make sure it fits perfectly."

Alyssa gasps, spinning to face me, her hands clapping in excitement. "Mommy's going to be a bride!"

I force a smile, crouching to meet her height as she bounces on her toes. "Sweetheart, it's just a dress. It doesn't mean anything."

"It means you'll marry Daddy!" she says, her grin wide.

The words hit me like a punch to the chest. I glance at Leo, who's wandered closer, his small hands clutching the stuffed bear Serge provided. His wide eyes shift between me and the dress, and I see the question forming on his lips before he speaks.

"Are we gonna stay here forever, Mommy?"

My heart aches at the innocence in his voice. I tuck a strand of his blond hair behind his ear and brush my hand gently over his cheek. “We’re just figuring things out, sweetheart. Don’t worry.”

The maid clears her throat politely. “Shall I help you try it on, ma’am?”

I stand slowly, forcing my face into something neutral as I glance at the dress. “You can leave it on the bed,” I say, trying to keep my tone steady.

“I was instructed to assist with the fitting,” she replies, her smile unwavering but firm.

I want to tell her no, but what good would it do? Refusing Serge’s orders is a battle I’m not prepared to fight—not yet.

“Fine,” I say finally. “Give me a minute.”

The maid nods, laying the dress gently across the smaller bed before retreating to a corner of the room. Alyssa climbs onto the canopy bed and hugs a pillow, watching me with wide eyes. “Can I help, Mommy?”

“Not this time,” I say softly, smoothing her hair before stepping toward the dress.

It’s beautiful, of course. Serge doesn’t do anything halfway. The bodice is covered in intricate lace, the skirt flowing and elegant. It’s exactly the kind of dress I’d imagined as a little girl, back when fairy tales seemed real and princes were kind.

Now it feels like a costume.

The maid steps forward as I hesitantly slip the dress from the bag, her hands deftly undoing the buttons and preparing it for me to try on. “It’s lovely, isn’t it?” she says,

her tone conversational.

“It’s something,” I mutter under my breath, slipping out of my sweater and jeans.

The weight of the fabric settles over me as she helps guide it into place. It fits perfectly, of course. The lace clings to my torso, the skirt flaring out just enough to look regal without being overwhelming. I avoid the mirror, focusing instead on the children.

Alyssa beams, clapping her hands again. “You look like a princess!”

“Do I?” I ask, my voice tight.

Leo tilts his head, his gaze thoughtful. “You look pretty, Mommy.”

I swallow hard, forcing a small smile as I kneel to be closer to them. “Thank you, sweetheart.”

A knock at the door startles us, and Roman’s voice carries through. “Is it done?”

The maid glances at me, waiting for permission.

“Yes,” I say, standing carefully and smoothing the skirt. “It fits.”

Roman steps inside, his sharp eyes scanning the room before landing on me. He doesn’t comment on the dress, but there’s a flicker of satisfaction in his expression.

“Good,” he says simply. “Mr. Sharov will want to see it. You’re expected downstairs in an hour.”

Alyssa bounces on the bed again, oblivious to the tension thickening in the air.

“You’re gonna get married, Mommy!”

I glance at Leo, who clings tighter to his bear, and then at Roman, whose presence feels suffocating despite his silence.

“I’ll be there,” I say, my voice steady despite the storm building inside me.

Roman nods and steps back out, the door closing behind him.

I kneel again, taking Alyssa’s hands in mine. “You two stay here, okay? Play with your toys. I’ll be back soon.”

Her face falls, but she nods. “Okay, Mommy.”

Leo just stares at me, his small face pinched with worry.

I force another smile, brushing his hair back. “Be good for me, baby.”

As I stand, my heart feels heavier with every step. Whatever comes next, I’ll have to face it. For now, I’ll hold on to the fact that they’re safe, even in this house that feels more like a prison.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:10 pm

The room is quiet except for the soft rustle of fabric and the murmur of voices. A low hum of anticipation buzzes in the air, but it's muted—nothing over the top. I wanted this wedding to be small, intimate. Close family, trusted friends, no unnecessary eyes to witness what is ultimately a transaction disguised as a ceremony.

I stand at the altar, my hands clasped loosely in front of me, my expression composed. My tuxedo feels stiff, unfamiliar, as if it doesn't belong on my body. I'm used to control, to power, to commanding attention when I enter a room. Standing here feels... different. Exposed, almost.

I keep my face impassive.

The children's laughter draws my gaze to the side. Alyssa and Leo are seated with Katya, my mother. She looks radiant, happier than I've seen her in years. She leans in close to Alyssa, who's whispering something in her ear, and the two of them burst into giggles. Leo sits quietly beside them, his small hand wrapped around hers, his bear tucked under his other arm. He watches everything with wide, curious eyes, taking it all in.

Katya adores them already. It didn't take long. She's doted on her other grandchildren for years, and now, with Alyssa and Leo in her life, it's like she's been given a second wind. It's hard not to feel some satisfaction watching her beam with pride, her joy so genuine it almost softens the tension in my chest.

Almost.

I adjust my cuff links, forcing myself to focus. This is a formality, I remind myself. A

necessity. The ceremony, the vows—it's all for appearances. Chiara knows that as well as I do.

When the music begins, my breath hitches before I catch myself. I glance toward the entrance, and there she is.

Chiara.

She's breathtaking.

The dress fits her perfectly, every detail accentuating her curves without being overly elaborate. Her dark hair falls in soft waves, framing her face, and even from this distance, I can see the faint tension in her jaw, the way she holds her chin just a little higher as if daring anyone to pity her.

Her steps are slow, measured, her hand resting lightly on Roman's arm as he escorts her down the aisle. She's not smiling, but she isn't trembling either. She looks like she's walking to her execution and refusing to give her captors the satisfaction of fear.

The room blurs for a moment as my focus narrows entirely on her. On the way the soft light catches the lace of her dress. On the set of her lips, pressed tightly together. On the flicker of vulnerability in her eyes when she glances at the children.

She doesn't look at me until she's standing directly in front of me. When her gaze finally meets mine, it's a challenge.

I take her hand as Roman steps back, his expression neutral but approving. Her fingers are cool, her grip firm.

The officiant begins to speak, but I barely register the words. I'm too focused on her,

on the way her chest rises and falls with each measured breath. She's keeping it together, but just barely.

When it's time for the vows, she hesitates. A brief pause, so brief I doubt anyone else notices, but I do.

Her voice shakes as she begins. The words feel forced, like she's dragging them out of herself. "I, Chiara Vinci, take you, Serge Sharov—" She swallows hard, her eyes flickering down to my hand before meeting mine again. "—to be my lawfully wedded husband."

Her voice wavers, but she gets through it. I can see the strain it takes, the effort to make it sound even remotely sincere.

My turn is easier. I've made vows before—to family, to loyalty, to bloodlines. This is no different. My voice is steady, unshaken.

When the officiant declares us husband and wife, there's a pause. A moment where I could pull her closer, kiss her, make it official in a way that would leave no room for doubt.

I don't.

Instead, I lift her hand to my lips and press a kiss to her knuckles. Her skin is soft, delicate, and for a moment, the scent of her surrounds me—subtle, floral, intoxicating. I pull back quickly before I let it go to my head.

I don't kiss her lips. I know better than to go there. Her lips drive me wild in ways I can't afford right now. Not here, not in front of an audience, not when I'm supposed to be in control.

The applause is polite, restrained. This isn't the kind of crowd that cheers wildly for a wedding. It's not that kind of wedding.

Chiara's hand trembles slightly in mine, and I glance down at her. Her expression is blank, carefully composed, but her lips are pressed tightly together again. She's barely holding herself together.

Katya stands, holding Alyssa's hand as they approach. Alyssa practically skips down the aisle, her face lit with excitement. "Mommy, you're so pretty!" she exclaims, tugging on Chiara's dress.

Chiara forces a smile, kneeling slightly to meet her daughter's gaze. "Thank you, sweetheart."

Leo hesitates, clinging to Katya's hand, his wide eyes darting between Chiara and me. When I crouch down, holding my arms open, he takes a small step forward, then another.

"Come here," I say softly.

He stares at me for a moment longer before finally letting go of Katya's hand and running into my arms. I lift him easily, his small frame fitting perfectly against me.

It's a strange feeling, holding him like this. He's so small, so fragile, yet there's a strength in him, a quiet resilience I can't help but admire.

"You did great," I murmur, my voice low enough for only him to hear.

He nods against my shoulder, his fingers clutching at my jacket.

Alyssa climbs into Chiara's lap as Katya wraps an arm around her new daughter-in-

law. My mother's face is glowing, her joy unmistakable.

"They're perfect," she whispers to me as I rise to my full height.

I glance at Chiara again, at the way she holds Alyssa close, her smile strained but genuine for the children.

"Yes," I say quietly. "They are."

Perfection comes with a price. One I'm not sure Chiara is willing to pay.

The ballroom is subdued, filled with the low hum of conversation and the occasional clinking of crystal glasses. It's exactly as I planned—restrained, controlled, nothing flashy or chaotic. For a wedding afterparty, it's a far cry from the gaudy celebrations some of my guests might have expected. But I don't do anything for show. Everything here serves a purpose.

My gaze sweeps over the room, taking in the careful movements of those in attendance. My men stand scattered among the guests, their presence subtle but unmistakable. No one would dare step out of line here—not with me at the center of it all.

I sip my whiskey slowly, watching the way Chiara hovers near the edge of the room, her shoulders tense and her head held high. She's not wearing the mask of a blushing bride, and I didn't expect her to. Chiara doesn't belong to this world, not yet. But she will.

Jennifer approaches her, and I catch their brief exchange from across the room. Jennifer leans in, speaking quietly, and Chiara's posture softens slightly. For a

moment, she looks less like a cornered animal and more like the woman I met long ago—fierce, stubborn, unyielding.

It's a fleeting moment. The tension ripples through the room again as Maxim approaches me, his presence commanding attention without effort.

"I don't know how to feel about this," Maxim says, his voice low but steady.

I glance at him, my expression impassive. "Feel however you like. It doesn't change anything."

He lets out a humorless chuckle, his lips curving into a faint smirk. "I don't regret killing her father, you know. The bastard deserved worse for what he tried to do to my wife."

His words are matter-of-fact, but I see Chiara stiffen in the distance. Her movements are quick, her heels clicking sharply against the floor as she strides toward us, her anger unmistakable.

"Chiara," Jennifer calls after her, a soft warning in her tone, but it's too late.

"Ah, the bride herself," Maxim says as she approaches, his smirk deepening.

"You don't regret killing my father," she says, her voice shaking but loud enough to draw attention. "Good for you. I'm sorry if I can't be as cool about it."

Maxim's gaze darkens, and he steps closer to her, his towering presence intimidating. "You should be grateful," he says, his tone sharp. "Your father was a monster. You, of all people, should know that."

I step forward, my voice cutting through the tension like a blade. "Stay down,

Chiara.”

She ignores me, her fury boiling over. “Grateful? For what? Losing the only family I had left? For watching my world fall apart while you played executioner?”

Timur appears at Maxim’s side, his hand firm on his shoulder. “That’s enough,” Timur says, his voice steady but unyielding.

After a tense pause, Maxim allows himself to be guided away, though his glare lingers on Chiara for a moment longer.

I step in front of her, blocking her view of him, my tone icy. “Do not argue with him.”

Her chest heaves, her anger still simmering. “I’m sorry if I can’t be okay with the man who killed my father.”

I narrow my eyes, my voice low and deliberate. “You tried to kill my brother. Do you think we’ve forgotten that?”

Her defiance falters for a split second, her expression flickering with guilt before she regains her composure.

Before she can respond, Alyssa’s laughter rings out across the room, light and pure, cutting through the tension. I glance over my shoulder to see her perched on Katya’s lap, Leo nestled against her side. Katya whispers something to Leo, and his small face lights up with a smile, his hand wrapping tightly around hers.

Chiara’s anger drains as she watches them, her shoulders softening. She crosses the room toward them, her focus entirely on the children. Alyssa spots her first and leaps from Katya’s lap, running into her mother’s arms.

“Mommy! Did you see Grandma Kat? She says we’re staying at her house tonight!”

Chiara blinks, her expression faltering. “What?”

“We’re sleeping over,” Alyssa says, grinning. “She said we can stay up late too!”

Katya rises gracefully, taking Leo’s hand in hers as she approaches. Chiara’s confusion is written plainly across her face.

“They’ve never slept without me,” she says, her voice laced with disbelief.

Katya offers her a gentle smile. “No matter the circumstances, this is your wedding day, Chiara. And your wedding night. The children will be safe with me. You have my word.”

Chiara hesitates, her grip tightening on Alyssa, but Katya leans down to kiss the girl’s cheek and gently pulls her away. Leo clings to Chiara for a moment longer before Katya crouches beside him, whispering softly. Whatever she says works, and he lets go, taking Katya’s hand again.

“Say goodbye to Mommy,” Katya says gently.

“Bye, Mommy!” Alyssa chirps, waving enthusiastically.

Leo looks up at her, his voice small. “You’ll come get us tomorrow, right?”

“Of course,” Chiara whispers, brushing her fingers through his hair.

Katya gives her a reassuring nod before leading the children out of the room. Chiara watches them go, her expression torn between relief and worry.

“They’ll be fine,” I say, my tone softer than I intend.

She glances at me, her voice tight. “I know.”

I step closer, holding her gaze. “Do you?”

Her eyes harden, but I see the doubt flicker in them. “I trust Katya with them. That doesn’t mean I trust you.”

My lips twitch, not quite a smile. “Fair enough.”

Her disbelief rises again, her words cutting through the space between us. “Are we going to consummate the wedding night? I’m assuming that’s why your mother was so insistent on taking the kids.”

I smirk faintly, letting the silence stretch before responding. “We’re sharing a room,” I say simply. “You’re my wife now. You’ll live as one in every aspect.”

Her expression tightens, but I step closer, lowering my voice as I lean in. “That,” I whisper, “is your punishment.”

Her breath catches, the slightest hitch that betrays her composure. I don’t move, letting the silence settle between us, my dark gaze fixed on hers. She doesn’t back away, but her defiance is fraying at the edges. I can see it in the flicker of uncertainty that crosses her face, in the way her shoulders tense as if bracing for the next blow.

“You think this is a punishment?” she snaps, her voice sharper now, trying to claw back the control she knows she doesn’t have.

I tilt my head slightly, my reply calm, unwavering. “I know it is. You hate me, Chiara. That much is obvious. Now you’ll have to live with me, in my world, under

my rules. That's your reality."

Her chest rises and falls in quick, shallow breaths, her fury barely contained. "You think you can control me like this?" she says, the words biting but laced with fear she tries desperately to mask.

I allow a faint smirk to play at my lips, deliberate and dangerous. "I already do."

She flinches, barely, but it's enough. Enough to tell me that my words have struck deeper than she'd like to admit. Her eyes blaze with defiance, but her body betrays her, the tension in her frame pulling her taut as a bowstring.

"Then you've underestimated me," she spits, her voice trembling but still filled with fire.

I take a step closer, watching as her hands curl into fists at her sides. She doesn't retreat, even as I invade the small space between us. "Maybe I have," I say quietly, my tone almost reflective. "But that doesn't change anything."

Her nails dig into her palms, her knuckles white with the effort to steady herself. I know I'm pushing her, testing how far she'll go before she cracks. I can see the war in her eyes, the fight between anger and fear, between standing her ground and giving in.

"You can force me into this marriage, Serge," she says, her voice low but trembling with barely contained rage. "You can't force me to be your wife in the way you want."

Her words should sting, but they don't. Instead, they spark something darker, something that tightens in my chest and sharpens my focus. I step closer still, until there's no space left between us, until my presence becomes something she can't

ignore.

“Careful, Chiara,” I warn, my voice low, edged with steel. “You’re not in control here. Remember that.”

The air between us feels heavy, charged with the weight of everything unsaid. She swallows hard, her jaw tightening as her gaze refuses to waver. She’s trying to be strong, trying to hold on to what little power she thinks she has left.

I lean back slightly, giving her a fraction of space, but my words remain heavy in the air. For now, she won’t break, but I can see the cracks forming, and I know it’s only a matter of time.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:10 pm

Steam fills the bathroom, clinging to the mirrored surfaces and curling around me as I step out of the shower. The warmth is soothing against my skin, but my heart pounds harder with each passing moment. I grip the plush towel tightly around myself, staring at my reflection in the fogged mirror. My cheeks are flushed, my hair damp and curling against my shoulders.

This is his bathroom. Now, apparently, it's mine too. The realization sinks in like a weight pressing against my chest. I'm Serge's wife. Legally bound. His name is now tied to mine, and there's no undoing it.

My eyes dart to the counter where an array of items waits—lingerie, carefully chosen and undeniably provocative. A pale silk set trimmed with delicate lace, its softness contradicting the tension in the air.

Beside it sits a bottle of perfume, the glass bottle etched with an intricate design. I uncapped it earlier, catching the faint floral and spicy scent that felt far too intimate to wear.

He picked these out for me.

The thought sends a rush of conflicting emotions through me—anger, defiance, and a traitorous flicker of anticipation I can't quite suppress. Does he think he can control me completely? Dress me like a doll and mold me into the perfect wife?

Yet, there's something else beneath the surface. Something I don't want to admit.

The truth is, Serge has always had a way of unraveling me. Even when I hated him

most, there was no denying the pull between us, the way his touch could ignite something in me that no one else ever could. I crave him, even now. The thought alone makes my breath catch.

I brush away the fog on the mirror with a trembling hand, staring hard at my reflection. My damp hair clings to my skin, my lips slightly parted. I look like a woman bracing herself for something she doesn't understand but can't resist.

I shouldn't feel this way. He's dragged me into his world, into a life I never wanted. He's dangerous, controlling, infuriating. There's no denying that he's also captivating in a way I can't escape.

My fingers brush over the silk of the lingerie, and I hesitate. Am I really going to wear this for him? The answer should be no. I should rebel, fight him at every turn.

I don't.

I slip the silk over my skin, the cool fabric clinging to my curves like a second skin. It's too revealing, too intimate, and yet it feels right in a way I don't want to examine too closely. I spritz a touch of the perfume onto my wrists and throat, the scent immediately wrapping around me like a whispered promise.

My nerves twist tighter with each passing second as I glance toward the door. He's waiting for me. The thought sends a shiver down my spine, and I can't tell if it's from fear, excitement, or something darker that I don't want to name.

The bathroom feels too small, too confining. I take a deep breath, steadying myself. Whatever happens, I can't let him see how nervous I am. I won't give him that satisfaction.

The truth is, I'm terrified.

Terrified of what he'll do. Terrified of what I'll do.

I smooth my damp hair back, straighten my shoulders, and step toward the door. My hand hovers over the handle for a moment before I turn it, pushing the door open slowly.

The bedroom is dimly lit, the soft glow of a bedside lamp casting shadows across the room. Serge stands near the bed, his hands tucked into the pockets of his slacks. His jacket is gone, the crisp white of his shirt rolled up at the sleeves, exposing his forearms. He looks relaxed, almost casual, but there's a tension in the way he watches me.

His icy-blue eyes sweep over me, taking in every inch of my appearance. I feel the heat of his gaze like a physical touch, and my breath catches despite myself.

"You're ready," he says, his voice low and deliberate.

I take a step forward, my bare feet sinking into the plush carpet. My pulse thunders in my ears as I meet his gaze, my heart a warzone of emotions I can't control.

"Yes," I whisper, though I'm not sure if I mean it.

His lips curve into the faintest smirk, and he gestures toward the bed. "Come here, wife."

My stomach flips at the word, but I force myself to move, each step bringing me closer to whatever comes next.

The scent of the perfume I'd sprayed lingers in the air, soft and alluring, mingling with the rich spice of his cologne. The combination is intoxicating, wrapping around us like an invisible thread drawing us closer. Serge doesn't take his eyes off me as I

step further into the room, each movement deliberate, hesitant. The silk of the lingerie clings to my skin, its coolness a stark contrast to the heat spreading through me.

He closes the distance between us in a few strides, his presence overwhelming, suffocating in its intensity. My heart pounds as he stops just inches away, his eyes boring into mine. I try to hold his gaze, to show him I'm not afraid, but the pull between us is too strong, my resolve faltering under the weight of his dominance.

"You look perfect," he murmurs, his voice low, almost reverent. But there's nothing gentle about the way he grips my chin, tilting my head back to meet his gaze. His fingers are firm, commanding, and the roughness of his touch sends a shiver through me.

"Serge," I start, but the words die on my lips when he leans down, his mouth crashing against mine.

The kiss is rough, unrelenting, his lips demanding submission. It's not tender or sweet—this is about control, about staking his claim. His hand slides to the back of my neck, holding me in place as his mouth moves against mine, taking, consuming.

I freeze at first, my instincts screaming to push him away, to fight. My hands press against his chest, but the solid muscle beneath my palms only reminds me of his strength. His other hand slides down, gripping my waist possessively, and I feel his heat seeping through the thin fabric of the lingerie.

I want to resist. I tell myself I should, that I hate him, that this is wrong. But the truth is, I want this. I've wanted this for longer than I care to admit. No one else has ever made me feel this way—like I'm burning alive and I don't want it to stop.

My resistance crumbles as his tongue sweeps over my lips, demanding entry. I part them, letting him in, and a low growl rumbles in his chest as he deepens the kiss. My

hands move from his chest to his shoulders, clutching him tightly as if I might fall.

His scent surrounds me, heady and intoxicating. The spice of his cologne mixed with the faintest trace of something earthy and warm. It's a stark contrast to the delicate floral notes of the perfume he'd chosen for me, and together, they create an atmosphere that's almost suffocating in its intensity.

He pulls back just enough to speak, his lips brushing against mine. "You're mine now, Chiara. In every way."

The words send a jolt through me, and I feel my body tense instinctively. Before I can form a response, his lips are on mine again, stealing my breath, my thoughts.

His hands slide lower, gripping my hips and pulling me flush against him. The heat between us is electric, every touch igniting something primal and uncontrollable. He breaks the kiss, his mouth trailing along my jaw, down the curve of my neck. His stubble grazes my skin, a delicious friction that makes me gasp.

"Serge," I manage, my voice trembling as his hands roam over me, his touch firm and commanding.

He lifts me effortlessly, his strength evident as he carries me the few steps to the bed. I want to protest, to reclaim some semblance of control, but my body betrays me. My legs wrap around his waist instinctively, my hands clutching his shoulders as he lays me down on the soft mattress.

The silk of the sheets is cool against my heated skin, and the scent of him is everywhere now, filling my senses, clouding my thoughts. He hovers over me, his gaze dark and unreadable as he takes me in.

"I've waited four years for this," he says, his voice rough, almost possessive. His

hand trails along my side, the silk of the lingerie barely a barrier between his touch and my skin.

I can't speak, can't think. All I can do is feel—the weight of him above me, the heat of his breath on my skin, the way his touch ignites a fire that I can't control.

“Say it,” he demands, his lips brushing against my ear. “Say you're mine.”

My heart pounds as I meet his gaze, the intensity in his eyes leaving no room for escape. I should resist, I should fight, but instead, I whisper the words he wants to hear.

“I'm yours.”

His lips crash against mine again, and this time, I don't hold back. I kiss him with everything I have, surrendering to the storm that has been building between us for far too long.

I feel his fingers dig into my hips, his touch firm enough to leave marks. I gasp against his mouth, a mix of pain and pleasure surging through me as his hand slides to the curve of my thigh, pulling me closer beneath him.

“You're mine,” he growls, his voice low and possessive, as if the words alone could brand me. His teeth graze the sensitive skin of my neck, and I arch against him despite myself.

I can feel his cock strain against his pants, tantalizingly out of reach. Despite the time I was in Montana, I remember him perfectly—thick and long, the best I've ever had.

It's enough to make me moan.

He pulls back just enough to meet my gaze, his eyes searching mine. “Say it again,” he demands, his fingers trailing down my arm before gripping my wrist. His thumb brushes over the tender skin there, and I know he can feel my racing pulse. “Say you’re mine. I won’t fuck you unless you say it again.”

My lips part, the defiance bubbling up despite the fire roaring in my veins. “You make it sound as if you want to own me.”

His smirk is faint, dangerous, as if he finds my resistance amusing. “Don’t I?” he murmurs, his hand sliding to the back of my neck, holding me in place. “Then why are you letting me do this?”

“Serge, fuck me already—”

“No. Not unless you do as I say.”

I huff, desperately clawing at him. “I’m yours! I’m yours. ”

“Good girl.”

Before I can respond, his lips are on my collarbone, his teeth grazing the delicate skin there. I cry out softly, my hands clutching his shoulders as his touch turns rougher. He bites down, not enough to break the skin but enough to send a sharp jolt through me.

He tugs down his pants and enters me; I’m so thoroughly soaked that his cock slides in effortlessly, filling me to the brim. Serge thrusts, and I gasp, my head spinning as hot arousal envelops me.

I feel the bruises forming already as he pounds into me, his hands gripping painfully tight. The heat and sting of his mouth leaving a trail of evidence across my skin. My

breath comes in shallow gasps as he moves lower, his hands gripping my waist tightly. His fingers dig in, holding me in place, and I know there will be marks there too.

“These bruises,” he says against my skin, timed with each delicious thrust, “they’re mine. They mark you as mine. No one else will ever touch you like this.”

My stomach twists at his words, a mix of anger and desire that I can’t untangle. “You think bruises make me yours?” I snap, but the meaning is lost as I arch my back, desperate to feel him stretch me wide.

“They’re a reminder,” he says, lifting his head to meet my gaze. His eyes are dark, unwavering. “A reminder that you’re not free, Chiara. Not anymore.”

His words should terrify me, should ignite the fury I’ve been clinging to. Instead, it brings me over the edge with a breathless gasp. I moan against his lips, eyes squeezed closed as my world goes white with pleasure.

Serge comes too, spilling hot seed as my walls clench around his cock. He grunts—it could have even been my name—and his hands are like a vise on me.

We come together, and I’m barely even aware I’m calling his name.

When it’s over, we lie side by side on the bed, the room silent except for the sound of our breathing. My skin feels tender, bruised in places, and the faint scent of his cologne still lingers in the air, mixing with the floral perfume I’d worn earlier.

I turn my head slightly, glancing at him. His expression is unreadable, his gaze fixed on the ceiling, as if lost in thought. For a moment, I wonder if he regrets it, but then his hand moves to my wrist, his fingers brushing over the faint marks he left there.

“You’ll remember this,” he says quietly, not looking at me.

I don’t reply. I’m too tired, too overwhelmed by everything that’s happened, to argue or fight. My body aches, and my mind is a whirlwind of conflicting emotions—anger, guilt, desire, and something I can’t name.

The room is heavy with silence, the kind that presses against your chest and makes every sound feel too loud. Serge lies beside me, his arm casually draped across his stomach as he continues to stare at the ceiling, his expression unreadable. I hate the way he can look so composed, as if this was just another calculated move in a long game.

I shift slightly, the ache in my body a constant reminder of everything that just happened. My fingers brush over the faint bruises on my wrist, and I glare at him, though he doesn’t meet my gaze. “You think this proves something?”

His lips twitch, but it’s not quite a smile. “It proves enough.”

I push myself up on one elbow, ignoring the way the sheets slide against my skin, cool and soft in stark contrast to the heat still simmering in my veins. “Bruises don’t mean anything, Serge. They don’t mean you’ve won.”

His eyes finally meet mine, sharp and unyielding. “You say that now,” he murmurs, his voice low. “You didn’t push me away, did you? You wanted this just as much as I did.”

I swallow hard, the truth of his words cutting deeper than I want to admit. “I didn’t—”

He interrupts me, sitting up slightly, his presence overwhelming even in his stillness. “You can lie to yourself, Chiara. Don’t lie to me. I know you better than that.”

I open my mouth to argue, but no words come. His gaze pins me in place, and for a moment, all I can do is stare back.

Finally, I drop back against the pillow, my body too exhausted to keep fighting.

“You’re insufferable,” I mutter.

I close my eyes, his words haunting me as sleep takes over.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:10 pm

The early sunlight filters through the tall windows as I descend the staircase, the house unusually quiet except for the faint sound of laughter drifting up from downstairs. It's a sound that doesn't belong in my world—a soft, innocent thing that feels out of place amidst the cold marble and sharp edges of my home.

I pause for a moment, letting the sound wash over me before continuing down, the soft padding of my bare feet against the polished steps the only indication of my presence. As I approach the dining room, the scene unfolds before me.

Chiara is sitting on the floor with Alyssa and Leo, her smile wide and unguarded as she holds up a small toy horse for Alyssa to inspect. Leo clutches a stuffed bear, his laughter quiet but genuine as she tickles his side, pulling a giggle from his usually shy demeanor.

Katya sits nearby, a steaming cup of tea in her hands, her expression warm but knowing as she watches her daughter-in-law with the children. She catches my eye as I step into the room, offering a slight nod.

“They couldn't sleep,” she says softly, her voice laced with amusement. “Your children missed their mother.”

Chiara glances up at Katya's words, her eyes meeting mine for the briefest of moments before flicking back to Alyssa. Her smile doesn't falter, but there's a hint of tension in the set of her shoulders, a reminder of the dynamic between us.

“Papa!” Alyssa's voice pulls me from my thoughts as she leaps up, her small frame barreling toward me with unrestrained excitement.

I crouch slightly, catching her as she collides with me, her arms wrapping around my neck. “Good morning, Alyssa,” I say, my tone softening instinctively.

“Did you sleep good, Papa?” she asks, her voice muffled against my shoulder.

“I did,” I lie, though the restless night I spent staring at the ceiling says otherwise. “You?”

She pulls back, her face lighting up as she nods. “Grandma said we could come back early because Leo missed Mommy.”

I glance at Leo, who’s now climbing into Chiara’s lap, his small hands clutching at her shirt as she strokes his hair. His gaze meets mine briefly, and there’s a flicker of recognition there, though he quickly buries his face in her shoulder.

“He’s still warming up,” Chiara says softly, her hand moving in slow, comforting strokes over his back.

“He’ll come around,” I reply, standing with Alyssa still clinging to me.

Katya rises gracefully, placing her cup down on the table. “I’ll leave you to your family time,” she says, her tone light but pointed. She presses a kiss to Alyssa’s cheek, pats Leo’s head, and gives Chiara a look that I can’t quite decipher before she exits the room.

The air shifts as her presence fades, leaving just the four of us.

“Papa, come play!” Alyssa tugs on my hand, pulling me toward the floor where Chiara sits with Leo still in her lap.

I let her guide me, lowering myself onto the floor beside them. Alyssa grabs a toy car

and places it in my hand, her bright eyes watching expectantly.

“Drive it!” she commands, giggling as she picks up a second car and mimics a race.

I indulge her, rolling the car along the floor and making a halfhearted engine noise that sends her into a fit of laughter. It’s infectious, and despite myself, I feel a faint smile tugging at my lips.

Chiara watches us, her expression softer than I’ve ever seen it. She doesn’t say anything, but there’s a flicker of surprise in her gaze, as if she hadn’t expected me to be capable of this.

Leo shifts in her lap, his small hand reaching tentatively toward the car. I hold it out to him, keeping my movements slow and deliberate. He hesitates, his wide eyes darting to Chiara for reassurance before he finally takes it.

“Good boy,” I murmur, watching as he grips the car tightly, his fingers wrapping around it as if it were a precious treasure.

Chiara smiles down at him, pressing a kiss to the top of his head. “See? Papa’s not so scary.”

Her words are light, teasing, but there’s an edge to them that makes me glance at her. Our eyes meet, and for a moment, there’s an understanding between us, fragile but present.

Alyssa climbs into my lap without warning, her small hands reaching up to frame my face. “Papa,” she says seriously, her nose wrinkling. “Can we have pancakes?”

I chuckle softly, brushing a strand of hair from her face. “I think we can do better than pancakes. Let’s see what the kitchen has prepared.”

Her squeal of excitement fills the room, and she scrambles off me, pulling Leo to his feet. Together, they dart toward the dining table, their laughter echoing as they climb into their chairs.

I follow, glancing back to see Chiara standing, her expression unreadable as she watches the children. She joins me at the table, taking a seat across from me as the staff begins to bring out breakfast.

The scent of something sweet wafts through the air, and when the plates are set down, my gaze locks on the dish in front of me. French toast, golden and crisp, dipped in milk and sprinkled lightly with powdered sugar.

I glance at Chiara, my brow lifting slightly. She avoids my gaze, her focus entirely on cutting a piece for Alyssa.

“French toast,” I say casually, my tone low.

Her hand stills for the briefest moment, her lips pressing into a thin line before she resumes. “It’s the children’s favorite.”

I pick up my fork, cutting a piece and lifting it to my mouth. The taste is rich, the milk softening the crisp edges. My eyes don’t leave her as I chew slowly, deliberately.

Her gaze finally flicks up to meet mine, and I see the tension there, the memory of what this dish once meant hanging between us.

“It’s good,” I say simply, offering a faint smirk.

She says nothing, turning her attention back to the children, but I catch the faintest flush of color on her cheeks.

As we eat, Alyssa chatters nonstop about her plans for the day, waving her fork animatedly. Leo is quieter, humming softly and eating steadily, his little hands clutching his utensils with determination. Chiara sits across from me, her focus shifting between the children, a small smile tugging at her lips every now and then. I lean back in my chair, my gaze lingering on Chiara. She's a good mother. That much is undeniable.

Katya, seated at the head of the table, sips her tea gracefully, though her expression is distant. Finally, she places her cup down, the soft clink drawing everyone's attention.

"I'll need to leave shortly," she says, her tone brisk but not unkind. "There's some business I need to attend to."

Chiara glances at her, a flicker of curiosity crossing her face. "What kind of business?"

Katya smiles faintly but doesn't elaborate. "The kind that keeps our world turning." Her gaze shifts to the children, softening. "Be good for your mother and father today, my darlings."

Alyssa beams. "We will, Grandma!"

Leo nods solemnly, still chewing a bite of his French toast.

Katya rises, smoothing her blouse, and presses a kiss to each child's head. "Enjoy your day," she says before turning to me. "Serge, I trust you'll handle everything."

I nod, my expression neutral. "Of course."

With that, she leaves, her heels clicking against the marble as she exits the room.

For a moment, the table is silent except for the soft clinking of silverware. Alyssa is the first to break it, launching into another story about her favorite book, and I listen, amused, as she details every character with dramatic flair.

Chiara remains quiet, her gaze occasionally flicking to the children, her expression thoughtful.

“You’re quiet,” I say, leaning back slightly and letting my eyes settle on her.

She looks up, startled, as if caught in a thought. “Just tired,” she replies quickly, her tone even. “It was a long night.”

My lips curve into a faint smirk. “I’m sure it was.”

Her cheeks flush, and she looks away, focusing on cutting Leo’s next bite into smaller pieces.

The kids finish eating soon after, Alyssa bouncing in her seat as she finishes the last of her juice. “Mommy, can we go play now?”

Chiara smiles at her, though there’s still a hint of weariness in her eyes. “Yes, but first you need to get dressed.”

Alyssa hops down from her chair, grabbing Leo’s hand. “Come on, Leo!”

Chiara starts to rise, but I hold up a hand, stopping her. “No need,” I say. “They’ll be taken care of.”

She pauses, frowning slightly. “What do you mean?”

“I’ve hired a nanny,” I reply, my tone calm. “She’ll handle things like this from now

on.”

The frown deepens, and she crosses her arms, leaning back in her chair. “A nanny, for what? I’m perfectly capable of taking care of my children.”

“Your children,” I repeat, my voice steady as I meet her gaze. “This isn’t about capability. It’s about convenience.”

“They don’t need convenience,” she snaps. “They need me.”

“They need stability,” I counter, my tone firm. “With everything else happening, you can’t do it all alone.”

Her jaw tightens, her eyes flashing with defiance. “I’ve been doing it alone for years, Serge. Don’t act like you know what they need better than I do.”

“They’re in my house now,” I reply coolly. “As long as they are, they’ll have everything they need, including help.”

Chiara glares at me, her hands gripping the edge of the table. “Help, or control? Because it feels like the latter.”

I lean forward slightly, my voice dropping. “You can call it whatever you like, but the nanny stays.”

The tension between us is thick, and for a moment, I expect her to push back harder, to keep arguing. But then she exhales sharply, shaking her head. “Fine,” she says, her tone clipped. “Don’t expect me to sit back and let someone else raise my children.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it,” I reply, my smirk returning.

She rolls her eyes and rises from the table, muttering something under her breath as she moves to check on the kids.

Alyssa and Leo, oblivious to the tension, dart toward the stairs, their laughter echoing through the hall. I watch them go, a faint pang of something unfamiliar twisting in my chest.

Alyssa is so full of life, so eager to explore and experience everything. I want to give her the world, to protect that spark of innocence for as long as I can.

And Leo... he's quieter, more reserved, but there's a strength in him, a determination that reminds me of myself at his age. He'll be my pride, the one to carry on the Sharov name and legacy.

Chiara returns, her steps slower, her expression guarded as she sits back down.

"They love you, you know," I say suddenly, surprising even myself with the admission.

She looks at me, her eyes narrowing slightly as if trying to decipher my intent. "They're children," she says softly. "They love easily."

"No," I reply, my voice firm. "They don't just love. They trust. Don't underestimate how rare that is."

She doesn't respond, her gaze dropping to her hands, which rest loosely in her lap.

Before the silence stretches too long, the staff begins clearing the table, bringing out fresh coffee and tea. I glance at the empty plates, the remnants of the French toast lingering in the air, and my gaze shifts back to her.

“You’re a good mother,” I say finally, my tone quieter now.

Her head lifts slightly, and for a moment, I see the faintest flicker of vulnerability in her eyes. But then she straightens, her expression hardening again.

“You’re just figuring that out?” she asks, her voice tinged with sarcasm.

I chuckle softly, shaking my head. “No. I’ve always known.”

Her lips part, and for a fleeting moment, I think she might say something—anything—to bridge the chasm between us. Instead, she closes them again, the faint hesitation replaced by the guarded expression I’ve come to know so well. It’s her armor, the wall she puts up every time I get too close.

The silence stretches between us, heavy but not uncomfortable. It’s a truce of sorts, neither of us willing to escalate further, yet neither backing down completely. I lean back in my chair, studying her as she traces the rim of her teacup with her finger.

“You’re quiet again,” I say softly, breaking the stillness.

Her gaze flicks up to meet mine, and there’s a flicker of defiance in her eyes. “Like I said, I’m tired.”

I let the corner of my mouth lift in a faint smirk. “Tired from what, when I fucked you last night?”

Her cheeks flush, but she quickly schools her expression, straightening in her seat. “Don’t flatter yourself, Serge. The only exhausting part of last night was dealing with your nonsense.”

Her words are sharp, but there’s no real bite to them. She’s deflecting, as always, and

I decide to let it go. For now.

“Well, then,” I say, my tone light.

Her lips twitch, almost forming a smile, but she catches herself, turning her attention back to the tea. She’s avoiding me again, retreating into her thoughts.

I lean forward, resting my elbows on the table, and let my voice drop slightly. “You’re a terrible liar, Chiara.”

That gets her attention. Her head snaps up, and her eyes narrow at me. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means you can pretend all you want,” I say, meeting her gaze steadily. “I know you’re thinking about last night just as much as I am.”

Her jaw tightens, and I see her fingers grip the edge of the table. “Don’t push me, Serge,” she warns, her voice low.

“I’m not pushing,” I reply smoothly, leaning back again. “Just stating the obvious.”

Her glare sharpens, but before she can retort, the sound of the children’s laughter drifts down from upstairs. It breaks the tension like a knife cutting through rope, and she exhales, her shoulders relaxing slightly.

“They’re happy here,” I say, my tone quieter now.

Her gaze softens as she glances toward the staircase. “For now,” she murmurs.

“They’ll always be happy,” I counter firmly. “I’ll make sure of it.”

She turns back to me, her expression unreadable. “Happiness isn’t something you can buy or control, Serge. It’s earned.”

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:10 pm

The soft evening light filters through the curtains as I sit on the edge of the bed, the comforter cool against my fingers.

Days have passed since I first stepped into this house as Serge's wife, and I'm still adjusting to the rhythm of living under the same roof. The mansion is quiet now, the children tucked away with the nanny for their nightly routine, and I find myself in the rare calm that comes when no one else is demanding my attention.

The door opens without warning, and Serge strides in, his presence filling the room like a storm cloud. He's still in his formal wear, his tie slightly loosened and his jacket slung over one shoulder. His eyes meet mine briefly before he moves to the corner of the room, unbuttoning his cuffs with deliberate ease.

"Long day?" I ask, my voice casual as I watch him from the bed.

He doesn't answer immediately, his focus on removing his tie. When he finally speaks, his voice is low, steady. "The usual."

He drapes the tie over a chair, then moves on to his belt, sliding it off with practiced efficiency. There's something strangely intimate about watching him shed the trappings of his power, even though he's still every bit the man who commands fear and respect.

I clear my throat, deciding to seize the moment. "I need to talk to you about something."

He pauses, his hands hovering over the buttons of his shirt. "Oh?"

“It’s about the twins,” I say, my voice softening. “They’ll be four in a few days. I usually plan a little birthday celebration for them.”

His expression shifts, the faintest hint of surprise flickering in his eyes. “Four already,” he murmurs, almost to himself.

I nod. “Yes. It’s important to me that they have something special. Something that feels normal.”

To my surprise, he steps closer, his interest clearly piqued. “What do you usually do?”

“Nothing extravagant,” I reply. “A small party. Some decorations, a cake. They love anything with animals, so I usually make that the theme.”

He leans against the dresser, his arms crossing over his chest as he considers my words. “Animals, hmm? We can do better than a simple party, don’t you think?”

I blink, caught off guard by his enthusiasm. “What do you mean?”

He smirks faintly. “They deserve something memorable. We’ll get a cake, of course, but let’s add something more. Maybe a petting zoo, or—”

“A petting zoo?” I interrupt, my brows raising.

“Why not?” he replies, his tone almost playful. “Or perhaps something even better. We could bring in performers, magicians—whatever they’d enjoy.”

For a moment, I don’t know how to respond. This is a side of Serge I haven’t seen before, and it unsettles me almost as much as it intrigues me.

“They don’t need anything grand,” I say cautiously. “Just a little joy. That’s all I want for them.”

He nods, his expression softening slightly. “Then we’ll make it perfect.”

Before I can process his words, his phone buzzes on the nearby dresser. He picks it up, glancing at the screen, and his smirk deepens.

“Excuse me,” he says, stepping away as he answers the call. His voice drops into a smooth, controlled tone. “Yes?”

I can’t hear the other side of the conversation, but his responses are short, laced with amusement. “Is that so?” he murmurs, a chuckle escaping his lips. “Well, well. That’s unexpected.”

He ends the call and turns back to me, his smirk now fully formed, as though he’s just received the most interesting news of the day.

“What is it?” I ask, wary of the glint in his eyes.

Serge doesn’t answer immediately. Instead, he sets the phone down and takes a deliberate step toward me. “It seems,” he begins, his tone laced with mockery, “that your dear half brother, Lorenzo, has suffered an unfortunate end.”

I stiffen, my heart skipping a beat. “What are you talking about?”

He shrugs, almost casually. “He had a heart attack earlier today. Didn’t survive it.”

I stare at him, the words sinking in slowly. Lorenzo. My half brother. The man who had always stood as a looming figure of control in my family, distant yet omnipresent in his influence.

“And,” Serge continues, his smirk widening, “as the next of kin, all his assets and power transfer to you. Congratulations, Chiara. You’re now a very wealthy woman.”

His tone is mocking, but his words cut through the haze of shock settling over me. I sit back on the bed, my hands gripping the edge tightly.

“I don’t want it,” I say quietly, my voice trembling.

“That doesn’t matter,” Serge replies, his tone turning serious. “It’s yours now. Whether you want it or not, his legacy is tied to you.”

I glance up at him, my emotions warring between anger and indifference. “Do you think I care about his money, about his power?”

“No,” he says simply, his gaze unwavering. “It’s yours regardless.”

I shake my head, my lips pressing into a thin line. “I’m not going to grieve him, Serge. Lorenzo was never family to me. He barely acknowledged my existence unless it suited him.”

Serge watches me closely, his expression unreadable. “Good,” he says after a moment. “You shouldn’t waste tears on someone who didn’t deserve them.”

I look away, my gaze falling to the floor. There’s no sadness in me, no sense of loss. Just a hollow resignation, an acknowledgment that Lorenzo’s death changes nothing for me.

The silence between us stretches, heavy and oppressive. My gaze stays on the floor, the weight of Lorenzo’s death pressing down on me—not because I mourn him, but because his passing has brought an unwelcome shift to my life. One more thing to manage. One more legacy I didn’t ask for.

The soft rustle of fabric pulls my attention back to Serge. He's standing at the dresser, unholstering the sleek black handgun tucked at his waist. His movements are unhurried, methodical, as if this is just another part of his routine. He sets the gun down, carefully dismantling it piece by piece before placing it inside the hidden compartment of the drawer.

"What do you plan to do now?" he asks, his voice breaking the silence but still quiet enough to feel deliberate.

I look up at him, startled by the question. "What do you mean?"

He closes the drawer, locking it with a subtle flick of his wrist before turning back to me. His blue eyes meet mine, sharp and unreadable. "You have influence now," he says, leaning casually against the dresser. "Power. It's yours whether you want it or not. So, what will you do with it?"

For a moment, I don't know how to respond. The idea of wielding Lorenzo's influence feels foreign, like wearing a coat that doesn't belong to me. I could use it, I realize. I could take my children and disappear, build a new life far away from Serge and the suffocating grip of his world.

The thought is fleeting. He would never let me go, never let the twins slip through his fingers. And even if I somehow managed to escape, what kind of life would they have without their father?

I exhale slowly, forcing myself to meet his gaze. "I'll continue like this," I say, my voice steadier than I feel. "As your wife."

His brow lifts slightly, the faintest flicker of curiosity crossing his face. "You've accepted your role, then?"

“I haven’t accepted anything,” I snap, my tone sharper than I intended. “I’m staying because the kids are happy. When we live like a happy family, they smile more, laugh more. I’ll do anything to keep it that way. For their happiness.”

For a moment, he doesn’t respond. He studies me, his expression unreadable, before giving a single nod. “Good,” he says simply, turning back to the dresser.

His lack of argument unsettles me. I expected him to push, to gloat, to wield this as another form of control. Instead, his calm acceptance feels more disarming than any threat.

“But,” I continue, my voice softening slightly, “I need to attend to my family’s businesses.”

His shoulders stiffen, but when he turns back to me, his expression is calm. “Why?”

“Because it’s what I owe,” I say firmly. “If Lorenzo’s power and assets are mine, then I have a responsibility to maintain them. To make sure they don’t crumble.”

“You’re already stretched thin,” he counters, crossing his arms. “You have the twins, this house, and now the weight of his legacy. Are you sure you can handle all of it?”

“Yes,” I reply without hesitation. “I need your word that I’ll have the freedom to do so.”

He tilts his head slightly, his gaze narrowing. “You’ll have it,” he says after a moment. “On one condition.”

I tense, waiting for the inevitable strings attached. “What condition?”

“You stay in Chicago,” he says firmly. “Your businesses, your dealings, all of

it—keep them here. If you leave the city, you do so with my approval.”

The terms are less restrictive than I anticipated, though they still feel like chains. “Why does it matter where I go?”

“Because I need you close,” he replies, his voice low. “The twins need you close. If you’re here, I can ensure your safety.”

“Or your control,” I mutter under my breath.

He steps closer, his presence towering as he leans down slightly, forcing me to meet his gaze. “Call it whatever you want,” he says evenly. “The answer doesn’t change. You stay in Chicago, Chiara.”

I hold his gaze, the air between us thick with unspoken tension. Finally, I nod, though the motion feels heavy with resignation. “Fine,” I say quietly.

“Good,” he replies, his tone softer now. He straightens, running a hand through his dirty blond hair as he steps back. “You’ll need a proper team. Lawyers, accountants. Whatever it takes to keep your new empire running.”

His matter-of-fact tone grates on me, but I force myself to remain calm. “I’ll handle it,” I say simply.

“I’m sure you will.”

He turns toward the window, his posture relaxed but his eyes scanning the city skyline as if already calculating his next move. For a moment, I watch him, trying to piece together the man in front of me. Serge Sharov is many things—ruthless, controlling, impossible to predict. But right now, there’s something almost human about him, something that makes me feel more uneasy than any of his calculated

power plays.

“I don’t trust you,” I say suddenly, the words slipping out before I can stop them.

He glances over his shoulder, a faint smirk tugging at the corner of his mouth. “Good. You shouldn’t.”

His honesty stuns me into silence, and I look away, my hands gripping the edge of the bed tightly. The weight of the past few days presses down on me, the realization that my life has been irrevocably changed settling in my chest like a stone.

Lorenzo is gone, his shadow no longer looming over me. In his place is Serge, a man who has become both my captor and my partner.

Page 21

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:10 pm

The evening air is crisp as the car pulls up to the venue, the glow of the building's grand entrance reflecting off the sleek black surface of the limousine. I glance at Chiara beside me, and for a moment, the noise of the world outside fades.

She looks stunning tonight. Too stunning.

The gown she's wearing hugs her curves in all the right places, its deep emerald color a stark contrast to the soft waves of her dark hair cascading over her shoulders. Her lips, painted a deep red, catch my attention in a way that's distracting—dangerously so.

She adjusts the small clutch in her hands, her movements graceful but tense. She's been like this all week: polite but distant. Always with the twins, always avoiding me, always too busy to be alone with me for more than a passing moment.

It's driving me mad.

I clear my throat, forcing my attention away from her as the car slows to a stop. "You look beautiful," I say, my voice even despite the heat simmering just beneath the surface.

Her eyes flick to me, startled by the compliment. "Thank you," she says softly, her tone polite but guarded.

It's not enough.

Before I can say more, the door opens, and I step out, extending a hand to help her.

The flash of cameras lights up the night as soon as we're visible, reporters and onlookers clamoring for a glimpse of the Sharov couple.

Chiara hesitates briefly before placing her hand in mine, her touch light but steady as she steps out of the car.

Together, we make our way up the steps, the crowd parting like the sea as we move. She holds her head high, her chin lifted in quiet defiance, and I can't help the flicker of pride that runs through me. Despite everything, she carries herself like a queen.

Inside, the ballroom is buzzing with conversation, the air thick with the mingling scents of expensive perfume and champagne. The event is a gathering of powerful figures—business tycoons, politicians, and a handful of familiar faces from the underworld.

Chiara stays close to my side as we navigate the room, her posture poised but her fingers gripping her clutch a little too tightly. She's nervous, though she hides it well.

"Relax," I murmur, leaning closer so only she can hear. "No one here would dare cross me."

She glances at me, her lips pressing into a thin line, but she doesn't respond.

We're stopped by a group of acquaintances—businessmen with more money than sense, accompanied by their wives who eye Chiara with a mix of curiosity and thinly veiled judgment.

One of them, a tall, thin woman in an ice-blue gown, steps forward, her smile too sharp to be genuine. "So, this is the new Mrs. Sharov," she says, her tone dripping with false sweetness. "I must say, Serge, you have quite the taste for... unconventional choices."

Chiara stiffens beside me, and I feel the tension radiating from her.

I don't hesitate. My gaze locks on to the woman, my voice cutting through the noise around us like a blade. "Unconventional is simply another word for exceptional," I say, my tone cold. "My wife is far more exceptional than anyone else in this room."

The woman's smile falters, her eyes darting to her companions for support, but no one comes to her defense.

Chiara glances up at me, surprise flickering in her expression, but she quickly schools it into something neutral.

"Let's go," I say, my hand resting lightly on the small of her back as I guide her away from the group.

We find a quieter corner of the ballroom, away from prying eyes and whispered judgments. Chiara turns to me, her brows furrowing. "You didn't have to do that."

"Yes, I did," I reply firmly. "No one disrespects you and gets away with it. She's lucky I didn't get violent."

Her lips part as if to argue, but she closes them again, her gaze dropping to the floor.

"Chiara," I say, my voice softening slightly.

She looks up at me, her eyes searching mine for something I can't name.

"Thank you," she says after a moment, her voice quiet but sincere.

The gratitude in her tone stirs something deep within me, something I'm not ready to confront. I step closer, the scent of her perfume—a delicate blend of jasmine and

vanilla—wrapping around me and fueling the fire that’s been burning inside me for days.

“You drive me insane, you know that?” I murmur, my hand brushing against hers.

Her breath catches, and she takes a small step back, shaking her head. “Serge, not here.”

Her protest is weak, and we both know it.

“Why not?” I ask, my voice low as I lean closer. “You’ve been avoiding me since that night. Always with the twins, always too busy.”

She doesn’t answer, her gaze darting away, but the flush creeping up her neck betrays her.

“Tell me you don’t want this,” I whisper, my lips close to her ear.

Her hands tighten around her clutch, and for a moment, I think she’s going to push me away. Then her eyes meet mine, dark and conflicted, and she doesn’t move.

I smirk, satisfaction curling through me. “That’s what I thought.”

Before she can respond, a waiter approaches with a tray of champagne, breaking the moment. I step back, adjusting my tie as if nothing happened, but the tension between us lingers, thick and unrelenting.

The waiter disappears, but the charged moment between us lingers. Chiara’s gaze flicks to me, her eyes dark with something I can’t quite place. She doesn’t say anything, just tilts her head slightly, as if daring me to make the next move.

I adjust my cuff links, forcing myself to focus on the sea of people around us. “You’re quiet again,” I say, keeping my tone light. “Nervous about being seen with me?”

She snorts softly, a sound that shouldn’t be as endearing as it is. “Hardly. If anything, I’m surprised you haven’t been stealing all the attention tonight.”

“Oh?” I smirk, leaning closer so my words are just for her. “You think they’re looking at me when you’re in the room, dressed like that?”

Her lips curve into a faint smile, but she quickly suppresses it, her voice calm. “Flattery won’t get you anywhere, Serge.”

“It’s not flattery,” I reply, my eyes scanning her face. “It’s the truth.”

She shakes her head, but her cheeks flush slightly, betraying her. “You’re insufferable, you know that?”

“You’re teasing me,” I counter, my voice dropping just enough to make her pause.

Her gaze flicks to mine, a flicker of mischief crossing her face. “Maybe I am,” she says, her tone lilting, playful in a way that sets my blood on fire.

The rest of the evening passes in a blur, the tension between us simmering just below the surface. She stays close to me, her presence a constant distraction as we navigate the crowd. By the time we leave, my patience is wearing thin.

The car ride home starts quietly, the hum of the engine filling the space as the driver navigates the city streets. Chiara sits beside me, her posture relaxed, her fingers tracing idle patterns on the leather armrest.

“Tonight went well,” she says finally, breaking the silence.

“It did,” I reply, watching her out of the corner of my eye.

She glances at me, her lips quirking into a faint smirk. “You didn’t have to defend me back there, you know. I can handle a few snide comments.”

“Maybe,” I say, turning to face her fully. “You’re still my wife. No one disrespects my wife.”

Her eyes narrow slightly, though there’s no real anger there. “Your wife,” she repeats, her tone teasing. “You do love reminding me of that, don’t you?”

I smirk, leaning closer. “It’s a title I take seriously.”

Her laughter is soft, almost melodic, and it sends a rush of heat through me. “You’re impossible,” she says, shaking her head.

“You’re testing me,” I reply, my voice low.

Her gaze meets mine, a flicker of challenge in her eyes. “Am I?”

The playful tone in her voice pushes me over the edge. I lean forward, pressing the intercom button. “Stop the car.”

The driver glances at me through the rearview mirror, hesitating. “Here, sir?”

“Yes,” I snap. “You can leave early tonight.”

“Sir?”

“I’ll drive us home when we’re done.”

The car slows to a halt at the edge of a quiet street, the glow of the city lights casting long shadows across the interior. I turn to Chiara, my voice firm. “I don’t want to wait until we’re home.”

Her brows lift in surprise, but there’s no hesitation in her movements. She slides a leg over me, her dress brushing against the leather seats as she settles.

The air in the confined space is thick with tension, her perfume wrapping around me like a challenge.

“You’re full of surprises tonight,” she murmurs, her voice soft but teasing.

I lean closer, my hands bracing on either side of her as I cage her in. “And you’re driving me insane,” I reply, my voice rough with the heat I’ve been holding back all night.

Her lips part, but whatever she was about to say is lost as I claim her mouth with mine. The kiss is rough, demanding, my hands sliding to her waist and pulling her closer.

She gasps against my lips, her hands coming up to press against my chest, though whether it’s to push me away or pull me closer, I can’t tell. Her resistance is fleeting, her body melting into mine as the kiss deepens.

“You’ve been teasing me all night,” I growl against her lips, my fingers tangling in her hair. “Do you know what you’re doing to me?”

Her breath hitches, her voice trembling as she replies, “Maybe.”

The single word is enough to snap the last thread of my restraint. I trail my lips down her neck, nipping at the sensitive skin there as my hands slide over the curve of her hips. She arches against me, her soft gasps filling the space between us.

The scent of her perfume is intoxicating, a mix of vanilla and jasmine that clings to her skin, mingling with the faint leather and spice of the car's interior. It's a heady combination, fueling the fire burning through me.

Her hands grip my shoulders, her nails digging into the fabric of my shirt as she tilts her head back, giving me more access. "Serge," she whispers, her voice shaky but laced with something darker, something needful.

I pull back just enough to meet her gaze, my hand cupping her cheek as I run my thumb over her flushed skin. "You're mine, Chiara," I say, my voice low but unyielding. "Every part of you."

She doesn't reply, but the look in her eyes tells me everything I need to know.

The look in her eyes is enough to undo me. There's defiance there, as always, but it's softer now, tempered by something she can't hide. Something that matches the fire burning in my chest. Her lips part, as though she might argue, but the words never come. Instead, she leans into my touch, her breath hitching softly as my thumb grazes her cheek again.

This kiss is different—deeper, hungrier. It's not just about claiming her; it's about something darker, something primal that I can't fully control. My hands slide down to her waist, pulling her closer until there's no space left between us. The silk of her dress is cool under my fingers, but the heat radiating from her body more than makes up for it.

She gasps against my lips, her hands gripping the front of my shirt as though trying to

steady herself. “Serge...,” she whispers again, and this time, it’s not a protest.

I trail my lips down her jaw, to the soft curve of her neck, inhaling the intoxicating mix of her perfume and the faint saltiness of her skin. “You drive me insane,” I growl against her throat, my teeth grazing the delicate flesh there. “Do you have any idea what you’ve been doing to me?”

Her breath catches, her nails digging into my shoulders. “Then hurry up and—”

“Let me take my time,” I interrupt, biting down gently on the spot where her neck meets her shoulder. She arches against me, a soft moan escaping her lips that goes straight to my core.

My cock is straining, desperate to plunge deep inside Chiara. I tug it free, allowing Chiara a moment of suspense before hiking up her dress. She gasps and moans my name, lighting a fire in my stomach.

She’s so tight when I enter her, pussy clenching, and it’s divine.

The silk of her dress glides over her skin as I push the fabric higher, revealing more of her to my touch. I set an agonizing pace, pounding into her as she clings to me, my mind heady with arousal.

“Say it, Chiara,” I demand, my voice rough as my hand grips her thigh. “Say you’re mine.”

She hesitates, her breaths coming fast and shallow, but when I meet her gaze again, her resolve crumbles. “You know ’m yours,” she whispers, the words barely audible but carrying all the weight I need.

I growl low in my throat, capturing her lips in a bruising kiss as I lift her onto my lap.

She straddles me now, her dress bunched around her hips, and I revel in the feeling of her pressed against me, my cock nestled deep, her warmth seeping through every layer of clothing still between us.

Her fingers tangle in my hair, pulling slightly, and I groan against her mouth. My hands move over her thighs, her back, memorizing every curve, every shiver she gives me. She tilts her head back, exposing her neck, and I take full advantage, trailing hot kisses down to her collarbone.

“We belong to each other,” I say again, my voice rough and filled with promise. “I’m not letting you forget it.”

She doesn’t argue this time. Instead, she clings to me, her body pliant and willing beneath my touch. Her breaths are ragged, her skin flushed, and the way she tightens is enough to drive me over the edge.

“Serge,” she murmurs, her voice barely a whisper, but the way she says my name sends a shiver down my spine.

“Yes, dusha moya ?” I reply, my hands tightening on her hips.

Her eyes meet mine, and there’s something raw and unguarded in her expression. “You’ve ruined me for anyone else.”

Her admission sparks something primal in me, and I pull her closer, my lips crashing against hers once more. This isn’t just about possession or control anymore—it’s about us, about the fire that burns too bright to ignore.

We come together right there in the back seat, my orgasm washing over me so hard, I see white. Chiara squeezes her thighs together, trapping me beneath her as she calls my name.

It takes a while to come down from the high, sweating and breathless. When I finally catch my breath, it's to say, "From now on, we do this every night."

Chapter Twenty-Two - Chiara

The conference room is stifling, not because of the temperature but because of the weight of the situation. I sit at the head of the long, polished table, the leather chair beneath me creaking slightly as I shift.

Around me are the top officials of the Vinci Group, their faces lined with stress and exhaustion. Among them is Dante, my old right-hand man, his presence both a reminder of the past and a harbinger of the grim reality I'm now facing.

We've barely spoken since I returned home with Serge. I wish we had that same light, easy banter we used to.

I lace my fingers together, my elbows resting on the table as I scan the stack of reports in front of me. The numbers blur, but the overall picture is clear: the Vinci Group is on the brink of collapse. The once-mighty empire my father built and Lorenzo inherited is teetering on the edge of ruin.

"How bad is it?" I ask, my voice steady despite the unease roiling in my stomach.

Dante clears his throat, his expression grave. "Bad, signora . The debt has been mounting for years. Several of our key ventures are failing. The real estate developments in Rome and Naples are stalled indefinitely. The shipping company is hemorrhaging money due to delays and supply chain issues. And as for the pharmaceutical branch—"

"It's a mess," another executive interjects, his tone sharp with frustration. "Regulatory fines, lawsuits, bad PR... it's all coming down on us."

I close my eyes briefly, letting their words sink in. The Vinci Group isn't just struggling; it's drowning. I glance down at the report again, trying to make sense of the chaos. No wonder Lorenzo had a heart attack. The stress of keeping this ship afloat must have been unbearable.

"What's being done to address these issues?" I ask, lifting my gaze to Dante.

He shifts uncomfortably in his seat. "Lorenzo... he was looking for outside support before his death."

"Support?" I repeat, my tone hardening. "What kind of support?"

His hesitation is palpable, the tension in the room thickening as everyone exchanges nervous glances. Finally, he sighs. "He reached out to Serge Sharov."

My heart drops, though I manage to keep my expression neutral. Of course, Serge's involvement was inevitable. His name casts a long shadow, and now I understand why Lorenzo had approached him. Desperation.

"Why did Lorenzo want to be in control so badly, if this was the result?" I ask, my voice sharper than I intended.

"He always did like control," Dante says carefully, choosing his words. "Lorenzo didn't think you would have the connections or the resources to handle something of this magnitude. He believed Serge and the Bratva were the only way to salvage the situation."

I sit back, the leather cool against my skin, and let out a slow breath. The pieces are falling into place now, and none of it sits right. Lorenzo, for all his faults, had been fighting a losing battle for years, and now the weight of his failures rests squarely on my shoulders.

“What happens if we don’t act quickly?” I ask, though I already know the answer.

“Bankruptcy,” Dante says bluntly. “Within the year. Maybe sooner.”

The room falls silent, the severity of the situation hanging over us like a storm cloud. My fingers tighten on the edges of the report, and for a moment, I let the frustration bubble to the surface.

“This isn’t just poor management,” I say, my voice cold. “This is sabotage. Recklessness. How did Lorenzo let things get this bad?”

Dante’s gaze flickers with guilt, but he doesn’t argue. “He tried. His health... and his decisions weren’t always sound. He was under immense pressure.”

Pressure that killed him , I think bitterly.

I glance around the table, taking in the weary faces of the executives who once praised Lorenzo’s leadership. Now, they’re looking to me to fix the mess he left behind. It’s not just daunting—it feels impossible.

“We need a plan,” I say firmly, trying to summon a confidence I don’t entirely feel. “No more patchwork solutions. No more delays. Give me a breakdown of what’s salvageable and what we need to cut. I’ll review everything personally.”

There’s a murmur of assent, though the tension doesn’t ease. These men are looking at me like I’m their last hope, and it makes my stomach churn.

Dante speaks again, his tone cautious. “Chiara... you realize that without outside help, this might not be enough.”

I meet his gaze, my jaw tightening. “I’ll consider every option.”

Including Serge, though the thought makes my skin crawl. His world and mine have already become too intertwined, and letting him have any more influence over my life feels like a death sentence in its own way.

The meeting drags on as the executives outline the most pressing issues. By the time it ends, the stack of papers in front of me has doubled, and my head is pounding. Dante lingers as the others leave, his expression unreadable.

“You don’t have to do this alone,” he says quietly.

“Yes, I do,” I reply, my tone clipped. “It’s my responsibility now.”

He nods, though his concern is evident. “If you need anything—”

“I’ll let you know,” I say. I don’t need his pity. I need results.

As Dante leaves, I let out a long breath, my shoulders slumping. I feel like I’m standing at the edge of a cliff, the ground crumbling beneath my feet. The Vinci Group is falling apart, and now I see why Lorenzo was willing to strike a deal with Serge.

The thought makes my stomach twist. No matter how much I want to keep my distance from Serge’s world, I can’t deny that his resources, his power, could be the key to saving everything. But at what cost?

I rub my temples, trying to focus. There’s no time to dwell on what-ifs. If I’m going to save this empire, I need to act quickly.

The drive back home feels longer than usual, the city lights blurring as the car weaves

through traffic. I sit in the backseat, the reports from the meeting stacked neatly in my lap. My fingers drum against the leather armrest, the rhythm betraying the storm brewing in my mind. Everything is worse than I imagined. Every number, every failed project, and every mounting debt feels like a countdown to disaster.

By the time the car pulls into the long driveway of Serge's mansion, my temples throb with a dull ache. The house looms ahead, its lights casting a warm glow that feels at odds with the turmoil churning inside me. I step out, clutching the papers tightly as if they're the only anchor I have in this sinking ship.

Inside, the house is quiet except for the faint sound of laughter coming from the twins' playroom. I don't stop to greet them. I can't, not with my mind racing and my chest tight with worry. I head straight to the bedroom, shutting the door softly behind me. The reports land on the desk with a dull thud, and I slump into the chair, staring at them like they're a puzzle I can't solve.

It's not long before I hear the door open behind me. I don't turn around; I already know who it is.

"You've been gone longer than usual," Serge says, his voice calm but carrying the weight of his presence.

"I had a lot to handle," I reply, keeping my tone neutral. I don't want to get into this with him—not now, maybe not ever.

He doesn't take the hint. I hear the soft click of the door closing and his footsteps approaching. He stops behind me, his hands resting on the back of the chair. His warmth is close, too close, and it only heightens my unease.

"You're quiet," he observes, his tone sharper now, probing.

I exhale slowly, trying to gather my thoughts. “It’s nothing,” I say, but the lie feels thin even to me.

“Don’t insult me, Chiara,” he says, his grip on the chair tightening slightly. “What’s going on?”

I hesitate, my fingers curling into fists in my lap. He always seems to know, always seems to see through me no matter how hard I try to keep my walls up. I glance over my shoulder, meeting his piercing gaze.

“It’s the Vinci Group,” I admit reluctantly. “It’s worse than I thought. We’re... they’re on the verge of collapse.”

He doesn’t look surprised. If anything, his expression sharpens, his features hardening in a way that makes my stomach twist. “Of course, they are,” he says simply, moving to stand in front of me. “Your brother made reckless decisions. This isn’t news.”

I blink, my frustration bubbling to the surface. “You knew?”

“Of course, I knew,” he replies, his tone maddeningly calm. “Lorenzo came to me years ago, begging for help. He wanted to align himself with the Bratva, to use my resources to cover his failures.”

I rise from the chair, my hands braced on the desk. “You didn’t think to tell me?”

His eyes narrow slightly, his voice lowering. “I did tell you Lorenzo contacted me.”

I glare at him, anger and desperation warring within me. “You didn’t say it was this bad! Hundreds of people depend on that company. Families, livelihoods—”

“I’m aware,” he cuts in, his voice firm but not unkind. “Which is why I’m offering you the same deal I offered him.”

I freeze, his words hanging in the air like a challenge. “A deal,” I repeat, my tone flat.

He steps closer, his presence suffocating. “Yes. My resources, my power. I can stabilize the Vinci Group, pull it back from the brink. But you know what that means.”

I cross my arms, my heart pounding. “You want control.”

He smirks faintly, but there’s no humor in it. “Control ensures success. It ensures that your brother’s mistakes won’t be repeated.”

I shake my head, turning away from him. “This is exactly why Lorenzo didn’t want to rely on you. Because nothing with you is ever free.”

“Nothing in this world is free, Chiara,” he replies, his voice soft but edged with steel. “Think carefully. Do you want the Vinci name to be remembered as a legacy or as a failure?”

The weight of his words sinks in, heavy and unrelenting. He’s right, of course. Without his help, the Vinci Group will collapse, and everything my father built will be gone. Accepting his help means letting him into yet another part of my life, letting him tighten his grip even further.

“What’s your price?” I ask finally, my voice quiet.

“You stay in Chicago,” he says simply. “Focus on rebuilding the company under my guidance. I’ll handle the logistics, the debts, everything. You’ll report to me.”

I turn to face him, my jaw tightening. “You make it sound like I work for you.”

“You’re my wife,” he counters, stepping closer until we’re only inches apart. “I take care of what’s mine.”

The word mine sends a shiver down my spine, equal parts infuriating and undeniable. I want to fight him, to push him away, but the reality of the situation is clear. Without him, I’ll lose everything. The Vinci Group will crumble, and I’ll have nothing left but the ashes of my family’s legacy.

I exhale sharply, meeting his gaze. “Fine,” I say, the word tasting bitter on my tongue. “I won’t thank you for this.”

He smirks again, his hand brushing lightly against my arm. “I don’t need your thanks, dusha moya. Just your trust.”

I pull away from his touch, glaring at him. “Don’t push it.”

His smirk widens, but he says nothing more. He knows he’s won, and the realization burns more than I care to admit.

Serge lingers near the door, his sharp eyes fixed on me as though he’s waiting for something. I don’t know what he expects—gratitude, maybe, or some sign that I’m crumbling under the weight of Lorenzo’s mistakes. He’ll be waiting a long time.

I sigh, breaking the silence. “Lorenzo’s funeral is in two days. I’ll need to attend.”

He nods, stepping closer again, his hands slipping into his pockets. “Of course. Where is it?”

“Naples,” I reply, looking down at the reports still strewn across the desk. The

thought of returning to my family's home feels heavy, like a burden I don't want to carry. "It'll be formal, and I'll be expected to make an appearance as... well, as his only remaining family."

His gaze sharpens at my words. "How are you really coping with all of this?"

I glance up at him, surprised by the sincerity in his tone. "Coping?" I repeat, a bitter laugh escaping before I can stop it. "I'm not mourning Lorenzo, if that's what you mean. I'm more worried about the business he left behind—the disaster he created."

His expression doesn't change, but there's something softer in his eyes now, as though he sees more than I want him to.

"I can't afford to fall apart," I continue, my voice steady despite the storm in my chest. "Lorenzo and I weren't close. He didn't care about me, and I didn't care about him. The only thing I'll mourn is the mess he made and the people who'll suffer because of it."

Serge watches me for a long moment before speaking, his voice quieter. "The twins, are you taking them with you?"

I shake my head firmly. "No. They never met him. He wasn't their family, not in any way that matters. They don't need to be dragged into this."

His lips curve into a faint smirk, though there's no humor in it. "Practical, as always."

"I don't have the luxury of sentimentality," I reply, straightening in my seat. "Not anymore."

He moves closer, his hand resting lightly on the back of the chair. "You're stronger than you think, Chiara," he says, his tone low but deliberate. "You don't have to do

this alone.”

I glance up at him, my brows furrowing. “I’m not alone?” I scoff. “Because you’re here, right, offering help?”

His smirk deepens, though his eyes remain serious. “Exactly. You accepted it, didn’t you?”

I bite back a retort, turning away from him and focusing on the reports again. “I’ll handle Lorenzo’s funeral and deal with his legacy. Just make sure your part of the deal holds up.”

“It will,” he says, his voice firm. “You can count on that.”

His words linger in the air as he turns and leaves the room, the weight of his presence replaced by the silence that follows. I exhale slowly, knowing that the hardest part is yet to come.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:10 pm

The conference room is stifling, not because of the temperature but because of the weight of the situation. I sit at the head of the long, polished table, the leather chair beneath me creaking slightly as I shift.

Around me are the top officials of the Vinci Group, their faces lined with stress and exhaustion. Among them is Dante, my old right-hand man, his presence both a reminder of the past and a harbinger of the grim reality I'm now facing.

We've barely spoken since I returned home with Serge. I wish we had that same light, easy banter we used to.

I lace my fingers together, my elbows resting on the table as I scan the stack of reports in front of me. The numbers blur, but the overall picture is clear: the Vinci Group is on the brink of collapse. The once-mighty empire my father built and Lorenzo inherited is teetering on the edge of ruin.

"How bad is it?" I ask, my voice steady despite the unease roiling in my stomach.

Dante clears his throat, his expression grave. "Bad, signora . The debt has been mounting for years. Several of our key ventures are failing. The real estate developments in Rome and Naples are stalled indefinitely. The shipping company is hemorrhaging money due to delays and supply chain issues. And as for the pharmaceutical branch—"

"It's a mess," another executive interjects, his tone sharp with frustration. "Regulatory fines, lawsuits, bad PR... it's all coming down on us."

I close my eyes briefly, letting their words sink in. The Vinci Group isn't just struggling; it's drowning. I glance down at the report again, trying to make sense of the chaos. No wonder Lorenzo had a heart attack. The stress of keeping this ship afloat must have been unbearable.

"What's being done to address these issues?" I ask, lifting my gaze to Dante.

He shifts uncomfortably in his seat. "Lorenzo... he was looking for outside support before his death."

"Support?" I repeat, my tone hardening. "What kind of support?"

His hesitation is palpable, the tension in the room thickening as everyone exchanges nervous glances. Finally, he sighs. "He reached out to Serge Sharov."

My heart drops, though I manage to keep my expression neutral. Of course, Serge's involvement was inevitable. His name casts a long shadow, and now I understand why Lorenzo had approached him. Desperation.

"Why did Lorenzo want to be in control so badly, if this was the result?" I ask, my voice sharper than I intended.

"He always did like control," Dante says carefully, choosing his words. "Lorenzo didn't think you would have the connections or the resources to handle something of this magnitude. He believed Serge and the Bratva were the only way to salvage the situation."

I sit back, the leather cool against my skin, and let out a slow breath. The pieces are falling into place now, and none of it sits right. Lorenzo, for all his faults, had been fighting a losing battle for years, and now the weight of his failures rests squarely on my shoulders.

“What happens if we don’t act quickly?” I ask, though I already know the answer.

“Bankruptcy,” Dante says bluntly. “Within the year. Maybe sooner.”

The room falls silent, the severity of the situation hanging over us like a storm cloud. My fingers tighten on the edges of the report, and for a moment, I let the frustration bubble to the surface.

“This isn’t just poor management,” I say, my voice cold. “This is sabotage. Recklessness. How did Lorenzo let things get this bad?”

Dante’s gaze flickers with guilt, but he doesn’t argue. “He tried. His health... and his decisions weren’t always sound. He was under immense pressure.”

Pressure that killed him , I think bitterly.

I glance around the table, taking in the weary faces of the executives who once praised Lorenzo’s leadership. Now, they’re looking to me to fix the mess he left behind. It’s not just daunting—it feels impossible.

“We need a plan,” I say firmly, trying to summon a confidence I don’t entirely feel. “No more patchwork solutions. No more delays. Give me a breakdown of what’s salvageable and what we need to cut. I’ll review everything personally.”

There’s a murmur of assent, though the tension doesn’t ease. These men are looking at me like I’m their last hope, and it makes my stomach churn.

Dante speaks again, his tone cautious. “Chiara... you realize that without outside help, this might not be enough.”

I meet his gaze, my jaw tightening. “I’ll consider every option.”

Including Serge, though the thought makes my skin crawl. His world and mine have already become too intertwined, and letting him have any more influence over my life feels like a death sentence in its own way.

The meeting drags on as the executives outline the most pressing issues. By the time it ends, the stack of papers in front of me has doubled, and my head is pounding. Dante lingers as the others leave, his expression unreadable.

“You don’t have to do this alone,” he says quietly.

“Yes, I do,” I reply, my tone clipped. “It’s my responsibility now.”

He nods, though his concern is evident. “If you need anything—”

“I’ll let you know,” I say. I don’t need his pity. I need results.

As Dante leaves, I let out a long breath, my shoulders slumping. I feel like I’m standing at the edge of a cliff, the ground crumbling beneath my feet. The Vinci Group is falling apart, and now I see why Lorenzo was willing to strike a deal with Serge.

The thought makes my stomach twist. No matter how much I want to keep my distance from Serge’s world, I can’t deny that his resources, his power, could be the key to saving everything. But at what cost?

I rub my temples, trying to focus. There’s no time to dwell on what-ifs. If I’m going to save this empire, I need to act quickly.

The drive back home feels longer than usual, the city lights blurring as the car weaves

through traffic. I sit in the backseat, the reports from the meeting stacked neatly in my lap. My fingers drum against the leather armrest, the rhythm betraying the storm brewing in my mind. Everything is worse than I imagined. Every number, every failed project, and every mounting debt feels like a countdown to disaster.

By the time the car pulls into the long driveway of Serge's mansion, my temples throb with a dull ache. The house looms ahead, its lights casting a warm glow that feels at odds with the turmoil churning inside me. I step out, clutching the papers tightly as if they're the only anchor I have in this sinking ship.

Inside, the house is quiet except for the faint sound of laughter coming from the twins' playroom. I don't stop to greet them. I can't, not with my mind racing and my chest tight with worry. I head straight to the bedroom, shutting the door softly behind me. The reports land on the desk with a dull thud, and I slump into the chair, staring at them like they're a puzzle I can't solve.

It's not long before I hear the door open behind me. I don't turn around; I already know who it is.

"You've been gone longer than usual," Serge says, his voice calm but carrying the weight of his presence.

"I had a lot to handle," I reply, keeping my tone neutral. I don't want to get into this with him—not now, maybe not ever.

He doesn't take the hint. I hear the soft click of the door closing and his footsteps approaching. He stops behind me, his hands resting on the back of the chair. His warmth is close, too close, and it only heightens my unease.

"You're quiet," he observes, his tone sharper now, probing.

I exhale slowly, trying to gather my thoughts. “It’s nothing,” I say, but the lie feels thin even to me.

“Don’t insult me, Chiara,” he says, his grip on the chair tightening slightly. “What’s going on?”

I hesitate, my fingers curling into fists in my lap. He always seems to know, always seems to see through me no matter how hard I try to keep my walls up. I glance over my shoulder, meeting his piercing gaze.

“It’s the Vinci Group,” I admit reluctantly. “It’s worse than I thought. We’re... they’re on the verge of collapse.”

He doesn’t look surprised. If anything, his expression sharpens, his features hardening in a way that makes my stomach twist. “Of course, they are,” he says simply, moving to stand in front of me. “Your brother made reckless decisions. This isn’t news.”

I blink, my frustration bubbling to the surface. “You knew?”

“Of course, I knew,” he replies, his tone maddeningly calm. “Lorenzo came to me years ago, begging for help. He wanted to align himself with the Bratva, to use my resources to cover his failures.”

I rise from the chair, my hands braced on the desk. “You didn’t think to tell me?”

His eyes narrow slightly, his voice lowering. “I did tell you Lorenzo contacted me.”

I glare at him, anger and desperation warring within me. “You didn’t say it was this bad! Hundreds of people depend on that company. Families, livelihoods—”

“I’m aware,” he cuts in, his voice firm but not unkind. “Which is why I’m offering you the same deal I offered him.”

I freeze, his words hanging in the air like a challenge. “A deal,” I repeat, my tone flat.

He steps closer, his presence suffocating. “Yes. My resources, my power. I can stabilize the Vinci Group, pull it back from the brink. But you know what that means.”

I cross my arms, my heart pounding. “You want control.”

He smirks faintly, but there’s no humor in it. “Control ensures success. It ensures that your brother’s mistakes won’t be repeated.”

I shake my head, turning away from him. “This is exactly why Lorenzo didn’t want to rely on you. Because nothing with you is ever free.”

“Nothing in this world is free, Chiara,” he replies, his voice soft but edged with steel. “Think carefully. Do you want the Vinci name to be remembered as a legacy or as a failure?”

The weight of his words sinks in, heavy and unrelenting. He’s right, of course. Without his help, the Vinci Group will collapse, and everything my father built will be gone. Accepting his help means letting him into yet another part of my life, letting him tighten his grip even further.

“What’s your price?” I ask finally, my voice quiet.

“You stay in Chicago,” he says simply. “Focus on rebuilding the company under my guidance. I’ll handle the logistics, the debts, everything. You’ll report to me.”

I turn to face him, my jaw tightening. “You make it sound like I work for you.”

“You’re my wife,” he counters, stepping closer until we’re only inches apart. “I take care of what’s mine.”

The word mine sends a shiver down my spine, equal parts infuriating and undeniable. I want to fight him, to push him away, but the reality of the situation is clear. Without him, I’ll lose everything. The Vinci Group will crumble, and I’ll have nothing left but the ashes of my family’s legacy.

I exhale sharply, meeting his gaze. “Fine,” I say, the word tasting bitter on my tongue. “I won’t thank you for this.”

He smirks again, his hand brushing lightly against my arm. “I don’t need your thanks, dusha moya. Just your trust.”

I pull away from his touch, glaring at him. “Don’t push it.”

His smirk widens, but he says nothing more. He knows he’s won, and the realization burns more than I care to admit.

Serge lingers near the door, his sharp eyes fixed on me as though he’s waiting for something. I don’t know what he expects—gratitude, maybe, or some sign that I’m crumbling under the weight of Lorenzo’s mistakes. He’ll be waiting a long time.

I sigh, breaking the silence. “Lorenzo’s funeral is in two days. I’ll need to attend.”

He nods, stepping closer again, his hands slipping into his pockets. “Of course. Where is it?”

“Naples,” I reply, looking down at the reports still strewn across the desk. The

thought of returning to my family's home feels heavy, like a burden I don't want to carry. "It'll be formal, and I'll be expected to make an appearance as... well, as his only remaining family."

His gaze sharpens at my words. "How are you really coping with all of this?"

I glance up at him, surprised by the sincerity in his tone. "Coping?" I repeat, a bitter laugh escaping before I can stop it. "I'm not mourning Lorenzo, if that's what you mean. I'm more worried about the business he left behind—the disaster he created."

His expression doesn't change, but there's something softer in his eyes now, as though he sees more than I want him to.

"I can't afford to fall apart," I continue, my voice steady despite the storm in my chest. "Lorenzo and I weren't close. He didn't care about me, and I didn't care about him. The only thing I'll mourn is the mess he made and the people who'll suffer because of it."

Serge watches me for a long moment before speaking, his voice quieter. "The twins, are you taking them with you?"

I shake my head firmly. "No. They never met him. He wasn't their family, not in any way that matters. They don't need to be dragged into this."

His lips curve into a faint smirk, though there's no humor in it. "Practical, as always."

"I don't have the luxury of sentimentality," I reply, straightening in my seat. "Not anymore."

He moves closer, his hand resting lightly on the back of the chair. "You're stronger than you think, Chiara," he says, his tone low but deliberate. "You don't have to do

this alone.”

I glance up at him, my brows furrowing. “I’m not alone?” I scoff. “Because you’re here, right, offering help?”

His smirk deepens, though his eyes remain serious. “Exactly. You accepted it, didn’t you?”

I bite back a retort, turning away from him and focusing on the reports again. “I’ll handle Lorenzo’s funeral and deal with his legacy. Just make sure your part of the deal holds up.”

“It will,” he says, his voice firm. “You can count on that.”

His words linger in the air as he turns and leaves the room, the weight of his presence replaced by the silence that follows. I exhale slowly, knowing that the hardest part is yet to come.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:10 pm

The house is quiet when I finally head upstairs. It's late, the kind of late where the world feels still, as if everyone but me has already surrendered to sleep. I push the door to my room open, expecting darkness and solitude, but I'm greeted by a warm, unexpected sight.

Chiara is sitting on the bed, her back against the headboard, with Leo curled up in her lap and Alyssa snuggled beside her. A book is open in her hands, her soft voice filling the room as she reads aloud. She's so absorbed in the story that she doesn't notice me at first. The children hang on her every word, their small faces glowing in the soft light of the bedside lamp.

It's a domestic scene that feels completely out of place in my world of sharp edges and constant battles. Yet, for reasons I can't explain, it stops me in my tracks.

Alyssa notices me first. Her face lights up, and she bounces slightly in her spot. "Papa!" she exclaims, her voice a hushed but excited whisper.

Chiara's gaze flicks up to meet mine, startled at first, but her expression softens. "You're back," she says, her voice quiet but steady.

"Yes," I reply, stepping further into the room. "I didn't realize I'd find company here."

"The twins couldn't sleep," she explains, running her fingers through Leo's soft hair. "Alyssa insisted they stay here, and, well...."

"She said the bed is bigger," Alyssa pipes up, grinning at me. "And you wouldn't

mind.”

I smirk faintly, moving to the edge of the bed. “Oh, she did, did she?”

“Uh-huh,” Alyssa says, nodding vigorously. Then, with all the innocence only a child can muster, she pats the empty spot beside her. “Come sit, Papa. Mama’s reading a story.”

I glance at Chiara, half expecting her to protest, but she doesn’t. Instead, she shifts slightly to make room.

I sigh softly, more out of habit than resistance, and lower myself onto the bed. Alyssa immediately scoots closer, leaning against my side as if it’s the most natural thing in the world.

“What’s the story?” I ask, my voice quieter now.

“It’s about a family of bears,” Chiara replies, holding up the book briefly before continuing. Her voice softens as she picks up where she left off, her tone lilting and soothing.

I don’t pay much attention to the story itself. Instead, I watch her. The way her lips move as she speaks. The way her hands gesture subtly with the rhythm of the words. The way she glances down at Leo every so often, her expression tender as he blinks sleepily up at her.

She’s beautiful like this, at ease in a way I rarely see.

Alyssa nestles closer into my side, her small hand resting on my arm. The weight of her trust, her warmth, settles over me like a blanket I didn’t know I needed. Leo shifts in Chiara’s lap, his eyelids drooping as he fights the pull of sleep.

By the time Chiara finishes the story, Leo has succumbed, his small body curled tightly against her. Alyssa, too, is beginning to fade, her head lolling onto my shoulder. Chiara closes the book gently, setting it on the nightstand, and leans back against the pillows, her arms still wrapped protectively around Leo.

“You’re good with them,” I say quietly, the words slipping out before I can think better of them.

Her eyes flick to mine, a flicker of surprise crossing her face before she gives a small smile. “They’re my world,” she replies softly.

I don’t respond immediately. Instead, I glance down at Alyssa, who’s now completely asleep against me, her soft breaths steady and peaceful. For a moment, the weight of the day, the meetings, and even the looming tension of Chiara’s family legacy fade into the background.

“You bring them peace,” I say after a moment, my voice low.

Chiara’s eyes soften, but she doesn’t reply. Instead, she leans her head back against the headboard, her gaze fixed on Leo’s sleeping face. Her own exhaustion begins to show, her eyelids fluttering as sleep pulls at her.

I watch as she finally gives in, her head tilting slightly to the side, her arms still cradling Leo protectively. She looks vulnerable like this, her features unguarded and serene. It stirs something deep inside me, something I can’t quite name.

I shift slightly, adjusting Alyssa in my arms so she’s more comfortable. Her small frame feels so fragile, yet she clings to me with the kind of trust I’ve never known. I glance back at Chiara, at the way her body curls instinctively around Leo even in sleep, and a strange sense of fulfillment washes over me.

I've built my life on power, control, and dominance. Yet, here, in this quiet moment, surrounded by my family— my family —I feel something I haven't felt in years. Peace.

It's unsettling in its simplicity. I'm not used to feeling this way, to letting my guard down even for a second. As Alyssa snuggles closer and Chiara breathes softly beside me, I find myself leaning back, allowing the warmth of the moment to seep in.

Chiara stirs beside me, her lashes fluttering briefly before her eyes open, hazy and half lidded with sleep. She looks at me, her gaze soft and unguarded in the dim light. For a moment, neither of us says anything, the quiet in the room broken only by the steady breathing of the children.

"You're still awake," she whispers, her voice low and thick with exhaustion.

I nod, my gaze flicking to Alyssa nestled against my side before returning to her. "So are you."

Her lips curve into a faint smile, though it doesn't quite reach her eyes. "I'm trying not to wake them."

"They're out," I reply softly, shifting just enough to adjust Alyssa's weight without disturbing her. "You could probably shout, and they wouldn't budge."

Chiara lets out a quiet laugh, the sound warm and soft, curling around me like the scent of her perfume lingering in the air. It's intoxicating, the way she seems so at ease, so different from the sharp edges she wears during the day.

"I didn't expect you to stay," she murmurs after a moment, her gaze flicking down to Leo as her fingers gently brush his hair.

“I didn’t plan to,” I admit, my voice equally quiet. “You... and them... it’s hard to leave.”

She looks up at me again, something unreadable in her expression. There’s a flicker of vulnerability there, and it stirs something deep within me, something I’ve spent years burying.

“Serge...,” she starts, her voice hesitant.

I lean in slightly, closing the space between us. “Yes?”

Her breath catches, her lips parting as if she’s about to speak, but instead, she tilts her head just enough to meet my gaze fully. In the dim light, her eyes are dark, reflecting something raw and unspoken.

“I...,” she begins, but the words seem to fail her. Instead, her hand shifts slightly, brushing against my arm as if testing the waters.

The warmth of her touch ignites something I can’t ignore. Slowly, deliberately, I reach out, my fingers brushing against her cheek. Her skin is soft, warm, and she leans into the touch almost instinctively.

“Chiara,” I murmur, her name a whisper on my lips.

She doesn’t move away. Instead, her gaze drops to my mouth, her breath coming faster now. I lean in, unable to stop myself, until our lips meet in a kiss that’s soft at first, hesitant, but quickly deepens.

Her mouth is warm, sweet, and she tastes like everything I didn’t realize I was craving. My hand slides to the back of her neck, pulling her closer as her fingers curl into my shirt.

It's only when Leo shifts in her arms, murmuring softly in his sleep, that we both freeze.

She pulls back first, her breathing uneven, her lips slightly swollen from the kiss. "The kids....," she whispers, her voice shaky but firm.

I nod, forcing myself to take a step back, though every part of me screams to stay close. "We'll wake them," I agree, my voice huskier than I intended.

Her cheeks flush, but she doesn't argue. Instead, she adjusts Leo in her arms, cradling him closer as she leans back against the pillows. Alyssa murmurs something incoherent, her small hand curling against my chest as I settle beside her again.

The silence stretches between us, charged and heavy, but neither of us speaks. Chiara's eyes drift shut eventually, her breathing evening out as she succumbs to sleep.

I stare at her for a moment longer, my thoughts tangled in ways I don't want to unravel. Finally, I let my head rest back against the headboard, Alyssa's warmth a comforting weight against me.

The moment lingers, soft and unexpected, as sleep pulls me under too.

The soft glow of early morning filters through the curtains, casting a warm light across the room. I stir, blinking against the brightness as I adjust to wakefulness. The weight against my chest is unfamiliar, yet somehow comforting. It takes me a moment to realize what's different.

Chiara.

Her body is tucked against mine, her head resting just below my chin, her arm draped lightly across my side. Her warmth seeps through the thin material of my shirt, her scent—a delicate blend of jasmine and something uniquely hers—lingering in the air between us.

I freeze, my muscles going rigid as the realization hits. At some point during the night, Alyssa must have left my side, and Chiara has taken her place. My arm, draped lazily around her waist, tightens reflexively before I catch myself.

This is not how I planned to wake up.

Chiara stirs slightly, her breath warm against my collarbone. Her lashes flutter, and she blinks up at me, her eyes hazy with sleep. For a moment, there's no recognition, only the soft vulnerability of someone just waking up. Then her gaze sharpens, and she stiffens against me.

Her eyes widen, and her cheeks flush a deep red as she pulls back abruptly, her hand pressing against my chest as if to put more distance between us. "What... what are you doing?" she stammers, her voice still husky with sleep.

"What am I doing?" I echo, smirking slightly despite the situation. "You're the one cuddling me."

Her blush deepens, and she sits up quickly, smoothing her disheveled hair. "I—I wasn't! I mean, I didn't mean to!"

"Sure," I drawl, unable to resist teasing her.

She glares at me, though the effect is diminished by the way she ducks her head, clearly flustered. Before she can fire back, the sound of giggles cuts through the room.

I turn my head to see Alyssa and Leo standing near the door, their little faces alight with mischief. Alyssa clutches her stuffed rabbit tightly, bouncing on her toes as Leo stifles another laugh behind his hand.

“Good morning, Mama and Papa ,” Alyssa sings, her grin widening.

Chiara straightens, narrowing her eyes at them. “What are you two up to?”

Alyssa’s giggles grow louder, and she points at us, her expression completely unrepentant. “We switched places! Me and Leo! So you could snuggle.”

Chiara gasps, her jaw dropping slightly as her blush spreads down her neck. “You... you did what?”

Leo peeks out from behind Alyssa, his shy grin matching hers. “Alyssa said it was a good idea,” he says softly, his voice barely above a whisper.

“It was!” Alyssa declares proudly. “You two need more hugs. Grandma Kat says hugs make people happy!”

Chiara groans softly, burying her face in her hands. “Unbelievable,” she mutters.

I chuckle, sitting up and resting my arms on my knees as I glance between them. “Well, they’re not wrong,” I say, enjoying the way Chiara’s head snaps up, her glare fixed on me now.

“You’re not helping,” she hisses, though the corner of her mouth twitches as if she’s fighting a smile.

Alyssa takes a step closer, her hands on her hips in a comically serious pose. “Did it work? Are you happy now?”

Chiara presses her lips together, clearly torn between scolding them and laughing. “You two are impossible,” she says finally, shaking her head.

Leo tugs on Alyssa’s sleeve, whispering something I can’t hear. She nods enthusiastically before darting forward, climbing onto the bed with Leo following close behind.

“Breakfast now!” Alyssa announces, plopping herself between Chiara and me.

Leo crawls up onto Chiara’s lap, snuggling into her as she automatically wraps an arm around him. “Breakfast!” he echoes softly, his eyes still half lidded with sleep.

Chiara looks down at him, her expression softening. Whatever embarrassment she felt moments ago seems to melt away as she presses a kiss to the top of his head.

“Alright,” she says, her voice gentle. “Let’s get breakfast.”

Alyssa tugs on my sleeve. “Come on, Papa! You have to come too.”

I let out a mock sigh, ruffling her hair. “As if I have a choice,” I tease, earning a delighted giggle from her.

Chiara glances at me over Leo’s head, her gaze unreadable for a moment before she speaks. “You’re good with them,” she says quietly, almost to herself.

“Of course I am,” I reply, meeting her gaze steadily. “They’re my children too.”

Her eyes flicker with something—surprise, maybe, or something softer—and she nods, though she doesn’t say anything more.

The four of us make our way downstairs, the twins chattering about what they want

for breakfast. Alyssa insists on pancakes, while Leo quietly requests fruit. Chiara, still flustered from earlier, moves through the motions with ease, her focus entirely on the children.

Soon, the kitchen is alive with the warm scent of coffee brewing and the soft hum of morning activity. Chiara moves with practiced grace, pulling out ingredients as Alyssa tugs at her arm, insisting she help with the pancakes. Leo hovers near the counter, his small fingers gripping the edge as he watches quietly.

“I can mix it!” Alyssa announces, holding up a wooden spoon like a badge of honor.

Chiara smiles, her earlier flustered demeanor replaced by the calm patience she reserves for the twins. “Alright, but only if you promise to be careful.”

“I promise,” Alyssa chirps, already climbing onto the stool Chiara sets up for her.

I lean against the doorframe, watching the scene unfold. There’s something grounding about the way Chiara moves, her attention split between managing Alyssa’s overzealous stirring and slicing fruit for Leo. She glances back at me once, her brow arching slightly as if to say, Are you just going to stand there?

I step into the room, rolling up my sleeves. “Let me help.”

“You?” she asks, her tone teasing. “I didn’t think Serge Sharov knew his way around a kitchen.”

I smirk, grabbing the bowl of pancake batter from Alyssa before she tips it over. “I know more than you think.”

Alyssa giggles as I guide her tiny hands to hold the spoon properly, steadying the bowl as she mixes. Leo watches intently, a small smile creeping onto his face.

Chiara places a plate of sliced fruit in front of Leo and then leans against the counter, arms crossed as she watches us. Her eyes soften, and for a moment, the tension from the morning fades.

“Maybe you’re not so hopeless after all,” she murmurs, a playful glint in her eyes.

Her words, light and teasing, leave a warmth in the air that feels oddly like home.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:10 pm

The house is eerily quiet at night, the kind of silence that makes every creak of the floorboards and rustle of the curtains feel louder than it should. I lie awake in bed, staring at the ceiling as the minutes tick by, but sleep won't come.

Serge hasn't come home yet.

It's not unusual for him to work late—his world doesn't abide by standard hours—but tonight, the emptiness of the house feels heavier. My mind drifts to places I wish it wouldn't. I wonder where he is. Who he's with.

Is he with someone else?

The thought hits like a sharp knife, quick and cutting. I shake my head, trying to dismiss it. Why does it matter? He's Serge Sharov—powerful, controlling, dangerous. The kind of man who doesn't owe anyone an explanation, least of all me.

And yet, the idea that he could be with someone else—a stranger, a woman whose name I'll never know—makes my chest ache in a way I don't understand.

I sit up, pressing the heels of my hands to my eyes, trying to force the feeling away. This is ridiculous. I shouldn't care. Serge and I are bound by circumstance, by the children, by this fragile illusion of a marriage. That's all.

It's not all, is it? Somewhere along the line, I've grown... attached. Fond of him, even. It's infuriating and confusing, and yet, the way he makes Alyssa laugh, the way he steadies Leo's quiet nature with his presence, even the way he looks at me when he thinks I don't notice—all of it chips away at the walls I've built around my heart.

Frustrated, I throw the blankets off and head downstairs, my bare feet padding softly against the wooden floors. If I can't sleep, I might as well do something productive—or at least eat something.

The kitchen feels cavernous at night, the dim glow of the overhead light casting long shadows. I rummage through the fridge, pulling out some bread, butter, and a block of cheese. A grilled cheese sandwich seems simple enough, something to occupy my hands and distract my mind.

I butter the bread, heat the skillet, and let the quiet hiss of melting butter fill the space. It's calming, the small, mundane task of cooking. As the cheese begins to melt and the bread turns golden, I let out a soft sigh, feeling the tension in my shoulders ease slightly.

Then I turn around, and I nearly drop the spatula in my hand.

Serge is standing there, leaning casually against the doorway, his eyes glinting with amusement.

"You scared me," I gasp, clutching a hand to my chest.

His lips curl into a smirk, and the low rumble of his chuckle fills the room. "I can see that."

"Do you always sneak around like this?" I snap, more out of embarrassment than anger.

"I wasn't sneaking," he says smoothly, stepping further into the room. "You were too distracted to notice me."

I narrow my eyes at him, though my heart is still pounding from the shock. "It's late.

Where have you been?"

He raises a brow, clearly catching the edge in my tone. "Working," he replies, his voice calm but measured. "Why... did you miss me?"

The question catches me off guard, and I feel a flush creep up my neck. I turn back to the stove, flipping the sandwich in the pan. "Don't flatter yourself."

His chuckle comes again, deeper this time, and I feel him move closer. "Making a midnight snack?"

"Yes," I say shortly, refusing to look at him. "I couldn't sleep."

"You're not the only one," he murmurs, his voice lower now.

I glance over my shoulder and find him watching me, his gaze intense in a way that makes my breath hitch. He's still in his suit, though the tie is gone, and the top buttons of his shirt are undone, revealing a glimpse of his collarbone. There's a faint shadow of stubble on his jaw, and his blond hair is slightly mussed, as though he's run his hands through it a few times.

"You should eat something," I say, turning back to the pan to avoid his eyes. "You're always skipping meals."

"I didn't know you were so concerned about my health," he teases, stepping closer until he's right behind me.

I freeze, the heat of his body so close to mine sending a rush of awareness through me. "I'm not," I reply quickly, though my voice lacks conviction.

"Liar," he murmurs, his tone light but edged with something deeper.

I turn off the burner, sliding the grilled cheese onto a plate and stepping away from him. “Are you going to stand there all night, or are you going to eat?” I ask, shoving the plate toward him.

He takes it, his fingers brushing mine for the briefest moment, and the contact sends a jolt up my arm.

For a moment, he doesn’t move. He just watches me, the smirk fading into something softer. “You’re not like anyone else, Chiara,” he says suddenly, his voice low.

The words catch me off guard, and I look up at him, my heart pounding for an entirely different reason now. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means,” he says, stepping closer, “that you make this house feel alive. You make it feel like more than just a place to sleep.”

I open my mouth to respond, but the words don’t come. Instead, I find myself staring at him, the weight of his words settling heavily between us.

Just then, he leans down, his lips brushing against my cheek, then lower, grazing the corner of my mouth. My breath catches, my body frozen as the warmth of him surrounds me.

Before I can stop myself, my head tilts slightly, drawn toward him as though pulled by an invisible thread. His lips, warm and deliberate, brush against mine—not demanding, but coaxing, testing. My breath hitches, the spatula slipping from my hand and clattering softly against the counter.

“Serge...,” I murmur, but his name comes out more as an exhale than a protest.

He pulls back just enough to look at me, his blue eyes searching mine, unreadable

and yet heavy with intent. “Tell me to stop,” he whispers, his voice low and rough, though there’s no sign he actually wants to hear me say it.

I can’t.

Instead of pushing him away, my fingers curl into his shirt, holding him there, anchoring myself in the storm of emotions swirling around me. His eyes flash with something primal, and before I can second-guess myself, he closes the distance again, this time with certainty.

The kiss deepens, his mouth claiming mine as his hand slides to the back of my neck, his fingers tangling in my hair. There’s nothing gentle about it now—it’s all heat and hunger, his control barely restrained. I meet his fervor with my own, surprised by the way I lean into him, craving the intensity of his touch.

He presses me back slightly, pinning me gently but firmly against the counter. The edge digs into my hip, but I barely notice, too consumed by the way his lips move against mine, the way his hands explore my waist, holding me close as though I might disappear if he lets go.

I gasp softly when his teeth graze my bottom lip, a spark shooting through me that makes my knees feel weak. His other hand slides to my lower back, pulling me flush against him. It’s dizzying, intoxicating, and for a moment, I forget everything else—where we are, who we are, all of it lost in the heat of the moment.

Then the faint scent of melted butter and burning bread drifts through the air, grounding me.

“Wait,” I breathe against his lips, my fingers pressing against his chest to create some space.

His forehead rests against mine, his breath ragged as he struggles to calm himself. “What is it?” he asks, his voice hoarse.

I glance at the counter, at the abandoned plate of grilled cheese. “We’re going to burn it if we don’t move soon,” I say, a shaky laugh escaping me.

He follows my gaze, a low chuckle rumbling in his chest. “I suppose that would be a shame,” he says, though his tone suggests the food is the last thing on his mind.

Still, he steps back reluctantly, reaching for the plate and holding it up. “If we’re taking this, we’re doing it right,” he says, his smirk returning as he nods toward the stairs.

I raise an eyebrow, but I follow him, my heart still racing as we ascend together.

In the bedroom, he sets the plate down on the nightstand before pulling back the covers. “Come on,” he says, gesturing for me to sit.

I settle into the bed, suddenly aware of how intimate this feels, but the tension softens as he hands me half of the sandwich and joins me.

For the first time in what feels like forever, I laugh—softly, genuinely—as we sit there, sharing a midnight snack in bed. It’s strange and surreal, yet somehow, it feels perfectly right.

Serge leans back against the headboard, the warm light from the bedside lamp casting a soft glow across his face. He’s already halfway through his half of the sandwich, his sharp, calculating eyes darting between me and the remaining piece sitting on the plate in my lap.

I pick up the sandwich, holding it out to him with a raised eyebrow. “Here,” I say, my

tone light but teasing. “You’re a big guy; you could use more food.”

He narrows his eyes at me, suspicion flashing across his face. “You’re being awfully generous all of a sudden,” he says, his tone dry.

I groan, rolling my eyes dramatically. “Oh, for God’s sake.” I take a deliberate bite out of the sandwich, chewing exaggeratedly before swallowing. “See? Not poisoned. Satisfied?”

His lips twitch as if he’s fighting a smirk, but he shrugs and takes the sandwich from me anyway, biting into it without further argument.

“You’re impossible,” I mutter, brushing crumbs from my fingers.

“I’m thorough,” he counters, his smirk breaking through this time.

We sit in comfortable silence for a moment, the remnants of the sandwich disappearing between us. It’s strange how easy it feels, sitting here with him, no tension or pretense. Just... us.

I glance over at him, studying his profile as he finishes the last bite. “So,” I say carefully, leaning back against the pillows. “Are you going to tell me where you were tonight?”

His head tilts slightly, his gaze flicking to me with faint amusement. “Why do you ask?”

I shrug, trying to keep my tone casual, though my stomach twists with an unfamiliar emotion. “It’s late. You’re not usually gone this long. I figured you’d want to be home with the twins.”

His smirk deepens, and he sets the plate on the nightstand before turning fully toward me. “You figured,” he repeats, his tone teasing. “Or you were worried.”

“I wasn’t worried,” I snap, though the heat rushing to my cheeks gives me away.

“No?” He leans closer, his eyes glittering with mischief. “Then why are you asking?”

“Because I....” I pause, flustered under his sharp gaze. “Because I’m curious, that’s all.”

“Curious,” he echoes, his voice low and smooth. “Or jealous?”

The word catches me off guard, and I stiffen slightly, my blush deepening. “Don’t flatter yourself,” I say, trying to sound nonchalant.

His chuckle is deep and rich, the sound wrapping around me like warm silk. “You’re terrible at lying, Chiara.”

I huff, crossing my arms over my chest. “Fine. Maybe I was wondering if you were with someone else. Happy now?”

His smirk softens into something almost affectionate. “I was working,” he says, his tone sincere now. “Not with anyone else. Just handling business.”

I glance away, embarrassed by my outburst. “Good,” I mumble, focusing on a spot on the wall.

His hand brushes mine lightly, drawing my attention back to him. “Good?” he repeats, arching a brow.

“Yes, good,” I say firmly, though my voice lacks the bite I want it to have. “The

twins deserve a father who prioritizes them.”

He watches me for a long moment, his expression unreadable, before nodding. “I always will,” he says quietly.

Before I can respond, the door creaks open, and a small voice cuts through the quiet.

“Papa? Mama?”

We both turn to see Alyssa standing in the doorway, her stuffed rabbit clutched tightly in her arms. Her wide eyes are filled with worry, and her lip trembles slightly as she steps inside.

“What is it, sweetheart?” I ask, sitting up straighter.

“It’s Leo,” she says, her voice wavering. “He... he fell.”

Serge is on his feet instantly, his expression darkening. “Fell, what do you mean? From where?”

“The bunk bed,” Alyssa says, her voice cracking as tears well up in her eyes. “I told him not to climb up in the dark, but he didn’t listen!”

I’m already moving, rushing to scoop Alyssa into my arms as Serge strides toward the door. “Is he awake?” I ask, trying to keep my voice calm for her sake.

Alyssa nods against my shoulder, sniffing. “He’s crying. He says his arm hurts.”

Serge glances back at me, his jaw tight. “Let’s go.”

We hurry down the hall, Alyssa clutching me tightly as we make our way to the

twins' room. My heart pounds in my chest, fear clawing at the edges of my thoughts.

When we reach the room, Leo is sitting on the floor, cradling his arm against his chest. His face is red and tear-streaked, and he looks up at us with wide, frightened eyes.

“Leo,” I breathe, dropping to my knees beside him. “Sweetheart, what happened?”

He sniffles, his voice trembling. “I—I wanted to see if I could climb fast like Alyssa, but I slipped.”

Serge crouches beside me, his large hand resting gently on Leo's shoulder. “Let me see,” he says, his voice calm but firm.

Leo hesitates, his small body trembling as he extends his arm toward Serge. I can see the pain etched across his tear-streaked face, and my chest tightens. Serge's jaw ticks as he carefully takes Leo's arm in his large hands, his touch as gentle as I've ever seen it.

“Does this hurt?” Serge asks, moving Leo's arm ever so slightly.

Leo winces and lets out a choked sob, nodding rapidly. “It hurts a lot, Papa,” he whispers, his voice trembling.

My breath catches in my throat as Serge's expression hardens, a mix of concern and frustration shadowing his features. He glances at me, and the unspoken truth passes between us. It's not just bruised—it's broken.

“Chiara,” Serge says, his voice calm but with a steely edge. “We need to get him to the hospital. Now.”

I nod quickly, swallowing the lump in my throat. “Alyssa,” I call out, turning toward her. She’s still standing in the corner, clutching her stuffed rabbit tightly, her face pale.

Her wide eyes dart between us, tears threatening to spill. “Is Leo going to be okay?”

“He’s going to be fine, sweetheart,” I say, keeping my voice as steady as I can manage. “We just need to get your shoes on. Can you do that for me? Quickly?”

She nods, sniffing, and darts off to her side of the room, dropping to her knees to fish her shoes out from under her bed.

I pull my phone from my pocket, my hands shaking slightly as I dial emergency services. The operator picks up quickly, her calm voice a strange contrast to the chaos inside me.

“My son’s arm is broken,” I explain, my words coming out in a rush. “He fell from a bunk bed, and he’s in a lot of pain. We need an ambulance.”

The operator assures me that help is on the way, asking for details about our location and Leo’s condition. I give her the information as best as I can while Serge kneels beside Leo, murmuring quietly to him.

“It’s going to be alright, Leo,” Serge says, his voice low but firm. His hand rests gently on Leo’s uninjured shoulder, grounding him. “You’re a strong boy. We’ll get you taken care of.”

Leo’s sobs quiet slightly, though his little body still trembles with pain. “It hurts so bad,” he whimpers, leaning into Serge’s steady hand.

“I know, son,” Serge says softly. “I know it does, but the doctors will fix it. Just hold

on a little longer.”

Alyssa reappears at my side, her shoes haphazardly on her feet, and runs back to my side. “I’m ready, Mama,” she says, clutching my hand tightly.

I crouch down, pulling her into a quick hug. “You did so well, Alyssa,” I whisper, kissing her hair. “Now stay close to me, okay?”

The sound of the ambulance siren in the distance brings a mix of relief and urgency. I exchange a look with Serge, who scoops Leo up carefully, cradling him as though he’s the most fragile thing in the world.

“Let’s go,” Serge says, his voice steady despite the tension radiating from him. Together, we head downstairs to meet the paramedics, the weight of the moment heavy but united in our focus on Leo.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:10 pm

The harsh fluorescent lights of the hospital corridor sting my eyes as I pace outside the exam room. The sharp smell of antiseptic hangs in the air, mingling with the distant murmur of voices and the occasional chime of a nurse's station. In my arms, Alyssa clings to me tightly, her small fingers gripping my shirt as though I might disappear if she lets go.

Leo is inside with the doctor, Chiara by his side, and the minutes feel like hours. Alyssa hasn't spoken since we arrived, her wide eyes glistening with unshed tears.

"It's going to be alright," I murmur to her, my voice low and steady. I press a kiss to the top of her head, trying to reassure her as much as myself.

"Leo's brave, isn't he, Papa?" she asks softly, her voice trembling.

"He's the bravest," I reply, brushing her hair back gently.

The door to the exam room opens, and Chiara steps out. Her face is pale, her hands trembling as she clutches them to her chest. She looks at me, and for a moment, I see something in her eyes that I don't recognize—fear.

"He's burning up," she says, her voice cracking. "The doctor says he has a fever. What if—"

I close the distance between us quickly, handing Alyssa to one of the nurses who's been hovering nearby. Before Chiara can spiral further, I take her hands in mine, squeezing them gently but firmly.

“Chiara,” I say, my voice calm but unyielding. “Nothing will happen to him. Do you hear me?”

She looks at me, her breathing uneven, and shakes her head. “But what if—”

“No,” I interrupt, pulling her closer. “Look at me.”

Her eyes lock on to mine, wide and filled with tears.

“Leo is strong. He’s going to be fine,” I say, each word deliberate. “I promise you. Nothing will happen to him.”

She lets out a shaky breath, her body trembling as she leans into me. I wrap my arms around her, holding her tightly. “I’ve got you,” I murmur, my voice softening. “We’ll get through this together.”

For a moment, she clings to me, her head resting against my chest. It’s the first time I’ve seen her so vulnerable, and it stirs something deep inside me—a need to protect her, to take her fear and make it my own.

The doctor emerges then, clipboard in hand, his expression calm but focused. I feel Chiara stiffen in my arms, and I keep one hand on her shoulder as we step forward.

“How is he?” I ask, my voice steady despite the tension coiling in my chest.

The doctor gives a reassuring smile. “He’s going to be alright,” he says. “His arm is fractured, but it’s not a severe break. A cast will help it heal quickly.”

Chiara exhales sharply, her grip on my arm tightening. “And the fever?” she asks, her voice barely above a whisper.

“It’s likely a bug,” the doctor explains. “His temperature was high enough to make him dizzy, which could have caused his fall. We’ve given him something to bring it down, and he’s responding well. He’ll need rest and fluids, but there’s no cause for alarm.”

The weight in my chest eases, but Chiara’s shoulders remain tense. I glance at her, the relief in her expression tempered by lingering worry.

“Can we see him?” she asks, her voice soft but urgent.

“Of course,” the doctor says. “He’s already asking for you both.”

I nod, thanking the doctor before guiding Chiara back into the room. Alyssa follows close behind, her little hand slipping into mine as we step inside.

Leo looks small in the hospital bed, his arm now in a bright blue cast and a soft blanket tucked up to his chest. His cheeks are flushed from the fever, but his eyes light up when he sees us.

“Mama! Papa!” he says, his voice hoarse but excited.

Chiara rushes to his side, kneeling by the bed and stroking his hair. “I’m here, sweetheart,” she whispers, her voice thick with emotion. “How are you feeling?”

“Better,” he says, though he looks drowsy. “The doctor said I get to keep this.” He holds up his cast, his small smile making my chest tighten.

Alyssa climbs onto the bed carefully, sitting beside him and pointing at his cast. “It’s blue! That’s my favorite color!”

“It’s my favorite now too,” Leo replies with a tired grin.

Chiara presses a kiss to his forehead, her hand lingering on his cheek as though she needs the reassurance of his warmth. I step closer, resting a hand on her shoulder.

“See?” I say softly, meeting her gaze. “He’s already bouncing back.”

She nods, though her eyes glisten with unshed tears. “I was so scared,” she admits quietly.

“I know,” I reply, my voice steady. “He’s alright. You both are.”

We stay with Leo for a while, Alyssa chattering softly to keep him entertained while Chiara remains by his side. Her worry eases little by little, replaced by the fierce determination I’ve come to admire in her.

By the time the nurses return to check on him, Leo is asleep, his small body relaxed against the pillows. Alyssa stifles a yawn, leaning into Chiara’s side, and I lift her gently into my arms.

“Let’s let him rest,” I say, nodding toward the door.

Chiara hesitates, glancing back at Leo one last time before standing. I keep an arm around her as we leave the room, the other hand holding Alyssa, the warmth of their presence grounding me in a way I didn’t expect.

As we walk down the hall, Alyssa nestled against my chest, I glance at Chiara. Her gaze is forward, her expression thoughtful but calm.

“You handled that well,” I say softly.

She looks at me, a faint smile tugging at her lips. “I think you’re giving me too much credit.”

“I’m not,” I reply firmly, my hand brushing hers as we walk. “You’re stronger than you realize, Chiara.”

Her smile lingers, and for the first time tonight, I feel like everything will be alright.

The house is quiet again, the chaos of the hospital visit replaced by a deep stillness. Alyssa is asleep in her bed, her stuffed rabbit clutched tightly in her arms, and Leo hasn’t stirred since we brought him back from the hospital. The night is peaceful, but my mind isn’t.

I head downstairs, the faint hum of the refrigerator and the occasional creak of the old floorboards the only sounds accompanying me. When I enter the kitchen, I find Chiara already there, leaning against the counter with a cup of tea in her hands. Her hair is loose, tumbling over her shoulders, and her expression is thoughtful, tinged with exhaustion.

She looks up when I enter, her eyes meeting mine. “Couldn’t sleep?” she asks softly.

I shake my head, moving to the counter to pour myself a glass of water. “Not after everything tonight.”

She nods, her fingers tightening around the cup. “It’s hard to stop thinking about them, isn’t it? Even when they’re fine.”

I lean against the counter across from her, studying her. There’s something in her tone, a depth of emotion that feels heavier than usual. “The kids are tougher than they look,” I say, trying to reassure her. “Leo will bounce back. Alyssa... well, she’s already planning what color she wants for her cast when she breaks her arm next.”

Chiara lets out a soft laugh, though it quickly fades, her gaze dropping to her tea. “They’re doing so much better now,” she murmurs. “Since we’ve been here. Since you’ve been with them.”

I pause, surprised by her words. “They’ve always been strong.”

“Yes,” she agrees, looking up at me. “They’re happier now. They laugh more. They smile more. It’s because of you, Serge.”

Her voice wavers slightly, and I step closer, unsure how to respond. “I’m their father,” I say simply. “That’s what I’m supposed to do.”

“It’s more than that,” she insists, setting her cup down and wrapping her arms around herself. “I was so scared of letting them get close to you. Scared of letting you get close to me. Seeing them with you... I can’t deny how much better their lives are now. How much better our lives are.”

Her words hang in the air, and I cross the space between us, standing just in front of her. “Why were you so scared, Chiara?” I ask, my voice low.

She hesitates, her lips parting as if to speak, but she shakes her head instead. I gently place my hand on her arm, urging her to look at me.

“Tell me,” I say softly. “Whatever it is, just tell me.”

Her eyes glisten as she meets my gaze, and she exhales shakily. “Because I tried to kill you,” she says, her voice barely above a whisper.

I freeze, the words hitting me like a blow. “What?” I ask, though I already know what she’s referring to.

“Four years ago,” she continues, her voice trembling. “The poison. It wasn’t just about my father or his plans. It was me, Serge. I made the choice to follow through.”

I take a step back, my hand falling away from her arm. “Why?” I ask, my tone sharper now, though the hurt beneath it surprises even me. “Why would you do that?”

“Because you were getting too close,” she says, tears slipping down her cheeks. “You made me feel things I didn’t want to feel. You made me think that maybe... maybe I could have something with you, and it terrified me.”

I stare at her, her words sinking in. “So you tried to kill me because you felt something for me,” I say flatly, the bitterness in my voice undeniable.

She nods, wiping her cheeks roughly. “I thought I could escape it. Escape you. Even when I left, I couldn’t stop thinking about you. Now... being here, seeing you with the twins, seeing how much you care for them... for me....”

She trails off, her voice breaking, and I step forward again, cupping her face in my hands. “Did you fall in love with me?” I ask, my voice low and steady.

Her eyes widen slightly, and for a long moment, she’s silent. Then, slowly, she nods, her voice barely audible. “Yes. I did.”

The weight of her confession settles over us, and something inside me cracks open. “Chiara,” I murmur, leaning closer. “I’ve been in love with you for longer than I want to admit.”

Her breath catches, and I don’t wait for her to respond. I press my lips to hers, the kiss deep and slow, filled with everything we’ve been holding back for years. She melts into me, her hands gripping my shirt as though afraid I’ll pull away.

When we finally break apart, her forehead rests against mine, her breathing unsteady. “I’m sorry,” she whispers, her voice thick with emotion. “For everything.”

I shake my head, brushing my thumb across her cheek. “It’s in the past. We’re here now. That’s what matters.”

She nods, her tears slowing as she leans into my touch. “I love you,” she says softly, the words trembling but sure.

“I love you,” I reply, my voice steady. “We’re going to make this work, Chiara. For us. For the kids. For everything we’ve built.”

She smiles, small but genuine, and I pull her into my arms, holding her close as the first rays of dawn begin to light the sky. For the first time in years, I feel like we’re finally on the same path—together.

One year later...

The house is alive with energy, the sound of laughter and conversation spilling into every corner. Brightly colored balloons and streamers hang from the ceiling, and the twins' favorite theme—dinosaurs—decorates the tables and walls. Alyssa and Leo are buzzing with excitement, darting between guests with their usual boundless energy, their small faces lit with pure joy.

Serge's family is here, along with a few close friends. Katya oversees everything with her usual poise, making sure the day runs smoothly, while Serge is in the living room, talking with some of his associates who came to celebrate. The sight of him relaxed, a rare softness to his usually sharp features, makes me pause.

He's been different these past few months—calmer, more attentive. To me, to the kids. It's a shift I didn't expect, but one I find myself appreciating more than I care to admit.

"Chiara," Katya's familiar voice pulls me from my thoughts. She stands beside me, her warm smile an anchor in the whirlwind of activity. "Are you enjoying yourself?"

"I am," I reply, glancing toward the twins. "The kids are so happy. Thank you for helping with all of this."

She waves a hand dismissively, her earrings catching the light. "Anything for my grandchildren. They deserve the best."

My gaze flickers across the room, scanning the faces of Serge's family. There's an

absence that's impossible not to notice. "I don't see Maxim," I say carefully, keeping my tone neutral.

Katya's expression tightens slightly, but she covers it quickly with a sip of her champagne. "He wasn't invited."

The words surprise me. "He wasn't?"

She shakes her head, her gaze softening as she looks at me. "Serge thought it would be better this way. He didn't want any tension today. For the children's sake—and yours."

For a moment, I don't know what to say. The realization that Serge considered my feelings—enough to exclude his own brother—is unexpected. He's always been so confident, so commanding, that it's easy to forget he's capable of subtlety, of thoughtfulness.

"That's... considerate of him," I murmur, my heart tugging at the thought.

Katya nods, a knowing smile curving her lips. "He cares about you, Chiara. More than I think he's willing to admit."

Before I can respond, Alyssa's shrill voice cuts through the room. "Mama! Papa! It's time for presents!"

The twins gather at the base of the towering pile of gifts, their excitement infectious. Guests begin handing them carefully wrapped boxes—stuffed dinosaurs, puzzles, books, and clothes quickly pile up as they open each one with squeals of delight.

Then Serge steps forward, his hands clasped behind his back, his expression calm but carrying an undercurrent of mischief. "I have something special for you," he says, his deep voice commanding everyone's attention.

Alyssa and Leo both freeze, their wide eyes locking on to him. “What is it?” Alyssa breathes, practically bouncing on her toes.

Serge steps to the side, and a small brown puppy comes bounding into the room, its floppy ears and wagging tail drawing gasps and cheers from the twins. The puppy yips excitedly, its tiny paws skidding on the polished floor as it rushes toward Alyssa, who lets out a delighted squeal.

“A puppy!” she cries, dropping to her knees as the dog climbs into her lap, licking her face enthusiastically.

Leo is quieter but no less thrilled, his small hands gently petting the puppy’s soft fur. “Is he ours?” he asks, looking up at Serge with wide, hopeful eyes.

“He’s yours,” Serge says, crouching down to their level. “You’ll have to take care of him, though. He’s a big responsibility.”

The twins nod solemnly, though Alyssa’s beaming smile gives away her excitement. “We will! Right, Leo?”

Leo nods, his small fingers stroking the puppy’s ears. “What’s his name?”

“That’s up to you,” Serge says, his voice softening.

I stand off to the side, watching the scene unfold, a mix of emotions swirling within me. The puppy is adorable—soft brown fur, floppy ears, and the kind of boundless energy only a young dog has. But I’m also stunned. A labrador puppy. It’s such a big commitment, and while I’d considered getting one eventually, it hadn’t been on my immediate list of priorities.

Back in Montana, raising the twins alone had been enough of a challenge. Adding a dog to the mix had seemed impossible at the time. Now, though, things are different.

“They love him already,” Katya murmurs beside me, her smile widening as she watches the twins.

“They do,” I reply, my voice quieter. “It’s just... a lot.”

“Serge knows what he’s doing,” she says knowingly. “He’s thought this through. The children are thriving now. This is just another step toward building a life together.”

Her words settle heavily in my chest. She’s right—the twins are happier, more secure, and Serge is a big part of that. It’s not just his presence; it’s the way he’s thrown himself into their lives with such determination and care.

Serge glances over at me then, catching my eye. His expression softens, and for a moment, it’s just the two of us in the crowded room. I give him a small nod, and he smirks, clearly pleased with himself.

Alyssa’s voice snaps me back to the present. “Mama, look at him,” she calls, holding the squirming puppy up for me to see. “Isn’t he the cutest?”

I smile, walking over to crouch beside her. “He’s very cute,” I say, running my fingers through the puppy’s soft fur. “Do you have a name for him yet?”

“We’re thinking,” Alyssa says, her brow furrowing in concentration.

“We’ll decide soon,” Leo adds, his voice quiet but sure.

Serge stands behind me, his hand brushing lightly against my shoulder as he leans down. “What do you think?” he asks, his voice low enough for only me to hear.

“I think you’ve completely spoiled them,” I reply, though there’s no heat in my tone.

“They deserve it,” he says simply, his gaze fixed on the twins.

As I watch them play with their new puppy, their laughter filling the room, I can't help but agree. This is what I wanted for them—a sense of family, of joy. Unexpectedly, Serge has given it to them.

And to me.

The sound of the twins' laughter fills the air, blending with the playful barks of their new puppy. I stand to the side, watching Alyssa and Leo chase the energetic ball of fur around the room, their joy infectious. For a moment, everything feels perfect. The house feels like a home, alive with warmth and love, something I never thought possible not long ago.

As I soak in the moment, Serge appears beside me, his presence commanding even when he's quiet. His hand brushes against mine, a light, deliberate touch that sends a shiver through me. I glance up at him, and his smirk softens into something more sincere.

"Come with me," he murmurs, his voice low and private.

I hesitate, my gaze flickering back to the twins, but Katya steps in before I can say anything, her calm smile reassuring. "I'll keep an eye on them," she says, already moving toward the children.

Serge doesn't give me a chance to argue, his hand slipping into mine as he leads me out of the room and down the hall. The buzz of the party fades behind us, replaced by the quiet intimacy of the dimly lit corridor. He stops near the large bay windows overlooking the garden, the soft glow of string lights outside casting shadows across his sharp features.

"Serge, what—"

Before I can finish, his hands cup my face, and he kisses me. It's not the urgent, fiery

kiss of our past; this one is softer, deeper, laced with an affection that makes my heart ache. My hands rest on his chest, his steady heartbeat thrumming beneath my palms as he draws me closer.

When he pulls back, his forehead rests against mine, and his breath warms my lips. “I can’t wait for more,” he says, his voice thick with emotion.

“More?” I ask, still catching my breath.

“Birthdays,” he murmurs, his thumb brushing lightly against my cheek. “Christmas mornings. Family dinners. All of it. I want every celebration, every ordinary day, with you and the kids.”

His words sink into me, warming every corner of my heart. “You make it sound so easy,” I whisper, my voice trembling with the weight of everything I feel for him.

“It is easy,” he replies, his hands moving to my waist, grounding me. “With you, it’s easy.”

I laugh softly, shaking my head. “You say that now. Wait until the puppy chews up your shoes.”

He grins, the rare, boyish expression lighting up his face. “Then I’ll buy more shoes.”

I roll my eyes, but the smile tugging at my lips betrays me. “You’re impossible.”

“You love it,” he counters, his tone teasing but confident.

I can’t argue with him—not anymore. “I do,” I admit softly, the words falling between us like a promise.

He leans down, his lips brushing against mine again, this time slower, savoring. His

hands trace the curve of my back, pulling me flush against him, and I melt into the kiss, letting go of every doubt, every fear I've held on to for so long.

When we finally break apart, his hand slips into mine, his fingers intertwining with mine as if they belong there. "Come upstairs with me," he says, his voice low and intimate.

I hesitate for only a moment, glancing toward the sound of the twins' laughter echoing from the other room. "They'll be fine with Katya for a little while," he reassures me, sensing my worry.

I nod, letting him guide me up the stairs to our room. The door clicks softly behind us, and the quiet settles over us like a warm blanket. He turns to me, his eyes searching mine, and the weight of the moment presses against my chest.

"You've given me everything, Chiara," he says, his voice steady and raw. "The family I didn't know I needed. A reason to look forward to tomorrow. I'm never letting that go."

Tears prick at my eyes, and I step closer, wrapping my arms around him. "You gave me that too," I whisper. "I didn't know I could have this. Not with you. Not with anyone."

His arms tighten around me, and for a while, we simply hold each other, the silence between us speaking louder than words. When he leans down to kiss me again, it's slow, tender, and filled with every unspoken promise we've made to each other.

Later, we lie tangled together, the moonlight streaming through the curtains casting silver patterns across the bed. Serge's hand trails absentmindedly along my arm as I rest my head on his chest, the steady rise and fall of his breathing lulling me into a sense of peace I haven't felt in years.

“What are you thinking about?” I ask softly, tracing small circles on his skin.

He pauses, his fingers brushing against mine. “The future,” he admits. “What it’ll look like. How I’ll make it better for all of us.”

I lift my head to look at him, his sharp features softened in the pale light. “You don’t have to do it alone,” I say, my voice firm. “We’ll figure it out together.”

His lips curve into a small smile, and he presses a kiss to my forehead. “Together,” he echoes.

For the first time, the weight of the past feels lighter, the uncertainty of the future less daunting. With Serge by my side, and the twins filling our home with their laughter, I know we’ll face whatever comes next.

This is our happily ever after.

THE END