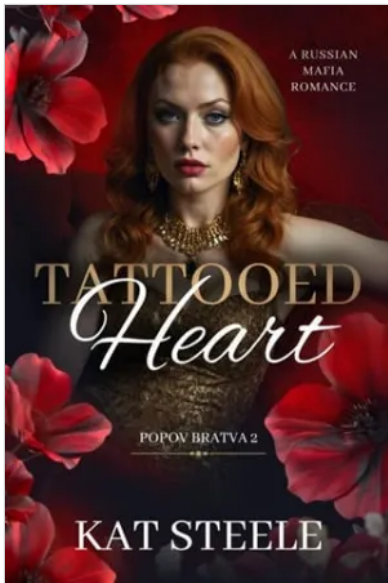




Tattooed Heart (Popov Bratva #2)

Author: *Kat Steele*

Category: Romance

Description: He's danger in a tailored suit. I'm the line he was never meant to cross. And now I'm carrying his baby.

Dimitri Popov lives in the shadows—an enforcer, a killer, the brother who protects the Avilov Bratva empire with ruthless precision.

He doesn't smile. He doesn't flinch. And he sure as hell doesn't fall in love.

Until me.

It started with a kiss that scorched through my defenses and a threat that sent us running.

Now I'm tangled in a world of blood-soaked loyalty and forbidden heat.

And Dimitri? He's become my only safe place in a world that wants me dead.

He says I'm his. That hell protect me at any cost. Kill for me. Die for me. And the terrifying truth?

I want him to.

But protecting me might just destroy us both.

Dark, addictive, and dripping with danger, Book Two will leave your heart racing and your sheets on fire. This is not just a love story—it's war.

Total Pages (Source): 37

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DIMITRI

The fifth day is always the hardest. That's what they say. Something about how the shock wears off and the crushing reality of it all settles into your bones. I wouldn't know if that's true for most men. But for me, it's the truth.

Five days locked behind steel and stone. Five days of recycled air, the stink of sweat and old blood, of silence, punctuated by shouting and metal clanging in the distance. Five days of being watched by guards, by inmates, by eyes I can't always see but feel crawling across my skin.

But it's not the confinement that cuts deepest. It's her.

Sandy.

She stood before me last night, hands trembling even though she tried to hide it. Her voice was strong, though I saw the tears threatening to spill. She looked at me like she wanted to kill whoever dared to do this to me. And then she said, "You better come back to me."

I didn't know how badly I needed to hear those words until she said them.

The cot creaks beneath me as I sit up, muscles tight and coiled. The fluorescent lights overhead hum like an angry insect. I haven't slept. Not really. Not since the arrest. Not since the cell door slammed shut, but I know exactly what this is.

Andrei Morozov doesn't want me silenced. He wants me erased.

I run my fingers along the cold concrete wall, tracing invisible patterns.

In Russia, prison is different. Perhaps more brutal, but also more honest. Here, they dress it up with words like “correctional facility” and “rehabilitation,” but prison is prison.

A cage is a cage, and a man in a cage is always a target.

I think of my brother, Aleksandr. By now, he's working every connection, calling in every favor. The pakhan of the Avilov Bratva doesn't let family languish behind bars. But even his reach has limits. Especially since Morozov has been planning this for months.

Morozov wants revenge for his brother, Sergei, who died at my hand in Russia years ago. It was a necessary and justified death. But blood demands blood. This is the old way. The Bratva way.

I stand, stretching slowly. My ribs ache from the scuffle on day three.

An inmate named Lewis thought he could earn a favor by taking a swing at me.

He's still breathing, but he won't try again.

I made sure of that. The guards intervened too late to save his pride, too early to let me finish what he started.

The cell door slides open. It's yard time. The same schedule every morning keeps the routine predictable and the prey comfortable.

“Popov,” the guard barks, “move it.”

I step out into the corridor, flanked by two guards. One of them, Jensen, gives me a look. Not friendly but not hostile. Just watchful. He's been here long enough to know when something's brewing. And something is definitely brewing.

“Try not to break anything today, Popov,” he mutters.

I don't respond. There's no point. Words in here are currency or curses. And I'm not here to waste either.

The yard is a cracked concrete slab surrounded by chain-link fences and razor wire. Inmates scatter in clumps—smokers, lifers, predators, and ghosts. The sky overhead is a pale shade of blue that doesn't feel real. Nothing here feels real.

I scan the yard, a habit born from years of surviving in places where letting your guard down means death. The Bratva taught me to always look for threats, but Otets taught me to look for opportunities. Right now, I need both.

I spot the guy near the west wall. He's pretending not to watch me, but he's doing a shit job of it. Tattoo on his neck—not Russian work. It's prison ink, crude but meaningful.

Left arm sleeved. He wasn't here yesterday.

New transfer, they'd say. But I know better.

Morozov's reach extends beyond these walls.

I clock him, then turn away. Let him think I haven't noticed.

I walk slowly, my shoulders loose, breathing steadily. I want them to think I'm relaxed and believe I don't see it coming. The yard is a stage, and everyone is focused

on the new performance.

Because I do see it coming. I feel it in the air.

That electric snap that happens just before a storm hits.

Like your body, the pull in your gut knows something your brain hasn't caught up to yet.

I've felt it before in Moscow, in Prague, in that warehouse in Jersey where my enemies thought they could take me. None of them walked away.

He makes his move.

I pivot, ducking just as the glint of a makeshift blade slices through the air where my throat had been. The edge grazes my cheek. Blood warms my skin, but adrenaline keeps the pain at bay. Time slows down, as it always does, in moments like this.

He lunges again.

This time, I grab his wrist, twist, and slam my elbow into his face. Bone cracks. He snarls and slashes wildly. I spin him, driving him back against the concrete wall. My forearm pins his throat. The shiv clatters to the ground.

“Who sent you?” I growl. I already know, but I need to hear it.

He coughs, bloody spit painting my collarbone. His eyes dart around, looking for backup that isn't coming. Not yet, anyway.

“Morozov,” he rasps. “Says you don't make it out.”

My vision narrows. The name twists like a knife in my gut.

“Wrong answer,” I hiss.

I let go just enough to let him fall. He drops, gasping. I kick the blade out of reach and step back, hands raised as the sirens blare and guards storm in. The yard erupts into chaos. Inmates are shouting, guards bark orders, and the metallic taste of violence hangs in the air.

Jensen is first.

“On the ground! Now!” he bellows.

I comply slowly, putting my hands behind my head and knees on the concrete.

Two guards drag the attacker away. Blood pools behind him like a signature. He won't be the last. Morozov is nothing if not persistent.

I'm hauled to my feet. No cuffs this time, just eyes. Lots of them watching and calculating. The inmates size me up with new interest. Some with respect, others with malice. I've just painted a target on my back, but it was already there. Now, at least, it's visible.

In the infirmary, the doctor stitches the cut on my cheek with seven stitches. I don't flinch. Pain is just another language I speak fluently. The doctor, a tired-looking woman with kind eyes, works in silence. She's seen it all before.

“Hold still,” she says, tying off the last stitch. “Unless you want another scar.”

“One more won't matter,” I mutter. My body is a map of old wounds and narrow escapes. Each one is a story Sandy traces with her fingertips in the dark.

Sandy. The thought of her sends a sharp pain through my chest. I remember the first time I saw her standing in Aleksandr's office, with her spine straight as steel, refusing to back down even when surrounded by men who killed for a living.

Her dark blue eyes had locked with mine across the room, challenging, unafraid, and something shifted in the universe.

I'd killed men, moved millions in illicit goods, and survived things that should have broken me, but nothing prepared me for her. It was how she looked at me as if the monster had never existed and only the man remained. It was how she ran her fingers over knuckles hardened by violence and whispered, "These hands can be gentle, too." And somehow, with her, they are. She brought out a softness I didn't believe I was capable of, like water from a stone.

Every night since the arrest, I've dreamed of her hair fanning across my pillow like molten silk catching fire in the sunlight.

The scent of her skin. The sound of her laugh and how she really listens when I speak.

No one has ever truly listened to me before her.

No one has ever made me feel worthy of being heard.

The doctor finishes and steps back. "You should try to stay out of trouble."

I almost smile. Almost. "Trouble finds me."

"It always does with you Russians," she mumbles, but there's no heat in it, just resignation.

I'm escorted back to my cell. Solitary, they call it, and it's for my protection. But I know better. They keep me isolated and vulnerable, which makes me easier to reach.

Hours later, I sit in the corner, staring at the wall. The cell is five by seven feet. I've counted every crack in the concrete and every water stain on the ceiling.

I think about the charges against me. Attempted murder of a federal witness, obstruction of justice, racketeering.

All of it is bullshit and fabricated. The audio they claim to have of me ordering a hit is a clever fake.

Morozov has resources; I'll give him that.

And connections in places that should be untouchable.

But so does Aleksandr. He isn't just the pakhan of the Avilov Bratva anymore. He's become a force in New York, a power that moves in the shadows between legitimate business and the old world we come from. He won't let this stand. Not when it's blood. Not when it's family.

Family. The word lodges deep in my chest. Sandy is carrying my child, a secret she whispered to me just weeks before the arrest. A new life. A chance at something I never believed I could have. A future that doesn't end in blood and bullets.

Morozov wants me dead. Not later. Not at trial. Now. And he nearly got what he wanted.

I press the buzzer. After a long pause, Jensen's voice crackles through the intercom.

“What?”

“I need to send a message.”

Silence. Then, “To who?”

“Aleksandr Avilov.”

Another pause. I can almost hear him weighing his options. Jensen isn't on anyone's payroll, as far as I know. He's just a man doing a job. But here, everyone has a price.

Finally, the door opens. Jensen stands there, nightstick at his belt, eyes unreadable.

“Make it quick,” he says, leading me down the corridor to the phones.

The receiver is cold against my ear. I dial the number to one of our secure lines. It rings three times, then clicks.

“ Da ?” Yuri's gruff voice answers.

“Morozov made his move today.”

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“Understood.” Nothing else needs to be said. The message will reach Aleksandr in a matter of minutes.

Jensen escorts me back to my cell without a word. The door closes behind me like a coffin lid, but I'm not dead yet, not even close.

My knuckles are bruised. My cheek is stitched. My ribs feel like they were kicked by a mule. But all I can think about is Sandy. A glimmer of light in a life spent too long in the dark.

Night falls, and the lights dim but never fully go out. They're always watching, always waiting. I lie on the cot, one arm behind my head, staring at nothing. Sleep won't come. Just fragments of rest between moments of vigilance.

The word family haunts me in the darkness.

The Bratva has always been my only family.

Brothers forged in blood, bound by oath, and tempered in violence.

It is the life I chose when I pledged myself to Otets and later swore unwavering loyalty to Aleksandr. I became more than his half-brother and second-in-command. I became his shadow, his weapon.

But Sandy changed everything. She showed me another kind of loyalty.

I close my eyes, and her face sharpens in my mind. I picture the curve of her smile,

the stubborn set of her jaw when she's angry, and how she looks at me like I'm worth saving.

Am I? I've never been sure. But I have to try for her and for our child.

A sound at the door pulls me from my thoughts. The small slot slides open, and a food tray appears, but I don't move. Poison is an old friend of the Bratva. One I've used myself on more than one occasion.

But hunger always wins in the end. I check the tray, inspecting every inch before I take a bite. Tasteless sludge masquerading as dinner, but I choke it down. I'll need my strength.

While Aleksandr works the outside—lawyers, bribes, pressure in all the right places—I'm trapped here, alone. And Morozov's reach? It stretches farther than the bars around me. The attacker today was just the beginning. A test. The real threats will come soon enough.

I need allies and information. A way to defend myself without ending up in deeper trouble.

My thoughts are interrupted by footsteps approaching my cell. They're heavy and deliberate. Not the usual guard patrol.

The door swings open, and two guards step in. Their uniforms are spotless, movements routine, but there's something off. Their eyes give it away. Cold and calculating.

"Popov," one says. "Special interrogation. Now."

I stand slowly, my muscles tensed. There is no scheduled interrogation. This is it.

Morozov's next move.

“Where's Jensen?” I ask, buying time and assessing options.

“Shift change,” the other guard replies quickly. His hand rests on his belt, near his baton.

I could fight. Take them both. But then what? I'd never make it out of the building. And Sandy would never forgive me if I got myself killed trying to be a hero.

So, I nod and let them think I'm compliant. I let them lead me down the corridor, away from the cells, toward a section of the prison I hadn't seen before.

My mind races, mapping exits, counting cameras, noting blind spots. The Bratva trained me well.

We round a corner into a silent hallway. It's empty, exposed, and stripped of cameras. A dead zone on purpose.

I make my move. I drop low, sweeping the legs out from under the guard on my right, sending him crashing to the floor.

Before the second can react, I drive my elbow into his throat, cutting off his shout mid-breath.

He stumbles back, gasping for air. I rip the baton from his grip and swing it in a tight arc, catching him across the temple. He goes down hard.

The first guard scrambles for his radio, but I stomp on his hand. Bone crunches beneath my boot, and he howls in pain. One more blow to the head silences him. Not fatal. Just enough to make sure he stays down while I move.

I strip them of their weapons, radios, and keycards, working quickly and methodically.

Their own zip ties bind their wrists behind their backs, and I shove rolled socks between their teeth to keep them quiet.

If I'm lucky, it's a temporary fix, giving me just a few minutes before someone realizes they're gone.

I need to move. But where? Escape would be suicide. Even if I made it past the fences, past the lockdown protocols, there'd be nowhere to run. Morozov would find me. Or worse, he'd find Sandy.

No. Running isn't the answer. I need to return to my cell and erase every trace of this. Make it appear as though they made their move and failed. Let it be another message. One he won't miss.

I drag them into a supply closet and lock it from the outside. Then, I go back through the corridors, avoiding the main pathways. My heart pounds in my ears, but my hands are steady.

I slip back into my cellblock unseen. The night guard at the desk, a heavysset man named Donovan, who's usually half-asleep, is nowhere to be seen.

Another of Morozov's men? Or just luck?

I don't stick around to see how long it takes for someone to find them.

Instead, I slip back into my cell, easing the door shut like nothing happened.

And then I wait for the alarms, the shouting, the inevitable fallout.

But for now, I've bought myself time. Another day.

Another chance. And if anyone tries to take that from me, I'll bring this place down with my bare hands.

I am Dimitri Popov. And I'm going home.

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SANDY

I didn't know a heart could break twice in the same day, but watching Dimitri behind bars, locked up like an animal, did something to me I didn't know was possible.

It tore open a part of me I thought had been hardened by years of surviving.

The chains around his wrists. The bruises that darkened his skin.

He met my eyes but didn't flinch, even when he saw what I was trying to hide. My fear. My fury. My need.

Back at the Avilov estate, I stand at the guest bedroom window I've been occupying since this nightmare with Morozov began.

The moon hangs low and heavy over the manicured gardens, dragging long shadows across the lawn.

In the distance, I can make out the silhouettes of Aleksandr's security team patrolling the perimeter.

It is a constant reminder that danger is never far away.

My fingers trace the glass of the window as I replay my prison visit for the hundredth time. That sterile room, the cold steel of the cell bars, the clock on the wall ticking away our precious minutes together. The memory of it burns like acid.

I'd never set foot in a prison before today.

The one holding Dimitri was buried deep in the forests of upstate New York, where time forgets you, and hope goes to die.

Aleksandr pulled strings through his contacts to get me in.

It was technically against protocol since I wasn't considered family.

Still, nothing about Dimitri's arrest had followed the rules.

Aleksandr refused to let me go without an escort.

Yuri and Viktor came with me, silent shadows who didn't leave my side.

The guard who met us looked bored, as if this was just another errand in a long shift of forgotten men and locked doors.

His keys jingled with every step as he led us down a maze of concrete corridors, the sound echoing off the walls like a warning.

It was cold, and the air felt stale, heavy with the scent of sweat and bleach.

At the end of the hall, he stopped and unlocked a steel door.

"Fifteen minutes," he said flatly before jerking his chin toward the room.

Yuri and Viktor stayed behind. I stepped inside. The room was small, windowless, and suffocating. Just a table and two chairs with no pretense of comfort. I stood frozen, my throat tight and my emotions climbing too fast. But I couldn't fall apart. Not now. Not when Dimitri needed me steady.

And then he walked in.

Dimitri.

He didn't speak, and neither did I. For a long second, we just looked at each other.

I drank him in, my eyes tracing every bruise, every cut, every mark left by men who thought they could break him.

The stitched gash along his cheekbone. The swelling beneath his eye.

They told a story I didn't want to hear but couldn't ignore.

He was still standing. But I could see it in his eyes. He was running on willpower alone. And it gutted me.

"Are you okay?" I asked quietly, my heart pounding in my ears.

"Yes," he said. Just that one word. Flat and controlled.

Now, alone in the darkness of the guest room, I press my forehead against the cool window pane, trying to ease the headache that has been building since I left the prison.

What could I have said to him? That I'm terrified?

That every night I wake up reaching for him, only to find his side of the bed empty?

That I'm carrying his child in a world that seems determined to take everything from us?

I blink hard, forcing the tears back. They have no place here. Dimitri doesn't need my grief. He needs my strength.

"Aleksandr will fix this," I said, injecting every ounce of conviction I could muster into my voice, even if it felt paper-thin.

He didn't answer. Not with words. Instead, he pulled me into a deep, desperate, and grounding kiss.

"I love you," I whispered against his lips. Three simple words, but they carried everything—hope, defiance, the promise of life waiting beyond these prison walls.

"I love you too," he murmured, his voice low and rough.

Then the guard cleared his throat from the doorway, and just like that, our time was up.

Only when I was outside, away from the cameras and the guards, did I let myself crumble. In the privacy of the car, I'd sobbed—for Dimitri, our baby, and the life that had been so cruelly interrupted. But when the tears dried, something else took their place. Determination. Resolve. Rage.

Now, hours later, I stand in the silence of the Avilov estate, my reflection ghostly in the window glass. The woman staring back at me is someone I barely recognize, her eyes hollow, her skin pale, her hand resting protectively over the small swell of her stomach.

I didn't sleep that night. I couldn't. I lay in bed with one hand resting against my stomach, the tiny baby bump a constant reminder that time is running out.

I need Dimitri here with me. He hasn't felt the baby kick yet or seen it on the

ultrasound monitor, and he won't get the chance if I don't do something.

By dawn, I'm downstairs in the kitchen planning. Talia takes one look at me, and she pulls me into a hug that undid me more than I care to admit.

"Tell me what you need," she says, her voice low and steady.

I tell her everything. The late-night visit. The way Dimitri looked. The feeling I can't shake that something worse is coming. That I need to come up with a plan. Talia doesn't hesitate. She is already reaching for her phone.

"Aleksandr needs to know," she says, her thumb hovering over the call button. My brother-in-law, the pakhan of the Avilov Bratva, isn't someone you keep in the dark.

"He'll try to stop me," I warn.

Talia meets my gaze, steady and unflinching. "He'll try," she states. "Aleksandr knows what it means to protect family. Dimitri is his brother. But you? You're family too."

My chest tightens, not just at her words but at the truth behind them. Aleksandr and Talia are my family. But Dimitri? He is something else entirely.

"Dimitri is mine," I say, the words escaping with a fierceness that surprises me. He is my heart, my fight, my future. We belong to each other in a way that doesn't need explanation.

The coffee machine gurgles to life, filling the kitchen with the rich aroma of fresh espresso. Talia pours two cups, setting one in front of me. The normalcy of the gesture is almost comical, given the circumstances.

“We need to find out who's pulling strings inside the prison,” I note, my mind racing through possibilities. “Morozov has someone on the inside. Someone who can make sure Dimitri doesn't make it to trial.”

Talia's expression darkens. “Aleksandr's already working on that. But his reach inside the prison system is limited.”

“What about Lev?” I suggest. Lev is Aleksandr's right hand, a man whose loyalty is as absolute as his capacity for violence.

“He's been making inquiries,” Talia admits. “But we need more. We need someone who can get close to Morozov.” She reaches for her phone.

Lev shows up less than an hour later. He always carries an air of coiled violence, like he can snap a neck and finish his coffee in the same breath.

He listens quietly while I explain what I want.

Names, connections, any hint of who might be pulling strings for Morozov inside the prison or the justice system. Lev doesn't blink.

“I know a few people,” he confirms. “But Aleksandr won't want you going rogue or putting yourself in danger. Besides, these people won't talk to me. Not without a reason.”

“Then we give them one,” I counter. “And if that doesn't work, we find someone who knows how Morozov thinks.”

Which brought me to Nick, my ex-boyfriend.

I hadn't seen him since that day in the coffee shop. The day Morozov's men came for

me and almost killed us both. Aleksandr had tucked him away under Avilov protection, probably to keep him from running his mouth. I know where he is, and I also know he owes me.

Getting access to him wasn't difficult. Convincing him to open the door was.

“Sandy,” he gasps, eyes wide as he pulls me into the apartment. He looks like hell. Scruffy, gaunt, hollowed-out look from too many nights staring out the window waiting for a bullet.

“Don't say anything. Just listen,” I instruct.

And he did for once.

I laid it out. Dimitri. The false charges. Morozov's reach into the system. Nick doesn't argue. He just drags a hand down his face, the reality of it all sinking into his features like he already knows how bad it is.

“I told him,” Nick mutters, pacing. “I told Dimitri it wouldn't be easy to take down Morozov.”

“You owe me, Nick. You owe him. And you're going to help me.”

He doesn't like it. I can see the fear shining behind his eyes. But I also see a hint of guilt.

“What do you want from me?”

“Everything you know. Names, habits, safehouses, anything Morozov might use to pressure judges or fabricate evidence. You worked for him. You know how he operates.”

“He'll find me. And then he'll kill me. Besides, I've already given Dimitri and Aleksandr information. I don't know what else I can tell you.”

“If we don't stop him, he'll come for all of us. So, start talking. Tell me everything you told them, every detail, every name. Don't hold back. Maybe something you forgot will come back to you.”

The silence stretches between us, tight and brittle. Then Nick nods. And just like that, we have a plan. A shaky alliance held together by desperation and the thin thread of past mistakes. But it's something. And right now, something is all I have.

Nick pours himself a drink, his hands shaking slightly. “I overheard something at Venezia,” he states, referring to the Italian restaurant where he'd worked. “Morozov's men talked too much when they thought no one was listening.”

“What did you hear?” I press.

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He takes a nervous sip. “There's a guard at the prison. Russian guy named Baranov. I served him and one of Morozov's enforcers dinner about a month ago. They kept their voices down, but I caught bits and pieces while refilling their drinks.”

“And?”

“Baranov's on Morozov's payroll. He has been for years. They weren't exactly friends, but both came from the same area in Russia. Baranov owes Morozov, though I don't know why.”

I lean forward. “Did they mention anyone else? Anyone controlling things?”

Nick hesitates, clearly deciding how much to share. “There's a lawyer they mentioned. Benjamin Petrov. He eats at Venezia every Thursday at the same table by the window. Very particular about his food. The kind of man who thinks everyone is beneath him.”

“What's his connection to Morozov?”

“He handles legit business stuff. At least that's what it looks like. But the way they talked about him...he's more than just a lawyer. He's Morozov's fixer.”

“You think he was involved in framing Dimitri?”

Nick nods. “I don't know details, but Morozov's men stopped talking whenever I got too close to their table. One night though, after too much vodka, one of them bragged about ‘setting up the Avilov dog’ and mentioned Petrov had ‘taken care of the

paperwork.””

“Where can I find this Petrov?”

Nick's eyes widen in panic. “You can't be serious. You can't just walk up to him and start asking questions. These people don't play games, Sandy.”

“I'm not planning to ask nicely,” I reply, calm despite the storm raging inside me. “I need leverage.”

Nick studies me for a long moment as if he's seeing someone he doesn't recognize. “You've changed.”

“No,” I say quietly, holding his gaze. “I've always been this way. I just never had a reason to show it—until now.”

He drains his glass. “Look, I don't know much. I was just the guy pouring drinks and serving pasta. But I do know Petrov keeps an office on the Upper East Side. It's very fancy. I delivered catering there once when they were short-staffed.”

“What else do you know about him?”

“He's paranoid. Keeps files on everyone, including Morozov. It's his insurance policy. If anything happens to him, those files go public. At least that's what I overheard one night.”

“And you know where these files are kept?”

Nick shakes his head. “In his office somewhere, but that place is like Fort Knox. I was only ever in the reception area.”

“You must know something else,” I press. “Someone who works there, maybe?”

Nick tugs at the ends of his hair, his eyes darting as if torn between silence and confession. “There’s a woman,” he answers at last. “Marina. She’s Russian, like the rest of them. She’s on the cleaning crew now, but she used to come into the restaurant sometimes for lunch.”

“And you think she could help me?”

“Maybe. She hates Morozov’s people. Something about her brother getting caught up in their business back in Russia. But Sandy, this is dangerous. These aren’t people you mess with.”

“I’m carrying the child of a man who’s been falsely imprisoned and might be murdered before he ever gets to see his baby,” I say, my voice breaking despite my efforts to keep it steady. “I’m already in danger. We all are.”

Nick exhales, the sound filled with hints of regret. “I might be able to work something out with Marina. But Sandy... you’ve gotta promise me one thing.”

“That depends on what you’re asking,” I mutter, my voice flat, arms crossed tight.

“If this goes sideways, if anything happens, you tell Aleksandr it was all me. That I forced you into it.”

I almost laughed. “Nobody forces me to do anything, Nick.”

His gaze drops to the floor. “When Morozov’s men came after me at the coffee shop, I dragged you into this. You were in the line of fire the second I opened my mouth. And now, Aleksandr and Dimitri... they’re protecting me. Giving me a second chance I don’t deserve. They’re helping me disappear.”

His eyes meet mine again, steady now, with no flinch or hesitation. “I owe them. I owe you. If this blows up, I take the fall. Not you.”

I don’t respond. There isn’t anything to say that doesn’t feel small in the face of that kind of loyalty.

“I’ll call you tomorrow with the details,” Nick says quietly, walking me to the door. Then, just as I step out, his voice stops me.

“And Sandy?”

I turn, catching the strain in his expression.

“Be careful. Morozov isn’t just dangerous because he’s violent. He’s dangerous because he sees people. He figures out what they want, what they fear... where they’re weak. And he turns it all into a weapon.”

I nod, the warning sinking in like a blade.

“Goodnight, Nick.”

As I drive back to the Avilov estate, I think about Nick's words regarding Morozov's understanding of people's fears. I place my hand on my stomach, feeling the gentle kick of my baby. The truth is, Morozov already knows my greatest fear. He's already targeted Dimitri.

But Morozov doesn’t understand that fear can be transformed into something else entirely. Something far more dangerous. Determination.

When I pull into the driveway, a plan begins to take shape. It isn’t perfect, and it sure as hell isn’t safe, but it’s something. A foothold in a war I’m not willing to lose.

The house is quiet when I step inside, but I'm not surprised to find Talia waiting. She emerges barefoot and wide-eyed from the living room shadows like she hasn't moved in hours.

"Did you talk to him?" she asks softly.

I nod, dropping onto the couch beside her with a weary exhale. "Yeah. And I might have a way to get to Morozov's lawyer, Benjamin Petrov."

Talia's eyebrows snap together. "Benjamin Petrov? Aleksandr's mentioned him before."

"But Aleksandr doesn't have what I do."

She tilts her head. "What's that?"

I let a slow, dark smile pull at my lips. "The element of surprise. Nobody sees the pregnant girlfriend as a threat."

Talia studies me, the worry unmistakable in her eyes. "This is a dangerous game, sis."

"I know," I admit. "But what choice do I have? Dimitri's running out of time. I can feel it."

She reaches for my hand, squeezing it tightly. "Then we better make sure you're prepared. Because if we're going after Petrov, you're going to need more than just surprise on your side."

"What do you mean we?"

Talia's expression hardens. "I mean, it's time you learned what it really means to be

part of this family. To be an Avilov.”

At this moment, as I look into my sister's eyes, I realize that the path forward isn't about escaping the darkness. It's about embracing it, becoming it, for Dimitri and our child. For all of us.

“We start tomorrow,” she states.

That night, I had a dream about Dimitri.

Not locked behind bars but standing in the sunlight, his arms around me, our child between us.

It was a dream of a future that seemed impossibly distant.

But as I woke to the cold emptiness of my bed, I made a silent vow.

I will make that dream real, no matter what it takes or who I have to become.

For Dimitri. For our family. For our future.

I will burn the world to ashes if I have to.

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DIMITRI

Prison changes a man. Not all at once or in the way people think. It doesn't shatter you in some sudden burst of clarity. No, it's slower than that. Quieter. Like rust eating through steel or rot spreading beneath the surface of a polished floor.

You don't notice it until the walls start pressing in on you. Not the physical ones, but the kind built from silence and the echo of what you've lost.

I lean against the cold cement wall of my solitary cell, a thin stream of light slanting in through the small window cut high into the wall.

I haven't seen the sun in full for days.

It just peeks through wire mesh or flashes through the reinforced glass during transfers.

But that light, pale, sterile, too weak to offer warmth, still finds a way to crawl over my bruised skin and into my bones.

Every movement hurts. My back aches where a guard's baton slammed into me last night.

It was "accidental," he said. My jaw still throbs from the fist that broke the skin on day five.

My knuckles are raw from the fight I started on purpose.

Better to strike first than wait for the knife in your back.

But none of that compares to the real pain of being without Sandy. Every hour without her, every minute without her voice or the touch of her hand, eats away at me.

I don't deserve her. But I'll die to protect her. And right now, death doesn't seem like such a distant possibility.

I close my eyes, letting memories of her wash over me.

The curve of her smile in the morning light, the way her hair spilled across my chest as she slept, the fierce determination in her eyes when she told me she was pregnant.

Our child. My legacy. The thought of them both pulls at something deep inside my chest that I buried long ago when I first took the oath of the Bratva.

Hope.

In this concrete box, hope is a dangerous thing. It makes you soft and vulnerable. But for Sandy and our child, I'll risk it all.

The scrape of my fingernails against the rough wall keeps me grounded.

Seven days in this hole already feels like five years.

Time stretches and contracts without rhythm or reason.

The only constants are the meals shoved through the slot three times a day and the bruising rounds of "questioning" that come without warning.

I trace the lines of graffiti etched into the wall beside my cot. Names, dates, prayers, curses. The desperate marks of men who'd sat exactly where I sit now. Some made it out. Others didn't. I wonder which I will be.

Heavy boots echo down the corridor. I don't move from the cot. You learn not to react unless there is a reason to. Half the time, it's some rookie guard swinging his authority around. The other half, it's a test. Today, it feels like neither.

The footsteps stop outside my cell. The small slot at the door slides open. Then, a voice, low and measured and unmistakably Russian, cuts through the quiet.

“Open it.”

The lock disengages with a loud mechanical clunk. The door creaks open, and the light from the hallway blinds me for a moment.

Then I see him. Aleksandr.

He steps inside like he owns the place. The walls don't matter, and the grime of the prison can't touch him. He wears his suit like a crown, his expression like a mask carved from ice.

“ Brat ,” he says.

“ Pakhan ,” I murmur, standing slowly. My ribs protest the movement, but I push through it. The pain is irrelevant. I won't let him see me weak.

His eyes sweep over me, cataloging the damage. “You look like hell.”

“Yeah?” I rasp. “You should see the other guy.”

He doesn't smile. He doesn't even flinch. He just walks farther in and glances around the cell like he might order someone to have it burned down out of spite. When he finally turns back, the tension between us isn't just about bruises and blood.

Aleksandr's jaw ticks. "Talk."

I sit back down on the cot, leaning forward with my elbows on my knees. "They sent a guy after me. Yard scuffle. Shiv to the throat if I hadn't seen it coming. He said Morozov gave the order. 'You don't make it out,' were his exact words."

The memory flashes before me. The glint of metal, the burning slice across my cheek, the copper taste of blood filling my mouth.

I'd moved on instinct, years of training kicking in before my mind could even process the danger.

One moment, I was standing in the yard. The next, I was driving my attacker into the concrete wall, his makeshift blade clattering to the ground between us.

Aleksandr paces, eyes sharp, every movement precise. The kind of quiet fury that makes men piss themselves. "You kill him?"

"Almost. Left him breathing—barely. The guards stepped in too early." I pause, licking the cracked corner of my lip. "They put me in solitary under the guise of protection. But you and I both know what that is—it's containment. It makes it easier next time."

He curses under his breath in Russian. His accent deepens when he does that, and his mask slips just enough to show the man beneath.

"Andrei won't stop," I continue. "He's not here for negotiation. He's here to destroy

us from the inside out.”

His face doesn't change, not at first. But I see the shift, the crack behind his eyes, that hint of worry no pakhan is allowed to show.

“The guards came after me, too. Two of them. They're on Morozov's payroll. I took care of them, but they haven't tried to kill me again. Not yet, anyway.”

I haven't told Sandy about that. About the night they'd come for me.

“Special interrogation,” they called it.

How I'd disabled them both, dragged their unconscious bodies into a supply closet, and made it back to my cell before anyone realized what had happened. She doesn't need to know how close I'd come to being another statistic, another body found hanging in a cell with a falsified report claiming suicide.

A long silence stretches between us. Aleksandr doesn't speak or move. Then he sits on the bench against the opposite wall, his hands clasped in front of him, his elbows on his knees, mirroring my posture. It was the closest we've been to equals in a long time.

“I'm not worried about dying in here,” I state quietly. “That's the easy part.”

He raises an eyebrow.

“I'm worried about Sandy. About what it will do to her if I don't make it out. About the baby growing up with a father's name and no father to wear it.”

My throat tightens at the thought. I know what it is like to grow up fatherless.

The hollow space where guidance should be, and the constant questions that had no answers.

My own father had been buried before I was old enough to remember his face.

I'd only known him through stories, faded photographs, and the rare occasions when Otets wasn't listening, and my mother's guard dropped enough to share a memory.

I won't let my child grow up that way. Not with the same emptiness and questions.

Aleksandr looks away, his jaw grinding tight. "You think I'd let anything happen to them?"

"No," I reply. "I think you'd burn this place to the ground to protect them."

"Damn right I would."

"If Morozov wants to hurt me, he doesn't need to touch me. He just needs to touch her."

The thought alone is enough to make my blood boil.

Sandy has already been through too much because of me and the world I dragged her into.

Every night since the arrest, I'd woken in a cold sweat, images of her broken body haunting me. It isn't just paranoia.

It's an experience. I know what men like Morozov are capable of.

He stands abruptly, fists clenched. "We should've killed him when we had the

chance.”

“I should've made sure I did,” I breathe.

The memory of that night played through my mind.

Morozov fought with the strength of a desperate man.

His elbow caught me in the jaw, sending stars across my vision.

I responded with a knee to his injured leg, drawing a howl of pain.

We rolled again, and suddenly, there was nothing beneath my back but air—we'd reached the roof's edge, teetering on the precipice.

For a suspended moment, we stared at each other, my hand gripping his coat collar, his fingers digging into my arm. Mutual destruction was one wrong move away. In his eyes, I saw naked fear for the first time.

Something shifted in his expression—calculation replacing fear. “Perhaps another day, Popov.”

With surprising strength, he ripped himself from my grasp, simultaneously shoving me back from the edge. As I scrambled to maintain balance, he grabbed his dropped rope, snapping the carabiner to his belt. Before I could reach him, he threw himself backward off the roof to his escape.

I lean back against the wall, staring up at the ceiling. “If I don't make it out of here, promise me something.”

Aleksandr doesn't turn around. “Don't say that.”

“I need you to hear it.”

I release a heavy sigh. “Promise me that she'll never feel alone. That our child will know who I was. Not the monster the media paints me to be, but the man who loves them more than his own breath.”

I can count on one hand the number of times I've seen Aleksandr truly shaken.

This is one of them. We've lost too much in this life. Parents, siblings, Bratva brothers, and parts of ourselves we can never get back. But this is different. This isn't about the Bratva, territory, or respect. This is about family.

Aleksandr turns slowly, and for once, the pakhan is gone. What I see in his eyes isn't power. It's pain. The same pain I'm carrying.

He steps toward the cell door and knocks once. It slides open, the light spilling in again.

“I'll get you out,” he vows without turning, his voice low and lethal. “You're not done yet. I'm getting someone inside. Someone we can trust. Until then, keep your head down and stay alive.”

He glances back, eyes burning like lit fuses. “One way or another, I'm pulling you out of this hell.”

I force a smirk through the pain. “Then move fast, brat . I'm running out of patience—and mercy.”

He pauses but doesn't respond.

“And maybe get a new cot, too. This one's shit.”

Then he was gone. The door slams shut behind him, steel against stone.

And I'm alone again.

I lean against the wall, one hand sliding to my side, where a bruise blooms beneath my shirt. The pain keeps me sharp. It reminds me I'm still alive.

Morozov wants me dead? He'll have to do better. Because when I get out of here, I'm coming for blood.

Hours pass like thick honey. I run through mental exercises to keep my mind sharp. Russian vocabulary my grandmother taught me as a child. Floor plans of buildings I memorized for Bratva operations. The exact sequence of events that led me here.

Morozov set me up. He has enough influence to fabricate evidence, to convince a judge that I'm an imminent threat who needs to be locked away immediately.

The charges are laughable to anyone who knows the truth.

Attempted murder of a federal witness who doesn't exist, obstruction of justice in a case I have no connection to.

However, the evidence they manufactured is convincing enough for a judge who already has a grudge against the Bratva.

I trace the seven stitches on my cheek, feeling the tight pull of healing skin.

The doctor was right. This one will leave a scar.

Another mark to add to my collection. Sandy always says my scars tell stories.

This one will tell of betrayal, a system rigged against men like me, and enemies who will stop at nothing to see me buried.

The scrape of metal against concrete pulls me from my thoughts. Heavy and purposeful footsteps approach my cell. It isn't the regular guard rotation. My muscles tense automatically, preparing for whatever comes next.

The metal slot slides open with a dull clank. Jensen's voice comes through, low and even.

"You've got a new neighbor, Popov. Thought you should know."

His tone is casual, almost conversational, but there is no mistaking the intent behind them.

"Is that right?" I keep my voice neutral, revealing nothing.

"Yeah. Some Russian guy. Transferred in this morning." He pauses, letting the implication sink in. "Name's Orlov."

My breath catches in my throat. Danil Orlov. One of Aleksandr's men. The "ally" he promised.

So, it begins. The first move in a game that will either set me free or bury me. I feel a smile tug at the corner of my mouth.

"Thanks for the update," I reply evenly.

The guard nods once, then disappears. I don't know if he was on our payroll now or just happened to be one of the decent ones.

It doesn't matter. What matters is that Aleksandr fulfilled his promise.

He got someone on the inside who can watch my back, relay messages, and maybe even help engineer a way out of this hellhole.

I sink onto the cot and draw in a breath, the first real one I've taken since the day they arrested me.

That night, I had a dream about Sandy. Not as I'd last seen her, pale with worry and trying desperately to be strong for both of us.

But as she will be when I return home. Glowing.

Fierce. Her body growing with our child.

In the dream, I place my hand on her stomach and feel our baby kick against my palm, a tiny heartbeat pulsing beneath my fingers.

I wake with fire in my veins.

Across the cell, the small window shows the first hint of dawn, a pale glow that does little to brighten the darkness. Another day, another step closer to freedom or death.

The Russian in me, the Bratva soldier trained to kill without remorse, wants blood. I want to tear Morozov apart with my bare hands and make him suffer as I'm suffering. To ensure that when death finally comes for him, it will be slow and painful. A lesson written in agony that no one will forget.

But the man I'm trying to be, that Sandy believes I can be, wants justice. I want the evidence to clear my name and to walk out of here with my head held high. To return to her and our child with clean hands and build a future that isn't founded on more

bloodshed.

I'm not sure which man will win in the end. Perhaps both. Perhaps neither.

All I know is that these walls won't hold me forever. That Aleksandr won't rest until I'm free. Sandy is out there waiting and fighting in her own way. And that has to be enough.

I press my palm against the cold cement wall, feeling the rough texture against my skin. Prison changes a man, yes. But it doesn't have to break him. Not if he has something worth fighting for.

Whatever comes next, whatever Morozov has planned, and whatever cards Aleksandr has yet to play, I will face it standing. Because that's what men like me do.

We stand. We fight. We survive. And then, when the moment is right, we strike.

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SANDY

I can't sleep. Every time I close my eyes, I feel Dimitri's hands again tracing over my skin like a memory I can't shake, searing and intimate, haunting me with every breath.

He pumps his cock slowly at first, and I dig my nails into his chest as the sweet friction sends me into a sexual frenzy.

"More," I whimper, grinding my pussy on his cock. "Faster...please..." I want him to fill me up until I can't think of anything else but his cock inside me. I'm writhing on top of him, trying to force him to pick up the pace. But instead, he pulls out completely, leaving me shocked and empty.

"Who does this pussy belong to?" he hisses, fire and desire burning in his eyes. "Tell me..."

"You," I purr, leaning forward and pressing my lips to his. "My pussy belongs to you."

"That's right," he rasps, sliding his tongue around my earlobe. "And don't ever forget it."

He lifts me up and slams me down onto his cock. I grit my teeth as my body spasms from the fullness. Sliding his arm around my waist, he pins me in place and fucks me hard, slamming his hips up so violently that the sound echoes in the cabin.

My eyes roll back inside my head from the pleasure, and I cry out, “Yes! Oh God...Dimitri...”

He fucks me even harder, wringing an orgasm from me so strong that my body goes limp on top of him.

Rolling me over, he slides his cock between my breasts, squeezing them together as he fucks them rapidly.

With a low grunt, he pumps his cock one last time before covering my breasts with ribbons of his hot sticky cum.

My eyes snap open, fixed on the ceiling above.

I exhale slowly, trying to steady my breathing, but my thoughts won’t quiet.

They begin to pace in circles like a bloodhound chasing its own tail.

Benjamin Petrov, the files, and the unshakable truth that somewhere inside that pristine office, hidden behind glass doors and polished marble, lies the key to freeing Dimitri.

By morning, Marina had texted me a single word: Tonight.

When the mansion finally goes still and sleep claims everyone else, I slip into all black.

Nothing flashy or cinematic, just fitted leggings, a hoodie, and worn sneakers soft enough not to echo against polished marble floors.

I leave my hair in a tight braid, tuck my phone into my sports bra, and try not to

flinch every time I pass a mirror.

I look like a girl about to commit a felony. Because I am.

Dimitri will kill me for this . I take a deep breath and release it slowly. Let him try.

Marina meets me two blocks from Petrov's office building. She doesn't say hello. She just hands me a laminated ID and a pair of latex gloves. "You've got twenty minutes. No more."

Her voice is low and clipped, her accent barely noticeable beneath years of practice. But her eyes, icy and sharp, speak volumes.

We slip inside through a side entrance used by staff, past a loading dock where empty boxes sit. Marina leads me through the service corridor, past a mechanical room, and then opens a nondescript door into the back of the lobby.

Petrov's office is on the twentieth floor. The elevator ride is silent except for the thrum of my pulse in my ears.

At the top, Marina hands me a keycard and a small silver key. "Once you're inside, Jorge will keep the cameras looped. But I can't protect you if someone walks in."

"Understood."

"Don't touch anything you don't have to," she warns.

"I'm not here to steal," I say.

She gives me a look that could crack glass. "Then you're dumber than you look."

Petrov's office is as ostentatious as I expected. It has floor-to-ceiling windows that overlook the city, polished mahogany floors, and a painting of some Russian czar glaring down from above the fireplace.

I head straight for the wall cabinet Nick described. It's locked, but that doesn't last. I slide the small silver key into place, turn it with a quiet click, and open the panel.

My breath catches. Files. Dozens of them.

Neatly organized, labeled with precision, each stamped with dates hinting at something far more calculated than coincidence.

I don't have time to review them all, so I grab the ones marked with red tabs.

My hands tremble as I flip through pages of names, transaction logs, call transcripts, and even printed emails annotated with a neat, vicious scrawl.

One name keeps surfacing. Detective Louis Russo.

At first, I think it's a coincidence. But then I see it again. And again. It's folded into reports about seized shipments that mysteriously vanished, testimonies that changed mid-trial, and a case dismissed because "the officer failed to appear."

Money moves through these pages like blood through veins. It isn't just bribes. It's laundered cash. Wire transfers are routed through shell charities and front companies, all of which bear Petrov's signature at the bottom. And Russo? He isn't a pawn. He's Petrov's partner.

This is it, I think, snapping photos as fast as my phone can handle. This is leverage.

I don't hear Marina come back in. I only feel the air shift before her voice slices

through the silence.

“Five minutes.”

I nod, already moving, restoring every file to its place like I was never there. “You said he keeps digital backups. Where?”

She pauses, then whispers, “Encrypted drive built into his desk. You need fingerprint access. You won’t crack it.”

I don’t waste time trying. I have enough to light a fuse, but Petrov won’t see the explosion coming.

We move fast on the way down. No words are exchanged, just the tense rhythm of two women bound by necessity and mutual risk. At the service exit, Marina pauses.

“If he finds out,” she warns, “he won’t just kill you. He’ll destroy everything you love.”

“He can try,” I hiss. “But he’s not the only one with sharp teeth.”

When I return, Lev is in the estate kitchen, hunched over a tablet with three phones scattered around him. He looks like a soldier who never came off the battlefield. He doesn’t glance up as I walk in.

“You need to take a look at this,” I state, tossing my phone onto the counter in front of him.

Lev picks it up, brows lifting slightly as he scrolls through the images. “Petrov’s files?”

“Mostly payment logs and police transcripts. There’s a name that keeps coming up. Detective Louis Russo.”

That gets his attention. He taps through a few photos, zooms in on the signature, then looks at me. “You’re sure this is legit?”

“They were in his locked office files. They have to be legit.”

Lev’s jaw tightens, and a muscle ticks beneath the shadow of his stubble. “Where’d you get these?”

Lev’s stare pins me in place, sharp enough to cut glass. I clear my throat, but he doesn’t push it.

“Russo’s been a thorn in our side for years,” he mutters.

“Corrupt to the core, but it’s more than that.

He’s got a personal vendetta against Aleksandr. Always finding ways to interfere, sabotage deals, stir up heat where there shouldn’t be any.

But if we can tie him directly to Petrov...

and to Morozov—” He lets the rest hang, the promise of retribution thick in the silence that follows.

“We use it,” I finish. “We turn his own man against him.”

Lev looks at me momentarily, not with pity or disapproval but with something close to respect.

“I’ll dig,” he finally says. “But quietly. If we go too loud too fast, Petrov will burn it all down before we can nail him.”

“I know.” I grab one of the mugs sitting near the edge of the counter, fill it with coffee, and take a sip.

Lev doesn’t say a word. He just sits there watching me. And somehow, the silence between us says more than any accusation ever can. “Dimitri wouldn’t want you taking this kind of risk.”

I meet his stare without flinching. “Too late for that.”

His eyes narrow. “You care about him.”

My throat tightens, but I don’t look away. “Yes. I do.”

He sets the phone down with a dull thud and leans in, his voice low and hard. “This world doesn’t forgive love. It chews it up and spits it out. Especially when it comes from people like us.”

I hold his gaze. “Then maybe it’s time someone makes it choke.”

He pauses, then nods slowly. The kind where words mean less than action. “I’ll reach out to someone I trust,” he states. “If there’s a trail, we’ll find it.”

I turn toward the hallway but stop just before crossing the threshold. “Lev?”

He glances up.

“Thank you.”

He doesn't answer. Just gives a single nod, quiet and firm. The type that doesn't ask for loyalty but returns it anyway. The kind that means I've got your back .

I step out of the kitchen and into the dim hallway. The estate is cloaked in quiet. My phone feels lighter in my hand, but my heart feels heavier in my chest.

Dimitri is still locked away in a concrete box for crimes he didn't commit. But for the first time since he was taken, I have a weapon. And I plan to wield it like hellfire.

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DIMITRI

They move me without ceremony or warning. There is a knock on the metal door, and a look is exchanged between the two guards, who don't bother hiding that they know exactly what they are doing.

"General population," one of them mumbles like it's nothing.

But it's everything.

Solitary might be hell, but it's controlled.

Predictable. I can manage my time, keep my head down, and wait for Aleksandr's next legal move. But gen pop? That is open season. A concrete jungle with no order, alliances, or rules. Just men crawling over each other to prove who the biggest monster in the cage is. And now I'm just another beast dropped into the pit.

The door clangs behind me with a finality that feels like betrayal.

I step into a cavernous, echoing space where every surface is made of steel and concrete.

The air stinks of bleach, sweat, and something sour that lingers in the back of my throat.

The din of voices dips for half a second as I cross the threshold, just long enough for the entire room to take notice.

Eyes track me. Heads lift. Bodies tense.

I feel the shift in the atmosphere, the tightening tension like a pulled wire straining before the snap that comes right before the first punch is thrown.

I don't slow my pace. Don't glance left or right. It will be blood in the water if I give them a moment of hesitation. I spent a lifetime cultivating the ice in my veins, and now it is the only currency that matters.

I walk through the center of the room like I still rule a goddamn empire. The concrete walls and steel bars are just temporary inconveniences in the grand scheme of my life. Like the men watching me are nothing but footnotes in my story.

They don't know me, but it doesn't matter. Men like me wear the aura of danger like a tailored suit. They'll either sense it and keep their distance or test it and find out the hard way why I'm the last man they should cross.

In the Bratva respect isn't given. It's taken by force if necessary. These prison walls might change the battlefield, but they don't change the rules of war.

I claim a corner table, my back to the wall, my hands flat on the cold metal. I don't touch the tray they shove in front of me. I don't react when the guards disappear behind the security glass like shadows retreating into the fog. I simply watch and wait. Each muscle is pulled taut and ready.

That's when he appears.

He is older than most of the meatheads milling around the mess hall. Hard, scarred, and as still as a loaded gun on a bedside table. His eyes have the flat, dead look of a man who's seen too much and lost everything that matters. He drops into the seat across from me without a word.

His arms are covered in ink. Military ink. He is the man who has walked through fire and didn't flinch when it scorched him.

“You're not stupid,” he says quietly, his Russian clean and clipped. “So, I won't insult you by pretending this isn't what it is.”

I don't speak. In my world, words are cheap unless they are backed by blood or bullets.

“That transfer wasn't random. It wasn't policy. It was a death sentence,” he continues, voice low and even. “Morozov has men in here. Not many but enough to make you bleed if you're not careful.”

My jaw tightens, the muscle ticking beneath my skin like a detonator waiting for its cue. I don't blink or show a single trace of the rage building inside me at Morozov's name. That bastard thinks he can reach me anywhere, even here, surrounded by guards, concrete, and security cameras.

“I've been inside a long time, Popov,” he adds, his eyes like slits of flint. “I know a setup when I see one. He wants you dead and he's getting impatient.”

“You're ex-Spetsnaz,” I say at last.

A faint smirk ghosts across his lips. “Mikhail.”

I lean in slightly, my voice dropping to something quieter, deadlier. “So, tell me, soldier...why the warning? You could've kept your distance. Let me bleed out like just another name on the list.”

He cocks his head, those sharp gray eyes sweeping the mess hall with lethal precision like a sniper marking threats before pulling the trigger.

“Because I don’t respect cowards,” he replies, his tone flat. “And Morozov? He’s the worst kind. Sends lapdogs to do the work his hands are too soft for.”

I watch him carefully. “And you’re not one of them?”

His gaze slides back to mine, unwavering. “I belong to no one.”

I study him. Every line of his face tells a story of battles fought and lost, of loyalty misplaced and trust shattered. He is a man with nothing left to lose, but he still hasn’t quit fighting. Those are the most dangerous kind. The kind I respect.

“You’ve got eyes in here?” I ask.

He nods once, a barely perceptible movement.

“I need them.”

“I figured.” He taps his fingers against the table once, then stands. “For now, we watch each other’s backs. That’s it. Don’t expect me to take a shiv for you.”

“I don’t expect anything I wouldn’t do myself.”

His gaze flicks over me again, a soldier’s appraisal of another soldier. There is no handshake, no dramatic oath. Just a silent understanding between two men who recognize the same darkness in each other. The kind of alliance we just made doesn’t need ink or blood.

It lives in the space between understanding and necessity.

My hand drops to my thigh, where the old ache still lives like a ghost beneath the skin.

The stab wound I took for Aleksandr all those years ago in Rio de Janeiro, the night everything went sideways.

A blood-soaked alley, a betrayal we never saw coming, and a choice made in seconds to protect my brother, protect the pakhan .

Danil is still in the hole, locked down and silenced. They know what they are doing, cutting the muscle from the bone and separating us like wolves pulled from the pack. Break the bond, weaken the defense, and leave me exposed for the kill.

But they missed something vital. I'm not alone anymore. Not really.

Sandy's face floats through my mind. Her fierce eyes and that stubborn mouth.

The way she looked at me before I was dragged out in cuffs like she already knew she'd burn the world down to get me back.

The woman who'd stumbled into my life and refuses to be intimidated by the blood on my hands or the price on my head.

The one who sees past the monster to the man beneath.

And the baby.

God help me. I can't even picture its face yet, but I feel it like a heartbeat under my skin. A tether anchoring me to something pure and still worth bleeding for. My child. My legacy. A part of me and Sandy that will live beyond this bloodshed.

Otets used to say men like us don't get happy endings. We live by the sword, and if we're lucky, we die by it too. No illusions. No peace. Just the mark of blood and the code etched into our bones.

But Sandy's pregnancy shifted something in me. It broke open the part I'd buried under years of violence and vengeance. It isn't about the Bratva anymore. It isn't about legacy, power, or retribution. It's about them. Sandy and the life growing inside her. The future I never let myself want.

And I sure as hell aren't going to die in a concrete tomb for Morozov's twisted idea of justice. I have a war to win. And I'll fight it tooth and nail, broken rib by shattered knuckle, until I claw my way out of this goddamn cage and back to them.

Mikhail slips back into the chaos like smoke on a battlefield, silent and unseen but ready to strike.

I stay put, my hands flat on the cold metal table, my body still and mind sharper than ever. Calm and controlled. In rooms like this, the real predators don't fidget. They wait.

The mess hall comes alive around me again.

The scrape of plastic trays, the clang of metal spoons, and the low grunt of laughter from men who long since stopped caring about being heard.

But I know better. That noise isn't comfortable.

It's camouflage. And the lull? It's just the calm before the blade.

Something is coming. I can feel it like static in my blood. It's the same instinct that has kept me alive through a dozen wars and twice as many assassination attempts. The sixth sense that all predators develop when they've been hunted long enough.

Two tables over, a fight breaks out. Fast and loud. It was the kind of brawl that didn't happen without permission.

A wiry inmate with a shaved head launches himself across a table, slamming into a broad-shouldered guy who doesn't even have time to stand. A fist connects with flesh. A tray flies, scattering food across the floor like shrapnel. Chairs topple. Men shout.

Then all hell breaks loose.

More inmates jump in. Some are pulled apart, others goad it on. It's chaos, or at least it looks that way. But I've seen too much to believe in coincidence. This is a distraction.

And just like clockwork, the real threat moves through the smoke.

He comes from the side, lean and pale. A teardrop tattoo on one eye and knuckles already cracked from too many fights. He doesn't charge. That would draw attention. No, he stalks like a fucking hyena looking for something soft to rip into.

I don't give him the satisfaction of standing. Instead, I watch him approach through hooded eyes, measuring his stride and noting the slight favor to his left leg. It might be a weak knee or an old injury. Either way, it's a vulnerability.

He closes the distance, one hand slipping something small and silver from his waistband. A shiv. Homemade and crude but effective.

I rise when he's three steps away, my body uncoiling with the controlled power of a viper's strike.

His mouth twists into a grin. "Popov," he sneers. "Morozov sends his regards."

"Then he should've sent someone better."

He lunges. But I'm already moving.

The bench screeches across the floor as I kick it behind me, forcing him to shift his footing. That moment of imbalance cost him. My fist slams into his jaw twice before he registers the hit. The knuckles connecting with bone echo in my ears, familiar as a lullaby.

His arm swings wide with the blade, but I duck low and drive my shoulder into his ribs, lifting and slamming him backward onto the table. The metal groans under the sudden impact of his weight.

He gasps, the air rushing from his lungs. I grab his wrist mid-swing, twisting until bone grinds against bone, feeling the tendons strain beneath my grip. This is the kind of pressure that promises broken fingers and a useless hand if pushed just a fraction of a second further.

The blade clatters to the floor. And that's when the second one comes.

The bastard was waiting, hidden by the noise, the bodies, and the guards, who were too slow to respond. Too busy handling the fight across the room to notice the real danger unfolding in the corner.

He rushes me from behind. I barely turn in time, but I didn't have to.

Mikhail moves like a shadow through fire. He appears out of nowhere, his forearm catching the second attacker mid-charge, driving him back with a grunt of pain. Then his elbow comes down hard across the man's temple, and he crumples.

It is fast, efficient, and brutal. The type of violence that doesn't waste movement or hesitate with mercy.

“Two already?” Mikhail quips, grabbing the man's collar sprawled across the table and tossing him off. “You're popular.”

I don't smile. But something in my chest settles. An alliance tested and proven in the heat of battle. Worth more than any oath or promise.

A whistle shrieks from the guard tower, piercing the din of shouting and fighting.

“On the floor! On the fucking floor!”

Rifles point down from the balcony. The guards finally noticed. Orders are barked, and sirens echo. Boots on the metal staircases thud as reinforcements descend.

“Go down,” Mikhail urges. “Let them do the rest.”

I kneel, putting my hands behind my head.

My pulse thunders, but I keep my breathing steady. The adrenaline still courses through my system, but I control it, channel it, and use it to sharpen my senses rather than cloud my judgment.

It isn't about winning the fight but about surviving the next hour, the next day, and the next week until I can find a way back to Sandy and everything that matters.

Boots thunder toward us. The first guard shoves me hard, checking for weapons. His hands are rough against my sides, back, and legs. The second slams the butt of his rifle into the ribs of the guy who came at me. Another is already cuffing Mikhail.

“What the fuck happened here?” the officer snaps, his eyes wild with that particular blend of fear and authority that makes prison guards dangerous.

I don't answer. Mikhail doesn't either. The evidence speaks for itself. Two inmates groaning in pain, one with a dislocated arm, the other half-conscious, both bleeding.

And me? Untouched. Not a scratch. Not a drop of blood that isn't someone else's. The guards can't prove shit.

Still, I know what is coming. They drag us toward the wall with zip ties cinched tight, curses flying, and boots thudding against concrete.

My wrists burn where the plastic bites into my skin, but I keep my mouth shut.

Pain is a familiar companion. I learned to ignore it long ago, back when Otets first taught me that Bratva men don't cry.

One of the guards leans in, his voice low and oily, his breath hot against my ear.

"You're making enemies in here, Popov."

I meet his gaze, cold and unflinching with an icy stare that's made harder men than him shrink away in fear.

"Then maybe they should bring tougher friends."

He flinches. Just slightly. But it's enough to know my message landed.

I might be locked up, but I'm not beaten. Not even close.

As they lead us away, I catch Mikhail's eye. A brief glance, nothing more. But in it is an entire conversation. A plan forming, and a strategy taking shape.

Morozov thought he could reach inside these walls and snuff me out. He thought

wrong.

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SANDY

Waiting is the worst part.

Lev is digging. Aleksandr is watching. And Talia is worrying herself into knots. But I can't just sit around the estate sipping tea, hoping justice will magically crawl out from whatever rock Morozov's hiding it under.

Dimitri is still in that concrete cage, one bad day from not making it out. And me? I'm done waiting.

I slump against the bay window in the west wing of the estate, watching rain trace jagged patterns down the glass.

Two weeks. Two weeks since they'd taken him.

Two weeks of lawyers, bribes, and threats that went nowhere.

The clock ticks away another hour of Dimitri's life, each sound like a hammer against my heart.

My phone buzzes with another text from Lev. Nothing yet. The judge is still deliberating on the motion.

Of course, he is. Because that's what corrupt officials do.

They deliberate while good men bleed. I toss the phone onto the cushion beside me,

watching it sink into the expensive fabric worth more than a year's rent for my apartment.

Funny how wealth means nothing when the person you love is locked away.

All these rooms, all this space, are empty echoes without him.

The baby kicks in a tiny flutter of protest against my ribs. I place my hand over the small bump, barely visible beneath my sweater.

"I know," I whisper. "I miss him too."

Talia doesn't see it that way.

"You need to let Lev and Aleksandr handle this," she told me this morning, her voice tight with fear masked as logic. "You're pregnant, Sandy. This isn't just about you anymore."

She'd cornered me in the kitchen as I made tea, her eyes puffy from another sleepless night. Talia had aged years in weeks, her usual graceful demeanor fractured by worry. Still, she watched me like I was a bomb about to detonate.

"I'm not reckless," I'd snapped, the ceramic mug hot against my palms.

"You're angry," she corrected. "And angry people make mistakes."

The tea scalded my tongue as I took a defiant sip. "We're all angry."

"But we're not all carrying Dimitri's child." Her voice softened as she reached out, her fingers ghosting over my arm. "He would want you safe. Both of you."

I set the mug down with more force than necessary, causing the tea to slosh over the rim. “He would want to be here. And every second we waste playing by their rules is another second he's not.”

“Aleksandr has connections ? —”

“Connections that haven't done a damn thing!” The words had exploded out of me, weeks of pent-up frustration cracking through the surface . “Connections that keep saying ‘wait’ and ‘patience’ while Dimitri is in a cell with men who'd kill him for a pack of cigarettes!”

Talia flinched, but her eyes remained steady. “You think I don't know that?”

Shame washed over me. Of course, she did. Of course, she was suffering too. I rubbed my temples, trying to massage away the constant headache that had taken up residence since Dimitri's arrest.

“I'm sorry,” I murmured. “I just feel so helpless.”

“We all do.” She squeezed my shoulder. “But running headfirst into danger won't bring him home any faster.”

Maybe she was right. But the thought of Dimitri bleeding out behind bars while I sit on my hands makes my skin crawl.

So, I won't stop. Not when Petrov is still breathing. Not when I know deep down that he is the key to all this.

After dinner, I wait until the house grows quiet. Talia retired early with a migraine. The kids are fast asleep. Aleksandr is on a call with his contacts in Moscow. The security team is changing shifts. That brief ten-minute window where attention

wavers just slightly is enough for me to slip away.

I change into black leggings and a black sweater, practical clothes that won't draw attention.

The guard at the gate barely glances at me as I drive past in one of the less conspicuous sedans from the garage.

I'm not the pregnant girlfriend of his imprisoned boss, just another staff member heading out for the evening.

I timed it perfectly to coincide with the shift change and kitchen deliveries.

That's how I ended up parked two blocks from Petrov's office on a Tuesday night, with the engine off, lights dimmed, and a camera clutched in my hands.

The Upper East Side is quieter after nine.

There are fewer cars, fewer distractions, just the occasional cab rolling by, and the buzz of distant neon signs.

Petrov's building sits like a monument to arrogance.

Stone and glass, pristine and smug. I watch the front doors like a hawk, my heart thudding with every passing second.

My back aches from sitting in one position for too long. I shift, trying to find comfort that refuses to come. The baby seems restless tonight, too, putting constant pressure against my bladder that I stubbornly ignore. This is too important to be interrupted by bathroom breaks or discomfort.

I pull out my phone to check for messages.

Nothing from Lev. Nothing from Aleksandr. I only received a text from Talia asking if I wanted chamomile tea before bed.

Guilt twists through me. She thinks I'm upstairs, resting.

She'll check eventually and find my room empty.

Another betrayal to add to the growing list.

A couple walks past my car, arm in arm, laughing about something trivial. I sink lower in my seat, absurdly jealous of their normal lives and ordinary problems. What I wouldn't give to have my biggest worry be which restaurant to try for dinner or which movie to stream on a weeknight.

The digital clock on the dashboard ticks over to 9:30pm.

Talia would kill me if she knew I was here alone. But I'm doing this for Dimitri and our baby.

The sound of the building's revolving door spinning pulls me from my thoughts. I straighten, camera ready.

At 9:37pm, the bastard finally emerges. With slick hair, a tailored coat, and a face like a wax figure carved out of contempt, Benjamin Petrov looks both ways and slides into the back of a black sedan that pulls up to the curb like clockwork.

I memorized his face from the photographs in Lev's files. Petrov has been on Morozov's payroll for years. He is the man who makes problems disappear with a signature and a hefty fee. The man who fabricated the evidence that put Dimitri

behind bars.

“He's a snake,” Lev had told me. “The kind that slithers into your life so quietly you don't notice until you're already poisoned.”

I wait a second, then two, before twisting my keys in the ignition and easing into traffic.

Following someone through the city takes skill.

Too close, and they'll notice. Too far, and you'll lose them at a light.

I watch enough crime dramas to know the basics, but theory and practice are different beasts.

My palms sweat against the steering wheel as I keep three cars between us, my heart hammering every time I think I lost them.

A horn blares as I cut off a taxi to make a yellow light. The driver shouts something obscene, but I keep my eyes forward. I can't afford to lose Petrov now.

They don't go far. Just ten blocks downtown to a private lot tucked behind an upscale steakhouse and a cigar bar. I park across the street, half-shielded by a delivery truck, and kill the lights again.

The restaurant glows with warm light. I can see silhouettes of the wealthy at play through gaps between the curtains. Champagne toasts and business deals are sealed over rare steaks and expensive bourbon.

Petrov steps out, lights a cigarette, and leans against the car like he has all the time in the world. Two minutes later, another car pulls in.

Isaak Kiril.

My pulse spikes the moment I see him. I recognize his face from one of the files in Petrov's office. Lev warned us about him. Kiril isn't just some thug. He's Morozov's cleaner. The guy you call when you want a body gone and no trace left behind.

He and Petrov shake hands. They laugh, the sound of it making my skin crawl like a death sentence sealed with a smile.

I raise my camera, zoom in, and snap a photo. Then another. And another.

Through the lens, I catch details my eyes miss. The thick envelope Petrov passes to Kiril, the casual way Kiril tucks it inside his jacket, the handshake that lingers too long, the wary glances they throw around the parking lot like two predators making sure they aren't observed.

There's a fresh cigarette for each of them, the smoke curling up into the night air like specters. They talk for nearly twenty minutes, heads bent close. I capture it all, finger pressing the shutter button repeatedly, collecting evidence with each click.

They don't hide. They don't care who sees. Confidence like that only comes from believing you're untouchable.

But as I snap one more shot of Petrov handing Kiril a slim black envelope, Kiril's gaze swings right to me.

Panic explodes in my chest. I drop the camera and duck, my heart slamming against my ribs so hard I'm afraid it might give me away. I hold my breath and crouch below the dash, every muscle trembling like I'm wired too tight.

Did he see me? Or did he just sense someone watching? I press my hand to my

mouth, stifling the ragged sound of my breathing. The baby kicks violently, responding to the surge of adrenaline flooding my system.

“It's okay,” I whisper, one hand on my stomach. “We're okay.”

But are we? My mind races through worst-case scenarios. Kiril coming over and finding me. Recognizing me as Dimitri's girlfriend. Doing something to silence me and make me disappear. The thought sends chills down my spine.

Seconds pass. Maybe minutes. I don't dare peek. The sound of tires screeching echoes down the alley. I risk a glance, and Kiril's car is gone. Petrov's, too.

They didn't see me. But Kiril felt something. I knew that look. It's a predator sensing motion in the brush.

I slump back against the seat, my breath catching in my throat. My phone vibrates in my pocket. It's Talia. Three missed calls and a flurry of texts.

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Where are you?

Sandy, please tell me you didn't go out alone.

I'm calling Lev if you don't answer in five minutes.

My fingers tremble as I type a reply. I'm fine. Needed air. Coming home now.

It isn't the first lie I've told my sister, and I hate that it comes so easily now. But it won't be the last until Dimitri is home, alive and free.

This time, though, the lie comes with something real. Something that matters. I have proof and photos of Petrov meeting with Morozov's enforcer. It isn't the smoking gun we need, but it's a thread. And threads, when pulled with enough pressure, can unravel entire tapestries of deceit.

I start the car with shaky hands, checking the rearview mirror compulsively as I pull away from the curb. Every shadow seems to hold a threat. Every passing vehicle is potentially filled with Morozov's men. The city I once found so charming now feels like a labyrinth of dangers.

The drive back to the estate takes thirty minutes. Thirty minutes of jumping at every honking horn and flash of headlights. When I reach the gates, my shirt is damp despite the cool breeze.

The same guard waves me through, still oblivious to what I've been doing. As I park in the garage, I notice Lev's car is there, too. That's not good. If he's here, it means

Talia called him after all.

I tuck the camera into my bag, take a deep breath, and prepare for the confrontation that awaits me inside.

The grand foyer is lit, and voices drift from the study.

Talia's is high with worry, and Lev's is deep and measured.

I consider sneaking upstairs, but they'll only follow. It's better to face them now.

"There you are." Talia's voice cuts through the hall as I step inside. She stands at the base of the staircase, arms crossed, face pale with fear and anger. "Do you have any idea?—"

"I'm sorry," I say, meaning it. Sorry for the worry, if not for the action itself. "I needed to clear my head."

"Clear your head?" She moves toward me, close enough that I can see tears shimmering in her eyes. "You disappeared without a word! With everything that's happening how could you be so thoughtless?"

Lev appears behind her, his massive frame filling the doorway to the library. His face, usually a mask of calm calculation, shows something I rarely see there. Genuine concern.

"Sandy," he huffs. "We were worried."

Guilt slices through me. They're my family, and they're hurting too. But I can't tell them what I did until I know what the photos show.

“I’m sorry,” I repeat, gripping my bag tighter. “It won’t happen again.”

“Where did you go?” Talia demands, wiping angrily at a tear that escaped. “And don’t say ‘for a drive,’ because I know that look. That’s the look you always give me when you’re hiding something.”

For a moment, I consider coming clean and showing them the photos, revealing everything. But something holds me back. Maybe instinct, maybe caution. I need to see what I have first to be sure.

“I went to my apartment,” I lie, the words bitter on my tongue. “I left some things there...some clothes and stuff. I thought it might help to have them.”

Talia’s expression softens slightly. “You should have told me. I would have gone with you. It’s not safe for you to be out there alone.”

“I didn’t want to bother you. You’ve been dealing with so much already.”

Lev’s eyes narrow as he studies me with the same intensity he applies to business negotiations and security threats. I meet his gaze steadily, praying he can’t see through me as easily as Dimitri.

After a long moment, he nods. “Next time, tell someone where you’re going. I have no doubt Morozov hasn’t forgotten about you.”

The bulk of the camera in my bag seems to increase tenfold. “I know. I’m sorry.”

Talia steps forward, wrapping me in a hug that feels like forgiveness I don’t deserve. “Go rest,” she murmurs. “You look exhausted.”

I hug her back, fighting the urge to confess everything. Later, I tell myself, when I

have something concrete to give them. This isn't just surveillance anymore. I'm in it deeper than I meant to go, but I have the photos and the evidence.

Upstairs in my room, I lock the door and pull out the camera with trembling hands. The photos load onto my laptop one by one, each a potential key to freeing Dimitri. In most photos, the quality is decent despite the low light and distance. Petrov's face is clear. Kiril's, too.

I zoom in on the slim black package. What's in it? Money? Documents? The answer to why Dimitri is really in prison?

I look at Petrov's smug face and Kiril's dead eyes. These men have taken Dimitri from me. Framed him and locked him away so men like Kiril could get to him anytime.

I'm not turning back. Not now. Not ever.

Outside my window, lightning splits the sky. One bright flash illuminates the estate grounds before plunging back into darkness. Thunder follows, a low rumble like distant artillery mimicking the storm brewing inside me.

I will find the truth and free Dimitri. And I will keep our child safe. God help anyone who stands in my way.

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DIMITRI

Five more days.

That's how long it's been since the last attempt. Since the previous bastard with a blade tried to carve my name into the floor with blood. He ended up spitting teeth and choking on his own blood. But that didn't mean I won. Not really. Because another attempt always follows.

And this time, the whispers come with a different kind of threat. Not a shiv. Not fists. Poison.

It makes sense. After the last two failed hits, Morozov's dogs won't want to risk drawing attention with another public brawl. Not when their target keeps walking away while his attackers leave in cuffs or on stretchers.

No, this time, they'll want me quiet. Gone. No mess and no questions. Just a body slumped over a tray of food.

But I'm not stupid. And I'm not alone.

Mikhail has been keeping close ever since the second fight. He never said why, but he doesn't need to. He knows what this place is, and he knows what I am. And that means something in here, more than the tattoos and scars.

He sees the tray before I do, catching the subtle hesitation in the server's hands. He also notices the slight shift in the rotation schedule and the fact that, of all days,

today, I'm the only one getting mashed potatoes.

"Don't touch it," he mutters, his voice low enough that no one else hears.

I don't flinch. I keep my face blank and my posture loose as I reach for a different tray near the edge, which is meant for the person next in line.

We sit like usual. A corner table with our backs to the wall. Nothing in our hands but cheap forks and sharp instincts.

Across the room, the unintended target takes a bite. Just one.

At first, nothing. Then, the tray clatters. His chair scrapes back hard, his hand gripping the edge of the table as his throat convulses. And then he collapses. He twitches once, twice, then stops moving.

The guards move in like they've been waiting for it. One barks into his radio. Another guard checks for a pulse, and his teeth grind together when he doesn't find one.

"No foaming," Mikhail mutters beside me. "It's something clean. Expensive. You've made an impression."

I don't answer. I just stare at the body being dragged across the linoleum like a bag of laundry.

My jaw clenches hard enough that pain radiates down my neck. Not because I'm surprised. Because I'm done. Done waiting. Done reacting. And done playing the part of the caged animal someone else is trying to slaughter.

They want me to fear the food, the air, and the man beside me. But it only solidifies what I already know. This isn't prison, it's war. And I refuse to die in here.

I push my tray away untouched, the plastic edge scraping softly against the table.

Mikhail doesn't look at me, but I see the nod. The quiet confirmation. They made their move. Now, it's my turn.

Lockdown comes fast after the body is dragged across the floor. Guards swarm like angry hornets, batons out, and voices sharp with the fear that makes men violent. They herd us back to our cells. No yard time or showers. Nothing but concrete and steel until they figure out what happened.

Not that they will. Men like Morozov pay well for silence, and money buys everything in here, even the blindness of those paid to watch.

My cell is six steps long and four steps wide. A metal toilet with no seat. A sink that runs rust-colored water for thirty seconds before it clears. A mattress thin enough to feel every spring beneath. This is where they expect me to break.

I sit on the edge of the bed, hands on my knees, and breathe deeply.

The image of Sandy flickers through my mind like sunlight breaking through storm clouds.

The fierce determination in her eyes, the gentle curve of her belly where our child grows.

Her fingers tracing the scars on my back in the darkness, never asking where they came from but understanding all the same.

She won't give up. So, neither will I.

From somewhere down the corridor, a man is sobbing the kind of broken animal

sounds that tell me he's been pushed past his limits. Another curses rhythmically, a metronome of rage punctuated by the sound of fists against concrete.

But what snares my attention is the silence from the cell directly across from mine. Mikhail stands at his cell bars, eyes locked on the corridor, waiting and listening. His body is wound tight like a spring about to snap.

The guards are supposed to make rounds every hour. But tonight, the pattern shifted. Boots on concrete every fifteen minutes. It's a break in the routine that tells me everything I need to know.

They're coming for me.

I don't move or tense. I wait, my mind calculating exits, weapons, and angles, planning the bloody chess match that is about to begin.

When the footsteps finally approach, there are three sets of them. Not the usual two. The jingle of keys is preceded by a hushed conversation. My door slides open with a metallic groan that vibrates through my teeth.

There are two guards and a third man in civilian clothes. He is tall and lean, the type of man who enjoys his work a little too much.

"Popov." My name in his mouth sounds like an accusation. "Up."

I don't ask where we are going. I don't need to. The thin smile on the civilian's face tells me this isn't a scheduled trip for questioning.

I stand slowly, my hands visible, telegraphing compliance as my muscles brace for what is to come.

One of the guards, who is younger than the others, with acne scars and nervous eyes, cuffs me roughly. It's clear he is new. His hands shake slightly as the metal closes around my wrists.

The civilian steps closer, his breath like cigarettes and stale coffee. "You've been causing problems," he hisses. "Time to resolve them."

I meet his eyes without fear or anger. With nothing but the cold calculation that has kept me alive through wars most men will never understand.

"Lead the way," I reply, my voice even as stone.

They march me down the corridor, Mikhail's eyes following our procession. I don't look at him. The plan we whispered in the yard three days ago was already in motion.

"If they come for you after lights out, it's not for questioning," he'd told me, his voice barely audible above the sounds of men working out around us. "You'll have ten seconds. Maybe less. The camera in the east corridor has been broken since Tuesday. They'll take you through there to avoid the main hallway cameras. That's where they intend to kill you. You'll have one chance to break free and get to the laundry room. Hide in the outgoing bin until you're loaded into the van. Once you're past the gates, you're free. "

I count steps as we walk. Left at the first junction and right at the second. We are heading toward the administrative wing but on a route that bypasses the night guard's station, exactly as Mikhail had predicted.

The east corridor stretches before us, dim fluorescents throwing more shadows than light. There are no cameras or witnesses, just a long stretch of concrete perfect for an "accident."

I slow my steps fractionally. The guard behind me shoves hard, impatient.

“Move it, Popov.”

That is all I need. I shove him hard, his body just slightly off-balance from the push.

I spin, my hands still cuffed, but my body is as fluid as mercury. The momentum of his own shove becomes his downfall as my shoulder drives into his sternum with brutal force. Air rushes from his lungs in a strangled gasp. Before he can recover, my knee finds his groin with surgical precision.

He folds like wet paper.

The second guard reaches for his baton, but he is too slow. I’m already moving, bringing my cuffed hands down hard on the back of his neck. The blow isn’t enough to knock him unconscious, but it stuns him and sends him stumbling forward into the wall.

That left the civilian. He isn’t like the others. He moves with the fluid grace of a fighter, sidestepping my first attack with ease. His fist connects with my ribs. It is a sharp, professional blow that would have dropped a lesser man.

Pain blossoms, hot and familiar. I embrace it. Use it. Let it fuel the cold rage I’ve been banking for days.

“Morozov send his best now?” I taunt, circling him despite the disadvantage of the handcuffs.

His smile never wavers. “Just his most efficient.”

He comes at me fast with a flurry of blows designed to overwhelm me. I block what I

can and absorb what I can't. I wait for the opening, and I know it will come.

Everyone has a pattern. Everyone has a tell. He slightly drops his left shoulder before he throws his right. When it comes, I'm ready.

I duck under his swing and drive my forehead into the bridge of his nose with a sickening crunch. Blood sprays. He staggers back, eyes watering. I press forward, ready to finish what I started.

Then everything changes.

A dull thud echoes in the corridor. The civilian's eyes widen in shock, then roll back as he collapses to the ground like a marionette with cut strings.

Behind him stands the older second guard, wielding his baton with practiced precision. His expression is neutral and professional, but his eyes are sharp as they meet mine.

"We don't have much time," he says in low, accented Russian.

I freeze, ready to attack or defend. "Who are you?"

"Someone who gets paid better by Mr. Avilov than by the prison system." He moves to the younger guard, who is still dazed on the floor, delivering another precise blow that renders him unconscious. "Your brother sends his regards."

Relief surges through me like a riptide, but I keep my face blank.

"Show me," I say, my voice cold and edged with suspicion.

He moves slowly, reaching into his pocket. No sudden gestures. No twitch of

betrayal. Then he pulls out a small, solid object that gleams in the light.

A ring. But not just any ring. The one etched with the Avilov family crest worn by enforcers and men who have killed in Aleksandr's name and bled for our Bratva.

"He said you'd need proof," the guard mutters before tossing it to me.

It lands in my palm with a heavy thud, solid and unmistakable. My fingers close around it, the ridges pressing into my skin with a familiarity that silences the doubt. It's real. And that changes everything.

My shoulders ease fractionally. "What's the plan?"

"Morozov paid this piece of shit"—he nudges the civilian with his boot—"to make sure you had an accident tonight. The permanent kind. Mr. Avilov got word three days ago. Managed to get a few of us on his payroll." He glances at his watch. "We have four minutes before the next patrol comes through."

I nod, my mind already shifting gears. "What now?"

"Now we make these two disappear." He moves to the younger guard, grabbing him under the arms. "Take the other one. There's a service elevator at the end of this hall. Leads to the laundry facilities. Transport van's waiting."

I don't waste time with questions. I seize the civilian, hauling his dead weight up and over my shoulder in a fireman's carry. The injury to my ribs protests, sharp pain lancing through my side, but I ignore it.

We move quickly down the corridor. The guard leads with confidence, telling me he mapped this route carefully. The service elevator is tucked behind an unmarked door that blends into the institutional walls until you know exactly what you are looking

for.

He swipes a keycard, and the door slides open silently. Inside is the elevator, barely big enough for all of us. The descent is short. The machinery hums with age but works smoothly enough.

“Three of Mr. Avilov’s men are on rotation tonight,” the guard explains as we drop deeper into the building's bowels. “Another five got transferred in last week. He's been planning this since they moved you to gen pop.”

My jaw tightens. “He knew about the transfer before it happened?”

“He had someone in administration tip him off.” The elevator doors open to a cavernous room filled with industrial washing machines and dryers, the air thick with the smell of bleach and detergent. “This way.”

We drag our unconscious cargo through the empty laundry facility. The night shift isn’t due for another hour. The guard moves with the confidence of someone who has memorized every detail.

A plain white van idles at the loading dock, its engine a quiet rumble in the night. As we approach, the back doors swing open, revealing two men in maintenance coveralls. I recognize neither, but they carry themselves with the unmistakable poise of Bratva soldiers.

We load the unconscious bodies into van-like packages. No words are exchanged. This is business, clean, and efficient.

When the doors close and the van pulls away, I turn to the guard. “Now what?”

“Now you go back to your cell,” he says, checking his watch again. “And I escort you

there like nothing happened.”

“And them?” I nod toward the van, which is now disappearing into the night.

A cold smile touches his lips. “They’ll wake up somewhere very unpleasant. Somewhere Morozov can find them and understand the message.”

I know what that means. They won’t die immediately. Death will be a mercy compared to what waits for them. A message written in pain and blood that even Morozov can’t misinterpret: touch what’s mine, and I’ll take what’s yours.

Aleksandr has always been ruthless in his vengeance.

“The story will be that Jacobs, the kid, got transferred to a different security detail,” the guard continues as we return to the main building. “Happens all the time. No one will question it.”

We walk in silence through the now-empty corridors. Nighttime prison has a different quality. The darkness is deeper, and the silence more absolute, broken only by the occasional moan or rustling from behind cell doors.

“How much longer?” I ask quietly as we approach my block.

He knows I’m asking how long it will take me to be free of this place, not how long it will take us to reach my cell.

“Soon,” his voice is low and confident.

We reach my cell. The door stands open, waiting. Inside is the same concrete box that has been my home for weeks. But now it feels different. Temporary. A way station rather than a tomb.

The guard uncuffs me. His movements are professional enough to avoid scrutiny.

I enter my cell, the door closing behind me with the usual metallic clang. But this time, it doesn't sound like defeat. It sounds like a countdown.

I sit on the edge of my bed, hands on my knees, and breathe deeply.

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SANDY

I wait until Talia finishes feeding Angelina dinner and leaves to hand her off to Nanny Olga before I pull out the folder, the edges slightly bent from how tightly I've been holding it.

My fingers trace the worn corners, evidence of my anxiety and the physical manifestation of hope and desperation bound in manila.

Outside, rain taps against the windows, a quiet percussion to match my racing heartbeat. The estate seems too peaceful for the storm I'm about to unleash.

Lev sits at the kitchen table, hunched over his laptop, his eyes narrowed like he can smell trouble brewing.

His massive frame dwarfs the ornate chair, his muscles tense beneath his expensive button-down.

He doesn't glance up, but I know he feels the shift in the room the second I step closer.

Years of surviving the Bratva have given him a sixth sense for approaching danger.

I say nothing. I just place the photos on the table, one by one, like cards in a game none of us want to play. Each image makes a soft whisper as it meets the polished wood surface.

Benjamin Petrov. Captured in grainy black-and-white, slipping a sleek black envelope into Isaak Kiril's greedy hands like it meant nothing.

Like he wasn't selling Dimitri's life for whatever backroom favors were scribbled in blood and signed in silence.

The fluorescent lighting of the parking lot highlighted the casual cruelty in their expressions.

Men conducting business and trading lives like commodities.

I watch Lev's face as he registers what he's seeing. The slight tightening around his eyes and the almost imperceptible clench of his jaw are small signs that speak volumes.

Talia enters the kitchen, her footsteps faltering when she notices the tension. She crosses to the table, her face still soft from motherhood but quickly hardening as she leans over the images.

She stares down at them, her breath catching in her throat. "What is this?" she asks, her voice cracking like dry ice.

"Proof," I whisper. "Or at least the start of it." The words sour on my tongue, tangled with triumph and fear. I did something dangerous that I can't take back.

Lev leans forward, picks up one of the photos, and turns it over as if the back might hold the answers.

His eyebrows snap together, and his silence says more than words.

I recognize the calculation in his eyes, the slow, methodical assessment of a new

piece on the chessboard.

Aleksandr might be the pakhan of the Avilov family, but Lev is the shadow who makes problems disappear before they reach the pakhan's desk.

Talia's eyes dart between the images and my face. "Where the hell did you get these?" she blurts out. Her lips are in a tight, pale line, her knuckles white where she's gripping the table's edge.

The protective fury of a sister is warring with the fear I know she carries daily and the knowledge that our lives are balanced on a knife's edge.

"I took them," I answer quietly, the truth spilling from my lips before I can take it back. "A few nights ago." I can't bring myself to elaborate, to describe the cold car seat, how my muscles ached from crouching, or the spike of adrenaline when Kiril's gaze seemed to find me in the darkness.

Her hands shoot out, gripping my shoulders hard enough to sting. I can feel the tremor in her fingers. Her eyes blaze with frantic worry.

"Are you out of your mind? You can't be out there chasing Morozov's men like you're some kind of?"

"I did what I had to do," I snap, lifting my chin. "No one else was going to." The baby flutters inside me, a small reminder of what I'm fighting for. I place a protective hand over my stomach, feeling the gentle curve that has become my anchor.

"You're pregnant!" she shouts, flinging her arms into the air. Her voice echoes against the high ceilings, startling a maid who appeared in the doorway only to retreat quickly. "And in case you forgot, these people aren't just scary. They'll kill you and dump your body in a shallow grave like garbage!"

What happens if you get caught, huh? What happens to the baby? ”

Her words strike like lightning, fierce and undeniable. I know what men like Morozov and Kiril do to those who cross them. But fear has become a weakness I can't entertain.

“I know the risk!” My voice rises, desperation finally slipping through the careful composure I have tried to maintain since Dimitri's arrest. “But I'm not going to sit on my hands while Dimitri rots in a prison cell for something he didn't do. Or worse, he dies in there!”

The baby kicks again, this time stronger, as if sensing my distress. I take a deep breath, trying to calm my racing heart.

The kitchen falls into a thick silence while Talia's anger fills the room. Outside, the rain intensifies, drumming against the windows with renewed force.

Lev clears his throat, stepping in like the calm between two storms. “I'll look into it,” he says, his tone steady but threaded with quiet urgency. His eyes don't leave the photos, calculating distances, angles, and implications.

“I've got a contact at City Records. If there's any trail, financial, digital, or even a sudden change in Kiril's phone activity, we'll track it.”

I nod, my heart still hammering against my ribs. Lev's quiet intensity is somehow more reassuring than any loud promises can be. He doesn't waste words. When he says he'll look into something, bodies move, money changes hands, and results follow.

“You can't keep doing this,” Talia whispers, pressing her fingers to her forehead like she can rub away the worry. “I won't let you put yourself in danger like this.”

“I don't have a choice,” I hiss, the words harsher than I mean them to be. “If there's even a chance this helps bring Dimitri home sooner, then I have to keep digging. I won't stop.”

My hand curls protectively over my belly again. This child deserves to know their father, to be held in Dimitri's strong arms, and to grow up with his fierce love protecting them. I won't accept any other outcome.

Talia stares at me, recognizing the fight in my voice and sensing the fear behind it. She sees my resolve. Her expression softens slightly, as always, when she realizes arguing is pointless. She knows my stubborn streak better than anyone.

“You're my sister,” she sighs. “And I know that look. Once your mind's made up, there's no changing it. But for your sake, and for that baby, promise me you'll be careful. You're playing with fire, and fire doesn't care how noble you are.”

She doesn't wait for an answer, turning on her heels and following Lev out of the kitchen. I stand there momentarily, her concern wrapping around my neck like a noose.

The grandfather clock in the hall chimes nine times, its deep resonance filling the empty kitchen. Time passes, and each second ticking away is another second Dimitri spends behind bars, surrounded by enemies with a target on his back.

I lower myself into a chair, suddenly exhausted. My fingers brush over the photos again, tracing the outlines of the men who think they can take everything from me.

A moment later, my phone buzzes in my pocket from an unknown number.

I stare at the screen, nerves twisting low in my stomach. In this world, unknown numbers rarely bring good news. They mean emergency drop phones, burners used

once and discarded, and voices that need to stay unattached to names. But something in my gut tells me to answer.

“Hello?”

“Sandy.” Nick's voice comes through the line, low and cautious. “How are you holding up?”

I sink deeper into the chair, tugging my hoodie sleeves over my hands like makeshift armor. His familiar voice, with its distinctive timbre, is comforting and cautionary.

“As well as I can, all things considered.” I keep my voice neutral, aware that even here, in the fortress of the Avilov estate, walls have ears.

“Any word on Dimitri?” he asks.

I exhale slowly, the ache in my chest sharp and familiar. Two weeks without him feels like two years. “Nothing yet. Not anything that can get him out.”

I think of the parade of expensive lawyers, the bribes that went nowhere, and the threatening phone calls that did nothing but put us all on higher alert.

A pause hangs in the air, and then Nick speaks again, his voice steadier now. “It's a shame you can't get Russo to run his mouth. If he admitted even half of what he helped Petrov pull off, you could tear the whole damn case to pieces.”

Something shifts in me. A pulse of heat ignites my gut. I sit up straighter, my free hand moving unconsciously to the table's edge, gripping it hard enough that my fingers turn red.

“You think he'll talk?” I ask breathlessly, hope and fear tangling in my throat.

“Off the record?” Nick lets out a dry laugh. “Get a couple drinks in him, stroke his ego a little and he won’t just talk, Sandy. He’ll brag. He’s the type of guy that loves attention.”

My fingers tighten around the phone. Detective Louis Russo.

I thank Nick and tell him I’ll be careful and keep him posted.

But I’m already moving before the call ends. Because I’m not going to stay safe. I’m going to blow this whole thing wide open.

Two hours later, I stand in front of my bathroom mirror, barely recognizing the woman staring back.

A wig of dark auburn waves frames my face, the color rich and vibrant against my skin.

My usually subtle makeup is traded for heavy eyeliner and red lipstick, transforming my features into a mask that’s sharper and more calculated.

A trench coat over a pencil skirt hugs my figure.

It hides my small baby bump, the fabric expensive enough to suggest success without flaunting wealth.

Sleek black boots give me the kind of confident click every seductress needs.

It’s the sound of a woman who knows exactly where she is going and what she wants when she gets there.

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Tonight, I'm someone else entirely. A freelance crime journalist. Hungry, ambitious, and just curious enough to get a man like Russo to underestimate me.

I practice smiling in the mirror. Not my real smile, the one Dimitri says lights up his darkest days. It is a smile designed to make men like Russo think they are in control.

The baby kicks as if protesting this masquerade. I place my hand over the small swell of my stomach.

"I know," I whisper. "But we're doing this for Daddy. Just a little longer, little one."

I slip the small voice recorder into my bra, testing it one more time to ensure it works. Then I grab my purse, double-check the fake press credentials I printed, and head out the door.

When I arrive, the precinct parking lot is half-empty. There is a shift change, perfect timing. I wait across the street, watching the main doors.

The rain has given way to mist, turning the streetlights into hazy halos. I check my watch. It's 7:45pm. Right on schedule, the door opens. Russo struts out, jacket slung over one shoulder, sunglasses on, even though the sun is already dipping low.

Showtime.

"Detective Russo?" I call, adopting a breathy, practiced voice that barely resembles mine.

I click across the pavement toward him, my movements smooth.

“Sorry to bother you. I'm Angela Dane with Midnight Crime Digest .

I've been researching the Popov indictment, and your name came up in some pretty intriguing ways.”

His posture shifts, his chest puffing out the way men do when they think they're smarter than the room. I can practically see him preening under the attention, his ego expanding like a balloon ready to burst.

“You don't say,” he smirks, removing his sunglasses to give me a slow once-over that makes my skin crawl. “You're writing a piece about me?”

I tilt my head, smile coyly, and slowly step close enough to smell his cologne, which is too strong and eager, like everything else about him. “Depends. Do you feel like telling me anything off the record?”

Twenty minutes later, we are tucked into a corner booth at some dive bar that smells like spilled whiskey and regret. This is a place where no one asks questions, and the lighting is too dim to see the lies on anyone's face. Perfect.

The bartender knows him by name and brings his usual without asking. I request a vodka tonic, knowing I won't drink more than a sip or two. My baby deserves better, and I need my wits sharp as razors tonight.

The small recorder hidden between my breasts is already live, tucked neatly beneath the neckline of my blouse. I nurse my drink, smiling like I'm starstruck, and every word he says is brilliant.

“So, this Popov case,” I prompt, leaning forward just enough to suggest interest

beyond the professional. “Word around certain circles is that it wasn't exactly...by the book.” I let the words hang there like bait on a hook.

He is four whiskeys in when the truth starts to bleed out, like poison from a wound too deep to heal clean.

“You know the problem with Petrov?” Russo leans in, his breath thick with alcohol and arrogance. “He thinks too small. Real damage? That takes vision. That's where I came in.”

I giggle at just the right moment, letting my fingers graze his forearm. My eyes widen like he just told me a secret I can't wait to write about. Inside, my stomach churns with disgust, but my face remains a perfect mask of interest, one that is flattered and impressed.

He basks in it like a reptile seeking the sun, his ego growing with each carefully placed compliment and each fawning question. And then he gives me everything.

He tells me Petrov brought him a “mess to clean up,” and Kiril only needed a little “incentive” to cooperate.

He brags about manipulating evidence, about the “miraculously discovered” shell casings that just happened to match a gun Dimitri had never even seen.

And the cherry on top was a witness who never existed, just a name and a face conjured from thin air to make the whole setup stick.

Every word is filth. Every sentence is a knife to the gut. Each confession pushes me closer to the edge of my control, testing the limits of my performance.

But I don't flinch. I smile like it is the most fascinating thing I've ever heard, even as

revulsion curls in my stomach and my hands are cold with fury. I think of Dimitri, alone in a cell, paying for crimes these men invented over drinks just like these.

“That's incredible,” I breathe, letting admiration color my tone. “The way you handled all that...most cops wouldn't have the courage.”

He preens under the praise, draining his glass and signaling for another. “That's the difference between me and the rest of them,” he slurs, tapping his temple with unsteady fingers. “I see the bigger picture.”

The bigger picture. As if framing an innocent man is some type of visionary act. As if destroying our lives is an accomplishment to celebrate.

The baby kicks again, harder this time. A fierce little reminder of who is counting on me to deliver justice.

Russo waves the bartender down, eager to keep talking. Eager to further incriminate himself to a pretty face that seems to hang on his every word.

But I'm done listening. I have what I need. Every damning word is captured, and every confession is recorded in crisp digital clarity. Enough to burn his career to the ground. Enough to start unraveling the web they spun around Dimitri.

I stand before the next round hits the table. “Thank you, Detective,” I say sweetly, slipping my coat back on. “You've been...illuminating.”

His brow furrows, confusion cutting through the alcoholic fog. “Wait, I thought we?—”

But I'm already gone, heels clicking over cracked tile, breath caught between a sob and a scream. I push through the door into the night air, which feels impossibly clean

after the suffocating closeness of his presence.

Outside, I press my back against the wall and clutch my bag as if it holds a loaded gun. I can't believe it. The recording is enough to blow Russo wide open. To dismantle the lie they wrapped around Dimitri's name like a chain.

I hail a cab, giving an address three blocks from the estate.

I don't want to lead anyone directly to the door.

As the city rushes past in a smear of lights and shifting shadows, I finally exhale, and that's when it hits me.

What just happened and what I just did. I risked everything.

My safety. My baby. But I won the gamble.

The proof is tucked against my heart, beating in time with it. Evidence that can free Dimitri. Evidence that can bring him home to me. To us.

My hands tremble as I cradle my stomach, feeling the small life inside responding to my touch.

But my resolve? It's rock solid.

I'm coming for you, Dimitri. And this time, I'm not leaving without you.

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SANDY

I clutch my purse to my chest, the recorder still warm from being pressed against my skin for hours.

Outside, the estate looms like a fortress.

A sprawling monument to power and protection that has been my home for these past brutal months.

Somehow, it looks different tonight, more imposing than before.

I barely wait for the car to stop before throwing open the door, ignoring the driver's protests.

My heels click on the concrete as I race down the street and up the driveway.

I rush toward the front entrance, my pulse hammering.

Every second feels like wasted time. Every breath without Dimitri is a moment stolen from us.

The grand doors open before I reach them. Aleksandr stands on the threshold, his massive frame blocking the light from inside. Even in the darkness, his eyes gleam like polished steel. Calculating, cold, yet burning with something that might have been pride if it wasn't so laced with fury.

“You're reckless,” he growls, his voice low. Aleksandr never needs to raise his voice to command attention. The quieter he speaks, the more dangerous he becomes.

“I got it,” I reply, brushing past him into the foyer, the scent of my perfume trailing behind me. I pull the auburn wig, yanking it free, and my red hair falls loose in a tangled mess that feels more authentic than anything I've worn or said for hours.

“And put yourself in danger in the process.” He shuts the door with a decisive click that echoes through the marble entryway. The sound is like a judgment passing.

I turn to face him, chin raised despite the exhaustion seeping into my bones. “Dimitri would have done the same for me.”

“Dimitri,” Aleksandr says slowly, each syllable punctuated, “is trained to handle men like Russo. You are not.”

The baby kicks defiantly as if rejecting the idea of being underestimated. I place a hand over the small bump, drawing strength from the life within. “And yet I'm the one with the evidence, aren't I?”

His eyes narrow, and his back teeth grind together. “Peter's waiting in the office. Lev is on his way.”

In Aleksandr's world, those simple words speak volumes. Peter Kreshnov, the Avilov family's attorney, doesn't just “wait” for anyone. And Lev being summoned means my evidence might actually be worth something.

Suddenly, too tired for further argument, I nod and follow Aleksandr down the grand hallway.

The estate has been in the Avilov family for generations, and every inch of it has

been meticulously maintained to showcase their wealth and power.

Crystal chandeliers hang from coffered ceilings, Persian rugs muffle our footsteps, and priceless art adorns walls that have witnessed decades of secrets.

It feels less like a home and more like a war room tonight.

The office door is ajar, warm light spilling into the corridor. Inside, Peter sits behind Aleksandr's massive desk, papers spread before him like a general mapping a battle plan. His wire-rimmed glasses reflect the light as he looks up, making his eyes unreadable.

"Sandy," he greets with a nod, his voice carrying the faint accent of his native Moscow despite decades in America. "I hear you have something for us."

I don't waste time with pleasantries. My fingers tremble slightly as I reach into my purse, pulling out the small recorder. It looks so innocent, so ordinary for something that holds the key to Dimitri's freedom.

"Russo confessed," I state, placing the recorder on the desk. "To everything."

Peter raises an eyebrow, the most emotion he typically allows himself to display. He picks up the device and turns it over as if he were measuring more than just plastic and circuitry.

"And how did you acquire this confession?" he asks, his gaze sharp despite his calm tone.

"She played the seductress," Aleksandr answers for me, pouring himself a generous measure of whiskey from the crystal decanter near the window. "Complete with disguise."

I shoot him a glare. “I did what was necessary.”

“You did what was foolish,” he corrects, but there is no real heat behind the words. Just the tired exasperation of a man who’s seen too many people he cares about put themselves at risk.

“Play it,” I insist, ignoring the rebuke. “Just play it.”

Peter presses the button without further comment. Russo's slurred voice fills the room, bouncing off mahogany panels and leather-bound books. Each word is a nail in his coffin. Each boasts another brick in the foundation of Dimitri's freedom.

“...the shell casings? Please. Those were from a range I practice at. Had 'em for weeks waiting for the right moment...”

“...witness never existed. Just needed a name. Someone who'd never come forward...”

“...Petrov said Morozov wanted it done clean. No loose ends. But you know what? I added those extra charges because I wanted that bastard Popov to rot...”

My stomach churns as I hear it again, the casual cruelty with which these men had torn apart our lives. The baby kicks, stronger this time.

When the recording finally ends, the office falls into heavy silence. Aleksandr stands at the window, his broad back to us, gazing out into the darkness beyond the glass. Peter removes his glasses, polishing them methodically with a handkerchief pulled from his breast pocket.

“Well?” I demand, unable to bear the suspense a moment longer. “It's enough, isn't it? We can get Dimitri out now?”

Peter sighs, replacing his glasses carefully. "It's good," he admits. "Better than I expected."

Hope blooms in my chest, wild and fierce. "Then?—"

"But not good enough." He cuts me off with a raised hand. "Not on its own."

The hope withers as quickly as it had grown. "What are you talking about? He confessed! To tampering with evidence, to fabricating witnesses?—"

"Without context, without corroboration, a drunk man's boasts to a pretty face could be dismissed as exactly that—drunken boasting." Peter's tone is clinical, devoid of the emotion surging through me. "Especially when the judge is on Morozov's payroll."

"Aleksandr," I turn to him, desperation cracking my voice. "You heard him. You know what this means."

Aleksandr turns from the window, his expression blank. "It means we're close," he replies. "But Peter's right. The judge will claim it's inadmissible. Russo will claim he was drunk, playing a role to impress a woman. Without something concrete to back it up?—"

"Like Petrov?" I cut in. "Like photos of him meeting with Isaak Kiril? Exchanging money and documents?" I reach into my bag again, pulling out the folder of photos. "Like this?"

I spread the photos across the desk, watching both men's expressions shift subtly. Aleksandr's eyes narrow, going from steel to obsidian in an instant. Peter leans forward, fingers trailing over the images with a lawyer's calculated interest.

“When did you take these?” Aleksandr questions, his voice dangerously soft.

“Last week,” I say, swallowing hard. “The same night I told Talia I was going to my apartment for clothes.”

His mouth tenses and his eyebrows snap together. “You've been busy.”

“Someone had to be.” The words come out sharp, but I can't take them back.

I won't take them back. “We need to follow the money.

Morozov might be smart, but greed leaves a trail.

Those envelopes they're exchanging...there's got to be records, bank statements, something to prove they're not just having friendly chats in parking lots.”

Peter glances at Aleksandr, something unspoken passing between them. “She's right about the money,” he says. “Financial records would be harder to dismiss than a recording or photographs. If we could connect Petrov to payments made to Russo or the judge...”

“Then we could blow the whole case open,” I finish, renewed determination surging. “Get Dimitri out. Make them pay for what they've done.”

The door to the office opens, and Lev steps in, broad-shouldered, composed, and already reading the room.

His eyes sweep over the photos scattered across the desk, the recorder resting beside them, and then land on me.

He takes in the smudged makeup, the tension in my shoulders, the fire I'm not

bothering to hide.

“Sandy’s been busy,” he says dryly, closing the door behind him with a soft click.

“Reckless,” Aleksandr mutters, not missing a beat.

“Effective,” I shoot back, not missing mine.

Lev crosses to the desk, his gaze narrowing as he studies the photos. Then he looks up directly at me. And for the first time, I see it. Not worry or frustration, but respect.

“I’ve already got our contact at City Records digging,” he informs Aleksandr. “I flagged any financial movement or unusual activity tied to Kiril or Petrov. Should have something back soon.”

Aleksandr doesn’t respond right away, but I see the shift in his stance, the calculation, and the beginning of belief.

We are getting closer. And now, they know it too.

“Have him dig into Russo, too,” Aleksandr instructs, his voice cool and controlled.

Then he turns to me, eyes like ice.

“This ends now,” he orders, the words slicing through the room like a blade. “You’ve done more than anyone could’ve asked. More than you should have. From here on out, you stay out of it. The investigation is ours now.”

The finality in his tone is unmistakable. But so is the fire building in my chest. The warmth drains from the room.

“Excuse me?”

“You're pregnant,” he reminds me as if I can possibly forget the life growing inside me. “You’re carrying my brother’s child, my blood. You're a target. And you're not trained for this.”

“I’m the one who got the recording,” I snap, the words sharp and fast. “I’m the one who risked everything to get those photos. While you’ve been barking orders and shaking down criminals, I’ve been out there collecting real evidence. Putting myself on the line because no one else would.”

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“Enough!” Aleksandr thunders. “You’ve been putting yourself and your child at risk in the process.” His voice lowers, but his eyes blaze. “Dimitri would want you safe. Above all else.”

“Dimitri would want to be free,” I retort, anger burning away my exhaustion. “And I’m not stopping until he is.”

Aleksandr takes a step closer, his frame blocking the light, engulfing me in shadow. “This isn’t a debate, Sandy. It’s done.”

“Unless you’re planning to lock me in a room with armed guards,” I hiss, meeting his gaze without flinching, “then this conversation is pointless.”

I can see the calculation in Aleksandr’s eyes. Evaluating the risk and determining exactly where my limit lies. What he sees in mine must give him pause because, after a brief silence, his posture shifts ever so slightly.

“You’re just like him,” he says, surprising me. “Stubborn to the point of stupidity.”

I don’t back down. “I’m getting him out. With or without your help.”

Lev clears his throat, drawing our attention.

“Perhaps a compromise, pakhan, ” he suggests, his calm voice cutting through the tension between Aleksandr and me.

“Sandy is smart and clearly has skills we’ve underestimated with passion that can’t be

contained.” He gestures to the evidence spread across the desk. “This proves that.”

Aleksandr's jaw tightens. “Your point?”

“Let her continue the investigation,” Lev explains. “But from the safety of the estate. Research. Phone calls. No more undercover operations. No more putting herself in the line of fire.”

The baby kicks hard as if voting in favor of Lev's proposal. I place a hand over my stomach, feeling the small life that depends on me making the right choice.

“I can't just sit around reading files,” I argue, though with less heat than before. “Not when Dimitri?—”

“Dimitri would want you alive,” Aleksandr cuts in. “He'd want his child alive. And if you truly want to help him, then you'll focus your considerable talents on work that doesn't involve putting yourself in Morozov's crosshairs.”

I look between Aleksandr and Lev, then to Peter, who has remained tactfully silent during our exchange. The attorney's expression is neutral, but his eyes hold a warning I can't ignore.

“On one condition,” I concede. “You keep me in the loop. Everything you find, everything you do, I want to know about it. No secrets.”

Aleksandr studies me. Then, surprisingly, he nods. “Agreed. But in return, you stay within the estate grounds. No more sneaking out. No more solo missions.”

The terms feel like a prison sentence, but I know it is the best offer I'll get. And deep down, I know he is right.

“Fine,” I agree, extending my hand formally. “I’ll stop putting myself in dangerous situations. But I won’t stop fighting for him.”

Aleksandr takes my hand, his grip firm but not crushing. “I’d expect nothing less,” he states. I think I see something like admiration flash in his eyes, hidden beneath layers of frustration and concern. “Now get some rest. You look like hell.”

Despite everything, a small laugh escapes me. “Thanks for the compliment.”

As I turn to leave, Peter calls out, “Sandy?”

I pause at the door, looking back at him.

“What you did tonight,” he says carefully, “was incredibly brave. And incredibly foolish. But it may have just given us the break we needed.”

The words settle over me like a balm, easing some of the ache that has been my constant companion since Dimitri’s arrest. I nod once, too overwhelmed to speak and slip out of the office.

The hallway stretches before me, grand and empty. My legs feel like lead as I trudge toward the stairs, the adrenaline that had carried me through the night finally draining away. Every step is an effort, every breath a reminder of how much I risked. And how much I gained.

Halfway up the staircase, I hear footsteps behind me. Talia stands at the bottom, her silk robe drawn tightly around her, her eyes wide with worry and relief.

“I heard you come in,” she says softly. “Aleksandr told me what you did.”

I brace for another lecture, too tired to defend my actions again. But instead, she

climbs the stairs in silence, stops at my side, and pulls me into a fierce, unexpected hug.

“You're the most stubborn, reckless person I've ever known,” she says, but her voice holds no anger, only a tired acceptance. “And I've never been more proud to call you my sister.”

Tears prick behind my eyes, hot and sudden. I didn't realize how much I needed to hear those words until they were spoken. “I had to try,” I whisper.

“I know.” She hugs me tighter. “Come on. Let's get you cleaned up and into bed. You look like crap,” she added, her voice softer than her words.

“I feel like it, too,” I admit as we continue up the stairs. “But it was worth it. We're closer now. I can feel it.”

Behind the closed door of my room, I peel away the mask I'd painted on. The heavy foundation and dramatic eye makeup disappear under gentle strokes of a makeup wipe, revealing the woman beneath. Tired, determined, and more terrified than I want anyone to know.

As I slip under the covers, my hand reaches my stomach again, cradling the bump that grows more pronounced each day.

“We're getting closer,” I whisper to our child. “Daddy's coming home soon. I promise.”

I close my eyes, letting exhaustion claim me at last, dreaming of Dimitri's arms around me and of our family whole again.

Morning comes too soon, sunlight streams through the curtains I forgot to close.

I blink awake, momentarily disoriented by the softness of the sheets and the stillness of the room.

For a blissful second, I forget everything.

The arrest, prison, the desperate fight for justice.

For just one heartbeat, I expect to roll over and find Dimitri beside me, his face peaceful in sleep, his arm instinctively reaching for me.

Reality crashes back with brutal clarity. The empty space beside me. The silence where his breathing should be. The cold sheets where his warmth belongs.

I push myself up, wincing at the stiffness in my muscles. My disguise from the night before lay abandoned on a chair, a stranger's clothes still holding the stale scent of cigarettes and cheap whiskey from the bar. Evidence of what I did and the risks I took.

A soft knock at the door draws my attention. "Come in," I call, pulling the blankets higher.

Lev enters, his massive frame making the doorway seem smaller than it is. Unlike Aleksandr, who wears his power like a second skin, Lev carries his strength with a quiet dignity that is somehow just as intimidating. He looks like he's been awake for hours, his shirt crisp, his expression alert.

"Morning," he greets, crossing to the window, where he stands, looking out rather than directly at me. It's a small courtesy that I appreciate in my disheveled state. "I thought you'd want to know we've started following up on your evidence."

I sit up straighter, instantly awake. "And?"

“The recording has been analyzed. It's clean with no signs of tampering or editing. Peter had copies made and secured in multiple locations.” He turns slightly, his profile silhouetted against the morning light.

“As for the photos, they've been enhanced.

We can clearly identify both Petrov and Kiril.

The envelope is visible, though we can't determine its contents.”

Hope stirs in my chest, fragile but persistent. “What about the money trail? Have you?—”

“We secured someone inside Petrov's office,” he cuts in, turning to face me fully. “A paralegal who's on our payroll now. She's going to access his financial records today.”

My breath hitches. “That's...that's good, right? If we can prove the payments?—”

“If,” Lev emphasizes, his expression guarded. “It's still a significant ‘if,’ Sandy. Men like Petrov don't typically leave paper trails.”

I push the covers aside, swinging my legs over the edge of the bed. “But they make mistakes. Everyone does. Especially when they think they're untouchable.”

A ghost of a smile touches Lev's lips. “Yes, they do.” He moves toward the door, pausing with his hand on the knob. “Aleksandr wanted me to remind you of your promise. No more sneaking out.”

“I remember,” I mutter, unable to keep the frustration from my voice. “I'm effectively under house arrest.”

“You're under protection,” he corrects. “There's a difference.”

I sigh, rubbing my temple where a headache is beginning to form. “What am I supposed to do, now? Just sit here and wait? I'll go crazy.”

“You'll help us from here,” he says simply. “You have a good eye. You took those photos. You got Russo talking when our people couldn't get near him.” He taps his finger against the door frame in a rare show of hesitation. “Use that mind of yours. Just do it where we can keep you safe.”

After he leaves, I sit there in silence, his words echoing in my mind.

I might be confined to the estate, but that doesn't mean I'm powerless.

I have a laptop, a phone, and a will that refuses to break.

I have the fierce, burning love for Dimitri that has driven me this far.

And I have a promise to keep to our child that they will know their father, not just in stories but in flesh and blood, in arms that will hold them and a voice that will soothe them.

I shower quickly, washing away the last traces of last night, and dress in comfortable jeans that still fit over my growing bump and a soft sweater that Dimitri once said brings out the blue in my eyes.

When I enter the kitchen, Talia is gently spooning mashed bananas into Angelina's mouth. My niece's face lights up the second she sees me, her tiny hands shooting into the air, fingers wiggling, cheeks dimpled with delight as she babbles excitedly.

The pure, unfiltered joy on her face hits me like sunlight breaking through storm

clouds, warm, healing, and exactly what I didn't know I needed.

Sasha and Maxim sit at the table halfway through their breakfast, offering cheerful mumbles of "Good morning," around mouthfuls of eggs.

"Where's Aleksandr?" I ask, wrapping my hands around the warm mug Abram passes to me. I'm grateful for the coffee's comfort and the brief distraction it offers.

"On the phone in his office," Talia answers. "He's been in there since dawn."

I nod, sipping the coffee slowly, savoring the warmth and the bitter tang. "Any word on the case? Lev said they're following up on my evidence."

Talia glances toward the doorway, checking to ensure we are alone, then lowers her voice. "Lev has someone inside Petrov's office. They're looking for financial records."

"He told me that much," I grumble. "But what about the judge? If he's as corrupt as Peter thinks?—"

"They're working on that too," she assures me, her eyes softening. "I know you want to be in the middle of everything, but sometimes the best thing you can do is step back and let Aleksandr handle it."

"That's what everyone keeps telling me," I mutter, staring into my coffee cup. "I just feel so useless sitting here."

Talia reaches across the table, her hand finding mine. "You're growing Dimitri's child," she says gently. "That's not nothing."

I squeeze her hand, grateful for the reminder. "I know. I just wish I could do more."

“You've already done more than you should have,” she says, a hint of rueful pride in her voice.

Before I can respond, the kitchen door swings open. Aleksandr strides in, his phone clutched in one hand, his expression tight with excitement.

“We've got something,” he announces without preamble. “The paralegal found transactions. Regular payments from an offshore account to both Russo and Judge Hargrove.”

My heart leaps, coffee forgotten. “Can we trace it back to Petrov? To Morozov?”

“Not directly,” he admits. “But the timing coincides perfectly with Dimitri's arrest. And there's more. Emails between Petrov and the judge discussing the case in detail, weeks before charges were even filed.”

I stand so quickly that my chair nearly topples. “That's it then! That's enough to get the case thrown out, isn't it?”

Aleksandr's expression is cautious, but I can see hope burning behind his eyes. “It's enough to demand a review. Peter's already drafting the motion. If all goes well, we could have Dimitri home within days.”

Days. The word rings in my ears like a bell, beautiful and terrifying all at once. After weeks of hell, after nights of crying myself to sleep with my hand over my growing belly, Dimitri can be home in days.

“I want to see the evidence,” I decide, my voice steadier than I feel. “All of it. I want to know exactly what we're working with.”

Aleksandr studies me for a moment, then nods. “In my office. Fifteen minutes.”

As he turns to leave, I call after him, “Aleksandr?”

He pauses, looking back at me over his shoulder.

“Thank you,” I say softly. “For not giving up on him.”

A shadow crosses his face, deep and painful. “He's my brother,” he says simply. Then he is gone, leaving behind a heavy silence.

Talia squeezes my hand once more before letting go. “See? Progress.”

I nod, the first genuine smile in weeks, tugging at my lips. “Progress,” I echo. “Finally.”

As I head for the office, my hand instinctively finds its way to my stomach again, cradling the small life within. “Did you hear that, little one?” I whisper. “Daddy's coming home.”

For the first time since Dimitri had been taken from us, I allow myself to believe it might be true.

We are so close I can almost feel him beside me again, his arms around me, his voice in my ear promising that everything will be alright.

And this time, I won't stop until that promise becomes reality.

DIMITRI

I know he is watching me before I even see him.

You learn fast here to pay attention to the quiet ones who don't puff their chests or bark threats. The ones who wait and calculate. In prison, it's never the loudest predator that gets you. It's the patient one.

He can't be older than twenty-one. Lean and sharp-boned with a couple tattoos that don't match his age or the stories he's lived. His eyes are like dead glass, flat and unreadable. The look that comes an instant before a blade slips between your ribs.

He leans against the wall across from my cell, arms folded, mouth twitching like he is on the verge of either grinning or lunging. His prison jumpsuit hangs too loose on his frame, which doesn't make him less dangerous. Sometimes, the hungry ones are the most lethal.

I don't move from where I sit on the edge of my bunk. Just meet his stare, my face a blank mask I perfected long before I ever stepped foot in this hellhole.

"You're Avilov's brother," he remarks, voice low and casual.

I stay silent. Here, words are currency I can't afford to spend, especially not on someone clearly sent to test my defenses.

His fingers tap against his bicep—one, two, three—a restless rhythm that betrays his youth despite his practiced stillness. A wolf pup trying to wear an old wolf's patience.

He smiles or tries to. It looks more like a crack splitting his face. “Lot of people in here owe favors. Lot of people who'd like to cash in.”

Still, I say nothing. Because I don't need to. We both know what he means.

Aleksandr built his empire on broken bones and blood debts. Some of those debts belong to men locked up with me. Others are owed to men who'd slit my throat just to hurt my brother.

The kid tilts his head, studying me like a puzzle. Maybe he expects fear. Maybe anger. He isn't getting either.

He lingers a fraction longer, testing me and looking for a weakness. Or maybe he's just bored and hungry for the wrong kind of attention. His eyes sweep over the cell, but they don't dwell on the few possessions that mark my existence.

Eventually, a guard passes, keys jingling at his belt like some twisted wind chime, and the kid peels himself off the wall. He slips away down the corridor without a backward glance.

But the message is clear. They're circling again. And this time, they are younger, hungrier, and less concerned with the consequences of spilling Avilov blood.

I exhale slowly, unclenching fists I didn't realize I made.

My knuckles ache with phantom pain from fights I didn't yet fight but know are coming.

Time works differently in prison. Threats don't always materialize immediately.

Sometimes, they hang in the air for days or weeks before the blade finally makes

contact with skin.

Patience is a weapon, as much as shanks fashioned from toothbrushes and bedsprings.

I stand, rolling my shoulders to ease the tension coiled there. My cell feels smaller each day. The walls seem to breathe and edge closer while I sleep. I pace five steps to cross from the bunk to the bars, then back again.

Five steps. Turn. Five steps. Turn. Like a caged animal. Like a man running out of time.

I think of Sandy the last time she visited. Her voice was strained but determined. Her eyes were fierce, loving, and scared all at once. And the child we share, growing inside her, is a miracle amid this nightmare.

My child.

The thought strengthens yet terrifies me. What kind of father will I be if I survive this? What kind of world am I bringing a child into? One where their father is either a convicted murderer or a target with a price on his head?

I don't allow myself to think of not making it out. Of Sandy raising our baby alone and never holding my child or seeing their first steps. Never hearing them call me Papa.

The fluorescent lights pulse overhead, stretching sickly shadows across the floor. In the cell block, someone is shouting. Their words are muffled by distance, but their tone is unmistakable. Rage and desperation, the sound of a man coming undone.

I stay on my feet long after lights out, one hand resting near the edge of the steel sink, the other curled loosely at my side.

Ready. The darkness in prison is never complete.

There's always light bleeding in from somewhere, enough to see shapes and movement.

Sufficient to defend yourself if you stay vigilant. Sleep can wait.

The days blur together. I wake. I exercise in my cell with push-ups, sit-ups, and anything to keep my body strong and ready.

I eat food that tastes like nothing. I avoid eye contact in the yard, but I never show weakness.

I'm always aware of the angles, the blind spots, and the men who watch too closely.

I keep to myself and speak only when necessary. I become a ghost among ghosts.

But the kid keeps appearing. Sometimes, in the mess hall, seated three tables away, eyes tracking my movements. Sometimes, in the yard, leaning against the fence, talking to men I know are connected to rivals of the Avilov family.

Testing. Watching. Waiting.

On the fourth day, a new guard appears outside my cell during the count. He's younger than most, with a nervous twitch in his left eye. His uniform hangs slightly askew on his frame, as if he hasn't grown into the authority it represents.

"Popov," he says, his voice carefully neutral. "You've got mail."

He slides an envelope through the bars. Plain white with no return address.

I don't move to take it immediately, my instincts screaming caution. In here, even paper can be a weapon soaked in chemicals, laced with threats.

The guard's eyes dart left, then right. "Special delivery," he adds, his voice dropping. "From someone who says the baby's kicking strong."

My heart stutters in my chest.

Sandy.

I take the envelope, keeping my expression blank despite the surge of emotion. The guard moves on quickly, continuing his count as if nothing happened.

I carefully open the envelope inside my cell, away from watchful eyes. The paper inside is high-quality and thick between my fingers. It's not the regular mail that passes through a dozen hands and scanners before reaching inmates.

Two photographs slide out. One shows Isaak Kiril shaking hands with Benjamin Petrov in what appears to be a parking garage. The second shows the same men exchanging what seems to be an envelope.

And below, in handwriting I recognize instantly: We're getting closer. Hold on. I love you. We love you.

I stare at the images, understanding crashing over me like ice water. Sandy isn't just sitting at home waiting. She's digging, fighting, and risking everything to gather evidence that can free me. Pride and terror war inside my chest.

What the hell is she doing? How did she even get these photographs? The thought of her anywhere near Kiril makes my rage simmer. If Morozov finds out she is investigating him...

I close my eyes and breathe deeply, trying to calm the panic that threatens to overwhelm me. I can't lose control. Not here. Not where weakness is like blood in shark-infested waters.

Instead, I memorize every detail of the photographs, then carefully tear them into tiny pieces. I flush them down the steel toilet in my cell, watching the evidence disappear. I keep the note folded and hidden in the seam of my mattress, where the guards rarely check.

Her words will keep me going. Her fight will fuel mine. But I need to get out of here. Before Sandy's investigation lands her Morozov's crosshairs again.

I have to survive and make it home.

Aleksandr shows up two days later. Peter comes with him.

The guards shuffle their feet, uncertain whether to salute or flee. I don't blame them. My brother has that effect on people, making them question whether they are in the presence of a businessman or an executioner.

I sit in the visitation room, chained at the ankles and wrists, while Aleksandr stands there in a crisp navy suit like he hasn't lost a single hour of sleep since they dragged me out in cuffs.

The contrast isn't lost on me. I'm in prison orange, and he's in tailored wool that costs more than most guards make in a month.

His eyes drag over me. Not with pity or sympathy. Just calculation and focus.

I know that look. He wears the same one when planning operations, analyzing risks, and determining where to allocate resources.

“You look like shit,” he says, taking the seat across from me.

“You would too if every asshole in here wanted your head on a tray,” I reply, keeping my voice low, mindful of the guard stationed by the door.

The fluorescent lights overhead accentuate the angles on Aleksandr’s face that make us recognizably brothers despite our differences. While I have always been the one people underestimated, quieter, and more calculated, Aleksandr wears his power openly, daring anyone to question it.

Peter sits down beside him, briefcase in hand, already talking. His wire-rimmed glasses reflect the light as he leans forward. “We've submitted a motion to the judge. A formal request for an evidentiary review.”

I raise a brow. “Meaning?”

“Meaning if the judge accepts, the prosecution will have to present all evidence against you for independent review. If the audio recording, witness tampering, and financial ties hold up, we might force their hand to drop the charges before trial.”

My heart rate quickens, but I keep my expression neutral.

“Might,” I echo, my voice flat.

Peter nods. “There's no guarantee. The judge is known to be cooperative with the DA's office. But we've flagged inconsistencies. It's movement in the right direction.”

I lean back in the metal chair, the cuff chain rattling softly. The cold metal bites into my wrists.

“Sandy,” I say, not a question but a demand. “How is she?”

Aleksandr's expression softens so subtly that only someone who's known him his entire life would notice.

“Stubborn,” he grumbles. “Fierce. Unstoppable.”

I almost smile.

“And the baby?”

“Growing strong. Healthy, from what the doctor says.”

I nod, relief washing over me. Whatever happens to me, Sandy needs to be safe. Nothing else matters as much.

“She's been busy,” Aleksandr adds. “Gathering evidence. Making connections.”

My shoulders tense. “And you let her?”

“You think anyone can stop her?” He raises an eyebrow, a ghost of amusement crossing his face. “She's as headstrong as you are.”

The chains rattle as I lean forward. “Keep her safe, brat. Whatever it takes. If Morozov finds out what she's doing?—”

“We've got her under protection,” he cuts me off. “At the estate. Guards. Security systems. She's not alone.”

The knot in my chest loosens slightly. The Avilov estate is as close to a fortress as any private residence can be. She is at least safe if she is surrounded by family and security.

“She got to Russo,” Peter interjects, his voice low. “Got him drunk, recorded him confessing to tampering with evidence, creating false witnesses. Everything.”

I stare at Peter, then at my brother. “She did what ?” I thunder.

Aleksandr meets my gaze steadily. “She disguised herself. Played a crime reporter. Got him talking. On record.”

My fists clench so hard the metal cuffs dig into my skin. The image of Sandy pregnant with our child sitting across from that corrupt piece of shit, pretending, risking everything is almost too much to bear.

“She shouldn't have?—”

“She shouldn't have, but she did,” Aleksandr interrupts. “And it might be what gets you out of here.”

It won't be over even if Peter's motion works. Even if they tear down the lies and drag Petrov and Kiril into the light. Not for me. Not for Sandy. Not for any of us. Because freedom doesn't mean peace.

Petrov will double down. Morozov will twist the knife. And the second I step outside these concrete walls, I'll have to be ready to spill blood just to protect the people I love. No mercy. No pause. Just blood and vengeance.

“When?” I question, keeping my voice steady despite the storm brewing inside me.

Peter shuffles papers, adjusting his glasses. “The motion is being heard tomorrow morning. If the judge grants it, we could have you out within days. If he denies it...” He trails off, the unspoken alternative hanging in the air.

If he denies it, I'll be facing trial. Years in prison. Missing my child's birth, their first steps, their first words. Missing a lifetime with Sandy.

Aleksandr's gaze hardens. "He won't deny it."

The certainty in his voice tells me everything. My brother has leverage. The kind that doesn't get discussed in prison visiting rooms under the watchful eyes of guards.

I nod in understanding. Some battles are fought in courtrooms. Others are fought with whispered threats and carefully placed bribes. Aleksandr will use every weapon in his considerable arsenal to get me out.

"Time's up," the guard announces from the doorway, keys jingling as he steps forward.

Aleksandr rises, straightening his already perfect suit. "We'll be back. Soon."

I stand as well, the chains around my ankles forcing me to move slowly. "Tell Sandy..." I pause, searching for words that can possibly convey what I feel. "Tell her I'm coming home to her. To both of them."

My brother nods once, a promise in the gesture.

As they lead me back to my cell, past the curious eyes of inmates who heard whispers of my potential release, past the kid still lurking like a shadow at the edges of the corridor, I feel something I haven't allowed myself to feel in weeks. Hope. It's dangerous and fragile, but there.

Back in my cell, I trace my fingers over Sandy's hidden note, words I memorized but need to feel beneath my touch.

We're getting closer. Hold on. I love you. We love you.

Outside, the prison continues its rhythm.

Guards calling counts, metal doors slamming shut, and the distant sound of someone weeping.

I begin my exercises inside my cell again, preparing my body for whatever comes next.

Whether it's walking out those gates a free man or fighting off whoever decides to make a move before I can.

Night falls. The cell block quiets, though it is never completely silent. I sit on the edge of my bunk, back against the wall, eyes on the corridor beyond the bars.

They are always watching like predators circling me.

I think of Sandy and her red hair splayed across our pillows, her laugh that can light up the darkest room, and her fierce determination that has apparently pushed her to risk everything to bring me home.

I think of our child still growing, becoming a promise of a future I never dared hope for.

I will survive this, and I will go home. And when I do, heaven help anyone who tries to take me from them again.

The lights dim for the night, enveloping the cell block in shadows. In the darkness, I remain vigilant. Because tomorrow, everything can change. Tomorrow, I might begin the journey home. Or tomorrow, the real fight might begin. Either way, I will be

ready.

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SANDY

I should be resting. That's the line Talia has been feeding me since breakfast. Rest, sis.

Drink tea. Let the lawyers do their jobs.

But she should know better by now. I'm not built for passivity.

Not when Dimitri is still locked up behind bars, and not when I learned the truth is buried in files no one else is willing to dig through.

The estate's library has become my war room.

Folders and papers surrounded me like landmines, each waiting to detonate under the right pair of eyes.

I am sitting cross-legged on the rug, a forgotten cup of cold coffee at my side, and Lev's decrypted spreadsheet pulled up on the laptop screen above me.

My back aches from hours of hunching over documents.

Still, the discomfort is nothing compared to what Dimitri must be feeling.

I turn another page in a Petrov shell contract. I feel that low thrum of anticipation begin to burn in my belly. It is faint but familiar. I'm close to something. I can feel it.

Talia's voice cuts through the silence behind me.

“You're nesting in a crime scene,” she huffs, stepping into the room with a soft thud of bare feet on hardwood. She is wearing one of Aleksandr's oversized sweatshirts and carrying a bowl of fruit like a peace offering.

“I'm working,” I insist without looking up. “And you're interrupting.”

She drops onto the floor beside me and sets the bowl between us. “You've had six hours of sleep in the past two days. That's not working. That's spiraling.”

I finally look at her. “You ever try resting when the person you love is locked in a concrete cage for a crime he didn't commit?”

Her eyes soften. “You think I don't get it? I lived through this too. With Aleksandr. With the kids. I know what it feels like to carry panic around in your bloodstream.”

“Then stop treating me like I'm fragile.”

She sighs and picks a slice of pear from the bowl. “I'm not. I'm treating you like my sister. Who also happens to be pregnant and might be pushing herself too damn hard.”

“I'm fine,” I mutter, sliding another folder onto my lap.

“You're lying,” she replies calmly. “And you suck at it.”

I let out a slow breath and slump back against the wall. “He's running out of time. Morozov already tried to have him killed twice. Peter's doing everything he can, but we both know the court system isn't built for men like Dimitri. It's built to keep them buried.”

Talia leans forward, resting her chin on her knees. “So, what are we doing here? Playing detective until something gives?”

“No.” I reach for the flash drive on the desk and hold it between us. “I found something. A transfer Petrov routed through a logistics shell tied to a holding company in Belize. There's a matching entry in the estate ledger with a forged authorization from someone who doesn't even exist.”

Her brow lifts. “You're saying you have proof that Petrov paid off the witness.”

“I'm saying I have a thread,” I correct. “And if we pull hard enough, the whole damn tapestry might unravel.”

Talia doesn't smile, but her eyes brighten with pride, resolve, or something more complicated than either. “You always did have a thing for finding trouble.”

I give her a tired smirk. “And you always had a thing for dragging me out of it.”

“I still do. But this time, I think I'll just sit back and watch you burn the place down.”

Her words settle over me like a warm blanket. We didn't come from love. We came from loss and chaos and a dozen foster homes with locks on the fridge and hands that reached for us in the dark. But somehow, we became family. We clung to each other through every storm. And this is no different.

I reach for her hand and give it a gentle squeeze. “Remember that night at the Morgans' house? When I found those bank statements in his desk?”

Talia's face softens with recognition. “You mean when you nearly got us kicked out of the only decent placement we'd had in years because you were convinced Mr. Morgan was embezzling from his company?”

“He was embezzling,” I insist. “The numbers didn't add up.”

“And you were seventeen with a hero complex and too much time on your hands.” Talia shakes her head, a fond smile playing on her lips. “But yes, I remember. I also remember staying up all night with you, helping you put those papers back in perfect order, so he'd never know we'd seen them.”

“You were so mad at me,” I chuckle.

“I was terrified,” she corrects, her voice dropping to a whisper. “Not of getting caught. Of losing you. I was afraid they'd separate us if we got kicked out.”

“But you still helped me,” I say softly.

“Of course I did. You're my sister.” She tucks a strand of hair behind my ear, a familiar gesture between us. “Even when you're being stubborn and reckless and completely infuriating, I'll always help you.”

A lump forms in my throat. “I never thanked you. For all the times you covered for me.”

Talia shrugs, but I can see the emotion swimming in her eyes. “You never had to. That's what family is.”

She picks up one of the folders and flips it open. “Tell me what I'm looking at,” she says.

I blink. “I thought you wanted me to rest.”

She shrugs. “I changed my mind. You want to dig? We dig. This baby is going to know their father, not some prison visitation room version of him.”

A quiet smile spreads across my lips. I lean beside her, pointing to the transaction log. “Right there. Valkyr Logistics. It's a shell. Look at the route. Follow it through the third entry. See that offshore jump? That account is tied to a Geneva firm that's under investigation for laundering.”

Talia whistles low. “Damn. When did you get so good at this?”

“I've always been this good,” I sniff. “You just never paid attention.”

“No, I noticed.” Her voice was suddenly serious. “I always knew you were the smart one.”

“Maybe,” I nudge her shoulder. “But look where we ended up anyway. Tangled up with Russian men who attract trouble like magnets.”

Talia's laughter rings out, warm and loud. “Not exactly what our social worker had in mind for our futures, huh?”

“God no. Poor Mrs. Hendricks would have a heart attack.”

Talia's eyes crinkle at the corners. “Remember how she used to lecture us about finding nice, stable men with boring jobs? Accountants and dentists, she'd say.”

“Instead, we got a Bratva pakhan and his second-in-command.” I shake my head, the absurdity of our lives not lost on me.

Talia's face softens. “Sometimes I look at Aleksandr with the kids, or the way you've bloomed since meeting Dimitri, and I think maybe this is exactly where we were always heading.”

We work silently, passing files back and forth, our fingers stained with ink and

highlighter. Outside the window, the trees rustle in the late afternoon breeze. Somewhere in the distance, I hear the faint clink of silverware from the kitchen staff preparing dinner.

The world goes on. But in this room, time bends around us. We are just two women piecing together the proof that can take down a corrupt lawyer, a dirty judge, and the man who thinks he can destroy our family and walk away untouched.

“So, what exactly is the plan here?” Talia asks, breaking the comfortable silence. “Once we have everything connected?”

I rub my tired eyes. “Peter takes it to the judge and gets the case thrown out. Dimitri walks free.”

“And Petrov?”

My jaw clenches. “He answers for what he's done.”

She nods slowly. “Aleksandr will want blood.”

“He might have to settle for justice instead.” I sigh, running my hand through my hair. “That's the deal Dimitri made when we got together. Less blood and violence. No more vengeance. No more bodies in the river.”

“It's strange,” Talia muses, leaning back on her hands. “How loving someone can change you. Make you want to be better.”

“Is that what happened with you and Aleksandr?”

She smiles with a soft, private expression. “He was already trying to change for Sasha and Maxim. But yes, I think we saved each other in a way.”

I think about Dimitri's face the first time he told me he loved me. A man who spent his life believing love was a weakness suddenly opened himself to the ultimate vulnerability.

“Dimitri told me once that he was afraid of me,” I say quietly.

Talia raises an eyebrow. “Of you? All five-foot-five of you?”

“Not physically.” I trace the edge of a document absently. “He said I was the first person who made him afraid of dying. Because before me, he didn't care if he lived or died. Now he has something to lose.”

Talia's eyes soften. “That's how I know he's the one for you, sis. He sees you clearly. All of you. Not just the prickly, stubborn exterior, but everything underneath.”

“Like you do.” I let out a deep breath. “I'm sorry I gave you such a hard time when you first met Aleksandr,” I whisper. “But given the circumstances...”

Talia laughs. “You were awful. You interrogated the poor man like he was on trial for murder.”

“I was protecting you!”

“You accused him of being a mafia hitman.”

“Well, I wasn't that far off,” I tease, tossing a paper clip at her. “Can you blame me for being protective?”

“No,” she smirks. “Just like I can't blame Aleksandr for being worried when you got involved with his brother.”

This was news to me. “Aleksandr was worried about Dimitri and me?”

“Concerned is the word he used. He knows how much Dimitri has lost. How much pain he's carried.” Talia meets my eyes. “He was afraid you might run when things got complicated. That you wouldn't truly understand the life.”

“And now?”

“Now he knows better.” She smiles.

“We protect what's ours,” I say quietly.

“Always have.” Talia nods. “Which is why I know we're going to get Dimitri out. Because you've claimed him as yours, and God help anyone who tries to take what belongs to Sandy Davis.”

I feel the sting of tears behind my eyes and blink them away. Pregnancy hormones are making me embarrassingly emotional these days.

Talia leans back and exhales. “You know what I think?”

I look up from the laptop. “Do I want to know?”

She grins. “I think Dimitri's in a hell of a lot more danger from you than from Morozov.”

“Good. He should be scared.”

“They all should be,” Talia agrees. “The men who took him have no idea what they've unleashed.”

I can't help but smile at that. Talia has always believed in me, even when I didn't believe in myself. Has seen strength in me when all I felt was fear. Looking at the mountain of evidence we accumulated, I feel that strength flowing through me like a current.

I save the files and close the laptop. My body is stiff, my lower back aches, and my eyes are dry from staring at the screen for hours. But I feel like I can breathe for the first time in days.

I found something real. And tomorrow, I'll give it to Peter. Just one more nail in the coffin of the man who framed Dimitri.

As we walk out of the library together, Talia hooks her arm through mine. "You know what's funny?"

"What?"

"After all those years of us against the world, we somehow found men who don't try to come between us," Talia grins.

"We got lucky," I admit.

"No." Talia stops in the hallway, turning to face me. "Luck had nothing to do with it. We chose well because we know what matters. Because we learned the hard way what family really means."

I pull her into a hug, feeling the familiar curve of her shoulder under my cheek. I breathe in her scent, warm and sweet. She is my sister, my constant, the only person who never left me.

She gives my arm a quick squeeze. "Let's finish this."

And just like that, we walk back into the fire together. Just as we always have and always will.

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 10:08 am

DIMITRI

The door buzzes with a metallic snarl that rattles through my bones.

That sound haunts me every hour I spend inside this place. The echo of it means movement, commands, transfers, or worse. But this time, when the bolts slide back and the door groans open, there is no command. No barked name or cuffs waiting to bite into my wrists. There is only Jensen.

He stands there holding a folder and a laminated badge. His face is a blank slate. It's the same look he gave me that first day in the yard when blood soaked the concrete, and they called it self-defense just to avoid the paperwork.

He extends the badge toward me. "You're leaving."

I stare at it, letting his words settle in.

They didn't make sense initially after weeks of stale air and cold stares.

Not after the nights I lay awake on a cot that creaked beneath the tension in my spine.

Not after the brawls I'd survived, the threats I'd weathered, the constant vigilance that had become as natural as breathing.

"Why?" I ask, because I don't trust anything here, not even good news.

Jensen shrugs, but there is a hint of respect in his eyes.

“Your lawyer pushed through a review. The judge agreed to an emergency motion based on new evidence. Said the case was compromised by falsified testimony and financial tampering. You're free to go.”

I take the badge, clip it to the front of my orange uniform, and follow him down the hallway.

Each step echoes loudly, and I feel eyes on me from behind the cell bars.

Inmates press against steel, watching in silence.

They know what this walk means. They know what it costs to survive long enough to make it out.

Some of them nod in silent acknowledgment.

Others turn away, unable to watch a man walk free when they have years left to serve.

Rodriguez, who shared his commissary with me that first week, raises his fist in solidarity.

Moore, who tried to corner me in the showers with a shiv, glares with pure hatred burning in his eyes.

I keep my gaze forward and my shoulders back. Even on your way out, you have to walk like you own every inch of concrete beneath your feet. The predators are always watching and waiting for the moment you forget this simple truth.

The guards say nothing as I pass. No congratulations or sarcasm, just silence. A silence so heavy it makes you wonder if the doors will suddenly slam shut again,

trapping you in this nightmare for good.

Officer Davis stands at the checkpoint, his fingers tapping impatiently against his belt.

He has been one of the few who treated me like a human being rather than an animal.

He nods once as I pass, a small gesture that might mean nothing to a civilian, but in this place, it is practically a farewell parade.

“Stay clean,” he mutters loud enough for only me to hear.

I give him a slight nod. We both know the odds of someone from my world staying clean are astronomically low. The Bratva isn’t a job you quit or a life you walk away from. But his words aren’t really about hope. They are about respect.

At processing, they hand me my belongings: black jeans, a black shirt, a watch, and the silver chain I always wore tucked beneath my collar. After weeks without it, it feels heavy, like a vital part of myself was missing and is finally restored.

I change quickly, trying not to think about how much of myself I’m leaving behind in this concrete jungle.

The man who walked in is not the same man who is walking out.

Prison hollows out parts of your soul and fills it with cold, hard calculation.

Every moment becomes a tactical assessment.

Every interaction is a potential threat.

Even now, as I slip my watch onto my wrist, I scan the room for exits, weapons, and any sign of danger.

The processing officer counts out the cash in my wallet I had upon my arrival. Four hundred and thirty-two dollars. It seems like such a trivial amount now. Outside, I have accounts with millions. Inside, it might as well have been pennies for all the good it did me.

“Sign here,” he instructs, sliding the clipboard across the counter and tapping the dotted line with the detached precision of someone who has done this a thousand times.

I skim the release forms. Everything seems in order. I sign my name with deliberate strokes. There is something satisfying about using a real pen again instead of the flimsy, flexible excuse for writing utensils they allow in the cells.

“Your personal effects have been cleared,” the officer mumbles, handing me a plastic bag containing my wallet, keys, and phone. “Battery's dead, obviously.”

I nod, pocketing everything quickly. The phone is useless now anyway. As is the standard security protocol, Aleksandr had all the lines changed after my arrest. New phones, numbers, and codes.

The final gate looms ahead, a massive slab of steel and security mechanisms. The officer swipes his card and enters a code, and the gate begins its slow, mechanical journey open. The sound of freedom has a distinct noise. Not the harsh buzz of the internal doors but a smoother, more deliberate hum.

"Good luck, Popov," the officer mutters, and I'm unsure if he means it or if it's just something they say to everyone who walks out.

When the final gate opens, and I step outside, the wind hits me with the warmth of spring.

The air is fresh and clean, with a hint of rain.

I listen to the rustle of branches from trees just beginning to wake up.

After weeks of recycled air tainted with blood, bleach, and sweat, it feels like my first real breath in a lifetime.

I turn my face to the sky and close my eyes for a long pause. When I open them again, I see him.

Aleksandr leans against a matte-black SUV, dressed in a tailored gray suit and wearing sunglasses that do nothing to hide the intensity of his stare.

He looks like power dressed in silk, but I can see the relief in the way his shoulders relax when he sees me.

His posture changes subtly. It only does that when he is truly at ease.

Which, for Aleksandr, is still more rigid than most men at their most alert.

I cross the parking lot, my shoes crunching over gravel, and stop a few feet from him.

“Lev actually let you do the pickup?” I quip. The words feel strange in my mouth, no longer confined to the clipped responses necessary for survival.

Aleksandr smirks and hands me a cup of coffee. “He didn't argue.”

Of course, Lev didn't. Aleksandr Avilov doesn't give people the opportunity to

argue.

Not when it comes to matters of family. I take the coffee with a weary exhale, the heat bleeding into my fingers.

It's the first normal thing I did in weeks.

I inhale the rich aroma, letting it ground me.

Prison coffee is thin and bitter. More water than anything resembling actual coffee.

This is thick and strong, exactly how I like it.

"You look like shit," he says, tilting his head.

"Better than I felt yesterday," I answer, sipping the coffee. It tastes like pure bliss, and I drink every drop. The caffeine hits my system like electricity, sharpening my senses even further.

Aleksandr falls into step beside me as we get into the SUV. Yuri is in the driver's seat, eyes on the rearview mirror like always. He nods to me, a silent welcome back. Ivan is in the passenger seat. Their presence means Aleksandr wasn't taking any chances with this pickup.

The SUV rolls forward, and I sink back into the seat, letting the city blur past the windows.

Everything looks sharper and brighter. After weeks of gray walls and harsh fluorescent lighting, the colors seem more vivid.

The streets seem wider, and the buildings taller.

It is as if my brain is trying to absorb every detail at once, overcompensating for the sensory deprivation of prison.

People walk along the sidewalks, going about their daily lives.

A woman pushes a stroller. A businessman argues on his phone.

A group of teenagers laugh outside a convenience store.

Normal people living normal lives, completely unaware of the power struggles and violence that shape the underworld just beneath the surface of their city.

But none of it matters until I see Sandy.

“Where is she?” I ask, my voice low but edged with urgency.

Aleksandr glances at me. “At the estate. She hasn't stopped working on your case. The judge couldn't deny the motion after what she found in the files.”

“What files?” I question, my eyebrows snapping together.

Aleksandr pulls out his phone, scrolls briefly, and hands it to me.

“Sandy found proof that a witness was paid off. She spotted a transfer Petrov routed through a logistics shell tied to a holding company in Belize. Lev did more digging and found another false witness, plus three separate accounts linked to Judge Hargrove, who presided over your case. He traced them back to the shell companies owned by Morozov.”

Morozov. Our most dangerous rival has reached further than I thought. Buying a federal judge is no small feat, even for someone with his resources.

“And the witnesses?” I ask, scrolling through the transaction records Sandy had uncovered.

“They recanted after Lev found their families. Turns out their testimony was motivated by very specific threats against their children.” Aleksandr's voice remains calm, but I can hear the underlying steel. Threatening children is beyond even our code.

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I hand the phone back and process this information.

Sandy didn't just find evidence. She helped Aleksandr and Lev dismantle an entire conspiracy piece by piece.

And she did it while pregnant with our child.

While carrying the heir to everything I've built over the last two decades.

Part of me admires the hell out of her for what she did.

The other part wants to shake her for putting herself in danger while I was stuck behind bars, powerless to protect her.

The estate comes into view faster than expected, my mind too tangled to notice the miles slipping by. We turn off the main road and wind through the trees that line the estate like a fortress. Familiar stone walls rise in the distance, guarding the estate and the lives within it.

Two hundred acres of privacy and security, designed to be an impenetrable stronghold and a place where the Avilov family can call home. Aleksandr offered me a place here before my arrest, knowing my property would be too exposed after this war with Morozov.

I see Sandy as the gates swing open, and the car stops in the circular driveway. She is standing on the front steps, one hand on the wrought iron railing, the other resting against the gentle swell of her stomach. Her fire-red hair is loose and windblown, her

blue eyes intense with anticipation.

She looks stronger yet more vulnerable than the last time I saw her.

There is a new hardness in her posture and a vigilance from months of looking over her shoulder.

But there is also softness, and a glow that pregnancy has given her.

My heart hammers against my ribs like it's trying to break free and reach her faster than my body can move.

She doesn't wait. Sandy walks toward me with purpose in every step, her eyes locking on mine like she doesn't believe it until she sees it herself.

Despite being five months pregnant, she moves with the same ease and grace she has always had.

Nothing slows her down. Not pregnancy. Not danger.

Not the fact that I was incarcerated with no guarantee of release.

I step out of the car just as she reaches me.

We look at each other as if trying to remember every line, every scar, every second lost to fear and silence.

The depth of emotion in her eyes nearly brings me to my knees.

Love, relief, exhaustion, and determination are all mixed together in a gaze that sees through every wall I put up.

Then she moves. She wraps her arms around me and holds on like she is trying to piece me back together from the outside in. I bury my face in her hair. She smells like safety, honey, and the echo of home.

Her voice cracks against my chest. “You're here.”

“I'm here,” I reply, my voice unsteady for the first time in years. My hands tremble slightly as I hold her, my freedom finally hitting me full force. I'm holding her, and I'm going to see my child born. The future I started to believe was lost forever is suddenly mine again.

She pulls back just far enough to look up at me, her fingers still gripping the front of my shirt. “I didn't stop, Dimitri. I couldn't.”

“I know,” I whisper, brushing a strand of hair from her cheek. Her skin is warm beneath my fingers, so different from the cold steel and concrete that surrounded me for weeks. “I saw the files.”

Her eyes well, but she doesn't cry. She carried both of us while I was gone, and I will spend the rest of my life making sure she never carries anything alone again.

“Come inside,” she hums, sliding her hand into mine. Her grip is firm, her fingers intertwining with mine like puzzle pieces.

As we walk through the estate doors, I feel a shift settle deep in my gut.

This isn't over. Morozov still breathes.

Petrov might have flipped, but the war hasn't ended.

There will be consequences for what happened.

There will be blood to pay for those weeks stolen from me.

For the fear Sandy lived with, and the threats made against our family.

But I'm no longer alone. And neither is she. And that changes everything.

Inside, the warmth of the estate envelopes us like a shield. The foyer echoes with our footsteps as Sandy leads me toward the stairs. Guards nod respectfully as we pass, their eyes alert despite the familiar surroundings. In our world, safety is never guaranteed.

"Are you hungry?" Sandy asks, her thumb tracing small circles on the back of my hand as we walk. Such a normal question. Such a domestic concern. It makes my heart ache with everything I missed.

"Later," I reply because food isn't what I need. What I need is to hold her without eyes watching. What I need is privacy, quiet, and time to remember what it feels like to sink my cock into her wet pussy.

She understands. Without another word, she guides me up the stairs and to the guest bedroom we have occupied since Morozov first threatened us.

When the door closes behind us, I slowly pull her back into my arms. I trace the lines of her face with my fingertips, memorizing her all over again. The slight arch of her eyebrows, the curve of her lips, and the small scar near her hairline from a childhood accident. She is real. This is real.

"I thought of you every night," I confess, my voice low against the room's quiet. "I told myself to stop. That it would be easier if I could just forget for a while. But I never could."

Sandy reaches up and touches my face, her fingers gentle against the stubble I wasn't able to shave properly in weeks. "Good," she breathes. "Because I never stopped thinking of you either."

At this moment, with her arms around me and her heart beating against mine, I know with absolute certainty that we will face it together, whatever comes next.

Morozov, Petrov, the police, the feds. No one stands a chance against what we have built.

Not just power, money, or influence. But something far more dangerous. Love.

DIMITRI

I need her more than my next breath in every way a man can need a woman. And in the next moment, I will claim her all over again, body and soul.

“I miss the feel of your sweet pussy,” I whisper, undressing her. She is so beautiful, and it makes my chest ache. I strip off my clothes and pull her to me, needing the feel of her skin against mine like a man starved for warmth.

She sucks in a breath as I grind my hard cock against her clit. Her nipples seem to harden even more as I cup her pussy against the palm of my hand.

“Who does this pussy belong to?” I demand. “Tell me, malyshka .”

“You,” she breathes, grinding her pussy against my hand. “It belongs to you.”

I lift her up and place her on the bed. Cupping her breast, I suck her nipple into my mouth, swirling my tongue in circles.

Sandy inhales sharply, grabbing onto my shoulders.

“Yes...” she moans, arching her back as I switch to the other breast.

She bites down on her bottom lip as I tease her, sliding my cock against her slick folds. Her plump breasts quiver as an animalistic need washes over me to push her breasts together and shove my cock between them. I pump my cock quickly, squeezing her breasts together.

“D-Dimitri,” she whimpers. “Fuck me...just fuck me...”

Her eyes flare with desire as she trails her tongue over her bottom lip. Releasing her breasts, I thrust my cock into her pussy in one swift motion.

She is so fucking wet. I push into her until my balls smack against her. I capture her gasp with my mouth, tasting her sweetness with my tongue.

Grabbing her hips, I thrust my cock in and out of her like a man possessed, hypnotized by the way her breasts bounce with each thrust. Sweat drips off my skin as her nails dig into my forearms. She feels so fucking good I want to shoot my cum into her right now.

But I hold back when I feel her core tighten.

“That’s it, kiska ,” I groan. “Come for me...come all over my cock...”

Her lashes flutter as beads of sweat collect between her breasts. I lean down, capturing her lips with mine as she convulses around my cock.

I’m still hard when I pull out of her. Grabbing her legs, I hook them around my waist and lift her off the bed. She nestles her head on my shoulder, her body still quivering from her release.

I walk her over to the window and watch her eyes widen with alarm as I twist her around and press her up against the glass.

“Dimitri...” she whispers. I place her palms flat against the glass and nudge her legs apart. Goosebumps spread across her porcelain skin as I rub a possessive hand over the globe of her ass.

“You’re such a good girl,” I hum into her ear. “Tell me what you want.”

She moans softly and presses her forehead against the cool glass. “I want you.”

I nip her shoulder and feel her tremble from my touch. “Where should I fuck you first?” I question, trailing my tongue down her spine. “Here?” I tease, pressing my finger into the crack of her ass. “Or here?” I hum, slipping my finger between her slick folds.

“Oh...” she moans, reaching down and cupping my hand, trying to push my finger into her pussy.

“No,” I growl, grabbing her hands and flattening her palms against the glass. “Don’t move...don’t you fucking move...” I grumble, trailing my fingers down her arms and reaching around to grab her breasts.

“Dimitri...please...” she begs when I pinch and twist her hard nipples. “Please...I need you inside me...”

“You’re so eager,” I say against her neck. Her body arches slightly, her ass pushing against my cock. “Soon, malyshka ,” I breathe, dragging my lips down her spine.

I spread her ass open and lick her puckered hole, fucking it with my tongue.

I’m overwhelmed with the desire to plunge my cock into her ass.

Instead, I slide my finger in and relish her surprised gasp.

Reaching around with my other hand, I play with her clit, simultaneously fucking her ass with my finger.

“Yes...” she moans against the glass, her palms frozen.

“Is this what you want?” I tease, pinching and rolling my thumb over her clit.

“Yessss,” she whimpers, pushing her ass against my finger, desperate for a release.

She cries out when I pull my finger out and thrust my cock into her ass.

Grabbing her hips, I angle her slightly to bury myself balls deep.

She’s panting and moaning, pushing her hips back and her ass up, spreading her legs wider.

I grit my teeth and force myself to keep going despite teetering on the edge of my release.

My fingers snake around her neck, and I pull her against my chest, pinning her in place.

Wrapping my arms around her, I squeeze her breasts, rocking into her at a fevered pace.

I feel her body vibrating as her release gathers in her core.

I’m completely lost in her as her release explodes, causing my own release to shoot rapidly into her luscious ass.

Sandy goes limp in my arms as I press one hand against the window to keep us upright. My breathing is labored as I pump every drop of cum into her. When my cock softens, I pull it out watching my cum drip down the crack of her ass.

Lifting her up, I place her on the bed, kissing her deeply. I tongue the inside of her ear as her body shivers beneath me.

“I’m not done with you yet,” I whisper, trailing kisses down her neck.

“I...I can’t come again,” she whimpers, digging her fingers into my shoulders.

“You can and you will,” I insist, sucking her nipple into my mouth.

She gasps, arching her back and grabbing a fistful of sheets.

Dragging my lips down her belly, I grip her thighs and spread her legs open. Her pussy is swollen, wet, and ready to be violated. I blow lightly on it and watch her shiver. Her fire-red hair is fanned out around her like a halo. She is so fucking perfect she’s like a work of art.

“Mine,” I growl, pressing my lips to her pussy. Her fingers thread in my hair, tugging at the ends.

“It’s too much...” she cries, trying to buck me off her.

“You’re mine,” I growl again, pinning her hips to the bed. “And I’m going to make sure you never forget it.”

Using two fingers, I rub her clit in slow circles.

Her eyes roll back, and a soft moan escapes her sinful lips.

I tease her opening with my tongue, and her pussy is dripping wet again in a matter of seconds.

I get off on the fact that I can make her orgasm any way I want.

I want her to scream for me just by touching her with my tongue and fingers.

I place possessive kisses on her, spreading her lips open with my fingers. Her lips are swollen and pink. I relish her sweetness as I fuck her with my tongue, listening to her gasp and whimper with every thrust.

Pulling my tongue out, I replace it with my fingers, shoving two in. I fuck her a few times before adding a third finger. Without giving her a chance to adjust to the thickness, I fuck her hard and fast.

Sandy grinds on my hand, riding my fingers like she's on a bucking bronco. I curl my fingers over her G-spot, and her legs begin to shake as she lets out a shuddering gasp of pleasure.

Covering her clit with my mouth, I swirl my tongue over it in rapid circles.

"Fuck! Yes, Dimitri! Oh...my...God..." she cries out as I fuck her savagely.

I smile against her as her pussy begins to convulse.

"P-please...y-yes...just like that..." she pants, chasing her orgasm.

I keep up the pace, slamming my fingers into her while stroking her G-spot with every thrust. With one final suck to her clit, she shatters around my mouth and fingers. I continue to fuck her through her orgasm, her fingers tangled in my hair.

Finally, I release her, leaving her writhing on the bed. I slide onto the bed and pull her against me, curling my large frame around her.

“I love you,” I whisper against her hair.

“I love you, too,” she whispers, her body relaxing against mine.

I hold her close, listening as her breathing slowly steadies. Within minutes, she’s asleep in my arms, soft and peaceful. I stay there, unmoving, wrapped around the woman I love, knowing I will never let her go.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 10:08 am

SANDY

The morning light slips through the curtains in soft ribbons, spreading warm golden stripes across the sheets. I lay in the hush of the mansion's guest bedroom, listening to Dimitri's breathing beside me.

For the first time in weeks, I don't wake up with dread curled around my ribs like barbed wire. There is no panic clawing at the back of my throat. No sharp stab of fear when I reach for him and find his side empty. He is here. Flesh and bone and scars and warmth. He is finally here.

My body aches in all the right ways. The kind of ache that makes me press my thighs together, remembering the way he worshipped every inch of me last night like a man starved.

Like he had been counting the hours until he could touch me again.

There was nothing rushed or careless about the way he claimed me.

His hands had been firm but reverent. His mouth had found every place in me that ached from grief and filled it with something I thought I might never feel again.

Love. Need. Redemption.

I turn my head slowly on the pillow and look at him.

Dimitri lay on his stomach, half-buried beneath the ivory sheets, one arm tossed

across the mattress as if he were reaching for me in his sleep.

The light traces the rough edge of his jaw, the curve of his shoulder, and the thick line of a scar I never saw before stretching along his bicep.

His hair is a little longer than usual and slightly disheveled, making him look younger, less hardened, and almost vulnerable.

Seeing him like this twists something tender in my chest and settles low in my belly, right where our child grows.

My hand drifts instinctively to my bump.

It's more prominent now. It's not huge, but it's enough to make my clothes fit differently and make strangers glance twice. I can feel the changes in my body every day. The shifting balance and tighter skin, and the way my heart beats a little faster, even when I'm standing still.

For weeks, I felt like I was doing this alone.

I never said it out loud, but I lay in bed every night and imagined him missing everything.

The soft kicks. The sound of the heartbeat on the monitor.

The quiet conversations I had with our baby when the fear of losing him was too much to carry.

But now he is here. And that changes everything.

As if he senses my thoughts, Dimitri stirs. He lets out a low groan, then turns onto his

side, reaching for me with a heavy arm that curls possessively around my waist. His hand finds the bare skin of my hip and stays there, warm and solid.

His voice is rough with sleep. "You're awake."

I smile into the pillow. "So are you."

He kisses my shoulder softly, then nudges the sheet down to place another lower, near the curve of my spine. "Couldn't sleep without you," he murmurs.

I roll toward him and bury my fingers in his hair. "You say that like you weren't passed out ten minutes after we... collapsed."

He smirks, lifting his head to look at me. "I wasn't passed out. I was satisfied."

Heat blooms in my cheeks, but I don't look away. "I think I've missed your cocky mouth almost as much as the rest of you."

He chuckles, then kisses me slowly. Not with heat this time, but with something softer that feels like home. When he pulls back, his hand slides between us and rests over my bump.

"Still feels surreal," he says quietly. "Knowing you're carrying my child."

I cover his hand with mine. "You should have seen your face last night when you felt the baby move. You looked terrified."

His brow furrows slightly as if the memory of that moment still grips him. "I was. I am...not of being a father. I want that. But I spent so long preparing for death. I don't know if I ever prepared for this."

My pulse drums, but I force myself to keep my voice steady. “Then we learn together.”

His eyes lock with mine. “You really want to build something with me after all this? You still trust me to be good for you? For the baby?”

I lean in and press my forehead to his. “You're not good for me, Dimitri. You're everything for me.”

He lets out a shaky breath and draws me closer, wrapping his arms around me like he fears I might disappear if he blinks too long. We stay like this for a while, tangled together in the quiet, letting the warmth of the morning soak into our skin.

Eventually, I trace a finger along the ridges of a scar near his ribs. “We can leave it all behind, you know. The Bratva. The danger. We can run.”

His jaw tenses, but he doesn't pull away. “I've thought about it. There's a part of me that wants nothing more than to disappear with you and the baby. Find some quiet corner of the world where no one knows my name.”

“But?” I ask softly.

“But there's still unfinished business. Morozov is out there. Petrov may have flipped, but there are still loose ends. And I can't walk away knowing he might come for you one day. Or for our child.”

I nod, even though it scares me. “Then we finish it. Together.”

His hand slides up my thigh, not to seduce but to anchor. “You really are the bravest woman I've ever met.”

“I'm not brave,” I whisper. “I'm in love.”

He kisses me deeply and intentionally. Full of everything he can't say. When we finally pull apart, he looks down at my belly and whispers something in Russian I don't understand. The reverence in his voice makes my eyes sting with tears.

“What did you say?” I ask.

His fingers brush my cheek. “I told our child that they are the best thing I've ever done. And that their mother is the only reason I made it home.”

A tear slides down my cheek, and he kisses it away.

The war is not over. The world outside this room still spins on a blade's edge. But here, at this moment, there is only us. And that is more than enough.

I watch his face as he gazes at my stomach, his dark eyes filled with a tenderness I rarely see.

The hardness that usually lines his features has softened in the morning light.

I savor the moment, trying to commit every detail to memory.

Dimitri Popov, feared enforcer of the Avilov Bratva, ruthless leader and dangerous man, looks at our unborn child like it is the most precious treasure in the universe.

“I never thought I would have this,” he whispers. “Men like me don't get happy endings.”

I run my fingers through his wavy hair, the strands thick and slightly coarse against my skin. “Maybe that's because you've never let yourself want one before.”

He looks up, his expression so unguarded it makes my heart clench. “There was nothing to want before you.”

The sincerity in his words threatens to undo me completely. This vulnerability is profound for a man who has spent his entire life hiding his emotions, building walls, and showing the world only his strength and brutality. I know what it costs him to let me see him this way.

“How long can you stay?” I ask, hoping the answer will be forever, but I know better.

He traces lazy circles on my hip with his thumb. “I told Lev to handle things for the day. Unless there's an emergency, I'm yours until tomorrow morning.”

A whole day. Twenty-four hours of him, all to myself. After weeks of phone calls monitored by guards and letters that could never say what we wanted to tell each other, this feels like a gift I don't deserve.

I shift closer to him, resting my head on his chest so I can hear the steady thump of his heart. “I've missed this sound,” I murmur. “Sometimes I would dream about it and wake up crying because I couldn't hear it anymore.”

His arm tightens around me. “I dreamed of you every night. Your voice. Your scent.” His hand moves to cup my face, tilting it up so he can look into my eyes. “The feel of your skin against mine. It was torture knowing you were out here, carrying my child, facing everything alone.”

“I wasn't completely alone,” I remind him. “Talía and Aleksandr were here. So were the kids. And Lev kept me busy searching through files and paperwork.”

Something like guilt shadows his features. “I should have been here.”

I press my palm against his cheek, feeling the rough morning stubble. “You're here now. That's what matters.”

He turns his face to kiss my palm.

“You're too good for me, Sandy Davis. Always have been.”

“No,” I say firmly. “I'm exactly where I belong.”

Dimitri pulls me closer and kisses me deeply, his tongue sliding against mine with languid purpose. My body responds instantly, heat pooling between my thighs as I press myself against him. His hand slides down my back to grip my hip, and I can feel him hardening against my stomach.

“Again?” I tease when we break apart, both breathing heavily.

His eyes darken with desire. “I have weeks to make up for, malyshka .”

“Then we shouldn't waste any time,” I breathe, sliding my hand down his chest.

He catches my wrist, his grip gentle but firm. “Not yet.” His expression grows serious. “First, I want to see.”

I know immediately what he means. Last night was frantic, passionate, and driven by weeks of separation and need. We barely removed our clothes before he was inside me, both of us desperate for that connection. There had been no time for exploration or rediscovery.

I sit up slowly, the sheet falling away from my upper body. His eyes travel over my breasts, which have grown fuller with pregnancy. Then down to my stomach, where our child grows. I watch his face, see the wonder there, and feel a surge of love so

powerful it takes my breath away.

“You're so beautiful,” he murmurs, sitting up to join me.

His fingers trace the curve of my belly with reverent care. Then he leans forward and presses his lips to where our baby rests.

“Moy rebenok ,” he whispers against my skin. My child.

Tears prick my eyes. This man, who has killed without remorse, who has built an empire on blood and fear, is treating our unborn baby with such tenderness it fills my heart.

As if sensing my emotion, he looks up. “What's wrong?”

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“Nothing,” I assure him, wiping at a tear that has escaped. “It's just seeing you like this with our baby. It's everything I dreamed about when you were gone.”

He pulls me into his lap, my legs straddling his waist, my belly between us. His hands cup my face.

I lean forward and kiss him, pouring all my love, relief, and gratitude into it. He responds with equal fervor, his hands moving to my back to hold me against him. When we finally break apart, he rests his forehead against mine.

“Tell me about the baby,” he smiles. “Tell me everything I missed.”

I settle comfortably in his lap. “Well, according to the doctor, everything is developing perfectly.” I take his hand and place it on the side of my stomach. “If we're patient, you might feel a kick. The baby's been most active in the mornings lately.”

“Boy or girl?” he asks, his hand splayed protectively over my bump.

“I didn't want to find out without you,” I admit. “But Dr. Daria said she could tell at my last appointment. I told her I'd wait.”

Something soft and unexpected crosses his features. “You waited for me?”

I nod. “Some things should be shared.”

He is quiet for a moment, his eyes never leaving my stomach. “Do you have a

preference?”

I think about it. “Not really. I just want a healthy baby. Although...” I smile, thinking of the tiny clothes I couldn’t resist buying. “I may have purchased a few things in neutral colors. Just small things. I didn't want to jinx anything.”

“Superstitious?” he asks, a slight smile on his lips.

I shrug. “Cautious. The first trimester was difficult.”

But Dimitri knows me too well. His eyes narrow slightly, reading the things I’m not saying. “What happened? And don't say ‘nothing.’ I can see it in your eyes.”

I sigh, knowing it is pointless to hide things from him. “There was some bleeding early on. The doctor said it happens sometimes, that it wasn't necessarily a sign of trouble. But it scared me. I thought...” My voice catches. “I thought I might lose the baby too.”

I can see the muscles in his neck strain with tension. “Why didn't you tell me?”

“What would you have done from inside a prison cell, Dimitri? Break out? That would only have made things worse.” I place my hand over his, which still rests on my stomach.

“By the time I saw you for that first visit, everything was fine. The doctor had confirmed the baby was healthy, and the bleeding had stopped. There was no point in worrying you.”

He looks like he wants to argue, but instead, he pulls me against his chest, burying his face in my hair. “No more secrets, malyshka . Not even to protect me. Promise me.”

I nod against his shoulder. "I promise."

We stay like that, the silence comfortable between us. His hands move soothingly up and down my back, and I feel myself fully relaxing for the first time in months.

"Are you hungry?" he asks eventually, his voice rumbling under my ear.

As if on cue, my stomach growls loudly, making both of us laugh.

"I'll take that as a yes," he says, kissing my head before gently shifting me off his lap. "Stay here. I'll find us something to eat."

I salute playfully. "Yes, sir."

He shakes his head, smiling as he pulls on a pair of black sweatpants that hang low on his hips. I enjoy the view of his bare chest as he moves around the room, the muscles in his back shifting beneath his tattooed skin.

"I'll be back," he promises, pausing at the door to look at me with an intensity that makes my skin tingle. "Don't get dressed."

The door closes behind him, and I fall back against the pillows, smiling at the ceiling. For the first time in months, the knot of anxiety in my chest has loosened. Dimitri is here. He is safe. And for now, at least, we are together.

I stretch luxuriously in the large bed, enjoying the feel of the expensive sheets against my bare skin. The Avilov mansion is opulent in a way that still makes me uncomfortable sometimes. It is a far cry from my modest apartment.

I let my hand rest on my stomach, feeling a subtle movement beneath my palm. "Your papa is home," I whisper. "I told you he would come back to us."

Another flutter, stronger this time, as if in response. I smile, imagining the tiny life inside me, already forming its personality and will. Will the baby have Dimitri's coffee-colored eyes and commanding presence? My tendency to speak without thinking? Will it be stubborn like both of us?

The sound of the door opening pulls me from my thoughts. Dimitri enters carrying a tray loaded with food. Toast, fruit, what looks like scrambled eggs, and two steaming mugs of coffee.

“Breakfast in bed?” I beam, sitting up and adjusting the pillows behind me. “You really are trying to impress me.”

He sets the tray down carefully across my lap. “Is it working?”

I pretend to consider. “Well, that depends. Is that regular coffee I smell? Because if you're trying to give me decaf, I might have to reconsider this relationship.”

He smirks, sitting on the edge of the bed. “Half-caf. Doctor's orders. Talia told me.”

I roll my eyes but can't help smiling. “You two ganging up on me is not fair.”

“All's fair when it comes to keeping you and the baby healthy.” He picks a strawberry from the plate and holds it to my lips. “Now eat. You need your strength.”

I bite into the fruit, the sweetness bursting on my tongue. “For what?” I ask innocently, licking juice from my lips.

His eyes darken as he watches the movement. “For when I'm done letting you eat.”

A shiver of anticipation runs through me, but I force myself to focus on the food. He's right. I need to eat. The baby needs nourishment, and I haven't taken the best

care of myself with Dimitri gone. I had too many sleepless nights and too many skipped meals because anxiety stole my appetite.

We eat in comfortable silence, Dimitri occasionally feeding me bites from his plate. When we finish, he takes the empty tray and sits it beside the bed. His hand moves to my neck, his thumb tracing my jawline. "Remember the first time we met?"

I feel the heat rise to my cheeks at the memory. "You were being an ass," I chuckle.

"You threatened to stab me with Aleksandr's letter opener," he remarks, a hint of amusement tugging at his mouth.

"You deserved it," I shoot back, giving his arm a playful smack. "You told him to lock me in the basement!"

I cross my arms with a dramatic huff. "You said it was for my protection from Vic and his goons. But then you muttered it was to shut me up." I stick out my bottom lip in an exaggerated pout.

"I did want you safe from Vic," he states, leaning in to kiss my shoulder softly, "but I also wanted you far away from me."

"What?" I blink. "Why? I didn't do anything to you."

"No," he murmurs, voice low and thick, "but I knew what I wanted."

His hand drifts from my neck to my shoulder, then traces slowly down my arm, leaving a trail of goosebumps in its wake.

"I still do."

The intensity of his gaze makes my breath hitch. Even after everything we have been through, our connection remains unbroken. If anything, it has grown stronger, tempered by our trials.

“And what is it you want, Dimitri Popov?” I breathe.

His answer is to pull me into his arms, his mouth finding mine with unerring precision. The kiss is deliberately slow, thoroughly exploring as if he has all the time in the world to taste me.

When he finally pulls back, his eyes are dark with desire. “I want everything. You. Our child. A future.” His hand moves to my stomach, protective and possessive at once. “And I want to spend the rest of the day reminding you exactly why you fell in love with me in the first place.”

“As if I could forget,” I murmur, arching into his touch as his hands begin a torturously slow exploration of my body.

He takes his time, relearning the map of my skin and discovering how pregnancy has changed me. His attention to every detail makes me feel cherished, desired, and beautiful despite the changes that sometimes make me feel like a stranger in my own body.

When he finally slides his thick cock inside me, the sensation is overwhelming. Not just physically but emotionally. Tears sting my eyes as he moves within me, his gaze never leaving mine. It feels like coming home, like finding the missing piece of myself that was torn away when they took him.

“I love you, Sandy,” he whispers against my lips as we move together.

“I love you, too,” I gasp, holding him tighter as the friction builds between us.

“Always.”

He keeps up a steady pace, and I quickly shatter around him.

Afterward, we lay tangled together, my head on his chest, his hand idly stroking my hair. Birds sing in the trees surrounding the mansion grounds, and a gentle breeze stirs the curtains.

“What are you thinking?” Dimitri asks, his voice rumbling under my ear.

I trace one of his tattoos with my fingertip. “About names for the baby.”

I feel him smile. “Any ideas?”

“If it's a girl, I was thinking Natalia,” I say softly. “After your mother.”

His body goes still beneath me. When he speaks, his voice is rough with emotion. “You would do that?”

I lift my head to look at him. “Of course. She's part of you, part of our baby's heritage. Talia told me she was brave and kind. That she loved fiercely.”

His eyes shimmer with feeling. “She would have loved you,” he says quietly.

I lay my head back on his chest.

“And if it's a boy?” he asks after a moment.

I smile against his skin. “I was hoping you might have ideas.”

He is quiet for so long that I think he might not answer. Then, “Mikhail,” he says,

“for my brother.”

“Mikhail,” I repeat, letting the name settle on my tongue. “I like it. It feels right. The perfect way to honor him. But do you think Sasha and Maxim will be okay with it?”

Their father was taken from them just over a year ago, murdered by the same psychopath who tried to kill Talia. I don’t want the baby’s name to be a constant reminder of what they lost.

Dimitri doesn’t pause. “I think they’ll be more than okay with it. A new life carrying Mikhail’s name... It’s a way to remember him with hope instead of grief.”

His hand moves to my stomach, and the baby kicks against his palm as if on cue. Dimitri's sharp intake of breath makes me smile.

“I think someone approves,” I grin.

“Strong,” he murmurs, his voice filled with pride. “Like their mother.”

I tilt my head to look at him. “And their father.”

He kisses me softly and pulls me closer to his side.

Outside the sanctuary of the bedroom, I know reality waits.

There are still enemies to face and dangers to overcome.

Dimitri's world will always carry risks, complications, and threats.

But for now, at this moment, there is only his heartbeat beneath my ear, his child growing inside me, and the promise of a future neither of us has dared to dream of

before.

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DIMITRI

Aleksandr's office smells like old wood, leather, and gun oil. Scents I didn't realize I missed until I stepped inside and shut the door behind me.

That familiar combination takes me back to years gone by, to moments of significance and consequence that shaped my life within the Bratva.

The aroma has become synonymous with power and decisions that alter fates.

The room is dim, lit only by the morning light pushing in through tall windows and the golden lamp on the corner of his desk.

Thick drapes hang heavily against the windows, blocking the outside world from peering in.

Shelves lined with rare books and locked drawers holding Bratva secrets stand as silent witnesses to countless plans and verdicts.

Aleksandr sits behind the desk, jacket off, cuffs rolled neatly to his forearms. His posture is straight, his shoulders broad, and he exudes authority without effort.

He doesn't look up right away. He is focused on the file he is reading.

His expression reminds me of our childhood, how he studied chess moves with that same intensity, plotting several steps ahead.

Lev stands near the corner, scrolling through surveillance photos on his phone, a cigarette unlit between his fingers. He glances up as I enter, nodding once. It is the only acknowledgment I need. In our world, words are often unnecessary.

I walk in and take the chair across from Aleksandr. The leather creaks beneath me, familiar and comforting in its own way.

I study my brother as he finishes whatever document holds his attention.

Prison didn't change me as much as it refined me, burning away the unnecessary parts.

I wonder if he notices the difference. The hardened edges and newfound patience that come with counting days and nights in a cell.

My newly dyed black hair is the most visible transformation.

The blonde locks I had my entire life are gone.

It is a deliberate choice I made the day after my release.

A physical manifestation of how prison altered me to my core.

Aleksandr finally sets the file down and looks up, his cold blue eyes locking on mine. "You ready?" he asks simply.

"I'm ready," I reply.

His gaze holds mine for a moment longer, assessing and measuring. His eyes linger on my black hair, taking note of the transformation.

“The hair,” he comments, his tone neutral but curious.

I run a hand through the dark strands. “Blonde was for the man who got framed. Black is for the man who's coming back to burn it all down.”

Aleksandr's eyes gleam with approval. Then he leans back in the chair, steepling his fingers. “Good. Because this war is shifting. We don't respond like thugs. We respond like kings.”

There is something in his voice, a calm certainty that has always made people listen. It isn't volume or aggression but absolute conviction. The voice of a man who knows the value of each word spoken.

Lev tosses a folder onto the desk. The sound of paper hitting wood punctuates the silence.

“The thread we needed. Petrov's payments came through Valkyr Logistics.

One of his shell fronts tied to Morozov's holding company in Geneva. We confirmed the dates. The money moved three days before the witness came forward.”

I feel a surge of pride thinking about Sandy and how she had unraveled what others couldn't see. Her intelligence had proven invaluable, and her determination matched our own. But I keep my face blank. There will be time for personal reflections later.

Aleksandr's mouth curves into something that's not quite a smile. It is the expression of a predator who has cornered its prey after a long hunt. “Petrov didn't just build the lie. He funded the entire play.”

“And Russo packaged it,” I add, leaning forward slightly. “Gave it to the feds wrapped in a bow.” The pieces finally connect, forming a picture of betrayal and

calculated moves against our family.

Aleksandr nods. “Russo’s been dancing between both sides for years. Feeding Morozov intel while pretending to keep our enemies at bay. But now we have proof. Not just whispers and suspicion.”

The revelation isn’t entirely surprising but having confirmation changes everything. Suspicion can be ignored, but evidence demands action. And action is what the Bratva does best.

Lev taps his phone screen and turns it toward me. “Russo was spotted leaving a private club near Brighton Beach. He met with Kiril the same night Petrov transferred money to that numbered account.”

I look at the grainy surveillance photo. With his off-the-rack suit and politician smile, Russo shakes hands with Kiril, a man known for breaking bones and burying bodies. The picture tells a thousand words, none of them innocent.

Aleksandr leans forward slightly. His voice doesn’t rise.

It never does when he is serious. That is what makes it so lethal.

“This is not just corruption. This is a coordinated attack on my family.

They didn't just target you. They tried to dismantle the foundation of everything we've built.

And they did it with the arrogance of men who think I won't cut their throats in broad daylight.”

I meet his gaze, steady and cold. “Then let's start with Petrov.”

Aleksandr inclines his head. “Exactly.”

He pulls out another file, which is thinner but more telling.

His fingers, adorned only with the gold family ring on his right hand and his wedding band on his left, spread the contents across the polished surface of the desk.

“He goes to the Hawthorne Club every Thursday.

Same booth. Same waiter. Same bullshit sense of immunity. You're going to take that from him.”

The photographs show Petrov entering the exclusive club and being greeted with smiles and handshakes. He is accustomed to the respect he hasn't earned, a man who believes money can shield him from consequences.

Lev steps forward and slides a blueprint across the desk. “Side alley leads to a service corridor. We'll tap into the back security feed and disable the camera loop for thirty minutes. That's your window.”

I study the blueprint, committing it to memory. The layout is simple enough. However, high-end establishments often overlook basic security measures, relying instead on their reputation and exclusive clientele. This is their mistake.

Aleksandr points to the floor plan, his finger tracing the extraction route. “No blood inside the club. We do this with precision. A quiet extraction. You get him out and into the car and we'll take him to the dungeon. He talks, or he vanishes.”

I nod, understanding the parameters. This isn't about making noise. It's about sending a message that will resonate throughout the underworld, a message that will make others think twice.

“If he talks?” I ask, already knowing the answer but needing to hear it confirmed.

“Then we cut deeper,” Aleksandr states, his voice like velvet over steel. “We follow the money. We expose the others. Russo goes next. Then Morozov.”

I lean back in the chair and nod once. “Simple.” And it was. Not easy, but simple. The best plans always are.

Aleksandr's voice sharpens like a blade being honed. “No mistakes. No collateral damage. I want the message to be unmistakable. We are not hiding in the shadows. Morozov wanted a war. Let's show him what happens when you strike at the Avilov Bratva and miss.”

Lev lights the cigarette and blows smoke toward the ceiling. The gray cloud swirls and expands above our heads. “You want him broken?” His question is casual, but the implications are anything but.

Aleksandr looks at me. Our eyes connect, and at that moment, he understands exactly what I want. “I want him to understand that the man he put behind bars walked out stronger,” I hiss.

I feel something shift inside me. Not rage or vengeance. Focus, pure and clarifying that comes from having a purpose larger than oneself.

Aleksandr stands, his fingers gripping the edge of the desk. “Then I'll make sure he understands.”

He slips on his jacket and tucks his cell phone into his pocket. “We move tomorrow,” he declares. “Tonight, you stay with Sandy. Rest and hold what is yours.”

His acknowledgment of Sandy's place in my life is significant. The Bratva is

traditional in many ways, often in a brutally direct manner. But Aleksandr doesn't just tolerate her.

He sees her worth not just as his sister-in-law but as a woman who has earned respect in her own right.

She isn't an outsider anymore. She is one of us.

"I already am," I reply.

Aleksandr claps a hand on my shoulder, firm and brief. His grip is strong, conveying more than words can. "Then tomorrow, you show them why the Popov name still carries fire."

I feel the truth of his words in my bones. Otets had built this empire with blood and vision. Aleksandr has maintained it with intelligence and ruthlessness. Now it is my turn to prove my worth, to show that prison didn't extinguish what made me a Popov.

I leave the office without another word. The mission is clear. The enemy is exposed.

The hallway outside is long and lined with paintings of Russian landscapes. I walk past them without really seeing them, my mind already mapping out tomorrow's operation. The extraction, the interrogation, and the necessary aftermath.

My men nod respectfully as I pass. My absence didn't diminish their loyalty. In fact, it seems to have strengthened it. There is honor among our kind and respect for those who suffer for the sake of family.

I stop by the security room to check in with Ivan. "I need everything you have on the Hawthorne Club. Staff schedules, security rotations, every detail."

Ivan nods without question. “On your desk within the hour.”

As I walk toward the kitchen, I think about Sandy. She waited and worked tirelessly to prove my innocence, eventually uncovering the threads that led to the revelations of today. She was fierce in her loyalty and brilliant in her strategies.

She is there, sitting by the bay window, laptop open.

She looks up as I enter, her eyes searching my face for information.

Her gaze lingers on my black hair, a change she is still getting used to.

She’s only known me with blonde hair, but she understands what this transformation means to me.

This is my battle armor, my declaration of intent.

“It's happening,” I say simply.

She closes the laptop and stands. Her movements are purposeful. “When?”

“Tomorrow. Petrov first.”

She crosses the kitchen and stands before me. There is no fear in her eyes, no hesitation. Only understanding and resolution. “Good. He deserves what's coming.”

I cup her face in my hands, allowing myself to truly look at her for the first time today. The woman who has become my anchor. The woman who has fought her own war while I fought mine behind bars.

“Aleksandr said to rest tonight. To hold what is mine,” I tell her, my voice soft.

She smiles, slow and knowing. “And what is yours, Dimitri Popov?”

“You,” I say. “You and the future we're building.”

I lean down and kiss her, pouring everything I can't say with words into it. The gratitude and unbreakable bond that has survived separation and slander.

That night, we did rest. But first, we reminded each other what we were fighting for. What made all the risk worthwhile. Her body was against mine, our hearts beating in sync, and we whispered our plans for after the storm passed.

As she sleeps beside me, her breathing deep and peaceful, I stare at the ceiling and continue planning. Petrov will be just the beginning. A message written in fear rather than blood. A statement that will echo through the criminal underworld.

The Popov family is not broken. The Avilov family will not break. And I am not beaten. By the time I return to Sandy's side after tomorrow's mission, I will have already begun writing Petrov's end. Not with bullets or blades but with the precise destruction of everything he believes keeps him safe.

That is the true power of the Bratva. Not violence for its own sake, but the strategic application of pressure until the enemy crumbles from within, understanding that crossing us is not just a mistake but a fatal miscalculation.

I turn toward Sandy, watching her chest rise and fall gently. For her, our family, and our future, I will ensure that our enemies learn that lesson well. Tomorrow will be the first chapter in their education. And I will be a thorough teacher.

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DIMITRI

We move like ghosts through the night, our footsteps barely audible against the cracked asphalt.

The alley behind the Hawthorne Club reeks of old piss and cigarette ash, a place where secrets are traded, and lives end without ceremony.

The streetlamps overhead have an anemic glow, barely illuminating the narrow corridor between the buildings.

We performed this dance many times before.

The spring air holds a bite tonight, carrying the scent of rain that fell earlier in the evening. New York City never truly sleeps, but we are tucked away from the main thoroughfares in a pocket of eerie silence broken only by distant sirens and the occasional drunk stumbling home.

Lev secures the side entrance with expertise, slicing through the club's service alarm with a deft hand and a whisper of wires.

His fingers move with surgical precision, disconnecting and reconnecting circuits until the security system surrenders quietly.

He gives a short nod, confirming our path is clear.

Yuri stands at my side, his massive frame coiled with anticipation and his eyes

methodically sweeping the alley for any sign of movement.

Aleksandr positions himself at the corner of the alley, half-shielded by a parked black SUV, watching the service door with the detached calm of a man who has orchestrated far worse operations.

His jet-black hair absorbs the minimal light while his ice-blue eyes gleam with predatory focus.

At thirty-three, my brother has already cemented his reputation as the most ruthless Bratva leader on the East Coast. As head of the Avilov family, he commands respect and inspires terror in equal measure.

“He's in booth seventeen,” Lev whispers, tapping the screen of his burner phone. The blue glow illuminates his face for a moment. “Same as last time. Drink in hand, back to the wall, no guards tonight. Overconfident mudak .”

“Then let us move,” Aleksandr orders, his tone dripping with authority. My brother does not ask or suggest. He commands, and men obey. He uses the same tone that has ordered executions without remorse and negotiated million-dollar deals without flinching.

I'm first through the door.

The kitchen sprawls before us, industrial and utilitarian, with staff long gone for the night.

The scent of old grease and spilled alcohol clings to the air, mixing with cleaning solutions into a uniquely nauseating combination.

Stainless steel surfaces reflect our silhouettes as we sweep through, our boots silent

on the tile floor.

Every movement is calculated, and every step is placed with intention.

The hallway beyond leads to the rear of the club.

An exclusive section where privacy commands premium prices.

The booths there are bathed in low blue lighting, and heavy velvet curtains shield patrons from unwanted scrutiny.

The Hawthorne caters to those who require discretion, making it popular with the criminal elite and wealthy businessmen with secrets to keep.

Booth seventeen is situated near the back, partially obscured by an ornamental divider crafted from dark wood and stained glass. Through gaps in the decorative screen, I can see him. Benjamin Petrov. The man who fabricated evidence that put me behind bars.

He casually sits with one leg crossed over the other, nursing a glass of amber whiskey.

His pinstripe suit appears impeccable even in the dim lighting, his signet ring catching blue reflections as he raises his glass.

The smug expression on his face is one I fantasized about shattering during countless sleepless nights in my prison cell.

He never saw us coming.

Aleksandr reached him first, moving with a speed that belied his commanding

position.

Most Bratva leaders delegate the dirty work, but my brother has always believed in leading from the front.

With a quick application of pressure to a specific point behind the ear, Petrov slumps forward without making a sound.

Lev catches his body before it hits the table.

At the same time, Yuri positions himself to block any potential view from other patrons.

We are gone in under twenty seconds, leaving only an unfinished drink and rumpled booth cushions.

By the time we load him into the back of the black SUV parked a block away, cuffed and gagged, the street remains undisturbed.

A single drunk stumbles past the alley entrance, never turning his head toward us.

The perfect witness. He is too intoxicated to be reliable, even if he did notice anything unusual.

It is a clean, professional grab that will leave police scratching their heads and filing reports that will eventually gather dust in evidence rooms.

“Drive,” Aleksandr instructs Yuri, who slides smoothly behind the wheel.

The journey to Aleksandr's estate takes forty minutes. We wind through progressively less populated areas until we reach the outskirts of the city.

Security cameras track us, and gates open automatically as we approach.

The grounds spread out around us, immaculate gardens just beginning to bloom in the early spring.

The driveway curves around a central fountain, currently switched off for the night, before delivering us to the rear entrance of the mansion.

Two men emerge silently to assist us, loyal enforcers who ask no questions as they help transport our unconscious cargo to the basement.

We call it the dungeon. It's built from damp stone and old despair, but it has been modernized with certain amenities that suit our purposes.

The walls are solid stone, three feet thick.

There are no windows. Instead, there is a hidden staircase, which is the only way in or out.

It is a place where truths are extracted, not freely given.

Petrov wakes up secured to a chair bolted to the center of the room, blood already dried along his temple from where Aleksandr had dropped him during transport. His expensive suit is rumpled and stained, the careful facade of power stripped away.

Overhead, a single bright light illuminates every detail of his face. The walls are bare concrete, the air still and crisp.

I lean against the far wall, arms crossed over my chest, watching his eyes flutter open.

The moment awareness returns is always fascinating to observe.

It begins with brief confusion, followed by a sudden, crushing realization of the situation.

Fear blooms across Petrov's features with satisfying speed.

"Good evening," Aleksandr greets, circling the chair with measured steps.

He removed his jacket, the sleeves of his black shirt rolled up to reveal powerful forearms. His voice carries the polite tone of a host greeting a dinner guest, making the situation all the more unnerving.

"I assume you are wondering where you are."

Petrov squirms against his restraints, the gag muffling his panicked questions. Lev steps forward and rips the cloth away with unnecessary force. Petrov coughs violently, his breath coming in ragged gasps, panic visibly taking hold of him.

"You have made a grave mistake," he rasps, attempting to sound confident despite his trembling voice. "You cannot touch me. I am protected."

"Protected?" I echo, pushing myself away from the wall and stepping into the pool of light. "By whom? Morozov?"

His mouth snaps shut, sweat beading on his forehead.

"You framed me," I continue, controlling my voice. "You sold your soul to a man with none of his own. I want names. Dates. Everything."

"I didn't have a choice," Petrov pleads, his eyes darting between me and Aleksandr. "He would have killed me."

I crouch in front of him, bringing our faces level, close enough to smell the whiskey on his breath mingling with the acrid scent of fear.

“Start talking,” I say quietly, “or you will wish he had.”

Aleksandr moves to stand behind me, adding to the psychological pressure.

My brother has long perfected the art of silent intimidation.

He can fill a room with menace without speaking a single word.

His blue eyes hold the cold detachment of a man deciding whether someone will live to see the sunrise.

Petrov breaks quicker than I had anticipated.

Thirty minutes later, we have enough information to destroy Russo and dismantle half of Morozov's operation.

Petrov spilled everything. The doctored recordings, the falsified testimony, the bank accounts in offshore havens, the cash delivered in unmarked envelopes, and the names of corrupt officials on Morozov's payroll.

“You provided Russo with the falsified files?” Aleksandr asks, his voice deceptively casual as he places a silver lighter on the metal table beside various implements none of us have yet needed to use.

“Yes,” Petrov nods frantically. “But it was Morozov’s idea. I had to do it. I had no choice!”

Aleksandr smiles, a cold, predatory expression that fails to reach his eyes. “Morozov

is about to discover what it feels like to fall from a great height.”

Lev and Yuri exchange glances across the room. Morozov's days are clearly numbered.

But the next revelation from Petrov turns my blood to ice.

“There is something else,” he whispers, his gaze shifting toward me.

“Something you should know. Morozov...he was furious when you were released. Your imprisonment was supposed to be permanent. You were meant to die there, Dimitri. When the charges failed to hold and you walked free, he modified his plan.”

“What plan?” My voice sounds foreign, even to my own ears.

Petrov hesitates, looking as though he is calculating whether this information might somehow save him. Aleksandr steps forward and places a firm hand on Petrov's shoulder, fingers digging into pressure points that make the man wince in pain.

“My brother asked you a question,” Aleksandr says softly. “It would be impolite not to answer.”

Then, in one desperate breath, Petrov says, “He is going after your child.”

The room goes completely still.

“Explain yourself,” I roar.

“Morozov wants to make you suffer. He knows about your woman. About the baby. He has placed people to watch her movements. The plan is to cause her to lose the child. Then he will have her killed. Very slowly.”

The silence that follows seems endless. My hands curl into fists so tight I can feel my nails cutting into my palms. I can't breathe properly, and I'm unable to move. Sandy's face fills my mind. Her fiery hair, her warm smile, and the beautiful curve of her stomach where our child is growing.

For the first time in years, I see something like genuine concern flash across my brother's typically impassive features.

Lev curses loudly, turning away and dragging a hand through his hair in agitation.

I step forward and seize Petrov by the throat, my fingers pressing into his windpipe with enough force to make his eyes bulge.

“You will tell me everything,” I growl, leaning close. “Every name. Every safehouse. Every route. Every detail of his surveillance on her. If you lie, if you hesitate for even a moment, I swear on our father's grave, I will make you bleed out on this floor while you beg for death.”

He nods frantically, choking, desperate for air. I release my grip, and he collapses forward as far as his restraints will allow, gasping like a man who has nearly drowned.

The light above swings slightly from my sudden movements, creating long, undulating patterns across the concrete floor.

“You do not get to die today,” I inform him, my voice terrifyingly calm. “But before this night is over, you will certainly wish that you had.”

Aleksandr places a hand on my shoulder. “We will handle this. No one touches our family. No one threatens what is ours.” His voice holds the absolute certainty of a man accustomed to dealing death sentences. “Morozov has signed his own death

warrant.”

For thirty minutes, I stand alone in the hallway outside the basement door, the cold seeping through the concrete walls, penetrating my core.

Aleksandr has walked away. His part was done.

Now it's Lev's turn to extract the truth, one brutal detail at a time, about Morozov's network and the surveillance on Sandy.

My mind conjures her image without mercy. Her voice when she laughs, the softness of her skin under my fingertips, and the gentleness in her eyes when she placed my hand on her stomach and told me I was going to be a father.

That child is mine. That future is mine. That happiness belongs to me after years of blood, violence, and sacrifice.

And Morozov wants to tear it all away.

This isn't the first time Morozov has targeted her, but it's different. Morozov's plans to have me killed in prison failed. Now, he's escalating, targeting not just Sandy but our unborn child. He wants to destroy everything I love before destroying me.

I push myself away from the wall and head for the stairs. The house above is quiet. Most of the staff have retired for the night, leaving only security personnel to move silently through their rounds.

Aleksandr is waiting for me in his office, a glass of vodka in his hand, another poured and waiting on the desk.

“She will be protected,” he insists as I enter, not bothering with preliminaries. “I have

already dispatched additional men to supplement your team.”

I nod, taking the offered drink and draining it in one swallow. The alcohol burns a path down my throat, a welcome distraction from the cold rage building inside me.

“This ends now,” I spit. “Morozov has been a problem for too long. It is time for him to disappear.”

Aleksandr’s smile is chilling. “I have something special planned for our friend Morozov. Something that will send a message to anyone else who might consider targeting the Avilov family.”

“And Russo?” I ask.

Aleksandr nods, his eyes reflecting the same murderous intent I feel. “His disrespect cannot continue. He will be taken care of.”

I pour myself another drink, staring into the clear liquid. “I want to be the one to end Morozov. For Sandy and my child.”

“As is your right,” Aleksandr agrees. “Family is everything, brat. ”

Aleksandr might be ruthless and feared throughout the New York City criminal underworld, but his loyalty to blood has never wavered. The Avilov family stands together, always. It is our strength and our salvation in a world that offers neither.

“Get some rest,” he advises.

I leave him there, making my way to Sandy and our bedroom. Outside, rain begins to fall again, pattering softly against the windows. New life is everywhere this season. Buds on trees, flowers pushing through the soil, and the child growing inside Sandy.

A life that I will protect at any cost.

I have a war to win. And it starts tonight.

SANDY

I barely close the door behind me when Dimitri calls my name from down the hall. Something in his voice makes my heart skip a beat. It isn't panic, but it isn't calm either. It is dark and controlled.

I open the door to find him striding toward me, his jaw clenched and his eyes stormy. The moment he reaches me, he places both hands on my arms, steady but not gentle.

"We need to talk," he instructs.

I nod, sensing that whatever he is about to say isn't just important. It's life-altering.

He leads me into the bedroom, quietly closing the door behind us.

"Petrov talked," he begins, his voice low. "He gave us everything. The false recordings. The bribes. Russo's involvement. The plan to keep me locked away."

I cross my arms, unsure if I'm supposed to feel relief or renewed fury. Probably both. "And now?" I probe.

Dimitri looks me straight in the eyes. There is no softening in his expression, only raw truth.

"Now Morozov wants the revenge he came here for," he seethes. "But he doesn't just want me dead. He wants to hurt you and take our baby."

The words should buckle my knees. Instead, I stand taller.

“He plans to do something that will make you lose the baby. Then, after that, he wants to kill you.”

Silence fills the room like a rising tide. I let it settle as the storm builds inside me. I expected fear, maybe tears, but what I feel is unbridled rage.

“That sick bastard ,” I hiss through gritted teeth. “He thinks he can take our child? He thinks I’ll let him?”

Dimitri steps closer, his hand reaching for mine. “I didn’t want to tell you like this, but you have to know.”

“No,” I interrupt, pulling my hand away. “I’m not some delicate flower that needs to be protected from the truth. And there’s no way he’s getting his hands on my baby.”

His expression softens, but I can see the tension lining his face and the muscle twitching in his jaw. “I know you’re strong. But this changes things. We need to tighten security here. No one comes in or out unless I personally approve it. You don’t go outside without someone with you.”

I step away and walk to the window. The garden is quiet and peaceful, and for a moment, I wish I could climb through the glass and escape into that stillness. But I can’t. Not now.

“I’m not afraid of him,” I insist. “Because he won’t win. You won’t let him. Aleksandr won’t let him. And I sure as hell won’t let him.”

He comes up behind me, wrapping his arms around my waist and resting his hands low on my belly. “I will kill anyone who tries to hurt you,” he vows. “I swear that to

you. On everything I am.”

I lean back into him, closing my eyes and letting myself feel the thrum of his heartbeat against my spine.

“He already made one mistake,” I murmur. “He underestimated me.”

Dimitri's lips brush my temple. “He won't live long enough to make another.”

I turn in his arms and look up at him. “Then go finish this.”

“I will,” he promises. “But I needed you to know.”

I touch his face, feeling the stubble beneath my fingertips. “Come back to me.”

“Always,” he nods.

When he leaves the room, I stay by the window. There is a storm coming. But I'm no longer afraid of storms.

After Dimitri left, the mansion felt unusually quiet. I place my hand on my stomach and cradle my baby. Our child. The thought of anyone threatening this tiny life fills me with white-hot fury.

I pace the room, my mind racing through every possibility of Morozov's plan and angle.

The door opens, and I turn quickly, my body tense and ready. Talia's long dark hair is pulled into a casual bun, and her eyes find mine immediately.

“Sis,” she calls out, her voice soft but urgent. “Aleksandr told me what happened. Are

you okay?"

I let out a deep breath. "Physically, yes. Emotionally...I'm not sure what I am."

Talia crosses the room and takes my hands in hers. "Being afraid is normal," she says, leading me to the plush sofa by the window. "When I first learned what this life truly meant, I spent nights unable to sleep, jumping at every sound."

"I'm not afraid," I insist, my voice steadier than expected. "Not for myself, anyway."

Talia studies my face. "The baby."

I nod, running my hand over my stomach again protectively. "How do you do it? How do you live with this constant threat hanging over everything you love?"

My sister leans back slightly, considering her answer. The rain outside has intensified, the wind driving it against the glass in rhythmic bursts.

"You adapt," she answers honestly. "You learn to see danger before it arrives. You build a wall around your heart, but you make sure there's a door for the people who matter. And most importantly—" she squeezes my hand "—you remember that you're not alone in this fight."

The thought comforts me, but only slightly. "Dimitri wants me locked away here until it's over. Protected like some treasure in a vault."

"And what do you want?"

What do I want? Safety, obviously. For myself, for our child, for Dimitri. But something else is growing inside me alongside the baby that burns brighter than fear.

“I want to rip out Morozov’s heart,” I reply. “And I want to know what I’m facing. No sugar-coating, no protective half-truths.”

Talia nods slowly. “Then come with me. Aleksandr is in his office going through the information from Petrov. You should hear it directly.”

I stand without hesitation. “Lead the way.”

We move down the grand corridor of the mansion, our footsteps muted by the thick, handwoven carpet stretching beneath our feet like a velvet river. Even after all these months, the sheer opulence of the place sometimes makes me pause.

Talia stops outside the heavy oak door and knocks twice, echoing like a summons. Aleksandr’s voice comes from within, cool and commanding.

“Enter.”

As we step inside, he looks up from behind his desk, his icy gaze settling on me.

“Sandy,” he greets, nodding once as we take the seats across from him.

“I want to know everything,” I demand before he can continue. “About Morozov and his threats.”

Aleksandr exchanges a look with Talia. She nods subtly.

“Dimitri did not want to worry you with details,” he begins.

“I’m already worried,” I counter. “Knowing less doesn’t make me safer. It makes me vulnerable.”

A slight smile tugs at the corner of his mouth. “You remind me of Talia when she first insisted on being included in family matters. Very well.”

He pulls a folder from the pile and opens it, revealing photographs and typed pages of information.

“Morozov has hired a doctor who is willing to administer something that would cause a miscarriage. It would look like a natural complication, nothing suspicious.”

The clinical way he describes it makes my skin crawl. This isn’t just a business rivalry or territorial dispute. This is deeply personal, targeted at the most vulnerable part of me.

“Where is this doctor now?” I ask, surprised by how calm my voice is despite the fury building in my core.

“Being tracked,” Aleksandr replies. “Dimitri and four of our most trusted men are closing in on him as we speak. Once they have him, he will lead us to Morozov.”

“And then?”

Aleksandr's expression hardens. “Then Morozov will learn why the Avilov family has survived for generations while others have fallen.”

Thunder rumbles outside as if nature is responding to the tension in the room. I think of Dimitri, hunting down the people who threatened our future. I always knew who he was and what his family was like, but until this moment, I never fully grasped what that meant for me.

“I want to be prepared,” I say firmly. “If someone comes for me, I need to be able to defend myself.”

Talia places her hand on my arm. "Are you sure? Once you cross certain lines..."

"My line was crossed the moment he threatened my child," I interrupt. "I'm not asking to become some kind of assassin. But I refuse to be helpless."

Aleksandr closes the folder and leans back in his chair, studying me. "Dimitri will not like this."

"Dimitri isn't here," I counter. "And when he returns, he can take it up with me directly."

For a few seconds, the only sound is the rain against the windows and the occasional rumble of thunder. Then Aleksandr nods.

"Talia will show you the basics today. The rest can wait until after we deal with Morozov. But understand once you begin this journey, there is no turning back. This knowledge changes you."

"I'm already changed," I say quietly. "From the moment I fell in love with your brother, and I learned I was carrying his child. There's no going back to who I was before."

Aleksandr rises from his chair, the edge softening in his voice. "We're family by blood, by love, by everything that brought us here. And that means you're never alone."

As Talia leads me from the office, a strange sense of calm settles over me. Not the calm of peace but the calm of absolute certainty. Whatever comes next, I will face it not just as Sandy, the woman who stumbled into this world, but as a mother and a protector.

Talia takes me to a room down the hallway, through a door that requires a keycode, and into what appears to be a small gym with padded floors and mirrored walls. She closes the door behind us and kicks off her shoes.

“First lesson,” she says, her voice shifting from sisterly concern to more authoritative. “Your greatest weapon isn't a gun or a knife. It's your mind. Your awareness.”

I slip off my own shoes and join her on the mat. “I thought you were going to teach me how to shoot.”

“Eventually. But what good is a gun if you don't see the threat coming? If you freeze when the moment arrives?” She begins to circle me slowly. “Tell me what you notice about this room.”

I glance around, seeing the obvious. The mirrors, the mats, and the exercise equipment that is pushed against one wall. “It's a private gym?”

“Look again,” Talia instructs. “Really look.”

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I force myself to slow down, to observe rather than simply see. The mirrors aren't just decorative. They are positioned to eliminate blind spots. The door we entered through is solid and reinforced. What I took for abstract wall decorations are disguised weapons storage panels.

"It's a training room," I say. "And a safe room."

Talia nods approvingly. "The entire mansion is designed this way. Every luxury hides a purpose. Every beautiful thing conceals something functional. This is how we survive."

For the next hour, she teaches me the fundamentals. How to stand to maintain balance, fall without injury, and identify potential weapons in ordinary objects. My body aches from unaccustomed movements, but I refuse to complain. Every strain is worth it if it means protecting my child.

"Enough for today," Talia breathes, handing me a water bottle. "We don't want to overdo it in your condition."

I drink gratefully, my throat parched from exertion. "When will we continue?"

"Tomorrow. And every day after that, until you can protect yourself and that baby from anyone who dares to come near you," she says, smiling with quiet pride. "You're a natural, you know. You stayed focused."

"I've got all the motivation I need," I murmur, resting my hand on my stomach.

“You’re going to be an incredible mother,” Talia comments, her voice softening. “You always looked out for me—and hey, I turned out pretty amazing.”

I laugh and tug her into a playful side hug, our arms linking like muscle memory. We slip our shoes back on and make our way through the mansion, the faint scent of rain still clinging to the air.

“Do you think Dimitri will call soon?” I ask as we reach the main staircase.

Talia's expression turns serious again. “When it's safe to do so. These operations require complete focus. Any distraction could be fatal.”

A sharp ache tears through my chest. “I can't lose him, Talia. Not now. Not ever.”

“You won't,” she assures me. “He knows what he has to live for.”

We part ways at the top of the stairs, Talia heading to her wing of the house while I return to the suite Dimitri and I share. The room feels empty without him, haunted by his absence. I shower away the sweat from training, letting the hot water soothe my sore muscles.

As I dress in comfortable clothing, I catch sight of myself in the bathroom mirror. Something has changed. There is a hardness in my eyes and a set to my jaw that wasn't there this morning. I look like someone who has made up her mind and won't be swayed.

I move to the bedroom and sit in the window seat, watching as the sun descends behind the trees surrounding the property. Somewhere out there, Dimitri is fighting for us. And here I am, preparing to do the same in my own way.

My phone buzzes on the nightstand. The text is from an unknown number, but the

content immediately identifies the sender.

Safe. Making progress. Be home soon. D.

Brief and careful, giving nothing away that can be traced or used against us if intercepted. But enough to ease the tightness in my chest.

I type back. Waiting for you. We both are. S.

The reply comes almost instantly. Everything I do is for both of you.

I momentarily hold the phone against my heart, allowing myself this small comfort. Then, as Dimitri taught me weeks ago, I delete the conversation. There are no digital footprints and no vulnerabilities.

A soft knock at the door pulls me from my thoughts.

“Come in,” I call, expecting Talia.

Instead, Aleksandr enters, his imposing frame filling the doorway. He holds a small box in his hands.

“I thought you might want this,” he says, crossing the room and placing the box beside me on the window seat. “Dimitri asked me to keep it for him some time ago.”

Curious, I open the lid. Inside, nestled on black velvet, is a delicate gold chain with a small oval locket with intricate engravings around the edge.

“It belonged to our grandmother,” Aleksandr explains. “The only woman in the family who successfully raised three sons in this life. Dimitri wanted you to have it when the time was right.”

I lift the necklace carefully. "It's beautiful."

"It's also practical," Aleksandr replies. "Open it."

I find the tiny catch and press. The locket springs open, revealing what appears to be an ordinary compartment for a photograph on one side. But the other side holds a small key.

"What does it open?" I question.

"A safe in your closet. Behind the third panel from the left. Inside, you'll find what you need if trouble ever finds you when we cannot."

I close the locket and slip the chain around my neck, feeling the cold metal warm against my skin. "Thank you."

Aleksandr nods once. "Talía tells me you did well today. That you're a natural."

"I'm motivated."

"Indeed. Motherhood is a powerful force." He moves toward the door but pauses before leaving. "Dimitri will object to your training. He believes he can keep you safe through his actions alone."

"He can't be everywhere," I defend. "And I won't be a liability."

"No," Aleksandr agrees. "I don't believe you will be."

After he leaves, I go to the closet and find the panel he described.

It slides away smoothly, revealing a small safe embedded in the wall.

The key from the locket fits perfectly into the lock.

Inside is a handgun, smaller than the ones I saw Dimitri carry but no less lethal, along with two loaded magazines and a folded note in Dimitri's handwriting.

For the darkest hour. Use it well. Love, D.

He prepared this for me, knowing there might come a time when he couldn't protect me himself. The realization chills yet strengthens me. I close the safe, replace the panel, and return to the window seat, the locket resting gently against my chest.

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DIMITRI

The gun's grip feels like an extension of my hand as I check the magazine a third time out of habit, not necessity.

I already know the bullet count, and I can feel it in my bones the way a pianist knows every key by heart.

Around me, my men move with precision, checking equipment, strapping on tactical gear, and speaking in the clipped, low cadence that always precedes action.

“Coordinates confirmed,” Ivan says, slipping his phone into his pocket. “The doctor is still at the clinic. Working late. Just like we thought.”

I give a single nod. “Security?”

“Minimal. Two guards at the entrance. Standard alarm system. Nothing we can't handle.”

The private medical clinic is located on the top two floors of a glass building on the Upper East Side.

It is exclusive and designed to cater to clients who value privacy and discretion.

The perfect place for someone like Dr. Reznick to practice without drawing attention to his more questionable services.

“Remember,” I order, sweeping my gaze across the men in the unmarked van, “this is an extraction. Not a hit. We need him alive.”

The men nod. They understand the stakes. This isn’t about territory or business. This is a personal matter and concerns protecting the family.

“Let’s move.”

Cool air hits my face as we step out of the van, the silence of the street broken only by the soft crunch of our boots. Two blocks out, we split. Yuri’s group circles the rear entrance, and Viktor establishes surveillance positions across the street. Ivan and I head straight for the front.

“It’s too quiet,” Ivan mutters beside me as we move beneath the weak spill of streetlights.

He isn’t wrong. For an upscale medical facility, security seems unusually light. There is no visible patrol around the perimeter and no evident surveillance beyond the standard cameras. Either our intelligence was wrong, or something else is happening.

“Stay sharp,” I reply. My instincts are on edge. Years of similar operations taught me to trust the prickling sensation at the back of my neck.

We circle the building once, confirming positions with each other through earpieces.

Everything appears as expected on the surface.

The clinic’s windows glow on the upper floors, while the lower levels remain dark after business hours.

According to our intelligence, Dr. Reznick will be alone in his office on the top floor,

reviewing files after his last appointment.

“Rear entrance secured,” Yuri’s voice crackles in my ear. “Ready when you are.”

I give the signal. The service door opens without a sound, and the alarm system is bypassed in under a minute. Inside, the service corridor is dimly lit by emergency lighting. We move silently, avoiding the elevator in favor of the stairs. Six flights up, we pause at the door to the clinic level.

“Viktor, perimeter report,” I whisper into my comm.

“All clear outside,” comes his response. “No movement, no new vehicles.”

I exchange a quick glance with Ivan. The ease of our entry only heightens my suspicion. The lack of protection makes little sense for a doctor allegedly involved with someone like Morozov.

We proceed through the door and into the clinic. The interior exudes wealth and exclusivity, with marble floors, abstract art on the walls, and furniture that prioritizes aesthetics over comfort. The reception desk sits empty, and the computer screens are dark.

“Check the examination rooms,” I instruct.

We move through the clinic methodically, clearing each room as we go. Nothing seems out of place, yet the uneasiness in my gut intensifies. Where is the night security? Even high-end medical facilities maintained some presence after hours.

A strip of light spills from beneath a door at the end of the main hallway. The nameplate beside it reads “Dr. Emerson Reznick, M.D.” I position myself on one side, Ivan on the other. With a nod, Ivan turns the handle and pushes the door open

smoothly.

The office beyond is spacious and meticulously organized. Behind a large walnut desk sits a man in his fifties, silver-haired and wearing an expensive suit rather than a doctor's coat. He looks up from his computer without surprise or fear, as though he is expecting us.

“Dr. Reznick,” I state, keeping my weapon lowered but ready.

“Mr. Popov,” the doctor replies with unsettling calm. “I was wondering when you would come.”

I move further into the room, signaling Ivan to secure the door behind us. The lack of alarm in the doctor's demeanor only confirms my suspicions that something is very wrong.

“You know why I'm here?” I study the man carefully, questioning him.

Reznick leans back in his chair, his expression indecipherable. “I can guess. But I suspect we've both been misled about tonight's arrangements.”

“Explain.”

The doctor sighs, folding his hands on the desk. “Three days ago, I was approached by an associate of Andrei Morozov. He offered me an extraordinary sum to maintain a predictable schedule this week. Come to the office early, leave late. That's all.”

“And you didn't question why?” I ask, eyes narrowing.

“In my position, Mr. Popov, it's rarely beneficial to ask questions. I assumed it was related to some business matter. Until yesterday, when I overheard a phone

conversation mentioning your name, and something about a pregnant woman.”

I keep my expression neutral, but rage simmers beneath the surface. “So, you just continued with the arrangement? Knowing what might be planned?”

“Self-preservation is a powerful motivator,” Reznick replies. “But I’m not a complete monster. I made some inquiries. Learned enough to realize I was being positioned as some kind of... bait.”

“For me,” I conclude.

“Indeed. Though I suspect I wasn’t meant to be aware of that fact.”

Before I can respond, my earpiece crackles with Viktor’s urgent voice. “Multiple vehicles approaching from east and west. Black SUVs, moving fast. This looks like?—”

The transmission cuts off with a burst of static.

“We need to move,” I say sharply to Ivan. “Now.”

The doctor rises from his chair, suddenly less composed. “If Morozov’s men are coming?—”

“Shut up,” I hiss, activating my comm again. “Yuri, Viktor, report.”

Silence.

“Yuri, Viktor?”

Nothing.

“Jammed,” Ivan confirms, checking his own device.

I move to the window, standing to the side of the frame as I look down at the street below. Three black SUVs pull up in front, and men in tactical gear emerge with military precision. Not Morozov's usual thugs. These men move with professional coordination.

“Russo,” I whisper.

Ivan joins me at the window, cursing at the sight. “How many?”

“At least six visible. Probably more covering the exits.”

“Your men outside are likely already neutralized,” Reznick offers, his voice tight with fear. “Morozov's associate was very confident in his plan.”

I turn to the doctor. “This associate—did you get a name?”

“Russo,” Reznick confirms. “Detective Louis Russo.”

“The others are here for a distraction,” I mutter, racing through options. “Russo wants me. The doctor is just the lure.”

The sound of the clinic's front doors being breached reaches us, followed by the methodical movement of men sweeping the premises.

“Is there another way out of this office?” I demand, turning to Reznick.

The doctor nods quickly. “Private elevator, behind that bookcase. Key card access only.” He reaches for his wallet, hands trembling slightly as he extracts a plastic card. “It leads to the parking garage.”

I take the card but keep my focus on the doctor. “What exactly did Morozov want you to do to my child?”

Reznick pales. “I never agreed to?—”

“What. Was. The. Plan.” Each word comes like the strike of a hammer.

“A compound,” the doctor admits. “Untraceable in standard toxicology. Administered through a seemingly routine prenatal vitamin injection. It would appear as a tragic but natural miscarriage.”

The rage I have contained threatens to explode, but years of discipline keep it channeled. “And how were you planning to get close enough to administer this?”

“One of your household staff has been compromised. A maid, I believe. Her role was to feign concern, claim the woman was bleeding, that the baby needed urgent, specialized care. Then she was supposed to recommend me as the specialist for high-risk pregnancies.”

Ivan steps closer to the door, listening intently. “They're getting closer.”

I make a snap decision. “You're coming with us,” I tell Reznick. “Anything happens to me and Ivan and we'll ensure you don't live to practice medicine again.”

The doctor nods quickly.

“Access the elevator,” I order. “Quietly.”

As Reznick moves toward the bookcase, the first gunshots echo from somewhere in the clinic. Not the controlled bursts of professional operators but chaotic return fire that suggests my men have regained their position.

The bookcase slides aside to reveal a small private elevator. We enter quickly, and I position myself to cover the exit while Ivan keeps his weapon trained on the doctor.

“This leads directly to my reserved space,” Reznick explains as we descend. “Level P2.”

The elevator hums quietly, the only sounds being the doctor's rapid breathing and the distant, muffled gunfire above us. My mind works furiously, calculating angles and assessing the likely situation we will face when the doors open.

“When we exit,” I instruct, “doctor in the middle. Move to the nearest cover. No heroics.”

The elevator slows, then stops. For a heartbeat, nothing happens. Then the doors slide open to reveal the concrete expanse of the parking garage and four armed men waiting in strategic positions around a black Escalade.

Instantly, I react, shoving the doctor back and firing twice in the same motion. One of the gunmen drops immediately but return fire forces us back into the elevator as bullets ping off the metal doors.

“Another way out?” I demand, pressing the button to close the doors.

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Reznick shakes his head, face ashen. “No, this is?—”

A bullet strikes the doctor in the chest, cutting off his words as he collapses. More shots follow, keeping us pinned in the cramped space while blood pools beneath the fallen doctor.

“Elevator won't hold as cover,” Ivan growls, returning fire through the narrowing gap of the doors.

I nod grimly. “When the doors close, hit the emergency stop. We make our stand here, control the choke point.”

The heavy doors finally slide shut, muting the gunfire. Ivan slams the emergency stop button, then positions himself to the side of the doors, his weapon ready.

“They knew exactly where we'd emerge,” he says.

“Russo's been planning this,” I agree. “Probably for weeks.”

Silence falls, broken only by the labored breathing of the doctor, who remains conscious despite his wound. I crouch beside him, checking the severity of the injury. The bullet entered below the collarbone, missing the heart but causing significant bleeding.

“You'll live,” I confirm, “if we get you help soon.”

Reznick coughs, blood speckling his lips. “Why would they shoot me? I did

everything they asked.”

“Loose ends,” I reply simply. “You're a liability now.”

Fresh fury surges through me, but I control it, channeling it into clarity rather than blind rage. “How many men does Russo have?”

“Eight...maybe ten,” Ivan guesses.

I stand, meeting Ivan’s eyes.

“I'll create the diversion,” Ivan affirms. “You take the doctor and find an exit.”

“No,” I snap. “Russo wants me. You get the doctor out.”

“With respect,” Ivan replies, “your family needs you alive. I'm expendable.”

Before I can argue further, my phone vibrates. Somehow, a text from an unknown number broke through the jamming signal, but the message is clear.

Roof access clear. Two minutes. A.

Aleksandr. He anticipated trouble and came with backup.

“Change of plans,” I announce. “We're going up.”

I press the button for the top floor, overriding the emergency stop. The elevator groans back into motion and rapidly ascends.

“They'll be waiting at every floor,” Ivan warns.

“Not the roof,” I assure him, showing him the message. “Aleksandr has men in position.”

As the elevator climbs, I tear strips from my shirt to create a makeshift pressure bandage for the doctor's wound. The man is growing paler by the minute, but his eyes remain alert, watching my movements.

“Why help me?” Reznick asks weakly. “After what I was part of?”

I secure the bandage firmly. “You're still useful.”

The elevator slows as it approaches the top floor. I position myself, weapon ready.

“Service stairs to the roof as soon as we exit,” I instruct. “Ivan, you take point. I'll cover the doctor.”

When the doors open, we move swiftly, encountering no immediate resistance. The top floor appears primarily administrative, with empty offices and conference rooms, all of which are dark at this hour. We locate the service stairs and begin the final ascent to the roof.

Behind us, the elevator descending signals that our movements have been detected. It won't take Russo's men long to figure out our destination.

The roof access door is locked with a simple mechanical mechanism, which Ivan bypasses easily. The cool night air greets us as we emerge onto the rooftop's open expanse, the city's lights spreading around us like fallen stars.

“There,” I nod toward a black helicopter stationed at the far end of the rooftop, its rotors already beginning to turn. Two of Aleksandr's men provide cover, their weapons trained on the access door.

We make it halfway across the roof when the access door bursts open behind us. Gunfire erupts, immediately forcing us to take cover behind an air conditioning unit. The doctor groans as I pull him down, the movement aggravating his wound.

“Get to the helicopter,” I order Ivan. “I’ll hold them here.”

For once, Ivan doesn’t argue. He takes charge of the doctor and heads toward the waiting aircraft, using the rooftop equipment as cover.

I provide suppressing fire, keeping Russo's men pinned at the doorway. I count four attackers from my position, which means others are likely securing different exits or moving to establish new firing positions.

Movement to my right confirms this suspicion. Two more of Russo's men emerge from the maintenance access I hadn’t noticed, cutting off my route to the helicopter.

“Dimitri!” Ivan shouts from ahead, spotting the new threat.

I take aim and eliminate one of the new arrivals with precision. The second finds cover behind a ventilation shaft. The odds worsen by the second.

Then, from the helicopter, covering fire erupts, forcing the remaining attackers to seek better protection. Aleksandr's men are providing the opportunity I need.

I use the moment to advance, moving from one position of cover to the next, closing the distance to the helicopter. Twenty feet, fifteen feet, ten feet.

“Popov!”

The voice cuts through the sporadic gunfire, commanding attention. I recognize it immediately. Russo stands by the roof access door, decked out in tactical gear. Unlike

his men, he holds his weapon lowered, almost casually.

“Enough games,” Russo calls. “Aleksandr’s men have given you an exit. Take it. This isn't the real fight anyway.”

I remain in position, my weapon trained on Russo's chest. “Giving up so easily?”

Russo smiles coldly. “This is just the opening act. The real target was never you.”

“Sandy,” I simultaneously whisper her name like a prayer and a curse.

“By now, Morozov's team should be approaching your brother's estate,” Russo continues. “While you're out here occupied, your woman and child are the ones at risk.”

Without taking my eyes off Russo, I reach for my phone. There are no new messages. I try calling Sandy and Talia, but neither answer.

“Figured it out yet?” Russo taunts. “This whole operation—the doctor, the ambush—it's all misdirection. Keeping you and your men occupied while the real work happens elsewhere.”

My finger tightens on the trigger. One shot will permanently end Russo's threat.

“Dimitri!” Ivan calls from the helicopter. “We need to move!”

The rational part of my mind recognizes the tactical reality. We are outnumbered and exposed, and the doctor needs medical attention. The primal part wants nothing more than to put a bullet through Russo's smug face.

“Your choice, Popov,” Russo calls. “Stay and fight or run home to your pregnant

whore and hope you make it in time.”

The crude reference to Sandy shatters my restraint. My shot takes Russo in the shoulder. It isn't a kill, but enough to drop the man to his knees.

I move with lethal purpose, closing the distance between us while Aleksandr's men provide covering fire against Russo's remaining team. When I reach Russo, I press my weapon against his temple.

Russo laughs through his pain. “You're already too late. But I'll tell you this much...Morozov doesn't want her dead. Not right away. He wants her alive, wants her to lose the baby first, and wants her to know it was because you're weak.”

I hear the helicopter's engine intensifying. Time is running out for my exit. “How many men at the estate?”

“Six men.”

“And the compromised staff member?” I probe.

Russo's eyes widen slightly, surprise breaking through his pain. “You know about her?”

“Name,” I growl, pressing the gun harder.

“Elena. Started a couple of months ago. She is supposed to ensure access through the east wing security system.”

I absorb this information, and the pieces fall into place. Elena is the new household staff member who was so eager to help Sandy with her pregnancy preparations.

“One last question,” I say, my voice deadly calm. “Why are you telling me all this?”

Russo's expression shifts to one of resignation. “Because Morozov promised me you'd be dead by now. The fact that you're not means I'm a dead man walking. Might as well make him work for it.”

I study him for a moment longer, then stand. “You're right about one thing. You are a dead man.”

My next shot is precise. Russo's body slumps to the rooftop as I turn and run for the helicopter, ducking as sporadic fire from the remaining gunmen follows my movements.

I leap aboard just as the aircraft begins to lift, Ivan pulling me to safety. At the same time, the doctor lies secure on the floor, emergency medical attention already being administered by one of Aleksandr's men.

“The mansion,” I shout to the pilot over the roar of the rotors. “Maximum speed.”

As we gain altitude, leaving the clinic and Russo's body behind, I try Sandy's phone again. Still, no answer. Then I try Aleksandr's. The signal is still jammed.

“What happened down there?” Ivan asks, noting my steely expression.

“It was a diversion,” I hiss, checking my weapon and reloading. “The real target was always the mansion and Sandy.”

Ivan's face hardens. “How many?”

“Six. And they have inside help.”

“Aleksandr will have protection in place,” Ivan offers, though his tone suggests he understands the severity of the threat.

The helicopter races through the night sky, but I’ve never felt more trapped or helpless. The minutes drag on, each second a torment as I imagine what is happening at the mansion.

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SANDY

The clock ticks too loudly. It has become a cruel metronome, pacing my anxiety as I stand by the window of the bedroom.

Wind whispers against the glass, and somewhere in the mansion, a door slams, followed by the faint echo of shouted orders.

I don't need to look to know Aleksandr's men are on alert. Dimitri is out there with his team, taking down the bastard doctor who dared to work for Morozov and threaten my baby. And I'm here, pacing.

My hand drifts to my belly, a protective gesture I make a hundred times a day now. The baby moves, a tiny flutter, and I close my eyes, breathing through the ache of worry. I want Dimitri back. I want him beside me, safe and breathing.

The minutes crawl by like hours. Each second stretches into eternity as my thoughts race between prayers and panic. Dimitri promised me he would return safely. It's already past eleven. The grandfather clock in the hallway continues its merciless rhythm, each tick reverberating through my bones.

I move away from the window, trailing my fingers along the silk wallpaper as I circle the room for what feels like the hundredth time.

With its ornate furniture and plush carpets, this bedroom has become a sanctuary and prison in the weeks since Dimitri brought me here.

The Avilov estate is impenetrable, he assured me.

No one can touch me here. But safety comes with isolation, and tonight, the walls seem to close around me.

“Come back to me,” I whisper into the empty room. “Please come back.”

My reflection in the vanity mirror grabs my attention.

I hardly recognize myself anymore. The woman staring back at me has changed in subtle but unmistakable ways.

My cheeks are fuller, my eyes hold a wariness that wasn't there a few months ago, and my hands now constantly seek the firm curve of my stomach.

If someone had told me a year ago that I would be carrying Dimitri Popov's baby, I would have laughed in their face.

But that was before I understood what it meant to belong to someone so completely.

A sudden crack of gunfire in the distance shatters my thoughts. I freeze. Then come more. Short bursts. They aren't close, but my pulse surges. The estate is under attack.

I turn and grab my phone, but before I can unlock the screen, the bedroom door slams open.

“Miss Sandy! You must come with me now!” Elena, one of the household maids, stands breathless in the doorway. Her hair is loose from its braid, her apron stained, and her eyes wild with urgency. “We have to go. This way.”

I cross the room. “To the panic room? Is Talia there with the children?” I ask,

remembering the last time Elena rushed me through hidden corridors to safety when Morozov's men tested the estate's security.

Elena's expression twitches almost imperceptibly. “Yes. Quickly. Follow me.”

Something about the way she says it scrapes against my instincts. The slight hesitation in her voice and the way her eyes don't quite meet mine set me on edge. But gunfire crackles outside, growing closer, and I have no choice. I follow her into the hallway, one hand protective over my belly.

The corridor is eerily empty. Usually, Aleksandr's security detail hovers nearby, their presence comforting but suffocating. Tonight, they are nowhere to be seen. The absence of guards sends a shiver down my spine.

“Where is everyone?” I ask, hurrying to keep pace with Elena.

“They are fighting,” Elena replies tersely. “All hands needed. Mr. Avilov gave orders for household staff to move you.”

We move fast, but not in the direction I remember.

The last time, the panic room was through the east wing.

We used a basement stairwell entrance beneath the library.

This time, Elena leads me through a corridor I've never seen, past the service kitchen, through the laundry hall, and out a narrow side door.

“Elena,” I say, slowing. “Where are we going? This isn't the way?—”

She stops and turns. And that's when I see the gun in her hand.

My heart stutters. “You're not taking me to the panic room, are you?”

She doesn't answer. Just gestures with the weapon. “Keep walking.”

The betrayal cuts deep, even though I barely know Elena. Since my arrival, she's been kind to me, bringing extra pillows without being asked for and sneaking chocolate when Dimitri's doctor put me on a strict diet. I thought perhaps we were becoming friends. How naive.

“Why?” I ask, my voice faint over the distant gunfire. “Why would you do this? Dimitri and Aleksandr trusted you.”

“I have no choice,” she replies, her accent thickening with stress. “Now move.”

The air outside smells of smoke and gunpowder.

Somewhere south of the property, I hear shouting, orders barked in Russian, and the answering crack of return fire.

A distraction, I realize with sinking clarity.

The attack on the south perimeter is meant to draw security away from the north side, where Elena is now marching toward freedom. Or toward my death.

The grounds are dark, and the security lights are mysteriously disabled. I stumble over uneven terrain, mud sucking at my sneakers with every step.

“Elena,” I try again, my voice trembling. “You don't have to do this. Whatever they promised you?”

“Quiet,” she hisses, jabbing the gun toward the waiting black van near the tree line. “I

don't have a choice. They will kill my daughter if I don't do this."

Two men wait by the open doors. One lights a cigarette with shaking fingers.

The other stands tense, hand on his belt as if he is barely holding himself back.

Their faces are unfamiliar, but their postures scream danger.

These aren't Morozov's usual thugs. These are desperate men hired for a job they probably don't fully understand.

I hesitate, every nerve in my body screaming for escape. But I'm outnumbered, unarmed, and pregnant. My options dwindle to a single, terrible choice: comply now to survive later. It is what Dimitri would want me to do. Stay alive at all costs.

The man with the cigarette grabs my arm and shoves me into the van. I land hard on the metal floor, my hip taking the brunt of the impact. I bite back a cry of pain, knowing it will only satisfy them.

"Careful with her!" Elena snaps, her words coming out quickly and angrily. "Mr. Morozov wants her unharmed."

The man with the cigarette gets in and slams the door, plunging the interior into darkness. He grabs my wrists, binding them roughly with a zip tie that bites into my skin.

"The baby," I whisper. "Please, not so tight. I'm pregnant."

The man pauses, his grip loosening slightly. Perhaps it is a twinge of humanity or simply following orders to deliver me intact. Either way, I take advantage of it.

“Thank you,” I murmur, making my voice small and grateful. “How far are we going? I might get sick if it's a long drive.”

“Shut up,” the driver growls. “One more word and I’ll tape your mouth shut.”

I fall silent, cataloging details instead. The van smells of stale cigarettes and a metallic odor. Blood, perhaps. The floor vibrates against my legs as the engine roars to life. I brace myself against the wall as we lurch forward, tires spinning in mud before finding purchase.

The ride is long. My wrists are bound, but they leave my legs free.

I count the turns. Memorize the bumps in the road.

I will tell Dimitri everything if I survive.

Left out of the estate grounds. Right onto what feels like a major road.

Then, straight for perhaps twenty minutes.

Another right, followed by a series of winding turns that suggest we are heading into the countryside. Away from the city. Away from help.

My thoughts turn to Dimitri. Has he returned to the estate to find me missing?

Is he tearing apart the mansion in search of me, or is he still unaware and focused on his mission against the doctor?

Or worse, have Morozov’s men succeeded in taking him down?

The possibility makes my stomach clench with nausea that has nothing to do with

pregnancy.

Time blurs. My body aches from the hard metal floor, each bump in the road sending jolts of pain through my joints.

I try to stay alert, to memorize every detail, but exhaustion pulls at me.

I lose track of how long we were driving by the time the van finally slows.

An hour? Two? The roads became rough, suggesting we are far from the city.

Eventually, the van comes to a stop, and the doors open. I'm yanked out, my legs nearly buckling after so long in one position. The night air hits me with unexpected warmth. We are indoors, I realize. Some type of garage or loading dock, dimly lit and smelling of engine oil and dust.

"Move," the driver orders, prodding me forward with his gun.

I'm forced through a rusted doorway into an abandoned warehouse that reeks of mildew.

The concrete floor is stained with substances I don't want to identify.

Forgotten machinery looms in the darkness like sleeping beasts.

Our footsteps echo in the cavernous space, announcing our presence to whoever may be waiting inside.

He leads me down a maze of hallways and narrow stairs to the basement.

We finally arrive at a doorway. He pushes me into a small room.

The door shuts behind me with a heavy thud.

A bulb dangles from the ceiling, swinging slightly with the movement of air, creating unsettling patterns of light and dark across the walls.

It exposes a crude cell that fills most of the room.

A caged-in corner with thick steel bars, a dirty mattress, and a chain bolted to the wall.

He shoves me into the cell. I back away from the steel bars, refusing to give him the satisfaction of my fear.

Then he walks in. Andrei Morozov.

He is taller than I expected, lean but unmistakably strong.

Silver streaks thread through his dark hair and neatly trimmed mustache, giving him a deceptive air of refinement.

But it is his eyes, cold, dark, and gleaming with triumph, that make my skin crawl as they roam over me.

They pause on my belly with a possessive hunger that makes me cringe.

“Welcome Sandy,” he says in flawless English, every syllable laced with venom.

“Nice place you have here,” I reply sarcastically.

He chuckles and motions for his man to leave. When the door clicks shut, he approaches the cage, dragging a chair with him. He sits with the casual ease of a man

who owns everything around him, including me.

“You look lovely in your condition,” he purrs, his gaze returning to my stomach.
“Motherhood suits you.”

I refuse to engage with his false pleasantries.

“Nothing to say?”

“What do you want from me?” I hiss, knowing the answer but needing to hear him say it.

His smile widens. “I want Dimitri to suffer as I have suffered. I want him to lose everything he cares about, as I lost everything when he murdered my brother and destroyed my operation in Moscow.”

“I am nothing to him,” I lie. “Just a temporary distraction.”

Morozov laughs, the sound bouncing off the concrete walls.

“Do not insult my intelligence, Sandy. Dimitri Popov has never taken a woman to a safehouse, let alone two of them. He has never brought a woman to his family estate. And he has never assigned his personal security to protect anyone outside his immediate family.”

He stands, approaching the bars, until his face is a foot from mine. “I want Dimitri to see what he’s cost you,” he says, almost dreamily. “I want him to look into your eyes as your child is ripped from your body.”

My knees nearly buckle, but I hold firm. I can’t let him see my fear. I won’t. Hot rage floods through me, replacing the fear with a clarity I never experienced before. This

man threatened not just me but my child. Dimitri's child. Our future.

“You think hurting me will break him?” I ask. “You don't know Dimitri. You don't know me.”

Morozov leans closer, his hands on the bars. “I know everything. I know the day you met. I know you're carrying a Popov heir, and that makes you valuable.”

“How long have you been planning this?” I probe, needing to keep him talking. Every minute he spends gloating is another minute for Dimitri to find me.

“Since the moment Dimitri took what was mine,” he sneers.

“He will come for me,” I say with a conviction I don't feel. “And when he does, there won't be enough left of you to bury.”

Morozov's expression hardens. “Perhaps. Or perhaps he will receive your body in pieces, starting with his unborn child.”

He smiles, all teeth and hate. “Sleep well, little dove. We'll have plenty of time to get acquainted.”

He turns and leaves, locking the door behind him.

Only then do I let the tears fall. But only for a moment. Because if Dimitri doesn't save me...I'll save myself.

My fingers move to the zip tie binding my wrists. They made them too tight, cutting into my skin, but that was their mistake. Tight means the plastic is stretched. And stretched plastic can break. I twist my wrists, ignoring the pain as the edges dig deeper, working my hands against each other.

The mattress in the corner of the cell snags my attention. Dirty and stained, but it has potential usefulness. I move toward it, scanning the frame for anything I can use as a weapon. The springs are exposed in one corner where the fabric had torn away. Perfect.

I sit on the edge, positioning my body to block the view from the door in case someone looks through the small window. My fingers work the springs, tugging until one breaks free. It isn't much, but it is sharp. And sharp is all I need.

As I work the metal between my bound wrists, sawing at the plastic, I think of Dimitri.

Of the night he told me about his childhood, about learning to survive in places much worse than this warehouse.

"Never show fear," he had whispered against my hair.

"Fear is a luxury for people who have never had to fight for their lives."

I'm not afraid anymore. I'm furious. Fury will keep me alive until Dimitri finds me. Or until I find my own way out.

The zip tie snaps with a satisfying pop. I rub my raw wrists, wincing at the sting of open wounds. Then, I turn my attention to the cell door. The lock is old and rusted, but it remains solid. No amount of makeshift tools will open it. But the hinges...those look promisingly worn.

I hear footsteps approaching outside. Quickly, I reposition myself on the mattress, hiding my free hands behind my back, the broken spring tucked into my palm. Whoever Morozov sent to check on me will be expecting a fractured, terrified woman. They will find something else entirely.

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DIMITRI

I crash through the mansion's front doors, my heart in my throat. My men move with urgency as they patrol the halls with weapons drawn.

Abram meets me at the entrance to the kitchen, his expression fearful. “She's gone,” he says.

Every cell in my body goes cold, a numbness spreading from my core outward as the words momentarily steal my breath.

“What the hell do you mean gone?” I snarl, already moving past him before he can explain. The marble floors echo beneath my boots as I storm toward the staircase.

Talia appears in the hallway, breathless and pale.

Her normally immaculate appearance is disheveled, her eyes wide with fear.

“She was waiting for you. I checked on her not long ago.

Then all hell broke loose outside—alarms, shouting—and when I went to get her, she was nowhere to be found.

Elena said she took her to the panic room, but when I checked, Sandy wasn't there.”

Elena.

The name evokes a visceral response within me. Russo's words on the rooftop replay in my mind with perfect clarity. "Elena. Started a couple of months ago. She was supposed to ensure access through the east wing security system."

I don't wait. I turn and storm down the west corridor toward the servant quarters, my body moving with deadly purpose. Ivan follows closely, his hand resting on his holstered weapon. The household staff scatters before us, pressing themselves against the walls to avoid my path.

I find her near the back stairwell, alone, trying to sneak her way toward the garage. Her movements are furtive. She has a small bag clutched in her trembling hands. She jumps when she sees me, eyes wide, heart pounding so hard I can see it in her throat.

"Where is she?" I growl, advancing slowly.

Elena backs away until she hits the wall, her face draining of color. She doesn't answer.

"Try again." I slam my hand against the wall beside her head, my face inches from hers. Her breath catches in a gasp.

"Please, Mr. Popov," she sobs, her voice breaking. "I didn't have a choice."

I grab her arm with enough force to make her wince and drag her through the mansion, fury pulsing in my veins. The staff avert their eyes as we pass, no one daring to intervene. I shove open the doors to Aleksandr's office without knocking.

My brother stands behind his massive desk, arms crossed over his chest. Talia is already inside, phone in hand, speaking rapidly to someone on the other end.

"She helped them," I growl, pushing Elena forward. "She took Sandy out of the

mansion.”

Aleksandr's gaze sharpens to a razor's edge directed at the trembling maid. “Sit,” he hisses.

Elena collapses into the chair across from his desk, visibly shaking.

“Talk,” Aleksandr commands, his voice deceptively calm.

Tears stream down her face, creating dark tracks of mascara on her pale skin. “They have my daughter, Juliana. Morozov...he showed me pictures of her tied up. Said if I didn't help him get Miss Sandy out, he'd kill Juliana. I didn't know what else to do.”

My jaw clenches so hard I can feel my teeth grinding. “Where did they take her?” I demand, every word laced with the promise of violence.

“I don't know! They didn't tell me.” Her voice rises hysterically. “They just gave me instructions. A burner phone. A gun. A van would be waiting by the north perimeter. That's all I knew, I swear it.”

“You betrayed this house,” Aleksandr states flatly. “You put a pregnant woman in the hands of monsters.”

“They gave me no choice,” she repeats, clutching her hands together.

“Just this morning, they sent me a video of Juliana. She was crying, begging for me to help her.” She fumbles in her apron and pulls out a small phone and a crumpled slip of paper.

“This has a number he said to use after it was done. And this was in the packet he sent me.”

Talia takes the paper and hands it to Lev, who appears silently in the doorway. He vanishes with it, already making calls.

“Where is the gun?” I bellow, startling Elena out of her tear-stained confession.

“It is in my room,” she cringes away from me. “Hidden under the mattress.”

Ivan moves without being asked, slipping out to retrieve it.

I turn to Aleksandr, my mind racing through possibilities. “We trace the number. Every known property Morozov has touched—we raid them. No more waiting. No more games.”

Aleksandr nods once, decisively. “We hit them hard. And we don't stop until we find her.”

“He touched what's mine,” I snarl, my voice like gravel. “I'm going to bury him for it.”

Aleksandr looks at me, something ancient and violent in his eyes. It was the look Otets had worn when enemies threatened the family. “Then let's start digging the grave.”

The plan forms between us without needing to speak it aloud. Aleksandr picks up his phone, barking orders for our security team to assemble.

“Talia,” I say, turning to her. “Get Yuri. Tell him to bring everything he has on Morozov's properties. Real estate holdings, businesses, family connections. Anything that might give us a location.”

She nods and leaves immediately, her phone already at her ear.

Ivan returns with the gun. “9mm,” he reports. “Unfired.”

I pace the length of the office, my mind sifting through information. Morozov is too smart to keep Sandy in an obvious place. The warehouse properties listed under his name will be decoys. He will want a secluded location, preferably with multiple escape routes. Somewhere personal.

“The phone,” I say suddenly, turning back to Elena. “Give me the burner.”

She hands it over with trembling fingers. It is a basic model designed to be untraceable and disposable. But everyone makes mistakes.

I scroll through the call log. It’s empty. The text messages are also empty. But, in the contacts, there is a single entry labeled simply “M.”

“When were you supposed to call?” I demand.

“After she was taken,” Elena whispers. “To confirm the handoff.”

“And did you?”

She shakes her head. “No. I was trying to get away. To go to my sister's house in Queens.”

I hand the phone to Ivan. “Get this to Lev. I want everything. Tower pings, GPS data if it exists. Anything that might give us a location.”

Ivan nods and disappears from the room.

I turn back to Elena, studying her face. There is genuine fear there but also a hint of resignation. She knows what happens to traitors in our world.

“Your daughter,” I bark. “What proof do you have that they actually have her?”

Elena reaches into her pocket and withdraws a small gold locket. “They sent me this. It's hers. She never takes it off. And they sent videos. Timestamped from today.”

I take the locket and examine it. Inside is a tiny photograph of a smiling teenage girl with Elena's eyes. The clasp is broken, suggesting it had been torn from the girl's neck.

“Address,” I demand.

“She lives with her father in Brighton Beach,” Elena replies. “242 Dover Street, apartment 3B.”

I toss the locket back to her and pull out my phone, dialing quickly. “Viktor. I need a team at 242 Dover Street, apartment 3B. Extraction job. Teenage girl, likely being held against her will. Use the brownstone two blocks over as staging. Report directly to me what you find.”

I end the call and turn back to Elena. “If your daughter is there, my men will get her out safely.”

A glimmer of hope crosses her face. “Thank you, Mr. Popov.”

“Don't thank me,” I snarl. “If anything happens to Sandy or my child, your daughter won't be enough to save you.”

The door opens, and Yuri enters, carrying a thick file folder and a laptop. He nods respectfully to Aleksandr before setting up at the side table.

“Everything we have on Morozov's known properties and associates,” he informs,

opening the folder to reveal maps, photographs, and documents. “Thirty-six locations throughout New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut.”

“Too many to hit simultaneously,” Aleksandr notes, examining the list.

“We need to narrow it down,” I agree. “Somewhere private, isolated. Somewhere he feels safe.”

Ivan pulls up satellite images on his laptop. “These eight are industrial properties. Warehouses and abandoned factories. Perfect for holding someone without attracting attention.”

I study the images, committing each location to memory. “Divide them between our men. Full tactical gear, shoot to kill anyone who resists.”

My phone buzzes with a message from Viktor. No girl at the apartment. Signs of struggle. Neighbors say she hasn’t been around for at least two weeks. Working on security footage from the building.

I show the message to Elena, watching her face crumple with fresh grief. “Your daughter was taken, at least that part is true. But Morozov likely planned to dispose of her regardless of your cooperation.”

“Oh my God,” she moans, burying her face in her hands. “What have I done?”

I have no comfort to offer her. All my focus and energy is directed toward finding Sandy. Every minute that passes is another minute she is in Morozov's hands. Another minute of danger for her and our child.

Lev returned, his expression tense. “The paper had coordinates. Upstate, a remote area, mostly abandoned businesses and warehouses.”

“Could be a trap,” Aleksandr warns.

“Or it could be where they're holding Sandy,” I counter. “Either way, we go.”

Ivan cross-references the coordinates with their property database.

“Nothing listed under Morozov's name in that area. But his brother owned property there before he died. About twenty acres, isolated, with a rundown house next to an abandoned packaging plant. Officially, it was sold two years ago to a shell company based in the Caymans.”

“That's it,” I say with certainty. The pieces align too perfectly to be a coincidence. “Morozov will choose somewhere with personal significance. Somewhere connected to his brother.”

Aleksandr nods, already activating our team through the security system. “Helicopter is fastest. We can have men there in forty minutes.”

“No,” I say firmly. “Too loud. They'll hear us coming and kill her before we can breach. We drive. Multiple vehicles. Approach from different directions.”

Aleksandr considers this and then agrees. “Four teams. We leave in ten minutes.”

As the room empties and plans set in motion, I stand alone with my thoughts. The rage inside me has crystallized into something cold and focused. Morozov has made his final mistake. He has taken what is mine and threatened my family and my future.

There will be no mercy tonight.

I check my weapons methodically: my primary sidearm, backup piece strapped to my ankle, and hunting knife in my boot. The familiar routine centers me and provides

clarity amid the storm of emotions.

Lev appears in the doorway, equipped for war. “Cars are ready.”

I nod, securing my tactical vest. “Make sure Elena is secured. If she's lying about anything else, I want to know immediately.”

“Already done. Talia is handling her personally.”

Outside, the convoy is assembled. Four black SUVs, windows tinted, engines idling quietly in the night. Our men move smoothly, loading equipment and checking communications.

Aleksandr approaches, dressed in black tactical gear. “Sandy is family,” he says simply. “We bring her home.”

I clasp his shoulder, a gesture of brotherhood that says everything words can't. Then I climb into the lead vehicle, Ivan beside me, the driver already plotting the fastest route north.

As we pull away from the estate, I think of Sandy's strength and stubbornness. The way she looks at me makes me feel like she can see past all my defenses to something worth loving.

Morozov doesn't understand what he unleashed. Sandy is mine to protect. Mine to love. Mine to avenge. And I'm coming for her.

SANDY

The cell smells like rust and mildew, and the mattress beneath me is so thin it might as well be a sheet draped over concrete.

I sit at its edge, the frame groaning beneath my weight, my hands resting loosely behind my back, carefully positioned to appear bound.

The broken spring I used to slice through the zip tie digs into my palm, cold and slick with a faint smear of my blood.

I fight to keep my breathing even, my face impassive. The baby flutters inside me, a tiny reassurance that I'm not alone in this nightmare. I place my free hand protectively over my belly when I'm sure no one is watching through the dirty window in the door.

"We will get out of this," I whisper to my unborn child. "Your father is coming for us, and I am not going to give up."

The sound of approaching footsteps makes me quickly resume my position, hands behind my back, shoulders slumped in feigned defeat.

The metal door groans open with a shrill squeal, and a man steps into view.

He has a thick neck, rotting teeth, and a smile that looks better suited for prison.

I recognize him from earlier. He is one of Morozov's lackeys who enjoys his job too

much.

“Morning, princess,” he sneers, unlocking the cell with a slow, deliberate click. “Brought you a little something.”

He holds up a bottle of water like a gift from the gods.

I don’t move. Don’t flinch. Just blink slowly, watching him from beneath lowered lashes. My fingers tighten around the spring, its jagged edge pressing into my skin. I need him closer.

He steps inside and kicks the door closed with the heel of his boot. The sound of it latching sends a spike of adrenaline through me. He drops the bottle on the floor with a loud clack.

“You could say thank you,” he snarls, stepping closer. His eyes roam, lingering too long on my chest. “Or better yet...” His hand reaches out, brushing a lock of hair behind my ear. “You could say thank you some other way.”

His fingers trail down the side of my face. I don’t recoil. I want to. I want to break his fingers one by one. But I force myself to stay still, to play the frightened captive.

“Shouldn't I cut that little tie off your wrists first?” he asks, chuckling. “Or maybe you like it this way.”

He crouches in front of me, hands on his knees, his foul breath wafting over my face as he leans in. “Bet you are real sweet under all that attitude.”

His hand slips down, grazing my thigh, moving higher.

That’s when I strike.

With a scream ripped straight from the pit of my lungs, I lunge, swinging the broken mattress spring in a wide arc. The jagged end slashes across his face, from cheek to jaw, splitting skin like butter. He roars in pain, stumbling backward, blood gushing in dark rivers down his neck.

“You bitch!” he thunders, clutching his face. “You fucking bitch!”

He charges, one hand raised, the other still pressed to the wound. But he doesn’t make it.

The crack of a gunshot is deafening in the tiny cell. The man jerks mid-stride, eyes wide before crumpling to the floor in a boneless heap.

Behind him, in the doorway, stands Morozov. Smoke curls from the end of the gun in his hand. He steps forward, the look in his eyes as dead as the man bleeding out at my feet.

“I apologize,” Morozov says calmly as if we are discussing dinner reservations. “He was warned not to touch what belongs to me.”

My stomach turns. The casual way he executed his own man chills me to the bone. This is not a person who values human life.

He steps over the body like it’s a rug and approaches me. I back away until I hit the wall, breathing hard, the spring still clenched in my fist. Blood drips from its point, mixing with my own.

“You are insane,” I hiss. “You are fucking insane.”

“Insane?” He chuckles, setting the gun down on the small table in the corner. “No, sweetheart. I’m focused and I know exactly what I want.” His eyes drop to my belly.

“And what I will take.”

He reaches for me, brushing the blood-spattered sleeve of my T-shirt. I slap his hand away. Hard.

He doesn't flinch. If anything, it excites him.

“I like a woman with fire. But you will learn,” he murmurs, seizing my jaw in one hand and yanking my face up to his. “The only person who touches you is me. You can fight. You can bleed. But in the end, you are mine.”

He crushes his lips against mine, and the taste that meets my tongue is rot and corruption, like kissing something already dead. I sink my teeth into him without hesitation, biting down until the copper tang of his blood floods my mouth.

With a roar, he backhands me across the face. I hit the floor, cheek stinging, mouth already swelling. The baby moves inside me, responding to the surge of adrenaline flooding my system.

“You fucking little whore,” he growls, looming over me. “You think this is pain? You think you have seen suffering? You have not even scratched the surface.”

He crouches beside me, seizing my wrist and twisting until a cry rips from my throat. Before I can catch my breath, his hand tangles in my hair and yanks me to my feet, only to send me crashing back with another savage backhand.

I hit the mattress hard, copper flooding my mouth. Blood spills from my lips and splatters onto the floor.

“I was going to kill that bastard's brat,” he snarls, looming over me like a demon. “But now? I'll wait. Let you carry it to term and then rip it from your womb with my

bare hands.”

A choked gasp escapes as I curl protectively around my belly, instinct eclipsing fear.

He leans down, fingers digging into my jaw, forcing my face to his. Without thinking, I rake my nails across his cheek, shoving him away.

“ Blyat ! You bitch!” he howls, stumbling back, staring at the blood smeared across his fingertips like it shocks him more than the pain.

Rage twists his face. With a snarl, he rears back and drives his boot into my ribs. Agony explodes through my side, stealing the breath from my lungs as I collapse, gasping and writhing on the cold, blood-slick floor.

He adjusts his suit, his breath still ragged. “Enjoy the time you have left with your baby, Sandy. Because the moment it is born...” His voice turns to ice. “It is gone.”

Then he turns and walks out, leaving me trembling on the floor. Alone with the body of the man he killed.

The cell feels smaller now, its walls closing in as my situation sinks deeper into my mind.

Blood trickles from the corner of my mouth, metallic and warm against my tongue.

I press my fingertips to my swollen lip, wincing as pain radiates through my face.

My ribs ache, but it is the terror for my unborn child that twists like a knife in my chest.

Time seems to stand still as I lay curled on the concrete floor, one arm wrapped

protectively around my belly, the other still clutching the blood-slick spring that gave me a moment's victory before everything went so horribly wrong.

The baby shifts inside me, a gentle roll that brings tears to my eyes.

"I know, little one," I whisper, my voice breaking. "I know you're scared, too."

The dead man's eyes stare at the ceiling, already glazed and vacant. Blood pools beneath his head, inching across the concrete floor in a slow, crimson tide. I force myself to look away as bile rises in my throat. I've seen violence before and even caused it moments ago with my makeshift weapon.

Still, the casual brutality with which Morozov executed his own man sends a bolt of terror through me.

I pull myself to my knees, ignoring the throbbing pain in my wrist where Morozov twisted it. Survival means staying calm and thinking clearly. I force myself to stand, my legs trembling beneath me. I press my hand against the wall for support, leaving a smear of blood on the grimy surface.

The bottle of water still lies on the floor. I pick it up, unscrew the cap with shaking hands, and take a small sip. The liquid is lukewarm but eases the burning in my throat. I pour a little into my palm and wipe at the blood on my face, the water turning pink as I try to clean myself.

"What now?" I ask myself aloud, needing to hear any voice, even my own.

The dead man on the floor draws my attention again. I force myself to approach him, to search his pockets despite the revulsion crawling across my skin. My fingers tremble as I pat his jacket, finding nothing in the front pockets. I reach into his back pocket and feel something solid. A phone.

Hope surges through me so violently that I nearly cry out. I pull the device free, only to feel that hope crumble to dust in my hands. The screen is shattered and completely black. I press the power button repeatedly, desperately, but nothing happens. It is as dead as its owner.

I slump back against the wall, clutching the useless phone. The tears I'd been fighting finally spill over, hot trails cutting through the grime on my cheeks. I allow myself exactly thirty seconds to cry, counting each second in my head, before wiping my face with determination.

“Get it together,” I tell myself firmly. “You're not dead yet.”

I tuck the broken phone under the thin mattress. Useless as it is, perhaps I can salvage parts from it and find something else to use as a weapon or tool. The spring served me well, but I need more.

My ribs pulse with each breath, a deep, bruising ache radiating from where Morozov's boot had landed. I press my fingers gently to my side, wincing at the sharp stab of pain. Likely fractured, but I'm hoping they're just badly bruised. Every movement lights a fresh fire beneath my skin.

Sweat beads on my forehead despite the chill in the air. My brain feels foggy, thoughts slipping through my fingers like smoke. When was the last time I'd eaten? Twenty-four hours ago? Longer? The baby needs nourishment. I need strength.

I force myself to return to the thin mattress, sitting on its edge. I need to conserve energy to think. The bottle of water is clutched in my hand like a precious gem. I take small, measured sips, savoring each one, knowing it might be all I receive for the day.

The sound of footsteps in the distance makes my entire body rigid.

I hide the spring beneath my thigh and assume the position of defeat once more, head bowed.

The footsteps grow louder, then pause outside my cell.

I fix my gaze on the floor, my heart thundering so loudly I'm certain whoever is there can hear it.

"Clean this mess up," Morozov's cold voice commands, directed at someone I can't see. "And bring her food. I want her properly nourished before I rip that bastard baby out of her."

Rage boils beneath my skin, fierce and hot.

"Yes, sir," a new voice replies.

Heavy footsteps retreat down the hall. Morozov is leaving but sending others in his place. I remain motionless, counting my heartbeats, trying to slow my breathing.

Minutes later, two men enter the cell. One is young, barely out of his teens, with a face that hasn't yet hardened into the cruelty of his profession. The other is older, battle-scarred, with eyes that have witnessed too much violence to retain humanity.

"Jesus," the younger one mutters, looking at the body. "Boss did this?"

"Shut up and grab his legs," the older man snaps. "You," he addresses me without looking at me directly. "Stay where you are if you don't want the same."

I don't respond, don't move. Just watch through lowered lashes as they heave the dead man between them. Blood drips from the corpse as they carry it out, leaving a trail of crimson droplets across the concrete floor. The scent of blood fills the air,

making my stomach turn.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 10:08 am

DIMITRI

The warehouse appears in the distance, its rusted exterior illuminated by the harsh orange glow of the setting sun.

Everything about the building screams forgotten and forsaken, except I know who lurks inside.

Andrei Morozov. The man who has haunted my every breath since I stepped out of that prison cell.

The man who dared to lay his filthy hands on Sandy.

My knuckles ache as I grip the steering wheel. The familiar burn of rage courses through my veins, but I keep it contained. Cold and controlled. The way I handle all my business. Emotions have no place in what is about to happen.

Viktor drives the lead SUV, and I follow close behind in the second, our convoy of blacked-out vehicles rolling down the abandoned industrial strip like harbingers of death. My gun sits on the seat beside me loaded and ready. My fingers twitch with the need to wrap around its grip. To end this.

The radio crackles with static. “Two minutes,” Viktor's voice comes through, calm and measured.

“Copy,” I respond, checking my rearview mirror. Two more vehicles trail behind mine, filled with my most trusted men. Men who will kill without question. Men who

understand the gravity of tonight's mission.

We stop a half mile out from the warehouse.

The engines die one by one until silence blankets the air.

I step out into the cool night air, which does nothing to quell the fury burning inside me.

Aleksandr exits the first SUV, and we gather behind an old shipping container to review the plan one last time.

“He's expecting us to come in through the front,” Aleksandr says, his voice a low growl as he spreads a crude map across the hood of the car.

“So, we won't. Ivan and Yuri will take the back entrance with their teams. Dimitri and I go through the north entrance.

Viktor cuts the power once we're inside. No mercy. No hesitation. We find Morozov, and we end him.”

A hard nod passes between us. I stay silent. Nothing I say can change what is coming. Only blood and fire will speak for me tonight.

I pull my gun from its holster, checking it systematically. I slide it back into place and arm myself with additional weapons. The cold metal against my skin grounds me.

“Ten minutes to positions,” Aleksandr instructs, checking his watch. “Communications check.”

One by one, my men confirm their radios are operational. This isn't our first ambush,

but the stakes have never been higher for me.

As the others disperse to their positions, Aleksandr catches my arm. “ Brat ,” he says, voice low enough that only I can hear. “Don't lose focus. Remember what happened in Odessa.”

I shrug off his hand. “Odessa was different.”

“Was it?” His gaze pierces through me. “You let personal feelings cloud your judgment. It nearly got you killed.”

“I won't make the same mistake twice.” My voice betrays nothing of the turmoil inside me.

“See that you don't.”

The cool night air brushes against my exposed skin as we approach the north entrance of the warehouse. My breath comes slow and deliberate, and every sense heightens to excruciating awareness.

The steel doors of the north entrance creak open under my hand. We slip inside, the darkness enveloping us whole. My pulse remains steady. The dangerous calm that comes before blood is spilled.

Inside, the warehouse stinks of mildew, oil, and rotting wood. Stacks of rusted crates loom around us. A generator hums somewhere in the distance, and above it, a low, guttural laugh drifts from the far corner.

I signal Aleksandr. We move like specters through the gloom, navigating by memory and instinct.

“Power going down in thirty seconds,” Viktor whispers through the comm.

Two guards round the corner, their figures barely visible in the dim light. I put them down without a sound. One bullet each, clean through the skull. They drop before their weapons even clear their holsters.

Behind me, Aleksandr moves with similar efficiency, taking down another guard who appears from a side passage. No wasted movement. No hesitation.

“North corridor secure,” I murmur into the comm.

“East side meeting resistance,” comes Ivan's strained reply, followed by the distant pop of gunfire.

We sweep through the corridors, advancing deeper into the warehouse. The sounds of combat echo from multiple directions, our men engaging Morozov's guards in short, brutal bursts. A sudden crackle over the comm confirms Viktor has cut the power. The warehouse plunges into total darkness.

Perfect.

I flip down my night vision goggles, and the world transforms into shades of green. I move with renewed confidence, scanning each room we pass. They're all empty.

Where is he keeping her?

A guard appears at the end of the hallway, alerted by the sounds of gunfire. I take aim and squeeze the trigger. His body crumples to the floor.

“We found something,” Yuri's voice comes through the comm. “Lower level. Looks like an entrance to a basement or sublevel. Heavily guarded.”

My heart rate picks up slightly. “On my way. Hold position.”

I signal to Aleksandr, and we change direction, heading toward the coordinates Yuri sent.

As we approach, the sounds of gunfire intensify. Yuri and his team exchange fire with at least six of Morozov's men, using a stack of crates as cover.

Aleksandr analyzes the situation in seconds. “Dimitri, left flank. I'll take the right.”

I move into position, using the darkness to my advantage. Morozov's men are focused on Yuri's frontal assault, leaving their sides vulnerable.

I emerge from behind a concrete pillar and open fire. Two men go down immediately. The others turn in confusion, caught between multiple lines of attack. Aleksandr's bullets find two more. The last pair attempts to retreat, but Yuri's team cuts them down before reaching the door they are guarding.

Silence falls again, broken only by the distant sounds of combat elsewhere in the warehouse.

“Clear,” Aleksandr announces after checking the bodies.

I approach the door the guards were protecting. It is heavy steel with an industrial-grade lock. “Viktor, we need tools.”

Within minutes, Viktor arrives with the equipment. The lock surrenders to our efforts and the door swings open to reveal a narrow staircase descending into darkness.

“I go first,” I demand, my voice leaving no room for argument.

“I’ll go with Dimitri. The rest of you secure the perimeter,” Aleksandr commands.

The stairwell is tight, forcing us to descend into a single file. My gun remains aimed ahead, ready for any threat. The air grows colder and damper with each step. The warehouse's basement stretches out before us, a maze of concrete pillars and abandoned equipment.

Aleksandr and I stalk through the basement level, checking every room and every corner. Where would Morozov take her? What is his plan?

The answer comes in the form of gunfire erupting from the far end of the basement. I sprint toward the sound, abandoning all pretense of stealth.

I burst into a large open area that once served as storage. Three of my men are engaged in fierce combat with Morozov's guards. Bodies already litter the ground.

I join the fray without hesitation, my bullets finding their marks with deadly precision. One by one, Morozov's men fall. But they buy their boss time.

“There's another level below,” one of my wounded men gasps, pointing toward a metal trapdoor. “They went down there.”

I nod once, then turn to Aleksandr. “I’m going after Morozov.”

“Not alone,” Aleksandr protests.

“Yes, alone.” My tone brooks no argument. “This is between me and him now.”

Before he can respond, I cross to the trapdoor and heave it open. Another set of stairs, cruder than the first, disappears into darkness. I descend without hesitation, my gun leading the way.

The air turns thick with moisture and the unmistakable scent of blood. My night vision goggles reveal a series of small chambers, likely used for storage in the past. Most stand empty, their doors hanging open on rusted hinges.

A guard appears from an adjacent room. I take a grazing hit to my shoulder, but adrenaline dulls the pain to nothing more than an irritating burn. I return fire, watching my opponent slump against the wall.

Silence descends once more. I pause, listening intently. A faint sound reaches my ears. Voices are coming from the furthest chamber.

I approach cautiously, my gun held ready. The door to the final room stands slightly ajar, a thin strip of light spilling onto the concrete floor. I position myself beside the frame, listening.

“...thought you were smarter than this.” It is Sandy's voice, though strained with fear and exhaustion.

“Smart enough to lure your attack dog here.” Morozov's reply is smug and confident.

I take a slow, steady breath. Then I kick the door open and enter in one fluid motion.

And that's when I see her. It instantly makes my rage intensify to a calculated fury more dangerous than any blind anger.

Sandy is on her knees in the center of a cell in the small room, her hands bound behind her back. Her face is bruised, a trickle of blood running from her split lip. But her eyes burn with an unbroken spirit as they meet mine.

Behind her stands Morozov, one hand tangled in her hair, the other pressing a gun against her temple. His face splits into a cruel smile when he sees me.

“You're too late,” Morozov sneers, pressing the barrel harder against Sandy's skin. “I already marked her. Just like you marked my brother for death.”

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 10:08 am

SANDY

Time doesn't just slow. It shatters.

One second, I'm on my knees, Morozov's hand tangled in my hair, his gun pressing into the soft skin of my temple. And next, I'm drowning in Dimitri's eyes.

He stands across the room, framed by darkness and smoke, but I see him.

It isn't the gun in his hands or the tactical calm of a Bratva soldier that strikes me. It is the fear. Beneath all that steel and rage, his eyes burn with it. Not fear for himself. Fear for me. For the baby I carry. For the family we didn't even get the chance to become yet.

But he doesn't flinch. Doesn't move like a man afraid. He moves like a man with nothing left to lose.

The concrete floor bites into my knees as I kneel there, prisoner to a madman. My body aches from being battered, my wrists raw from the restraints. But none of that matters now. All that matters is Dimitri, who stands there like a vision of vengeance and love.

"You came," I whisper, my voice cracking. Morozov yanks my head back sharply, causing me to gasp in pain.

"Shut up, little bird," he hisses into my ear, his breath hot and putrid against my skin. "Your prince has arrived, but he won't be taking you anywhere."

Morozov's face twists into a cocktail of murderous rage and gleeful anticipation. "How thoughtful of you to show up, Dimitri. Now I get to kill you both."

Dimitri's expression remains impassive, but I can read the rage brewing beneath. His eyes never leave mine, communicating volumes in silence. I learned to understand his wordless language over the months we spent together. He is telling me to trust him and stay strong for just a little longer.

"Release her, Morozov," Dimitri demands, a controlled thunder reverberating through the room. "This is between you and me. It always has been."

Morozov laughs, the sound grating against my nerves like nails on a board. "But she makes such lovely leverage, doesn't she? The mighty Dimitri Popov, brought to heel by a woman." His free hand slides down to rest on my stomach, making my blood boil. "And the little one she carries."

I can feel Dimitri's explosive tension from across the room, a living, breathing thing that fills the space between us. His grip on his gun tightens infinitesimally, but his aim remains steady.

"You know what your problem is, Popov?" Morozov continues, clearly enjoying his moment of power. "You've gone soft. The old Dimitri would never have allowed himself such obvious weaknesses."

My heart pounds so loudly that I'm certain Dimitri can hear it. The baby flutters within me as if sensing the danger we are in. I silently pray, begging whatever powers might be listening to protect this innocent life.

Behind Dimitri, I can make out other figures. Blurry silhouettes waiting in the periphery. Aleksandr, along with Ivan, Viktor, and Lev. They are here, too, ready to tear this place apart to get me out.

Dimitri and Morozov say something. Words that linger like smoke and broken glass. But I can't hear them. Not really. It's like I'm trapped underwater, the sounds distorted and meaningless. My breath catches somewhere between my lungs and my prayers.

Please, let Dimitri save me. Please, let my baby live.

I try to focus, to fight through the fog of terror surrounding me. I can't afford to be passive in my own rescue. Dimitri taught me to look for opportunities and to never accept defeat. But with a gun pressed to my head and my baby's life at stake, options seem nonexistent.

"I'm going to give you a choice, Popov," Morozov announces, his voice dripping with malice. "Drop your weapon and I'll kill you quickly. Keep it, and I'll make you watch as I put a bullet through your woman's pretty head before I finish you."

Dimitri's jaw clenches, the only indication of the wrath raging inside him. His eyes lock with mine again, and something passes between us. A plan. A promise.

I inhale slowly, trying to steady my racing heart. The tension in the room stretches taut, ready to snap. Morozov's grip loosens slightly as he grows more confident in his victory.

"Five seconds," he calls. "Four..."

I watch Dimitri's eyes.

"Three..."

His gaze flicks downward for a millisecond.

“Two...”

Morozov jerks me tighter, laughing like the unhinged monster he is. His thumb strokes my jaw in a mockery of tenderness as he taunts Dimitri. I feel the press of the barrel shift slightly against my temple.

And then Dimitri pulls the trigger. One clean shot. One flash of fire and thunder.

Morozov's grip goes slack. The gun clatters beside me as Morozov's body drops like a dead stone, slamming into the floor behind me.

For a heartbeat, I don't move. I can't. My limbs won't obey. The ringing in my ears drowns out everything else. The smell of gunpowder fills the air, acrid and biting.

Then I feel warm and familiar hands on me. Dimitri.

“Sandy,” he breathes, falling to his knees before me. His hands cup my face, brushing hair and blood away from my skin.

I can't speak. My throat is raw with silent screams, my lips trembling.

He pulls me into his chest, wrapping himself around me like armor. “I've got you now. You're safe. Both of you.”

My arms cling to him with what strength I have left. I bury my face in his neck, inhaling the scent of sweat, gunpowder, and him. My protector. My damn fool of a man who charged into hell and won.

Dimitri murmurs into my hair, his hands skimming over me in a frantic search for injuries. I flinch when he reaches my side, pain flashing across my face. “The baby? Is the baby okay?”

I nod, still unable to form words. My body shakes uncontrollably, and the adrenaline crashes, hitting me hard.

“We need to move.” Aleksandr's voice cuts through the haze of my shock.

Dimitri nods, but his attention remains fixed on me. “Can you stand?”

I swallow hard, forcing my voice to work. “Yes.”

He helps me to my feet with gentle hands, keeping me tucked against his side as if afraid I might dissolve into mist if he lets go. My legs feel like rubber, threatening to give out with each step, but Dimitri's strength holds me upright.

“Stay close,” he instructs as we move toward the exit, his gun now held ready in his free hand.

The warehouse is a maze of corridors and rooms, each doorway a potential threat. Aleksandr takes point, with Viktor and Ivan flanking us. Lev brings up the rear, his vigilant eyes scanning constantly for danger.

“We cleared most of the building on our way in,” Dimitri explains softly as we move. “But there may be stragglers.”

A door bursts open ahead of us as if summoned by his words. A man with a scarred face emerges, weapon raised. Before he can fire, Aleksandr puts him down with two rapid shots.

I flinch but keep moving. This is Dimitri's world, and it has become my world since the moment I fell in love with him. Its brutality no longer shocks me as it once had.

We encounter two more of Morozov's men before reaching the exit. Both times,

Dimitri's team eliminates the threat with ruthless efficiency. I try not to look at the bodies as we pass.

Finally, we emerge into the night air. I gulp it down greedily, realizing how stale and foul the air inside was. The sky above is clear, stars sprinkled across the velvet darkness like diamonds. I've never seen anything so beautiful.

Four black SUVs wait in the gravel lot, engines running. Dimitri guides me toward the second vehicle, his vigilance never faltering even as we approach safety.

"Perimeter secure," Ivan reports, joining us at the car. "No signs of reinforcements."

Dimitri nods once. "Good work." To me, he says, "Let's get you home."

Home. The word brings tears to my eyes. After almost two days in captivity, uncertain if I would ever see daylight again, the promise of returning to the mansion—to safety, to our life together—overwhelms me.

Dimitri helps me into the back of the SUV, climbing in beside me. His composure cracks the moment the door closes, sealing us in the quiet interior. Again he pulls me into his arms, burying his face in my hair.

"When they took you..." he mutters, his voice rough with emotion.

I press my palm against his cheek, feeling the stubble that has grown during my absence. "But you found me."

His eyes, usually so guarded, are naked with vulnerability. "I would have torn the world apart to find you, malyshka."

We don't speak as the others approach the SUVs. Aleksandr issues orders, and Ivan

and Viktor obey. But it is all background noise. None of it matters.

Only him. Only us.

The convoy pulls away from the warehouse, headlights cutting through the darkness. I nestle closer to Dimitri, craving his warmth and solidity after days of cold isolation. His arm tightens around me protectively.

“How did you find me?” I ask after several minutes of silence.

Dimitri's eyebrows snap together. “Elena... and a lot of digging for information.”

I don't ask for details. Some things are better left unknown.

Dimitri places his hand over mine. “We'll have you examined as soon as we get home. Talia already called the doctor.”

The mention of my sister brings fresh tears to my eyes. “She must have been worried sick.”

“She never lost faith,” Dimitri says. “She knew we would find you.” A small smile touches his lips. “She's as stubborn as you are.”

As we near the estate, familiar landmarks come into view. The old church perched on the corner, the long stretch of forest flanking the private road to the mansion. Each one is a reminder of a home I feared I'd never see again.

When the estate gates open and the mansion rises before us, I see Talia waiting on the steps. She runs before the car even comes to a stop. As soon as the door opens, she is there, arms around me, tears streaking her cheeks, her voice shaking as she whispers my name repeatedly.

I let her hold me.

But my eyes never leave Dimitri. Because he is the reason I'm still breathing. The reason our baby will be born. The reason the nightmare ended.

And I know at this moment that I'm his no matter what else comes. And he is mine.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 10:08 am

DIMITRI

It has been a week since I put a bullet between Morozov's eyes. Seven days since I watched Sandy held at gunpoint by that madman. One agonizing week since I nearly lost everything I didn't realize I couldn't live without.

Now, as the morning sun spills through the tall windows of the Avilov estate, I stand in the kitchen with a tray in my hands and a tremor in my chest.

Breakfast in bed. It sounds simple enough. But beneath the folded napkin, beside the sliced fruit and fresh-squeezed juice, isn't just a dish of strawberry jam. There is a small velvet box. It holds everything I don't know how to say unless I'm on one knee in front of her.

Alone in the quiet hush of morning, a thread of doubt creeps in. Am I doing the right thing?

Sandy deserves more than a man whose past put a gun to her head. She deserves peace, not the constant shadow of war. Someone who can offer safety instead of bloodstained promises. Someone whose love doesn't come wrapped in danger.

But I'm too selfish to let her go. Too far gone to pretend I can live without her smile and laughter.

I adjust the items on the tray one more time. Fresh blueberries and strawberries arranged just so. Raspberry jam she's developed a craving for during her pregnancy. Coffee with extra cream, the way she's started taking it lately. Two warm croissants

and a side of crispy bacon.

Sandy has been healing slowly but surely.

The bruises on her ribs have faded into yellow ghosts.

The split lip has smoothed over, the color returning to her face daily.

But she isn't just healing physically. There is a light in her again.

A steadiness in the way she moves, the way she laughs with Talia, the way she presses her hand to her round belly when she doesn't think anyone is looking.

I see it. I see all of her.

The way she talks to our unborn child when she thinks she is alone, her voice soft and musical as she tells stories about the world waiting outside.

The way she looks at me across the dinner table each night, love and trust shining in those blue eyes that first captured my attention in Aleksandr's office what felt like a lifetime ago.

And I knew I wanted to spend the rest of my life protecting every inch of that light.

Even when the darkness came calling. Especially then.

I carry the tray upstairs, the scent of bacon and coffee wafting with every step. I reach the guest suite and nudge the door open with my shoulder.

She is curled beneath the blankets, her hair like fire across the pillow, one hand resting lightly on her belly. The sight damn near undoes me. She is the most beautiful

thing I've ever seen. Her skin has regained its healthy glow, and her breathing is deep and even. Peaceful.

“Room service,” I say softly.

Her eyes flutter open, and when they meet mine, they warm instantly. A smile curves her lips, sleepy and content.

“Are you trying to spoil me?”

“Maybe.” I set the tray down over her lap and lean in to kiss her forehead, breathing in the scent of her shampoo. “You deserve it.”

She smiles sleepily and peeks under the napkin. “Ooh, is that the raspberry jam I like?”

“Only the best.”

Her laughter is soft, but it wraps around my ribs and squeezes. She picks up the juice and takes a sip, then reaches for the croissant, spreading it thick with the jam she's been craving.

“You're going to make me too comfortable here,” she says, taking a bite. “I'll never want to leave.”

“That's the idea,” I mumble.

She looks up at me, her expression shifting as if she can sense the importance of this moment.

“What's this?” she asks, uncovering the napkin entirely.

Her hand freezes. The velvet box sits in the middle of the tray, small and unassuming but radiating with intent.

She looks at me, eyes wide, lips parted. “Dimitri...”

My heart hammers against my ribs as I take the box from the tray. This is it. The moment that will change everything or break me completely. I drop to one knee beside the bed, the air catching in my throat.

“I know this life isn't what you imagined,” I begin, my voice thick. “I know I come with shadows and scars, and a past soaked in blood. But you're the first one that made me think about the future. Not just survival. Not just vengeance. A real future. With you. With our child.”

I open the box, revealing the solitaire diamond ring set in a platinum band.

The jeweler was right about this one. It wasn't the biggest stone in the store, but it was perfect.

Clear and brilliant, it was cut to reflect the light from every angle.

Nothing extravagant, but elegant. Beautiful, like her.

“Sandy Davis,” I breathe, “will you marry me?”

Tears well in her eyes, her hand trembling as it covers her mouth.

For a moment, I see the little girl who survived foster homes and heartbreak and taught herself never to hope too loudly.

The one who'd learned early that good things didn't last, that love was conditional,

and that she had to earn every scrap of affection she received.

But hope blooms in her face like a sunrise.

“Yes,” she whispers. Then louder, “Yes, Dimitri. Yes.”

Relief crashes over me like a tidal wave. I slip the ring onto her finger, marveling at how perfectly it fits and how right it looks there. Sandy launches forward, tray be damned, wrapping her arms around my neck. I catch her, hold her, and feel her press against me right where she belongs.

Coffee soaks into the bedsheets. Fruit scatters across the floor. Neither of us cares.

We stay tangled like that for a long time, her breath warm against my neck, her hand resting over mine where it cradles her belly. I feel our child move beneath my palm, a gentle flutter that makes my chest tight with emotion.

“I love you,” she whispers against my skin. “I love you so much it scares me sometimes.”

“You scare me, too,” I admit. “You scare me in the best possible way. You make me want to be better than I am.”

She pulls back to look at me, her eyes bright with tears and joy. “You’re already everything I need you to be.”

I kiss her soft and slow, tasting the salt of her tears and the sweetness of raspberry jam. She melts into me, her hands tangling in my hair, her body soft and warm and mine.

“Mrs. Popov,” I murmur against her lips, testing the words.

She shivers. “I like the sound of that.”

“Good. Because I plan to spend the rest of my life making sure you never regret saying yes.”

“Impossible,” she insists, her fingers tracing my jaw. “I could never regret you, Dimitri. Never.”

I stand, clear the scattered breakfast items from the bed, and then return to her side. She is watching me with desire and tenderness. The kind of look that makes me forget about everything except her.

“Come here,” she says, reaching for me.

I settle beside her on the bed, pulling her against my chest. She fits perfectly in my arms as if she were made for this spot.

Tilting her head back, I kiss her sweet lips and suck on her sinful tongue.

She clings to me as I grip the edge of her T-shirt and peel it off.

She slides onto her side, and her shorts and panties come off next.

Wrapping her arms around my neck, I bury my face between her breasts. I roll my tongue over her nipples, and she rocks her hips grinding her pussy against my hard cock. She’s wet, hot, and ready before I even take off my clothes. I’m aching for her, my cock threatening to punch through my shorts.

Sandy reaches between her legs, gripping my cock through the cotton fabric. “Off, now,” she demands.

My lips twitch as I pull off my boxers and cup her pussy. She grinds her slick pussy against my hand, begging me to press firmer.

Instead, I lift her legs to my chest, hooking her ankles over my shoulders. Without warning, I slide my cock between her folds. She cries out, arching and writhing to impale herself deeper onto me.

I lean forward to kiss her soft skin, making her legs open up even more. I bottom out in her pussy and groan. Fuck. She feels so fucking good around my cock.

Grabbing her legs, I wrap them around my waist, grinding into her as I do. Slipping my hands beneath her, I lift her ass, fucking her deeper with each thrust. I'm so engrossed in the moment that all I can hear is the wet slapping of my skin against hers as she pants and groans, begging for more.

Slowing my pace slightly, I give her exactly what she wants. Keeping her ass suspended, I shove two thick fingers into it, fucking both her holes at the same time. Sandy shudders and gasps, and I work her until she's sobbing for me to never stop fucking her.

"Yes...please Dimitri...don't stop..." she cries out.

"My dirty little kiska ," I groan, working my cock and fingers at a feverish pace. "You love it when I fuck all your holes."

"Yes, yes...I love it..." she gasps, her eyes rolling back in her head.

I pull my fingers and cock out of her and quickly flip her onto her stomach. Grabbing her waist, I pull her to the edge of the bed, lifting her ass into the air. I don't give her a chance to figure out what's about to happen when I shove my cock into her ass and plunge two fingers into her pussy.

She screams, gripping the sheets with both hands. “Oh...my...God...Dimitri,” she cries, “don’t stop fucking me...don’t you dare...” she cries out, pushing her ass back in sync with every thrust.

I hold onto her waist with my left hand, my fingers digging into her so every stroke hits as deep as my cock will go. I fuck her so hard I’m afraid I might split her in half.

When she comes, I allow my own release to fill up her ass with my hot sticky cum.

Her pussy clamps down on my fingers at the same time, her juices flowing down my hand.

I continue to pump until every drop is released, and my cock goes soft inside her.

Without pulling out, I drape myself over her limp body, kissing her shoulder and the side of her neck.

Finally, I pull my cock out and flip her onto her back. Spreading her legs, I slowly lap up her sweet juices and tease her clit, needing every drop on my tongue. She moans softly, gently running her fingers through my hair. When I’m satisfied, I lay next to her, pulling her back against my chest.

I hold her until her breathing evens out, gently rubbing her breasts. I play with her nipples for a few minutes until her hand finds mine, intertwining our fingers so the ring catches the morning light.

“Tell me about the wedding,” she breathes. “What do you want?”

“You in a white dress. Me in a suit that doesn't have bloodstains. Our child growing safely inside you. That's all I need.”

She laughs. “You make it sound so simple.”

“It is simple. Everything else is just details.”

I kiss her deeply, my fingers threading through the silk of her hair as if I can anchor us both with this one touch.

When we finally pull apart, I hold her close, my gaze falling to the ring on her finger, shimmering in the light and scattering a faint rainbow across the sheets. A quiet promise of forever.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 10:08 am

SANDY

The scent of blooming gardenias drifts through the open doors, mingling with the distant hum of strings being tuned. Morning sunlight pours through the windows, bathing everything in a soft, golden glow.

I've been awake since before dawn, too restless to sleep. The morning arrives with a chorus of birdsong and perfect spring weather that feels almost aggressive in its beauty. Not a cloud in the sky, not too warm, not too cool, as if Mother Nature conspired to give us this flawless day.

“You need to eat something,” Talia insists, appearing in the doorway with a tray. She’s been fluttering around me all morning like a mother hen, ensuring I have everything I need while trying to hide her nervousness.

“I can't,” I say, pressing a hand to my stomach. “I'm too?—”

“Excited? Terrified? About to marry a dangerous Bratva enforcer?”

I shoot her a look. “All of the above.”

She sets the tray down on the small table by the window. It is filled with fresh fruit, croissants, and coffee that smells like heaven. “You might be too nervous to eat, but the baby needs food.”

“What if I trip walking down the aisle? What if I forget my vows? What if?—”

“What if you stop overthinking and let yourself be happy?”

I look at her reflection in the mirror, this woman who's been my sister in every way that matters since we were kids in the system. Her dark hair is already styled in an elegant updo, and she's wearing a soft lavender dress that brings out her eyes.

As my maid of honor, she insisted on being completely ready early so she could focus on me.

“I am happy,” I say softly.

She moves to stand behind me, her hands resting gently on my shoulders. “You deserve this, sis. You deserve love, happiness, all of it.”

A knock at the door interrupts my spiraling thoughts. “Come in,” Talia calls.

Olga enters carrying a large white box, her face creased with the warm smile that has become familiar over the past months.

The older woman is not only the best nanny to the children, but she has taken it upon herself to mother both Talia and me from the moment we became part of the Avilov family.

Today, she looks as nervous and excited as if one of her children is getting married.

“The dress,” she announces, setting the box down with reverent care. “Are you ready?”

Am I ready? I nod, feeling the warmth spread through my chest.

The dress is a collaboration between a designer Aleksandr knows and my own very

specific vision. I wanted something that felt like me. Elegant but not overdone, romantic but not frivolous. And it had to hide my pregnant belly. When we went for the final fitting last week, Talia had actually cried.

As Olga and Talia help me with it, I understand why.

The silk feels like water against my skin, cool and perfect.

The illusion neckline creates a sense of delicacy, while the fitted bodice emphasizes my waist. The beadwork glimmers in the morning light, throwing back tiny rainbows.

But what makes it truly special is how it feels.

It's like armor and art combined. Like I can face anything in this dress.

I stand in front of the mirror, my fingers trembling slightly as I adjust the delicate lace sleeve on my shoulder.

The dress flows around me in waves of soft, white silk with intricate beadwork that shimmers when I move.

Talia stands behind me, tucking a loose curl behind my ear with gentle hands, her eyes already glassy.

"You're going to knock him dead," she whispers with a teary smile.

I huff a shaky breath. "Let's hope not literally. This is the Bratva, after all."

She laughs, the sound breaking through the tension in my chest. My fingers clutch the edge of the vanity for balance. It isn't fear, just an overwhelming swell of everything. Love, disbelief, the ghosts of the past still clinging to the edges of this new life.

How did I get here? I am the girl who spent more nights staring at cracked ceilings and devising escape plans than dreaming about white dresses or forever.

The girl who'd been passed from foster home to foster home, never staying anywhere long enough to put down roots.

The girl who'd learned early that counting on people was a mistake, that love was a luxury she couldn't afford.

That survival meant keeping one foot always pointed toward the exit.

I'd built walls so high and thick that I'd forgotten there was supposed to be a door.

But Dimitri isn't a dream. He is a storm I walked into with eyes wide open. He saw straight through every defense I built and decided I was worth the effort anyway. The man who's been patient when I pushed him away, gentle when I expected violence, present when I expected abandonment.

"Your flowers," Olga smiles, presenting me with a bouquet of white peonies and gardenias tied with ivory silk ribbon. "Mr. Dimitri chose them himself."

Of course, he did. Peonies are my favorite. I mentioned it once, months ago, during one of our late-night conversations when he was still trying to convince me to give him a chance. He remembers everything.

"Are you nervous?" I ask Talia as she fusses with the train of my dress.

"Me? I'm not the one getting married." She pauses in her fluffing. "But yes, I'm nervous. I'm nervous you're going to realize how perfect this is and spontaneously combust from happiness."

A soft knock interrupts us again. “Ladies, it’s time for photos,” a voice calls from the hall.

The next hour passes in a flurry of posed shots and candid moments.

The photographer captures everything with an artist's eye.

Me with Talia, sharing a quiet moment by the window.

Me with Olga, who insists on being in at least one photo “for posterity.” Me alone, looking out over the gardens where, in just a few hours, I'll promise my life to a man who already owns my heart.

Through it all, I keep stealing glances at the clock. Not because I’m impatient but because each passing minute makes it more real. This isn’t a beautiful dream I'll wake up from. This is actually happening.

The sound of footsteps outside the door pulls me from my thoughts. There is a soft knock and then Aleksandr's voice. “It's time.”

My heart starts racing. Not from fear but from the sudden, overwhelming realization that in a few minutes, I'll see Dimitri. My almost-husband. The man who convinced me that forever isn’t a terrifying concept but a beautiful one.

Talia kisses my cheek quickly and slips out, leaving me alone.

I brush my fingers over the blackbird tattoo on my wrist, which Talia has inked on hers as well.

I still remember the night we got them as if it had just happened.

I was determined to move to New York and begged her to come with me.

But she'd just landed her job at the Rum Room in San Francisco and wasn't ready to leave.

One terrible bottle of tequila and a pile of regretful tacos later, I dragged her into a dingy little tattoo shop on a whim.

Talia chose a tiny blackbird perched on a wire.

I picked one with its wings spread wide, soaring across the sky.

I told her it meant she'd always be with me, no matter how far I flew.

Standing here on the edge of forever, the irony isn't lost on me. We both ended up in the same place, after all. Married to brothers. Wrapped in the same brutal, beautiful Bratva world.

I step out of the room. The corridor has been transformed with trailing ivy, candles in crystal holders, and white rose petals dusted along the floor like snow.

The subtle scent of roses blends with the rich aroma of expensive furniture polish, and the faint fragrance of the gardens wafts in on the breeze.

Lev stands at the end of the hall, waiting to escort me.

He cleans up remarkably well for the occasion, wearing a perfectly tailored black suit and looking almost uncomfortable with the formality of his appearance.

But his expression is soft and protective.

It's the same look he wears when he watches Sasha, Maxim, and Angelina play in the garden.

As he offers his arm, I place my hand in his and whisper, "Thank you."

"For what?"

"For being family."

It's true. Over the past months, Lev has become like a protective older brother.

He taught me to shoot, accompanied me on shopping trips when Dimitri was busy, stood patiently outside dressing rooms, and carried bags without complaint.

He even helped me pick out Dimitri's wedding gift.

A vintage watch that had belonged to his grandfather, which I had restored and engraved.

He gave a small nod, clearly moved but trying not to show it. "Dimitri is a lucky man."

"I'm the lucky one."

"You're both lucky. That's what makes it work."

Then he turns to lead me through the hall, past family portraits and expensive art, toward the doors that open onto the garden. With each step, I can hear the string quartet more clearly, the soft murmur of conversation, and the rustle of fabric as guests find their seats.

“Ready?” Lev asks as we reach the doors.

I take a deep breath, inhaling the scent of flowers. “Ready.”

We step into the estate’s gardens, which are always beautiful, but today they are magical.

Rows of white chairs curve around the courtyard fountain, which is decorated with floating white roses.

Tall cypress trees wrapped in strands of gold-tipped lights create natural pillars along the sides of the seated area.

A white runner leads down the center, scattered with petals that shine in the afternoon light like tiny stars.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 10:08 am

Maxim and Sasha sit in the front row, dressed like they stepped out of a fairytale.

Maxim wears a miniature version of his father's suit, his dark hair slicked back and his blue eyes serious as he watches me approach.

Sasha's dress is a cloud of pale pink tulle, and she clutches a small basket that holds flower petals, now empty since she apparently scattered them all before I even appeared.

Little Angelina squirms in Olga's lap, wearing a dress that matches Sasha's but in miniature. At just over two years old, she is more interested in the ribbon from her flower crown than in the ceremony. Still, she claps her hands when she sees me, making Olga shush her gently.

There are more faces I recognize. Some of Aleksandr's men who have become friends and a few people from my old life that made the guest list. But they all blur into background noise because my eyes go straight to him.

Dimitri.

He is standing at the altar beneath an arch woven with white roses and ivy, dressed in black, his hands clasped in front of him, his jaw tight, his eyes locked on mine like nothing else exists.

I've never seen him look so...raw. No armor. No walls. Just a man who lived through hell and still somehow chose love.

The black suit fits him perfectly, emphasizing the broad line of his shoulders and narrow waist. But it is his face that stops my heart.

There is no trace of the cold, calculating man I first met.

This is the man who holds me when I have nightmares and who remembers my favorite coffee order. This is the man who loves me.

As I walk down the aisle, everything else falls away.

Each step brings me closer to a future I never allowed myself to imagine.

A future where I don't have to run, don't have to hide, don't have to protect myself from the possibility of loss because the man waiting for me has already proven himself worthy of trust.

I reach him, and Lev places my hand in Dimitri's. His fingers close over mine like a promise that says, I'll never let you go.

When our skin touches, I feel some nervous energy leave my body. This is right. This is where I belong.

"You're beautiful," he murmurs, low enough that only I can hear.

"So are you."

A ghost of a smile touches his lips. "Ready?"

I nod once.

The officiant speaks, but I barely hear him.

Something about love being a choice made daily, about commitment being more than promises spoken at garden parties.

Words about building a life together, about facing whatever comes next as partners.

Because when Dimitri looks at me, I see my entire world.

Dimitri reaches into his jacket and pulls out a velvet box. He slides the diamond wedding band onto my finger with surprisingly steady hands. I do the same with the platinum band I chose for him—simple, strong, unbreakable.

When the officiant pronounces us married, the world seems to exhale. Dimitri reaches out to cup my face in his hands, his thumbs brushing my cheekbones. We just look at each other for a moment, letting the magnitude of what we just did settle between us.

When the officiant tells us we are now bound, I don't feel caged...I feel free. His lips brush mine. It's not hard or urgent, just right.

The courtyard erupts in applause, cheers echoing off the estate's stone walls. Sasha squeals with delight. I hear Talia sniffing behind me, and when I glance over, I see Aleksandr's arm around her shoulders, keeping her steady while she cries happy tears.

Dimitri leans down, brushing his mouth against my ear. "You're mine now."

I smile at him, this dangerous, complicated, beautiful man who somehow became my everything. "I always was."

"Now what?" I whisper as we turn to face our guests.

"Now we celebrate," he says.

Hand in hand, we walk back down the aisle together, past smiling faces and thrown rose petals, past the fountain where the floating roses shine in the afternoon light, and past the cypress trees whose lights twinkle like stars when darkness falls.

We are married. And for the first time, I'm not afraid of tomorrow. I'm looking forward to it.

Dimitri pulls me aside as we reach the edge of the garden, where the reception will soon begin. The sounds of celebration continue behind us, but it is just us in the shade of an old oak tree.

"Any regrets?" he asks, although his tone suggests he already knows the answer.

I look back at the scene we just left. Talia is organizing the children for photos, Aleksandr directs the staff who are already setting up for dinner, and Lev smiles as he talks to some other guests. Our family is chosen, claimed, and fought for.

Then I look up at my husband— my husband —and feel my heart fluttering, just as it has been doing since the day I met him.

"None," I smile. "Not a single one."

He kisses me again then, slower this time, deeper, with a promise that makes my knees weak and my pulse race. When we break apart, I rest my forehead against his.

"I love you, Mrs. Popov," he purrs.

Mrs. Popov . The name will take some getting used to but hearing it from his lips makes it sound like the most beautiful word in any language.

"I love you too, Mr. Popov."

As we walk toward our reception, toward the first night of the rest of our lives, I realize that I am someone new. Someone who belongs, who is loved, and who is brave enough to stay.

The blackbird on my wrist will always remind me where I came from. But the ring on my finger will remind me where I belong. With him. With this family. With this love that is strong enough to build a future on.

Forever.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 10:08 am

SANDY

The gardens of the Avilov estate bloom with color and laughter.

A soft breeze blows through the white chiffon canopies strung between trees heavy with spring blossoms. A delicate string quartet plays beneath a shaded trellis, and little pink butterflies, some real, some sewn into the lace of decorations, dance on the breeze.

It is a celebration straight out of a fairy tale.

Angelina Avilov is turning three.

The transformation of the grounds is even more breathtaking than last year's celebration.

Long tables are draped in shimmering ivory silk stretched across the manicured lawn, each adorned with towering arrangements of white peonies, soft pink roses, and cascading baby's breath.

Crystal candelabras glimmer in the afternoon sunlight, sending prismatic rainbows across the perfectly set china.

Delicate place cards are marked with gold calligraphy on each seat.

Small gift boxes wrapped in lavender ribbon hold miniature music boxes shaped like spinning ballerinas, perfect for every setting.

The centerpiece is a carousel that has been specially installed for the occasion.

It is a vintage piece featuring hand-painted horses and golden poles that gleam in the dappled sunshine filtering through the ancient oak trees.

The carousel's melodic tune and the live quartet create a symphony of joy that makes the air sparkle.

Angelina stands proudly in the center of the courtyard in a sparkling lilac dress, her chocolate curls pinned into a bun, a crown of tiny roses resting on her head.

The dress is a masterpiece of tulle and silk, with hand-sewn pearls that dance with light with every movement.

Tiny butterfly wings are attached to her back, shimmering with iridescent thread that makes her look like she stepped out of a storybook.

Talia crouches beside her, helping her unwrap one of the gifts.

At the same time, Aleksandr stands nearby, a soft smile tugging at his mouth that few people ever see.

"Look, Mama!" Angelina exclaims, holding up a wooden jewelry box that plays a tinkling lullaby when it opens. "It's like the one in my room!"

Talia's face glows with maternal pride. "It's beautiful, sweetheart. Who is it from?"

Angelina smiles, "Uncle Dima!"

My heart warms as my husband's name tumbles from her lips.

Over the past year, watching him with the children has been a revelation.

The man who could dismantle enemies without blinking has infinite patience for bedtime stories and tea parties.

He softened around the edges, not in his strength or resolve but in how he moves through the world when children are present.

I lean back in my chair under an ivory parasol, gently rocking my son in my arms. Mikhail...our Mikhail.

He is nine months old now, his chubby fist curled tightly around the silver chain Dimitri wears with his Bratva crest. The pendant is warm from resting against Dimitri's chest, and our son seems fascinated by its weight and shine.

Like his father's, his coffee-colored eyes track the light bouncing off the silver surface. My husband doesn't seem to mind the tugging, not when it comes from his son.

He sits beside me, one arm stretched behind my chair, the other lazily tracing his finger down Mikhail's spine through the soft cotton of his onesie.

Our baby gives a sleepy sigh and nestles deeper into my chest.

Mikhail has his father's strong jaw and determined chin, but he inherited my softer features, the curve of his nose, and the shape of his lips. When he smiles, he often lights up the entire room.

Dimitri kisses my temple without saying a word, and I breathe in his familiar scent. His lips linger against my skin, and I feel him smile when Mikhail gurgles contentedly between us.

“What are you thinking about?” I ask softly, adjusting the baby's tiny cap to shield his face from the dappled sunlight.

“How different everything looks from this side,” he replies, his voice low enough that only I can hear. “How much brighter.”

I understand. The Avilov estate has always been impressive, but seeing it through the lens of our own family gives it an entirely different meaning.

Across the courtyard, Maxim runs by in a tuxedo T-shirt and grass-stained knees, sword-fighting an invisible enemy with a stick.

His dark hair is mussed from playing, but his smile is wide and carefree.

At ten years old, he is growing into himself.

He is still the serious, protective boy we know, but with more laughter in his eyes these days.

Sasha trails behind, holding her lace skirt with one hand and waving a wand with the other, trying to turn her brother into a frog.

Her golden curls bounce with each determined wave of her makeshift wand, and her green eyes sparkle with mischief.

“Ribbit!” Maxim plays along, hopping dramatically before collapsing onto the grass in giggles. Sasha squeals with delight, declaring her magic successful.

They are safe. Happy and thriving.

“Aunt Sandy!” Sasha runs over to us, slightly out of breath and beaming. “Look what

Papa gave me!”

She holds up a small wooden sword, beautifully crafted and sized perfectly for her small hands. “It's for when I'm a knight!”

Dimitri chuckles, a sound that still surprises me with its warmth. “And what will you do as a knight, printsessa ?”

“Protect everyone!” she declares with absolute certainty. “Just like you and Papa!”

The simple declaration hits me square in the chest. In her innocent way, Sasha has perfectly captured what our men do. Not just the violence, or the power games, but the protection and the willingness to stand between their families and harm, no matter the cost.

“That's a very important job,” I tell her seriously. “The best knights are brave, smart, and kind.”

She nods sagely, then notices Mikhail in my arms. “Can I touch his hand?”

“Of course, sweetheart.”

Sasha approaches carefully, extending one finger to brush against Mikhail's tiny palm. Our son's fist immediately closes around her finger, and her face transforms with wonder.

“He's so strong!” she whispers.

“All Avilov and Popov children are strong,” Dimitri states, playfully squeezing her arm muscle.

“Malyshka,” Dimitri murmurs, his lips close to my ear, “You’re quiet.”

“I’m just watching.” I look at him, meeting those coffee-colored eyes that have become my anchor through everything. “So much has happened. Sometimes it still doesn’t feel real.”

And it’s true. Sometimes, I have to actively remind myself that this isn’t a dream I’ll wake up from. That the man beside me is my husband, that the baby in my arms is our son, and that the threats hanging over us have been eliminated one by one until peace was possible.

The journey to this moment was written in blood and tears.

The fear of losing Talia to Vic or Danny, the agony of Dimitri’s imprisonment, and the final confrontation with Morozov left permanent scars on my neck and deeper ones on my soul.

Each challenge had felt insurmountable, but here we are, surviving and thriving.

Dimitri glances around at the estate, the party, and the people who fill the long tables, never realizing how much blood it took to create this type of peace.

His jaw tightens almost imperceptibly, and I know he is remembering the same things I am.

The late-night meetings, the difficult decisions, the prices paid to secure this tranquility.

“It’s real,” he says, then looks down at our son. His expression softens completely, and that transformation still takes my breath away. “This is ours. No one takes it from us.”

The quiet steel in his voice is absolute. This isn't hope or a wish. It is a declaration. A promise. And knowing Dimitri as I do, knowing what he is capable of, I believe him completely.

I reach for his hand, threading our fingers together. "Do you remember what you told me the first night we spent together?" I ask quietly, careful not to wake Mikhail.

Dimitri's thumb traces across my knuckles. "Which part? I said many things that night."

I smile, feeling heat climb my cheeks despite everything we've been through together. "You said you'd never let anyone hurt me."

"I meant it."

"I know. But I was thinking about something else you said." I pause, gathering my thoughts. "You said you never had anything worth fighting for before. Just things worth dying for."

His grip on my hand tightens. "I remember."

"This," I gesture around us with my free hand, "is worth fighting for. Living for."

For a moment, Dimitri doesn't speak. He watches Angelina across the courtyard, spinning in circles with her arms outstretched, making her butterfly wings catch the light.

He watches Maxim and Sasha playing knights and princesses under the ancient oak tree.

He looks down at our son, sleeping peacefully despite the music and laughter around

us.

“Yes,” he says finally, his voice rough with emotion. “It is.”

The string quartet transitions into a softer melody, and I recognize the piece. It is the same song that played at our wedding. Talia had cried happy tears, Aleksandr had given a surprisingly emotional toast, and the children had thrown flower petals with more enthusiasm than accuracy.

But the moment I remember most clearly is when the officiant asked Dimitri to speak his vows. He set aside the paper he'd prepared and looked into my eyes with an intensity that made my knees weak.

“Sandy,” he said, his accent thick with emotion, “you taught me that there is something stronger than fear, more powerful than revenge. You taught me love. And I promise you, on my life, my honor, and everything I am that I will spend the rest of my days proving worthy of the gift you've given me.”

There wasn't a dry eye in the garden that day.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 10:08 am

Now, sitting here with our son and watching our family celebrate, I feel the same overwhelming sense of completeness that filled me during our wedding ceremony. We built something beautiful from the ashes of violence and trauma.

A commotion near the cake table caught my attention. Angelina apparently decided that the three-tiered masterpiece needed her personal inspection. She stands on her tiptoes, reaching toward a sugar butterfly perched on the edge of the second tier

“Careful, printsessa ,” Aleksandr warns, scooping her up before she can topple the entire creation. She giggles as he lifts her to eye level with the butterfly.

“It's pretty like Mama's dress,” she observes solemnly.

Talia looks radiant in a flowing lavender gown that perfectly complements her daughter's outfit. She let her hair fall in soft waves around her shoulders, and motherhood has given her a glow that makes her even more beautiful.

It is still hard to believe sometimes that we both found our way to this life.

Two girls who had nothing, who clung to each other through the worst the foster system had to offer, now surrounded by luxury and love and safety.

We each found our place in the Avilov family.

But, more importantly, we found partners who understood that our bond is unbreakable.

“Sis, can you help me with something?”

I look up to find Talia approaching, a knowing smile on her face.

“Of course. What do you need?”

“Would you mind holding Mikhail for a moment, Dimitri?” Talia asks sweetly. “I need to borrow your wife.”

Dimitri raises an eyebrow but carefully takes our son from my arms. Mikhail stirs slightly but settles immediately against his father's chest. The sight of them together, my dangerous, powerful husband cradling our tiny son with such gentleness, never fails to make my heart skip.

Talia links her arm through mine and guides me toward the house. “How are you feeling? Really?”

“Happy,” I say without hesitation. “Tired, but happy. Why?”

She glances around to make sure we aren't overheard. “You've been looking a little pale lately. And I noticed you barely touched your champagne earlier.”

I stop walking. “What are you getting at?”

She turns to face me fully, her expression a blend of excitement and concern. “When was your last period?”

The question hits me like a lightning bolt. I open my mouth to answer, then close it as I think about it. When was my last period? Between caring for Mikhail, adjusting to life with Dimitri, and the general chaos of our daily routine, I stopped paying attention to such details.

“I’m not sure,” I admit. “Maybe six weeks ago? Seven?”

Talia's smile grows wider. “Sis, I think you might be pregnant again.”

The world seems to tilt slightly. Pregnant? So soon after Mikhail? We haven’t been trying, but we certainly haven’t prevented anything from happening. We’ve been focused on each other and our family.

“I could be wrong,” Talia continues quickly, seeing my shocked expression. “But you have that look. The same one you had when you were carrying Mikhail.”

I press a hand to my stomach, trying to imagine another life growing there. Another baby. Another child with Dimitri's eyes and my stubborn streak, or my nose and his determination.

“I should probably take a test,” I say weakly.

“I may have picked one up yesterday,” Talia says, smiling from ear to ear. “Just in case. It's upstairs in my bathroom.”

The next twenty minutes feel like 20 hours. The test. The waiting. The deep breathing while Talia paces in front of me. And then...two pink lines.

“Oh my God,” I whisper, staring at the plastic stick in my trembling hands. “Oh my God, Talia.”

“I knew it!” She exclaims, throwing her arms around me, careful not to squeeze too tight. “You're having another baby!”

The news is overwhelming, thrilling, yet terrifying. We’ll have another child to love, worry about, and raise in this complicated world we chose. But as the initial shock fades, excitement begins to bloom in my chest.

“I have to tell Dimitri,” I state, imagining his reaction. Will he be surprised? Happy? Worried about having two babies so close in age?

“You don't have to tell him right this second,” Talia says gently. “Take some time to process it yourself first.”

But I shake my head. Dimitri and I promised each other complete honesty after everything we've been through. No secrets, no matter how well-intentioned.

“No, I want to tell him. Today. Here, with everyone celebrating.” I look out the window at the party, which is still in full swing below. “It feels right.”

We return to the garden, and I feel like I'm walking on clouds. Everything looks different now, brighter, more vivid, and full of possibilities I didn't consider an hour ago.

Dimitri is exactly where I left him, with Mikhail and Angelina nearby.

Our son is awake and content in his father's arms. At the same time, Angelina convinced her “Uncle Dima” to wear one of her flower crowns.

The sight of my intimidating husband with a ring of pink roses on his head, completely unbothered by the feminine accessory, makes me fall in love with him all over again.

“There you are,” he purrs as I approach. “Angelina was just telling me about her plans to teach Mikhail to dance.”

“First he has to learn to walk,” the three-year-old says seriously. “Then dancing. Then we can be partners for the princess ball.”

“Of course,” Dimitri agrees solemnly.

I sit down beside him, my heart racing with the secret I carry. How do you tell your husband you're pregnant? Especially when your first baby is still so young?

"Dimitri," I start, then falter. The words feel too big for my mouth.

He immediately focuses on me, those perceptive eyes taking in every detail of my expression. "What is it? Are you feeling alright?"

"I'm fine. Better than fine, actually." I take a deep breath. "I need to tell you something."

Angelina chooses this moment to lose interest in our conversation and skip off to find her parents. Mikhail gurgles softly in Dimitri's arms as if sensing the moment's importance.

"Malyshka, you're making me nervous," Dimitri says quietly. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong. At least, I don't think anything's wrong. I hope nothing's wrong." I'm rambling. I force myself to stop and meet his eyes. "Dimitri, I'm pregnant."

He goes completely still. Not just quiet, but still. Like time has frozen around him. His dark eyes search my face as if looking for signs that I'm joking, or he misheard me.

"Pregnant," he repeats slowly. "Again."

"Again," I confirm, my voice low.

I watch as the news sinks in. I see the moment it truly hits him. His free hand comes up to cup my face, his thumb brushing my cheek with infinite tenderness.

"Are you happy about this?"

The question is so purely him, not assuming my feelings, but asking, making sure I'm okay with whatever comes next.

“Yes,” I reply, and saying it out loud makes it even more real. “Yes, I'm happy. Are you?”

Instead of answering with words, he leans forward and kisses me. Soft, sweet, full of wonder, and promises for the future. When we break apart, I see tears in his eyes, which makes my eyes water.

“Two babies,” he whispers, looking down at Mikhail, then back at me. “Two children.”

“I know it's soon, and it might be crazy with Mikhail still so little?—”

“It's perfect,” he interrupts firmly. “You're perfect. This is perfect.”

The certainty in his voice steadies something inside me that I didn't even realize was shaking.

Of course, he's happy. This is Dimitri, the man who fought for our love, who went to prison to protect it, who built us a new life from the ground up.

More love and reasons to fight, live, and hope. That is exactly what he wants.

“Should we tell them?” I gesture toward our family scattered across the garden. “Today?”

“Only if you want to,” he remarks. “This is yours to share when you're ready.”

I look around at the celebration, the joy and laughter filling the air. The timing feels symbolic, announcing new life at a birthday party, in the gardens where we were

married, surrounded by everyone we love.

“I want to,” I decide. “Not now, but maybe after the cake? It feels like the right moment.”

Dimitri nods, then shifts Mikhail to one arm so he can pull me closer with the other. “Our children will grow up together,” he muses. “Brothers close in age. They’ll be each other’s closest allies.”

“Or worst enemies,” I tease. “You’ve met siblings before, right?”

“They’ll protect each other,” he states with absolute confidence. “Just like you and Talia.”

The comparison makes my heart full. The idea that our children might share the kind of bond Talia and I have, unbreakable, unconditional, and fierce in loyalty, is more than I can ever hope for.

Aleksandr stands to make a toast, lifting a crystal flute. His presence effortlessly commands attention, and conversations quiet as all eyes turn toward him.

“To my daughter,” he begins, his accented voice carrying clearly across the garden. “Three years ago, you came into our lives and reminded us what we were fighting for. Not power or territory, but family. Love. The future we want to build for those who matter most.”

Angelina beams up at her father from her perch on Talia’s lap, not understanding all the words but recognizing that she is the center of attention.

“To my family, my wife, my children, my brothers, and the women brave enough to love us despite knowing exactly who we are,” Aleksandr continues, his gaze finding each of us in turn. “And to the future we fight to protect.”

The crowd raises their glasses. Dimitri lifts his without letting go of me, managing the gesture one-handed with the skill of someone accustomed to adapting to challenging situations.

I raise mine as well, thinking about the new life already beginning inside me, the future expanding even as we celebrate.

“To family!” someone calls out.

“ K sem'ye !” echoes from several voices.

As we drink, I feel Dimitri's hand find mine again, his fingers intertwining with mine in a grip of permanence and promise. The war is over for now. But more than that, we found something worth far more than victory. We found a home and love. Our love survived it all.

Later, after the cake is cut and the gifts are opened, Angelina falls asleep against her father's chest. Maxim and Sasha are reluctantly convinced to come inside.

That's when we make our announcement. The joy and excitement from our family is overwhelming.

Talia cries happy tears again, Aleksandr embraces Dimitri with genuine warmth, and the children are already making plans for the baby, who won't arrive for months.

Now, as the evening settles into twilight and the last guests depart, Dimitri and I walk through the gardens with Mikhail sleeping peacefully in his stroller.

The fairy lights strung through the trees create a magical ambiance, and the air still holds the faint scent of the flowers that decorated the tables.

“Do you think we're crazy?” I ask, one hand resting on the handle of the stroller, the

other on my still-flat stomach. “Two babies, this life, all of it?”

Dimitri stops walking and turns to face me fully. In the soft glow of the lights, he looks younger somehow, more at peace than I've ever seen him.

“Malyshka,” he says, using the endearment inscribed in my wedding ring, “if this is crazy, then I never want to be sane.”

He cups my face in his hands, his thumbs tracing the lines of my cheekbones. “You gave me everything I never knew I wanted. A family. A home. A reason to be better than I was.”

“You did the same for me,” I whisper. “I was lost before you. I didn't even know what I was looking for.”

The kiss that follows is soft and deep and full of promises for all the tomorrows we have together. When we finally pull apart, Mikhail stirs slightly in his stroller, making soft sleeping sounds that remind us we aren't alone.

“Come,” Dimitri says, taking my hand. “Let's go home.”

Home. The place where we'll raise our children, where we'll grow old together, where love triumphed over everything that tried to destroy it.

As we walk back toward the house, I think about the journey that brought us here. The fighting is done. And what remains is love, family, and the beautiful future we're building together, one day at a time.

Inside the house, we can hear the family settling in for the night. Aleksandr's low voice is reading a bedtime story, Talia hums while organizing Angelina's gifts, and the distant sound of children's laughter echoes through the halls.

This is our world now. Messy, complicated, real, and absolutely perfect in its imperfection. And I can't wait to see what tomorrow will bring.