



The Bratva's Forbidden Pregnancy (Wolkov Bratva #4)

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Category: Suspense Thriller

Description: I had a forbidden one-night stand with my father's best friend, a Bratva King.

Since the first moment I met him our age gap didn't diminish the attraction.

Vladimir Wolkov is ruthless, possessive, cruel and makes me quiver with a single look.

I allowed him to seduce me, for one night, and now I'm left with a surprise pregnancy.

When I met Vlad on a visit to Russia, I didn't expect to become his obsession.

After a few coincidental meetings, I finally gave into our desires only not to hear from him again.

When I see him in a club weeks later, I take revenge by making him jealous.

I didn't expect this ruthless monster to sweep me away, to ravish me, or to claim me as his own.

Now I've been kidnapped by Vlad's enemy and discover my whole life was a lie.

The man whose child I carry in my womb, is the same man who murdered my father.

He's a monster, I hate his callous touch and his ruthless voice, and yet I succumb to him every time.

Held captive by my uncle, pregnant with the Bratva King's child, I fear my act of revenge could cost me my life.

Should I wish for the ruthless bratva monster to rescue me, or can I escape both him and my captor?

Page 1

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:51 am

I rested my head against the cool glass of the plane window, looking down at the gorgeous view of New York from my first-class seat. The Hudson River snaked its way through the city like a silver ribbon, and skyscrapers draped in the golden glow of the sun had their peaks shrouded in mist. It was a view that never got old.

I loved the city—maybe because my life was rooted there and it had been my home since I was a child—so I wasn't particularly excited to be leaving it.

Regardless of my preference, my father woke up one morning with the idea to pack up and leave for a holiday in St. Petersburg so we could get familiar with his family.

It hadn't gone down well with me when he said it, but then again, he didn't exactly ask for my permission. His precise words were, "We're going to St. Petersburg to spend Christmas with my family."

Nothing in that statement suggested he cared about my opinion—or anyone else's, for that matter. I would have argued with him, but I'd learned over the years that it was pointless. I would never win.

Dad was a successful lawyer, a really good one—one of the best in New York City and maybe even beyond. His reputation preceded him.

I was just a college girl: an arts student with a passion for interior design and an obsession with impressionist art. So, there was no way in hell that my twenty-one-year-old brain would beat such a man.

Believe me, I'd tried so many times, and so many times, I failed. Even Mom rarely

argued with him. Sometimes, she'd just make her point about stuff and be mad at him when he decided to play smart and provide excuses for virtually everything he did wrong.

My dad had a perfect court record of never losing a case. How was I supposed to beat that?

Dad was part Russian from his mother's side, and now we were headed to St. Petersburg to meet my Babushka and other relatives. It sucked a lot because I was forced to leave my life so I could get acquainted with folks I'd never met before.

He really fancied this idea. Me, not so much. I had my own plans on how to spend my winter break, but all of that was thrown out the window now, and I'd be stuck with Dad's mother and the rest of his family all through the break. I couldn't imagine anything more terrifying or more boring than that.

It's official; I was about to have the worst time of my life.

Don't get me wrong; I had nothing against my relatives. It's just that the thought of being around

people that I hadn't met before was quite exhausting. Plus, I was trading in New York's mild winter weather for a snow-filled wonderland in Russia.

Great! Just great!

I picked up a glass of champagne from the table in front of me and took a sip, crossing my legs as I relaxed in the plush chair, the glass cradled in my hand like a precious gem. At least this tasted better than my life at the moment.

Dad's voice caught my attention as he asked my mom what she thought was the

healthiest option on the menu a flight attendant had offered him. She leaned forward, and together, they weighed their choices on which dish to select with totally bored looks on their faces—lips thin and eyes dull.

I could tell that the attendant, a beautiful tall brunette with hazel brown eyes and cute dimples, was getting annoyed with my parents' pickiness.

She must be thinking , Just pick something already, goddamn it!

I let out a very subtle laugh, most likely unnoticed by anyone else.

I didn't catch what Dad said, but I heard Mom chuckling in a soft tone. The attendant was trying her best to put on an elegant smile, but I knew she was screaming inside.

Yep! Paul and Natalie Summers, my charmingly infuriating parents, usually had that effect on people. Of course, I'd know; I grew up with them. They could effortlessly piss you off and act like they'd done nothing.

"Sienna, honey!" Mom called out to me, turning in my direction. "Can you come over here to help your father, please? He seems confused." She laughed lightly.

Mom had the most amazing pair of green eyes that everyone told me I'd gotten from her, and they weren't wrong. I'd also inherited her heart-shaped face. What I hadn't inherited from her, though, was her hair color. Mom was blonde. I wasn't. I got my black hair from my dad.

"No," I replied, my voice a bit rusty from disuse. "I think you two got it covered." I squeezed out a smile.

"Oh, come on, don't be like that," she objected, wearing one of those pitiful looks of hers.

“He’s your husband, isn’t he?” I teased her. But I seriously did not wanna get involved.

“He’s your father, isn’t he?” she replied, cocking her head.

Good one, Mom .

I scoffed and shook my head, withholding my response.

The poor attendant was still towering over my parents in silence as they deliberated over the menu like it was a life-or-death decision. I pinched the bridge of my nose and rolled my eyes when their inane questions started pouring in.

“Will the chicken be organic?” Dad peered at the attendant over the rim of his glasses.

“Also, can they substitute the sauce?” Mom chipped in. “I don’t think I want it, and I’m pretty sure my husband doesn’t either....”

The attendant was about to respond when I returned my gaze outside the window and slowly drifted back to my thoughts as their chatter, with time, became indistinct.

This was really happening. I was indeed going to Russia to connect with my heritage, as Dad had said. Like I said, I didn’t approve of this trip and had concluded that nothing fun or great would come out of it. But I had to go because Dad really wanted me to.

It’s good to know your roots, to know where you come from , his voice echoed in my head, and I let out a soft sigh, gently rubbing my tired eyes. Maybe this was a good thing; if only I could see past my anger.

I'd spent most of my life in the United States, and to be honest, I was clueless about my Russian heritage—never having really cared to learn about it because I didn't feel the need to. But he was probably right; understanding my heritage was important.

Plus, a change of environment just might be good for me, like Mom had suggested earlier before we boarded the plane.

We would only be there for a couple of days, maybe weeks—God! I hope it was a couple of days. I was already missing New York City.

“Ladies and gentlemen, this is your captain speaking,” his voice cut through the air, forcing me out of my thoughts. “We'll be arriving in St. Petersburg in approximately twenty minutes. Thank you, and I hope you had a pleasant flight.”

Wait. We're here, already?

I poured myself another glass of champagne and drained it in one swift motion.

“Look alive, baby,” Dad said to me.

I turned to look at him, and he added, “We're in Russia now.” His eyes crinkled at the corners as a smile played on his lips.

I gulped and mustered a faint grin despite the dryness in my throat.

Here goes nothing.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:51 am

The winter cold was harsh tonight, and the wind was whistling in my ears as snowflakes fell like tiny razors on the seaport. It was freezing out here, but my long black fur coat kept me warm.

The headlights of the exotic cars parked behind me cast beams that illuminated the night, shining on my men as they worked, loading smuggled drugs onto the ships. I stood there in silence, overseeing the operation.

The port was bustling at this time of night when others were cozy in their homes with their families. But I was out here in the snow with my men, taking care of my business.

St. Petersburg, being a major port city in Russia, offered access to the Baltic Sea and international connections, making it an ideal location for my kind of activities: smuggling and trafficking.

I was bathed in the warm beams behind me as I scanned the environment meticulously, my eyes catching every slight movement, including those in the shadows.

I drew from the cigar stick wedged between my gloved fingers, savoring the smoke before slowly exhaling it.

“Hey, careful with that!” one of my men said, warning three others to my right, prompting my eyes to shift in their direction.

He walked over there, and I could tell he was scolding them for being reckless with

my merchandise. They looked terrified of him, and their hands were shaking.

I did see how sloppy they were while loading the ship assigned to them. Clearly, they were new recruits, and peering closely, I realized they were younger than most of the men working for me. They lacked experience from the looks of things, and that explained why they trembled when Sebastian spoke. In time, though, they would toughen up.

Sebastian, one of my loyal soldiers, was still yelling at them and demonstrating with his hands, his movements accentuating his anger. His English was rusty, so he switched to Russian, intensifying his threats.

“Gruz stoit deneg, a vasha oshibka stoit vam same. Ponimaete?” he said, meaning, “The cargo is worth money, and your mistake will cost you your life. Understand?”

In unison, they nodded, fear-stricken.

“Now, get back to work!” he hollered at them.

He left them and walked over to me.

Sebastian was huge, standing almost as tall as I was. His face was a canvas of tattoos telling stories of his past. The scar cutting across his face stood out, a testament to his loyalty to the brotherhood. He’d gotten that during a brutal clash with a rival organization, and with that single act of selflessness, he’d gained a fraction of my trust.

He halted before me in a pair of black jeans and a black turtleneck shirt that hugged his body. His gray eyes were devoid of any emotion, his head was completely bald, and his face was so rigid and covered in ink. To an average man, Sebastian looked like a demon from hell with all those rings on his face.

With a slight nod, he greeted, “ Pakhan .” Around his fingers, he rolled an unsheathed dagger with dangerous precision. He’d always been good with knives, and whenever he hurled it, he never missed.

“How long until we get these to New York?” I asked, my voice low and even.

“Seven, maybe ten hours,” he replied, his thick, raucous tone laced with the Russian accent, “depending on the weather.”

“Good.” I nodded, taking another drag on my cigar.

Being a member of the New York Russian Bratva, I could have been working in the United States, but I preferred to operate from my home country, where I’d spent most of my life. My cultural heritage meant a great deal to me, which was why I loved to operate from here. It was the connection to my roots that I cherished deeply. Plus, I wasn’t exactly fond of the Americans.

I heard a car pull over behind me, and soon, the engine died down. The door unlocked, and someone stepped out of the vehicle, slamming it shut. I turned to the newcomer as he walked up to me.

It was Simon Olegov, the only man I completely trusted in this business. He was my most loyal soldier, and he’d been working for me since he was eighteen.

It’s been that long, eh? Two fucking decades of unwavering loyalty .

The man had my respect.

Trust was a strong word to throw around in this business, given the nature of our work. But Simon was my right-hand man, and I trusted him with my life. It had taken a long time to let him in, though—to fully trust him, and for good reason—but

eventually, I learned to do so. Besides, he worked so hard to earn it. A few years ago, he took a bullet for me; it wasn't the first time he'd done that, but this recent act was different because the bullet had missed his heart by an inch. He was more than willing to die for me.

As he stopped in front of me, his black buzz cut shimmered in the overhead lights, and the tattoos on his neck were visible through the collar of his black shirt. Simon was a sucker for tats, and almost his entire body was covered in ink. He was so close to me, and one might say I considered him my best friend. Simon was the only one who truly knew me inside and out.

He wasn't so tall, nor was he heavily built like Sebastian, but the man was just as dangerous, maybe even worse than Sebastian. Once, I'd watched him kill five guys three times bigger than him in less than sixty seconds with nothing but a broken table leg he'd used as a makeshift weapon. In hand-to-hand combat, Simon always used his average size to his advantage; he was fast and strategic in his thinking.

"Pakhan, there's something I want you to see," he said, flashing me a cocky grin with his eyes crinkling at the corners. Simon set the pace, leading me to the rear of his car. "Trust me, you're gonna love this." He chuckled, popping the trunk open.

I was certain that I would. Whenever Simon came to me like this, whatever he had was always something worth my time.

I looked into the trunk, and there was a man tied—hands and feet—with his mouth taped, but as he saw me, he almost lost it, immediately turning into a crackhead. He was struggling, his speech muffled, but that didn't stop him. His eyes were wide with fear, and his breathing was heavy.

Peering closely, I realized who the man was, and in that instant, I frowned. It was Denis.

I saw in his eyes that he knew I was pissed, and that alone had him squirming in the trunk.

Simon shot a glance at me, awaiting my instructions.

“Get him out,” I said.

Without hesitation, Simon hurled him up with a rough jerk and slammed him to the snow-covered ground.

Denis was a member of the Wolkov Bratva who had committed a grievous offense; he’d killed another member of the brotherhood. It was an act of betrayal.

I stepped forward as Denis continued to struggle with the zip ties that had him bound. He was trying to speak, to plead, but his lips were still sealed.

Simon whistled, catching the attention of the other men, and soon, they gathered to watch.

I pulled out my gun and aimed at Denis’ head while his hands were thrown up in front of him in fear.

“Let this be a lesson to every one of you,” I said to my men, and within the next second, I squeezed the trigger.

Denis’ head fell back with a hole in it, his blood splattering on the snow.

The barrel of my gun was still smoking when I lowered my hand and looked at the faces of my men, their breaths visible in the chill air. “This is the Wolkov Bratva. Here, we are our brothers’ keepers. We are a brotherhood, and as such, no one is allowed to kill anyone,” I began, my voice steady but authoritative. “The only enemy

is he who is against us. That is one of the rules. Break it, and I can assure you that you will meet a fate far worse than this man's."

A heavy silence fell amongst the men as they exchanged hidden glances, but I knew they'd gotten the message loud and clear.

"Clean this up," I said to Simon, dragging on my cigar.

He nodded and signaled to a couple of men while I walked back to my car. Around me, the others returned to loading the ship, keeping their eyes downcast as my boots crunched through the snow.

Soon, not even Denis' blood would remain. The man would vanish without a trace, just as he deserved.

Page 3

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Is it always this cold in Russia? I wondered, gritting my teeth so they'd stop gnashing.

Even with my thick coat on, I could still feel the harshness of the winter cold seeping into my bones. The car windows were wound up, and I was seated in the backseat, eyes fixed on the snow-covered horizon as I pulled up the collar of my coat to shield my neck from the chills.

Dad stole a glance at me from the driver's seat. Our eyes met in the rearview mirror, and I saw the smile playing on his lips.

He thought it was funny, watching me shiver. Classic! My brows furrowed, but I remained silent, too numb to speak. The cold was seriously doing a number on me.

"You okay back there?" he asked, gently steering the car down a slope.

I managed to nod.

Mom turned around from the front passenger seat and looked at me. "You big baby," she teased. "You'll be fine."

I exhaled sharply, and I could almost imagine my breath misting in the air like a wispy cloud.

Russia wasn't bad at all, except for the biting cold that seemed to pierce through my bones, threatening to inflict me with pneumonia or hypothermia.

It was a beautiful place, much better than I had expected. The frosty landscape, dotted with snow-covered trees and ancient architecture, was fascinating.

A hearty chuckle escaped my lips as I spotted a snowman that looked exactly like Olaf, the adorable cartoon character from Frozen. Its charcoal eyes and carrot nose were placed with perfection, and its rounded body was incredibly accurate. It was as if Olaf had somehow sprung to life in this part of St. Petersburg.

I smiled, admiring the skills of whoever had molded that figure. I was impressed.

“We’re here,” Dad said as he turned into the driveway, bringing the car to a stop beside a wooden fence.

He killed the engine, and we all stepped out of the vehicle. The neighborhood was calm and quiet yet also beautiful with its serene atmosphere.

I immediately buried my gloved hands into my coat pockets as the wind whistled in my ears, forcing me to squint against the icy blast that seemed to target my eyes.

Mom and I rushed to the front door while Dad was busy with the luggage, and I tightened my shoulders against the chill, anticipating the warmth inside the house.

“A little help here, please,” he said, shutting the trunk of the car.

I was already taking cover by the porch, and there was no way in hell I would be going back out there.

Mom, being the loving wife that she was, rushed back to help.

Aww. How adorable!

That was sarcastic, by the way.

The door squeaked open, and I turned in its direction.

A beautiful girl was standing at the entrance. She was tall and lanky, with an amazing pair of blue eyes. Her hair was dyed purple, which complemented the color of her coat.

She smiled at me and gestured back into the house. “They’re here!” she announced and walked up to me. “Hi, I’m Sasha.” She hugged me.

Her embrace caught me off guard, but damn, she was so warm, and I needed that.

“Hi, Sasha, I’m—”

“Sienna.” She let go, grinning widely. “I know who you are.”

Sadly, I couldn’t say the same; she was a total stranger to me.

“Finally, they come home,” a masculine voice spoke, and I jerked my head at the young man approaching from inside.

The warmth that seeped out as he opened that door was so comforting, and I couldn’t wait to get inside.

These people didn’t know that I was freezing out here. Could they not see that?

“Isn’t she more beautiful in person?” Sasha asked him as he stood beside her, his height making her look small. She was taller than me— way taller than me. Now imagine how I looked before him.

Yep. I was like a freaking grasshopper. But that wasn't my concern at the moment. What the hell did Sasha mean?

"In person?" The words came out reflexively, mirroring my shock.

"Yes, your dad sent pictures," she replied, giggling. "He wanted us to have an image of you in our minds before you arrived."

"Oh. Did he now?" I asked through gritted teeth, feeling a little upset.

He should have asked my permission before sending my pictures to people I didn't know. Was I right to feel this way? Anyway, moving on.

"Dmitry, Sasha," my dad called as he climbed up the steps with the luggage in his hand.

"Uncle," Dmitry left us to help my dad, and Sasha soon followed to help my mom.

In case you're wondering, Dmitry was the super tall guy. Just thought that I should get that clarified.

I watched them exchange pleasantries with genuine smiles on their faces, so genuine that I didn't realize I was smiling as well.

"Sienna, you've met your cousins?" Dad asked.

I nodded, itching to get inside. They might be used to the Russian cold, but I wasn't, and it sucked that they couldn't see that I was fucking freezing out here.

"Don't be shy. We're family." Sasha wrapped her hand around mine, leading the way into the house.

I wasn't shy; I was just busy masking the cold that sent shivers down my spine—literally.

It was cozy inside, warm and safe from the winter chill. The interior decor reflected the Christmas season, and it was beautiful. Simple but classy.

I let out a sigh, enjoying the warmth that filled the air. Finally, some heat.

“Grandma, they're here!” Sasha announced, tossing herself onto a couch.

My cousins spoke English more fluently than I would've thought, although they still had the accent. But I found it rather interesting.

“Ahh. There they are.”

I looked at the woman walking up to us—my babushka.

She was still gorgeous for an old woman; her gray hair was piled up high on her head, and her eyes shimmered behind her glasses. There were wrinkles on her face, and her back was slightly hunched.

“Sienna, moya lyubov ! It's so nice to finally meet you.” Her voice was a bit shaky from old age, but she sounded just fine to me.

Dad leaned forward and whispered in my ear, “She just called you her love.”

“Babushka.” I smiled as she embraced me so tightly, her perfume flooding my senses.

“Look at you!” she said, her eyes darting across my body in wonder. “So beautiful!”

For some reason, my cheeks flushed, and I found myself blushing at her remark.

“Last time I saw you, you were a baby,” she added emphatically.

I heard her say something else in Russian, and although I didn’t understand it, I recognized flattery when I heard it.

Dad cleared his throat to get her attention. “What about me? I’ve been standing here all this while.”

“Jealous much?” she teased and turned to him.

“Mama,” he called softly with wide open arms, and she slipped into them. “Oh, I didn’t realize how much I’d missed you.”

“You miss me, but you never come home!” She struck his arm with a playful punch.

“Look who finally decided to visit,” a feminine voice joined in.

“Natasha!” Dad said, smiling at the slender, hot woman approaching him.

“It’s good to see you, brother,” she replied. “You too, Natalie.” She hugged Mom and then fixed her gaze on me.

“Sienna, this is your aunt, Natasha, my sister,” Dad introduced us.

“Older sister,” she emphasized. “The one in charge of taking care of dear old mom.”

“That part was highly unnecessary,” Babushka chipped in. “Besides, I can still take care of myself.”

“Nice to meet you, Aunt...” I said amidst chuckles.

“Oh, come on—quit the formalities. I’m not that old. Please, call me Natasha,” she said. “And my God! You’re gorgeous!”

I blushed again. Twice now. Did flattery run in this family?

“Indeed.” I heard another voice, a thick one this time. “Paul just decided to keep her from us,” a man, almost as old as my dad, said, walking down the steps.

Mom leaned in and whispered to me, “That’s your Uncle Ivan.”

He did look like Dad, only a little bigger. The two greeted, and he faced my mom, dramatically kissing the back of her palm with a slight bow.

Then, he turned to me. “Welcome, Sienna.”

“Thank you,” I replied.

Uncle Ivan looked like someone who would have been a boxer a couple of years ago. He had the same build and stance. Maybe I’d ask Mom later what career choice he’d made in his life.

Aunt Natasha, on the other hand, was too sexy to be Dad’s older sister. If she hadn’t been a model when she was my age, then it would’ve been a waste of that gorgeous body.

“It’s your first time in Russia, eh? What do you think of the place?” Dmitry asked me.

“Hey, let her settle down first. Questions can come later!” Babushka warned him, her voice stern.

“But—” he started, trying to object.

“No buts . She’s tired and exhausted. Aren’t you, honey?”

“Yes, I am,” I replied. And indeed, I was.

“Come on. I’ll show you to your room.” Sasha sprang to her feet and grabbed my hand. “Trust me, you’ll love it. I cleaned it up myself.” She dragged me up the stairs.

“Careful, I don’t want her hurting herself,” Babushka said to Sasha.

“Mama, she’s not a child, you know,” Dad said, his tone low and soft.

“She is to me. You all are,” she replied.

“Oh, here we go again!” Uncle Ivan grumbled aloud.

Babushka switched to Russian, her voice rising and falling as she spoke quickly, demonstrating with her hands. I couldn’t understand a thing she was saying, but she sure seemed determined to make her point, and it was really funny.

The belly laughs of the entire family bonding in the living room prompted a smile on my lips as I went up the stairs with my cousin. I was wrong to think this would be the most boring winter break ever. It wasn’t. In fact, I knew that instant that my stay would be fun and blissful.

“So, what do you think?” Sasha asked as we stepped into the neatly arranged room, which had a banner hanging over the bed posts.

Welcome, Sienna was the content written boldly on the banner. It was cute but weird.

“Too much right?” She followed my gaze to the banner. “I knew it.” She rushed over and yanked it down. “Sorry, it looked cool when I was hanging it, I promise.”

I laughed. “It’s okay, Sasha.”

The interior decor was elegant and cozy, and the room itself seemed very comfortable—especially the neatly made bed.

“This is amazing, Sasha.” I admired the space. “It feels like home.”

“That was the point.” She smiled. “And I’m glad you feel that way.” She paused and continued, “Alright, uh...shower’s that way—and don’t worry, the heater’s working.” Sasha pointed in the direction of the bathroom. “There are some dry-cleaned clothes in the closet. I hope they’re your size.”

Did she think I wouldn’t come around with my own clothes? Anyway, that was quite thoughtful of her.

“Every other thing you need is in the appropriate place. All you have to do is check,” she said.

“Thank you, Sasha.”

She flashed a wide grin. “You’re welcome. I’ll leave you to yourself now. We’ll all be downstairs.”

With that, she left the room and shut the door behind her.

I sat on the comfy mattress and exhaled sharply, unable to hide my grin. It was official; my stay here would be quite memorable.

I got up and settled in properly, then changed into something more casual—a winter combo, though. I couldn't risk the cold.

A couple of minutes later, I ran downstairs to continue with the fun. While my cousins were setting up the Christmas tree and arguing about something I couldn't follow, I sat with my grandmother.

“Pay no attention to them,” she said to me. “They never agree on anything.”

I chuckled and took my eyes off Dmitry and Sasha. Dad was sitting on a sofa close to the front door while Mom and Aunt Natasha were in the kitchen making a local dish, the aroma of which had filled the air. Uncle Ivan was taking a nap on a couch next to Dad, who seemed engrossed in the book he was reading.

The wood in the fireplace crackled and spat out embers as Babushka and I sat on the plush sofa beside it. The flames cast a soft glow in the room, radiating warmth through my chilled bones. I needed the heat anyway.

I was going through the family photo album, flipping through the pages and feeding my eyes with the black and white images of unfamiliar faces. On every page, Babushka would take some time to explain the events that happened the day the photo was taken and the events that led to it. She'd point at each person in the photo and tell me about them—where they were now and what had become of them.

It was fun listening to her stories and learning about my dad's family, my roots.

From what I could tell, growing up hadn't exactly been bad for my father; in fact, the man had lived a fun-filled life before I was born. One of the photos in the album was a picture of Dad and Mom from way before I was born. They looked so young and naive but clearly in love, judging by the dopey smiles on their faces and the way Dad was tenderly holding Mom's waist from behind.

“They’d just graduated high school,” Babushka said, her eyes flicking toward me.

“They’ve been in love since high school?” My brows rose in surprise.

“Oh, dear, your parents have been in love long before high school.”

“Wow!” I exclaimed softly, impressed. “I didn’t expect that at all.”

“If you ever doubt the existence of true love, take a look at your parents.” She smiled.

“Those two have endured a lot, and their love has stood the test of time. Their bond is strong and quite unbreakable.”

I stole a glance at Dad and smiled, watching as he laughed with some other family members, his fingers curled tightly around Mom’s despite sitting in separate chairs.

“Yeah...yeah, you’re right.”

I continued to shuffle through the pages until I stumbled on a photo of three young men, one of which I knew was my dad. The picture was older than most of the others, but I still recognized him.

“That’s Dad,” I said, placing a finger on the man in the middle.

“Yes,” she replied.

The other two men beside him were complete strangers to me.

“Who’s this?” I asked, pointing at one of the men.

“That?” she began, drawing the word out. She seemed hesitant, but she eventually added, “His name was Joshua.”

“Past tense noticed,” I said, turning to look at her. “What happened?”

“The poor boy was a friend of your Dad’s who, unfortunately, died young,” she muttered, shaking her head.

I frowned at her tone—how biting and cold it was.

“Oh, I’m sorry to hear that,” I said, clearing my throat.

I knew there was more to the story, but I couldn’t pry because she was already getting upset.

“That was a long time ago,” Babushka said dismissively.

“And this one?” I asked, looking at the other young man in the picture.

He was very attractive, and, above all else, his eyes caught my attention. That piercing shade of hazel-brown was so charming, seeming to gaze right through me. His dress sense was unique, as he donned an overcoat and a pair of matching pants, a hat balanced on his head.

Babushka was silent for a moment. Then, she said, “Wouldn’t you like to see a photo of your mother when she was pregnant with you?”

It was almost like Babushka had intentionally changed the subject. But why? She’d answered me when I asked her about Dad and that Joshua guy. Why didn’t she answer me now that I’d asked about this attractive young man?

Babushka flipped to the next page.

“Ahh. There it is,” she said, tapping a photo of Mom and Dad cuddled up together,

Mom's stomach protruding.

I blushed at the pure love and affection shown there. "Aww. They look so cute."

"This was taken a month before you were born."

I smiled, my gaze fixed on the photo; I couldn't possibly adore this couple who had brought me into this world more.

Just then, there was a knock on the door. Dad glanced at Babushka and me and then at Dmitry and Sasha, but we all had stuff we were doing, so he was forced to answer it himself.

I watched him grouch as he headed to the door and opened it.

That instant, I heard Babushka inhale sharply, like she was terrified. She rose to her feet, her attention focused on the door, and her brows furrowed. Her lips tightened, and the disdain on her face was glaring.

The visitor was clearly not welcome, at least not by her.

Surprised by her reaction, I turned to the door where my dad was standing face to face with one of the most handsome men I'd ever seen, though he was eyeing my dad quite sternly. The man's aura was terrifying, practically filling the room with its presence. No wonder Babushka was seething silently while looking at him.

As I gazed at this man, I couldn't help but be struck by his commanding presence, which exuded an air of confidence and power. He stood tall with an imposing frame that drew my attention like a magnet.

His dirty blond hair was perfectly styled, adding a hint of ruggedness to his chiseled

features and strong jawline.

He was dressed in a long fur coat, an impeccably tailored suit underneath. A stick of cigar was clutched between his fingers.

The two men faced off against each other, and the atmosphere was so tense that everybody was silent while watching them. They looked like two wrestlers in a ring, about to start throwing punches.

I glanced outside the window and saw multiple black cars. Then, I spotted some men in black trench coats, all heavily armed, as they circled the house.

Okay, what exactly is going on here? Who are these guys, and why's this incredibly attractive man looking like he's about to hit my dad?

"Who are these men outside the house?" I asked my grandma, keeping my voice low as I rose to my feet.

She gripped my hand and whispered, "It's the Bratva."

Babushka said it like I was supposed to know what it meant, but I didn't.

She looked up at me, and, seeing my confusion, added in simpler terms, "They are mafia."

Mafia. That can't be good.

And what in the world was my dad doing facing off against a man who seemed to be a mafia boss?

What the hell was really happening here?

The air was thick with tension until the man finally broke the silence and snickered. Dad did the same, and they both shook hands and then hugged like they were old buddies.

What the hell?

Well, it turned out that they were buddies, indeed. But why be so dramatic about it? They almost gave me a fucking heart attack.

I exhaled slowly.

At least there was nothing to worry about here.

“Wh—what’re you doing here?” Dad stuttered, surprise coloring his eyes.

“I was passing by the neighborhood, and I decided to say hello to my old friend,” the man said.

My dad squinted, and I could tell he was confused. “How did you know I was back in town?”

The man chuckled. “You know me, Paul. I have eyes everywhere,” he replied with a faint grin.

Those eyes...I recognized them. Those hazel brown eyes.

Fuck! It was him. It was really him. He was the same young man from the album, the one Babushka refused to tell me about, only this time, he was more mature...more handsome.

“Vlad, hi,” my mom greeted him with a warm smile.

It was fake, though. She was so good at pretending sometimes, but I knew her better than anyone else in this room—except for my dad, of course. Mom was faking her gladness to see this man, and was it just me, or did she seem rather worried at the sight of him?

“Natalie,” he muttered. “It’s good to see you again.”

She flashed that plastic grin again.

He walked over to me and my grandmother and then faced her, his head bowed in respect. “Privyet , Babushka,” he said, his voice low and calm.

Dang it! His voice was so sexy.

Focus, Sienna. Focus.

I didn’t understand what it meant, but I knew it was some kind of greeting.

Instead of returning it, my grandma rolled her eyes and turned away from him without a response.

Okay, what’s really going on here?

Babushka clearly hated this man, and Mom was acting so weird now that he was around.

I shifted my gaze to everyone else in the room, and they all looked terrified—pale and practically trembling where they stood. It was like the devil himself had walked into our living room. It appeared that I was the only one in the room with no problem with this man. My only issue with him was that he was way too hot.

Were they afraid of him because he was in the mafia? Or was there something else that I was in the dark about?

I was standing next to my grandma, meaning that my parents were supposed to introduce me to this man who was clearly known to everyone else but a complete stranger to me. However, they seemed hesitant.

Mom looked at Dad as if unsure of whether or not to introduce us. Her breathing was heavy; she was nervous, and I could tell, even though she was doing a pretty good job at masking it.

Finally, my dad cleared his throat and said, “This is our daughter, Sienna. You remember her?”

Vlad looked at me, and I felt a flutter in my chest. My knees turned to jelly that instant. He had those charming eyes fixed on me for a while, and his expression was unreadable. I tried to read him, but I couldn’t.

What is he thinking? Why’s he looking at me like that?

He really was observing me heavily. Nothing creepy, just a good old stare. But why? I couldn’t tell.

I finally mustered the courage to speak, saying, “Hello.”

He was quiet at first but eventually gave a faint grin, nodded, and turned back to my dad. “It was good seeing you people again. Let’s meet some other time, shall we?”

My dad nodded and saw him off to the door.

Wow! My God, he’s handsome!

As he left, the tension his presence had created left with him, and everyone else returned to what they'd been doing before, almost as if he'd never come.

By the way, Uncle Ivan was still in a deep sleep, somehow missing everything.

I sat back beside Babushka, my eyes fixed on the very attractive man who had captivated me as he headed out of the house.

“Who is Vlad to Dad? And how come I didn't know about him?” I asked her.

Her brows furrowed. “Vlad is trouble, my dear. He is a man that leaves a trail of blood and chaos wherever he goes,” she replied. “He is an embodiment of evil.” The bitterness in her tone was glaring, and so was the frown on her face.

Not exactly the response I was hoping for, but alright.

“Okay, but who is he exactly?” I persisted.

“He was Paul's best friend when they were young—always getting my boy into trouble,” she continued with a scowl. “Paul even got involved with the Russian mafia because of him.” She clicked her tongue in disdain.

I raised my brows in surprise, astonished by her story, which, for some reason, I found rather intriguing.

This certainly wasn't the effect Babushka expected her story to have on me, but I couldn't help being fascinated by it...by him.

I leaned close to her and mumbled, “I didn't see a ring on his finger.”

I smirked as she playfully hit my elbow, though it managed to hurt. “Snap out of it!”

she squawked.

“Ow!” I laughed lightly.

She sighed, massaging her temples. “What part of what I said did you not understand?”

I chuckled and drew closer. “But seriously, Babushka, why did Dad drift away from Vlad? I mean, I know most of his friends, and he’d mentioned a couple of his old folks, as well, but not Vlad. Why is that?”

“Wouldn't you like to know?” Mom interrupted us, arms folded across her chest. “Go help your cousins and stop asking questions about Vlad.”

From her tone, I knew that she also wasn't comfortable with me discussing this man.

Who was Vlad, and why did his presence stir up so much tension?

I was determined to find out whether my family wanted me to or not.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:51 am

Soft chatter filled the expansive space that dripped with opulence. Above, crystal chandeliers hung off the high ceilings, casting warm glows on the velvet walls and marble floors.

Waiters in crisp white uniforms moved around in silence, serving drinks in glasses to the cream of the crop, the high rollers.

The swanky casino was bustling with activities, playing host to the members of society's elite: the rich and famous, the powerful and feared. In other words, the crème de la crème.

Sitting at the high-stakes poker table, my eyes narrowed at the game unfolding before me. The table around which players were seated was a masterpiece made of rich mahogany of inlaid mother-of-pearl.

The air was filled with the rich smell of expensive cigars and thick with tension, indicating clearly that this was no place for small bets.

I adjusted my long coat as I sat there with squinted eyes, trying to focus, surrounded by my associates. By my side, Simon was seated, observing the nature of the game. My rivals sat on the other side of the table, their faces serious and attention focused solely on the cards sliding across the smooth green felt.

The game was intense, but even with the distraction it posed, I couldn't stop my mind from drifting back to Sienna Summers: the sweet, innocent girl with an amazing aura who had caught my attention with a single glance.

Her enchanting smile kept flashing in my head, tampering with my focus.

“Hello ,” her sweet voice resounded in my ears as I recalled just how beautiful she was.

I jerked my eyes up, scanning my opponents’ faces in an attempt to read them, but I couldn’t stay focused for more than ten seconds.

Sienna was all that I could think about.

Struggling to remain as calm and composed as I was supposed to be, I put my head down a bit, pressing my fingertips over the bridge of my nose. It wasn’t helping at all. All I could see was her face.

Her gaze was mesmerizing. Her green eyes sparkled with mischief, and she had the prettiest smile I’d ever seen. Her dark hair fell in soft waves down her back, framing her heart-shaped face and accentuating her striking features.

Sienna seemed like a lovely girl, charming and fun to hang around—the exact opposite of me. But didn’t physics tell us that unlike terms attract?

She was so gorgeous—beautiful in every way—and I loved beautiful things; I loved to have beautiful things. But Sienna was off the menu, and for the first time in a long time, I knew I couldn’t have something I so desperately wanted. The fact that she was Paul’s daughter was reason enough for me to back the hell off.

The game was still ongoing, and these fuckers were determined to win. They looked like wolves about to devour their prey, but at this table, I was no prey. I was the predator.

I was a bit out of balance; my usual control and focus were slipping, but despite that,

I wasn't prepared to lose and put my winning streak at risk.

I watched the green felt closely, observing my opponents and their hands. My brain was doing a million things at once, one of which was a serious calculation for my next move.

It was a tug of war because images of Sienna kept invading my thoughts, pulling my attention away.

I could feel Simon's gaze on me. He knew that something was up. I was distracted, and he must be wondering what was going on in my head.

Discreetly, he scooted over and leaned in close. "Is everything okay?" he whispered.

"Yeah, why?" I replied, my eyes fixed on the cards in my hands.

"You seem...distracted." A slight pause came when he saw my cards. "I'm not sure that's a good idea," he added, objecting to my next move.

My opponents were watching me closely, and some of them were whispering to themselves, likely plotting my demise.

"If you call, you will lose," Simon said. "It's a shitty move, boss. Don't make it."

Running the numbers in my head, I glanced at the pile of chips at the center of the table while attempting to shake off the thoughts of Sienna that flooded my mind.

I couldn't afford to lose, so I had to force myself back into the game. I had a reputation to protect, and I wasn't going to give these losers a reason to go home happy.

They'd been anticipating my downfall, and for the past few minutes, they had a glimpse of hope that I would actually lose.

The next few rounds were a blur of bets and raises, and Simon's concern seemed to amplify by the second.

I locked eyes with Mr. Kincaid, the old man sitting directly opposite me. He'd never won against me, but tonight, he felt like he was lucky, like I was losing. He smirked at me, revealing the green stuck in his teeth.

Silently, I drummed my fingers on the table's edge, calculating and evaluating what move I'd make next.

Again, Simon saw my cards and asked, "Are you sure about this?"

I turned to him, exuding confidence. "Do you trust me?"

I knew he did, but he didn't seem sure I was making the right move.

"I do," he finally said, his tone laced with uncertainty.

"Then sit back and watch," I said.

He saw the conviction in my eyes and decided to let me do my thing.

I faced Mr. Kincaid, watching him sternly so I wouldn't miss the reaction on his face.

With a final glance at my cards, I finally made my move.

"Call," I said, pushing my chips into the center.

Tension filled the air, and I could tell that even my associates were concerned about how this would turn out. The room was charged with a sense of unease as the cards were revealed.

At this point, my gaze was fixed on Mr. Kincaid, and he seemed stressed by the way I was looking at him. His confidence was depleting by the second; he was anxious about what the cards would reveal.

“Yes!” Simon said softly as the cards showed that I had won.

Mr. Kincaid and the others had looks of shock and disbelief written all over their faces. He glared at me, gritting his teeth and frowning like that would change the fact that I was, once again, victorious.

I smirked.

He hated me, always had. But I didn’t give two fucks.

Gambling was something I did for fun, not for money. I simply loved a good game, and I loved winning. Plus, putting people like Mr. Kincaid in their place always brought me joy. I loved that they hated me and couldn’t do anything about it.

The rage on Kincaid's face was priceless. He was boiling, and his eyes had practically turned red.

“You did it again,” Simon said to me. “But he doesn’t look so happy about it.” He nodded toward my rival, whose eyes closed in a silent mockery.

Kincaid was a businessman and a boss of a rival organization. He was ruthless in his dealings, at least so I heard. However, he knew better than to try anything silly around me.

This wasn't our first showdown in this casino, and each time he faced off against me, he lost. So, I guess his anger was justified. He clearly hated losing, and I had a feeling that he'd continue to try, hoping that, someday, luck would smile on him and that he'd win.

Yeah, right.

I heard my phone buzz, and, glancing at the lit screen, I squinted, a little surprised by the identity of the caller.

It was my cousin, Maksim: the Pakhan , head of the Wolkov Bratva. He was the top authority in the hierarchy, making decisions and overseeing all operations within the organization.

His call wasn't something I could ignore. I had to answer; it was mandatory.

Maksim only reached out when absolutely necessary, meaning whatever he had to say to me was important.

I whispered to Simon, asking him to keep an eye out while I went to answer the call.

What could be the issue?

Why was Maksim reaching out to me?

Page 5

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:51 am

It was a beautiful morning in New York City, and I was tangling in my sheets, staring blankly at the ceiling as I clung to a pillow like a lifeline. The yellow sun shining through my window cast a warm glow that draped across my room, illuminating anything in its path.

I remained snug in bed, feeling too comfortable to get up as I was wrapped in a blanket of laziness. And to make matters worse, Bruno Mars' "The Lazy Song" wouldn't stop playing in my head.

"Yep, buddy. Looks like, today, I really don't feel like doing anything." I sighed, rolling over to the other side. "Nothing at all."

I caught my reflection in the mirror across the room just in time to watch a smile play on my lips as I recalled the day I'd met Vlad.

His aura of confidence and power still had a hold over me. And his eyes...those beautiful hazel brown eyes!

I couldn't shake him off my mind, and honestly, I didn't want to. Delving into my memory of him was satisfying.

Despite my parents' reservations and Babushka's glaring dislike for the man, I still found him really fascinating and interesting.

I wondered why, though. Why was there so much tension in the room that day? Why did my grandma feel that much hatred for him? Even Mom didn't waste any time showing her disapproval of me asking questions about Vlad.

Babushka said Vlad was mafia and had once dragged Dad into the criminal underground business. Maybe this was why she hated him. Was that a good enough reason?

My curiosity was piqued; I needed to know who he was and what the internet had to say about him. Grandma had her opinion, but I needed to find out for myself.

Out of the blue, a zeal to get out of bed struck me, and I sprang to my feet, flinging my sheets to the side.

Barefoot, I headed to my table by the window, my steps silent on the polished marble floor. Sitting in my chair, I flipped my laptop open, ready for a quick search.

My fingers rattled across the keyboard as I typed in his name. Shit! What's his last name?

I didn't know it. No one had told me, and I forgot to ask. Well, they probably wouldn't have told me even if I had asked, given the hostility around anything concerning the man.

What should I do?

I stared at the laptop screen, watching the cursor blink on the search bar, waiting for my next word. After thinking for a moment, I hit the enter key, and the internet worked its magic.

"No...no...no...not him...." Those were the only words I muttered as I scrolled through my search results. The images that popped up on my screen weren't of him.

"Hold on." I quickly zoomed in on a picture of a handsome man in a long fur coat.

But on a closer look, I realized it wasn't him. Another dead end.

There was nothing on the internet about the Vlad that I was looking for. Even when I decided to search for any Vlad associated with the Russian mafia, nothing about him popped up.

I dropped my head into my hands and slumped my shoulders. Leaning back in my chair, I let out an exhausted sigh.

"Hope you're happy now," I said to myself, referring to my parents.

It was established that Mom and Dad were keen on keeping information about him from me, only sharing what they deemed necessary.

Not cool.

Back in Russia, about two days after Vlad's visit, Dad had received an invite from him. Babushka was against the idea, obviously, but he said he'd be fine. He'd taken Mom with him, so I naturally asked, "What about me?"

He'd replied, "You're staying back with the rest of the family."

That had really hurt, and it pissed me off because I was already looking forward to seeing him again. When Dad had announced Vlad's invitation to his place, I was sitting beside my grandmother, and my excitement soared. But he'd crushed my hopes and shattered my joy.

I didn't know how Vlad did it, but he had somehow managed to crawl under my skin. He'd taken a place in my heart and was already living rent-free in my head. It was an amazing feeling but scary at the same time.

Why was I so attracted to this man? I was willing to rebel against my entire family. Why was that?

I threw my hands into my hair, letting out an exasperated groan.

Vlad was still in my mind: his handsome face and the scent of his cologne. I drew in a deep breath, recalling how I'd felt when my knees turned to jelly after he stopped before me. The energy that accentuated his presence had left me almost literally breathless. As he stared at me without a word, my heart had raced so fast, and my eyes rapidly blinked as I tried to stay reserved. I'd had butterflies in my belly, and the smile on my face was genuine.

Did I blush when he looked at me? I wondered.

I think you totally did , one of the voices in my head said.

Fuck, it's so embarrassing—but he was so hot he made my heart boil.

It's your father's friend we're talking about, Sia. Stop having funny thoughts, my voice of reason chipped in with a sound warning.

That voice was absolutely right, but it wasn't something I had total control over. I wanted to stop thinking about him—I really did—at least because he was Dad's old buddy. It was just impossible to do so. He'd left a mark on my soul the day we met, and even though I was almost certain that he didn't feel the same way about me as I did about him, I couldn't get him out of my mind.

Thoughts of him were like poison, slowly moving through my system and eventually breaking all of my defenses. It felt good, and that was the problem.

A line from Beyoncé's "Poison" popped into my head: "How can something so

deadly feel so right?”

The sound of my phone buzzing on my nightstand interrupted my thoughts. At first, I didn't want to answer it, but when it started buzzing again, I got out of the chair and walked toward it.

I saw Fiona's name flashing on the screen, and with a smile, I answered. “Hi, Fi.”

“What happened? Why didn't you pick up on the first ring?” she asked on the other line.

“Uhh...” I drawled lazily.

“You know what? Forget it—I've got news!” She literally shrieked on the last statement, her voice vibrating with excitement.

This had to be really good to get her so elated.

Fiona Winter was my twenty-one-year-old Russian best friend, gossip buddy, confidant, and college classmate. She was feisty, although an introvert. Thanks to my influence on her, she could socialize sometimes. Most of the time, though, she loved her private space.

We both had a passion for art and spent a lot of time studying together. On campus, wherever one of us was seen, the other wasn't too far behind. That's how close we were. Buddies—BFFs.

“Okay,” I said, indulging her.

“What do you mean, okay ? Come on, guess.”

My mind was blank at the moment. I couldn't think of anything other than Vlad.

"You got back together with Kyle?" I gave it a shot, raising my brows.

"What? No!" she barked.

Yep! I should not have said that. The bastard had shattered her heart, and now she hated him.

"Just tell me already," I urged her, unwilling to play her game this morning.

"Fine," she budged.

"Thank you."

She muttered something under her breath, but I couldn't make out what it was.

"What was that?"

"Nothing."

I smiled. Fiona must have grumbled about how I crushed her vibe. It was funny, considering that usually, she was the party pooper, not me.

She continued, "Anyway, since you've decided to be such a buzz kill, I'll just play your game."

I chuckled softly.

"My cousin—you know, the one I told you about, who's a famous artist?"

My eyes widened at this point, and I was immediately more receptive. “Wait, Caspian Nightingale?”

“Oh, now you’re interested,” she teased.

“Come on, you know how much I love his art,” I said, my whole body buzzing with anticipation for what she had to say.

Caspian Nightingale was a very famous artist in the city of New York. His skills were out of this world, and I admired all of his achievements. Why wouldn’t I? He was good at what he did and was where I’d always wanted to be. I truly loved his work, and oftentimes, I drew my inspiration from his pieces.

The guy was really talented.

“Fi, talk to me,” I said, my voice raising in my excitement.

“Okay, so he’s having an exclusive gallery display this Friday, and guess what? We’re going!” Fiona exclaimed.

I gasped, just about ready to jump for joy. “Shut the front door!”

She laughed. “I’m serious!”

“Oh, my God, that’s great news!” Smiling from ear to ear, I couldn’t contain my feelings.

“I know, right?”

“Honestly, I still haven’t gotten over his last exhibition yet; it was so breathtaking.” I tossed myself into my chair, my heart soaring.

“Yeah, tell me about it,” she replied with a sigh. “Wanna know what I heard?”

Knowing Fiona, she must have wiggled her brows mischievously while asking me that. Like I said, gossip buddy.

“What did you hear?” I asked, shifting in my seat.

She hesitated before giving her reply, allowing the suspense to hit me first. “He’s been working on some new pieces, and they say they’re even better than the last ones.”

“That’s so cool,” I declared. “Fi, we have to look our best. This sounds like it’s going to be a big event.”

“I know, and it’s going to be super amazing, too.”

“I really can’t wait, Fi.” I was already imagining the vibrant art and the bustling gallery atmosphere.

“Me, neither,” she said. “Okay, so what’re you gonna wear? Because honestly, that’s not really my mojo.”

“Don’t worry. I’ve got you,” I assured her.

We spent the next few minutes discussing what we’d wear, who we’d meet at the exhibition, what the art would look like, and all that stuff.

This was exactly the type of distraction that I needed. At least now I was thinking about something other than Vlad; I was free from the spell he’d cast on me.

Just like that, the laziness that had plagued me all morning lost its hold over me, and I

rose to my feet, ready to start my day.

I headed to the bathroom, freshened up, and skipped downstairs to have breakfast. It was going to be a great twenty-four hours; that was for sure.

From the top of the stairs, I heard my parents' voices; they seemed to be talking about something important, judging by their tones. At first, I wanted to dismiss the conversation as regular talk; then, I heard his name on my dad's lips, the name of the man who'd been running through my mind all morning.

Abruptly, I stopped in my tracks to listen in on their conversation, but their voices were still muffled, and I couldn't really make out what they were saying.

With gentle steps, I walked down the stairs, and the closer I got, the clearer their words became.

I halted by the wall, eavesdropping on them.

"Vlad is coming to New York?" Mom asked, her voice filled with a mix of surprise and apprehension, a hint of concern creeping up in her tone.

Wait, what? Did I mishear, or did she just ask if Vlad was coming to the city?

"Yes," Dad replied. "Apparently, Maksim wants him to take care of business here for now," he added.

Wow! Amazing.

I grinned widely, my heart speeding up. More good news in the space of minutes. The universe must really be smiling on me today.

“So, that means he’s—”

“Yes, Natalie,” he replied. “Vlad is moving to New York.”

My eyes widened. This day couldn’t get any better! I was screaming on the inside. Finally, I’d see him again because he was definitely going to stop by the house to greet his old friend as he had back in Russia.

Perfect.

What will you do when you see him? I asked myself and paused for a second. I hadn’t given it much thought, really. What would I truly do?

If he dropped by to see Dad one of these days, then what?

“Paul, I know Vlad is your friend...” Mom began.

Uh-oh, that can’t be good.

Whenever Mom started a sentence like that, she was about to drop something that would inevitably contradict whatever was spoken before.

I braced myself, knowing there was a ninety-eight percent chance that I wouldn’t like what would come out of her mouth next.

“...but he’s not a good guy, and you know that. You, of all people, know that he’s trouble,” she continued.

“I know,” Dad said softly.

“Please, make sure he keeps a distance from us,” Mom said. “We can’t have him

jeopardizing everything we've worked so hard to build."

"Way to go, Mom," I said to myself.

Well, there goes your shot.

She just had to ruin this for me.

I guess I won't be seeing him anytime soon.

With that, Mom left, and I could hear her footsteps retreating. I snuck a peak from behind the wall and saw Dad standing all by himself, rubbing his eyes.

It looked like this was going to be a tough call for him. Vlad was his friend, so it made sense that this would weigh him down a little.

I exhaled sharply, struggling to come to terms with the fact that Vlad wouldn't set foot in this house, at least not in a long time.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:51 am

New York: a city crowded like a Black Friday sale. But worse. It was like they were trying to squeeze all the vodkas into one tiny shot glass.

I looked outside my window, watching as people packed like sardines on the sidewalks. The city was bustling with life, and the energy levels were off the charts. It was as if the entire population of Wyoming could fit into one neighborhood in this crowded city. And still, more would come. Idiots!

They say the city never sleeps, and in my opinion, that wasn't far from the truth.

Regardless, it was a beautiful place, and the view from the backseat of the car wasn't bad. The sun cast a warm glow over the concrete jungle, making everything seem golden, even the trash. Towering skyscrapers pierced the sky, and the city's skyline unfolded like a canvas of steel and glass.

The lofty arch of the Brooklyn Bridge, the stately opulence of the New York Public Library, and the bright lights of Times Square were all revealed as we drove around the city that would be my new home—for the time being, anyway.

This wasn't my first time in New York; I'd visited the city a couple of times before, but only for business-related issues. I wasn't the type to roll well with a crowd. I hated it, and NYC was known for its crowding.

The city was so dense that you could find a different nationality, language, or cuisine on every block—sometimes, all at once.

I toiled with the cufflink on my left sleeve, thinking about how different St.

Petersburg was compared to this bustling city.

New York was beautiful, but I liked my homeland better. Russia was more beautiful in every aspect.

It was too noisy out here—no peace and quiet.

“Hey, watch it, punk!” a cyclist yelled at a driver who almost knocked him down.

Like I said, too noisy.

The car came to a halt, waiting for the light to turn green. I gritted my teeth in displeasure, as the driver directly behind us wouldn't stop blaring his horn, yelling God-knows-what.

In a short while, we were in motion again.

Americans were too loud and carefree; I didn't like them. But I didn't have much of a choice because I was stuck with them for the time being, thanks to my cousin, Maksim. He just decided to send me.... Of all the Wolkovs, he chose me to come to America, knowing full well that I hated leaving my home country.

As Pakhan , his orders were not to be disobeyed. I didn't like being here, but I was compelled to; that was loyalty on my part. He'd ordered me to take care of the business here in New York, and that was exactly what I would do.

I caught Simon's eyes watching me through the rear-view mirror. He had a faint grin etched on his face, like he knew exactly what I was thinking; he truly did. He'd been with me long enough to understand my reactions to different situations.

Our driver was Fyodor Apagov, Maksim's right-hand man. He was in charge of

making sure that I was fully settled in the city. He'd taken his time to show me around, introducing me to our business associates.

Today, he was driving us to a gallery opening in New York City's Chelsea, a neighborhood known for its vibrant art scene, trendy galleries, and hip atmosphere. At least, that was what Simon said he'd read on the internet.

The reason we were headed there was to network with other powerful and influential visitors who would be present at the gallery. So, basically, you could say I was going there on business.

Fyodor pulled over outside a building with a magnificent exterior that featured tall arched windows framed by ornate stone carvings.

The backseat door opened for me, and I stepped out, adjusting my coat, my eyes scanning the surroundings.

My men flanked me as Simon and I followed Fyodor to the entrance: heavy wooden doors polished to a shine with intricate carvings and patterns that gave it a touch of elegance.

Fyodor pushed the doors open, and we stepped inside.

The air was filled with the subtle scent of fresh flowers arranged in vases at strategic locations throughout the expansive space, and soft classic music played in the background.

With graceful steps, the waitstaff moved around, serving drinks in silver trays.

The walls were lined with captivating portraits: a diverse array of incredible art pieces that had me enthralled. I was impressed by the paintings that I saw, and I

wasn't one to be so easily impressed. This artist was good. The oil paintings and contemporary sculptures seemed carefully displayed to draw my eye.

Under the high ceilings and moldings that soared above, I made my way through the crowd of people dressed to impress, their conversations a low hum that filled the space, blending with a mix of different colognes and perfumes.

"These are amazing," Simon said, admiring some pieces as he walked beside me.

"The artist, Caspian Nightingale, is really talented," Fyodor said, "He always adds a touch of excellence to his work, making his pieces...unique."

"I can see that," I replied, accepting a glass of champagne from a waitstaff's tray.

Simon helped himself to a piece of hors d'oeuvre from the same tray.

"Come on, there's a couple of people I'd like you to meet," Fyodor said, leading the way to a small group of impeccably dressed men—our associates.

We followed.

"Gentlemen," he greeted, adjusting his tie as we halted before them.

"My, oh my, look who it is," one of them said, his eyes fixed on me.

The old man seemed absorbed by my presence; in fact, the smirk on his face couldn't be any more subtle.

"Vladimir Wolkov himself, in the flesh." He chuckled.

I squinted, and before I could even think, he added. "Oh, come on, don't be so

surprised; your reputation precedes you.” He shook my hand, adding, “Bradley Finch is the name.”

“Nice to meet you,” I said.

He chuckled. “No, that pleasure’s all mine.”

“You have a famous name among the brotherhood, Mr. Wolkov,” another said, offering his hand.

I shook it with a nod.

It was no news that my name had spread like wildfire in the criminal underworld, even here in New York.

We talked for the next few minutes; actually, they talked, and I listened. Mr. Finch wouldn’t stop praising me, saying he loved the way I handled my business. He was a lively one, throwing jokes here and there, but in time, I got bored.

However, while standing with these men, something caught my eye, stealing my attention. It was an artwork hanging on the wall in front of me. The piece was so fascinating—dark and agonizing yet beautifully made.

My gaze was captivated by this hauntingly amazing piece, reminiscent of Edgar Degas’ impressionist style.

Although it was Caspian Nightingale’s original work, it reminded me a lot about Degas’ “Echoes of the Night.” Maybe he drew inspiration from the deceased artist.

“Whispers in the Dark” was the name of this painting—I saw it written at the base of the portrait—and before I knew it, I was standing before it, enamored by the artist’s

precision and skill.

The painting was a mesmerizing oil on canvas piece, evoking the mystique of a moonlit night with thousands of stars twinkling in the sky. A series of soft, feathery brush strokes danced across the canvas, enveloping a lone figure that seemed to be drowning in a sea of despair. Within the darkness of the woods, painted to reality, a hand stretched out, conjuring whispers of secrets shared beneath the stars. Shadows twirled and writhed, like dark tendrils of vines, as a streak of smoke surrounded the figure, the gender of which was artistically concealed.

I took a sip of my champagne, eyes glued to this masterpiece that had drawn me to it, a piece I felt so connected to, like it whispered secrets that only I could hear. In a strange way, I saw myself in that portrait, and the story hidden in it was one filled with darkness and loneliness. There was also a glint of hatred, anger with a touch of violence and betrayal.

As I studied the painting, I noticed, at a small distance, another enthusiast looking at the piece with the same passion as I was.

That instant, we locked eyes with each other.

Peering closely at the enthusiast, I immediately recognized those sharp green eyes and that heart-shaped face. I had met her only once in Russia, but I was certain it was her.

How could I not recognize the only girl who had been running through my mind for a while now?

It was Sienna Summers.

Her eyes widened, and her cheeks flushed with a soft pink hue. Her lips parted

slightly, and she seemed to hold her breath as if caught off guard by my presence. Sienna's gaze faltered, and she immediately looked away, pushing a strand of hair behind her ear.

I smirked, feeling a wind of passion brush over my face.

She was so beautiful in that red dress, with its hem almost sweeping the fine floor. Her feet were perfectly balanced on a pair of silver heels. Around her neck was a silver jewel that shimmered in the lights, as did the watch on her left wrist, which was the same color.

She was shy and avoided eye contact with me, but the smile on her face remained. Her slender body tensed, yet her sparkling eyes darted back to mine as if drawn by a magnet.

Sienna's grin revealed her perfect white teeth, even though she seemed troubled about what to do next. She was probably contemplating saying hello or just acting like she didn't recognize me. But the latter was almost impossible.

Her turmoil must have resulted from what her grandmother or the rest of the family had told her about me.

I flashed her a warm grin, hoping that she'd mirror it, and she did with a shy smile of her own, her eyes dazzling with a hint of mischief.

This was the invitation I needed, so I approached her.

"Fascinating, isn't it?" I asked. "The painting."

"Of course," she replied, returning her eyes to it. "It captures a story hidden within the brush strokes." She stole a glance at me. "This piece reminds me of Degas' iconic

‘Echoes of the Night.’” She let out a soft sigh. “Nightingale is truly talented.”

I smirked; she was indeed an art enthusiast. “Remarkable,” I said. “I didn’t know you were into art.”

“Well...” she said, blushing, “art is beautiful, and I love beautiful things.”

“That makes the two of us,” I said with a low hum.

For the next two seconds, we locked eyes in silence, her smile unwavering.

“Take this piece, for instance.” Her eyes darted back to it. “It already resonates with me, and I see hope and beauty in it. Like a little light in the dark.”

“How do you see light in that?” My brows instinctively rose. “All I see is darkness, pain, and suffering,” I said, wondering where she saw hope and beauty in the painting.

She glanced at me and flashed that pretty smile of hers. “You see agony and despair, but I see a struggle to find light in a world consumed by darkness. How come you don’t?”

I paused for a moment, shifting my gaze back to the portrait. “I guess that’s because I view the world from a broken lens.” I turned to her. “Where you see good, I see evil.”

“We both have different opinions on this, then.”

“I couldn’t agree more. We see what we want to see,” I replied. “I guess that’s the magic of art.”

“Maybe,” she said, looking right at me. “But why would you want to see pain and

suffering?”

I paused for a moment. “When you’ve lived so long in darkness, it’s hard to imagine a world without it. You became one with it, with the pain and all the suffering that comes with it. Therefore, when you look at things, that’s all you see.”

“Are you talking about the painting or everything in general?” she asked, unwilling to tear her gaze from me.

I couldn't respond, so she added, “What do you see when you look at me? Do you see pain and suffering?”

She almost threw me off balance with her question; it was a trick, and I had to think before giving her my response.

“You're beautiful,” I said, “No one will see pain and suffering when they look at you.” My eyes bore into hers, and I offered her a faint grin when her cheeks turned red.

“Thank you,” she replied. “If you can see beauty in me, surely you can manage to see the light in this painting.” She returned her eyes to it.

“Unfortunately, I can’t,” came my reply. “The more I try to see anything other than darkness and pain, the more darkness I see.”

She was supposed to have been disturbed by the words that I’d spoken; many would have been. But Sienna looked at me as though I was some lost sheep. She wasn’t scared or anything. No. She simply retained her smile.

“What’s so amusing?” I asked.

“Nothing, really,” she replied. “It’s just that even in darkness, there’s always a glimmer of hope. You just have to find it.”

I admired the good in her, her ability to be optimistic, and for a minute, we both stared at each other, not saying a word.

Sienna and I were from different worlds, had different opinions on life, and saw things differently. Our individual views on this portrait reflected our personalities, and everything about her was positive. She saw the good in things; no matter how faint a light was in the dark, she’d spot it. She was the exact opposite of me.

Within this last minute, she showed me that I could see things from a different perspective, that life wasn’t black and white. Sienna’s lack of fear also intrigued me, drawing me to her and deepening my affection for this fearless, confident, and positive-minded girl.

Unlike terms do attract .

I realized that there and then.

“But you have to admit, despite our differences, we have one thing in common,” I said, savoring her smile with a cocky smirk.

“What’s that?”

“We both find this piece fascinating.”

Sienna chuckled lightly. “True.”

I took a sip of my champagne.

“So...” she said, changing the subject. “How do you like New York so far?”

I buried a hand in my pocket. “Well, it’s not St. Petersburg.”

She laughed. “Come on, there’s gotta be something—gimme something.” Her face lit up in excitement, accentuating her beauty.

“It’s not all bad,” I confessed, unable to quit staring at her.

I didn’t want to come off as creepy, but it didn’t matter how many times I tried to look away; I simply couldn’t. She had me under her spell, gluing my eyes to her alluring figure.

“See, that wasn’t so hard,” she said amidst chuckles.

“Don’t get ahead of yourself,” I joked. “I still haven’t found places that offer good food.”

“Well, you’re in luck because I happen to know a ton of those places. But there’s this one place that’s, like, my personal favorite. I go there every weekend. It’s in the downtown area, and it’s called Josie’s—it’s super popular, so you shouldn’t have trouble finding it.”

“Josie’s, eh?”

Sienna nodded. She was so full of life and light, and it was amazing how comfortable she was around me. I was pretty sure she knew the type of man I was, yet she was so free. I admired that about her.

“Josie’s sounds amazing,” I said. “Maybe I’ll try it out sometime.”

She gazed at me and replied, “Yeah, you should. You won’t regret it.” Her sharp green eyes sparkled, and her black hair shimmered beneath the golden glow of the chandelier above.

“Hey, Sienna!” a female voice called out from behind her.

She glanced back at the girl standing at a distance and then faced me again. “That’s my cue. I have to go now.”

I was disappointed that our little talk was interrupted, but I wouldn’t keep her with me a second longer, even though that was exactly what I wanted to do.

“It was nice seeing you again,” she added.

“You, too, Sienna.” I gave a faint grin.

“Alright. Bye,” she said softly.

I raised my glass in acknowledgment and watched her hurry up in her heels to meet her friend. Even while the two girls were in motion together, Sienna took one last look at me with a charming smile.

Her beauty, once again, left me in awe. I was deeply drawn to her, captivated not just by her looks but by the aura and the goodness she exuded.

This was all shades of wrong, not to mention dangerous. It was a forbidden passion, one that I shouldn’t feel, but would I be able to resist giving in?

Trouble was knocking at the door, and I might just as well answer it.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:51 am

Our conversation still lingered on the fringes of my mind, even though it had happened yesterday. I couldn't believe it when I'd seen him there, standing in front of that painting.

I had almost retreated when our eyes locked; the connection that sparked between us was like electricity, and I was shocked by it. Being in his presence made my knees quake and my throat dry, but I loved the feeling—that sense of vulnerability I had around him.

Even now, his aura still clung to me, drawing me in like a moth to a flame.

I was at the table, having lunch with my parents, but my mind was reliving the beautiful encounter at the art gallery.

Fiona had done me a solid by inviting me to the gallery opening. Part of the reason this excited me so much was that our meeting wasn't planned.

Hell, he was the last person I would've thought I'd run into yesterday.

This was all the work of the universe—fate, destiny, whatever term best fit the scenario. But I was grateful that we'd run into each other.

I couldn't understand why my parents didn't want him around, especially Mom. Vlad was a pretty interesting man. He was cold and probably as ruthless as they claimed, but he was also a wonderful person.

He and I were so different, but that's what made this bond more special. We were

nothing alike, yet I was drawn to him as much as he was drawn to me. Or at least, I hoped so.

Those five minutes I'd spent talking with him had been on repeat in my mind since I left him yesterday. And now, I was wondering if he was affected by me, just as I was deeply affected by him.

"You alright, honey?" Dad asked, directing his question to me.

"Huh?" I responded, confused.

Mom was busy digging into her salad, her fork clanking against the plate.

"Are you alright?" he repeated.

"Yes," I replied, trying to get a hold of myself.

"You've barely touched your food," Mom said.

"What?" I hadn't quite caught what she said; it was as if my hearing had suddenly failed or something.

"You seem distracted," Dad said, munching on his vegetables.

"I'm not. I'm just..." I exhaled slowly. "It's nothing anyway." I picked up my fork and began eating the lobster on my plate.

Mom and Dad exchanged glances and returned to eating in silence, leaving me to my thoughts.

Fiona freaked out when I told her all about Vlad.

“Hold on,” she said, sitting on the bed in my room. “Let’s see if I get this straight.”

I was standing by my table, chewing on my fingernails, watching her eyes widen like a camera lens zooming in.

“So, you’re saying that the hot man from the gallery opening is your father’s best friend....” Her brows were raised as she fixed her gaze on me.

I nodded.

“And now, you’re attracted to this man...your father’s best friend,” she added as though she was still processing it and needed my response for confirmation.

“Shh. Keep your voice down!” I exclaimed softly.

“Okay, sorry,” she said, throwing her hands in the air. “It’s just....” Fiona burst out laughing.

“What? What’s so funny?” My mouth dropped open like a trapdoor falling.

“I’m sorry, but this sounds like some Pornhub shit,” she replied amidst chuckles.

“Haha, very funny!” I rolled my eyes at her statement.

“But it does,” she insisted.

“I’m serious, Fi!” I grumbled, tossing myself into my chair.

“Okay. Alright. Walk me through how you feel,” she said.

I sighed heavily, burying my face in my palms. “Argh! I find him so irresistible—you

saw the man; he's gorgeous!"

"Yeah..." Fiona drawled lazily. "He is."

"I don't know what to do, Fi. It's like you said, this is like a scene straight out of an adult movie." I rubbed my eyes.

"Do you think your parents know?" she asked.

I shot a glance at her. "That I have a huge crush on my father's friend? I don't think so." I paused. "I mean, Mom might suspect, but—"

"Quick question," she cut me off. "What would you do if this 'crush' grows into something deeper?"

"What?"

"You heard me."

I hated it when Fiona got all serious with me, and her stare wasn't helping at all.

"Okay, you need to stop looking at me like that." I rose to my feet, massaging my temples.

"Like what?" she asked, feigning ignorance.

"Like that!" I blurted out, gesturing at the seriousness etched on her face. "It's...it's making me uncomfortable."

"Oh, I'm sorry." The sarcasm in her statement was glaring. "Do you think your parents would make you feel comfortable if they were the ones asking this question?"

She had a valid point.

“Sienna, we need to understand how you feel—how you truly feel—and to do that, you need to start talking...from your heart,” she said.

I heaved a sigh. “Well, if what I feel for Vlad turns out to be something deeper as you said, then I’ll go for it...if he’s willing to do the same.”

She looked at me, as if searching my soul. “And if your parents object?”

“If someone had objected to their union decades ago, and they listened, then I wouldn’t have been born.”

“So, you’re saying you’d go against them, then?” It was supposed to be a question, but it didn’t sound like it.

“Abso-fucking-lutely,” I replied.

“I like the sound of that,” she said. “Well, if Vlad would make you happy, then you have my blessings—if that’s even a thing.”

We laughed. It felt good talking to her about this whole bizarre situation, and her support meant a lot to me.

“It’ll be nice having a friend who’s married to a powerful Russian mafia boss,” she teased.

“Marriage?” My eyebrows shot up, eyes wide with shock. “Hold on a second, you’re taking this way too far—we’re barely in the talking stage.”

“We’re thinking out loud, aren’t we?” She smiled, and gradually, her look became

solemn. “Sienna, do you really like this man?”

Worry washed over her face, and I could tell she only wanted to be sure that I knew exactly what I was getting myself into.

“I mean, you said it yourself: He’s a mafia boss—that shit comes with a lot of death and chaos, Si,” she added, her eyes fixed on me. “Are you sure you’re ready for what comes with being associated with this man?”

I thought for a moment and said, “It might sound a little weird, but I believe I’ll be safe around him.”

“That’s weird, Sia. Not a little weird.”

I sighed. “Look, I know how it sounds, and I might be moving too fast, but I feel...I feel safe around him, you know.” The break came when I groped for the right word to better describe my feelings. “It’s still a little too early to decide how exactly I feel about him. So, let’s see how it goes.”

“However it turns out. I’ll be here,” she said, her tone supportive and kind. “Just be careful, Sia. The mafia isn’t something to take lightly. It’ll be like playing with fire and expecting not to get burned.”

She was right, and that made my heart skip a beat. I was indeed playing with fire, but was I ready to get burned?

“Thanks, Fi.” I exhaled softly. “I’ll be careful.”

I watched my parents eat in silence and decided to raise the controversial topic that I was certain would catch them off guard. Then, I dove headfirst into the sensitive subject, shattering the uneasy calm.

“I ran into Vlad at the gallery opening yesterday,” I declared.

Mom’s eyes widened, and she spluttered, choking back on a mouthful of her drink.

Oops! Here we go.

“Sorry.” Dad passed her a napkin and then looked at me, surprised. “Is that so?”

“Yeah. We had a long talk,” I replied, watching the tension arise between us.

“You had a long talk,” Mom repeated, chuckling like she was nervous. “They had a long talk, Paul. Can you believe that?” She faced him. Her laughter was a clear indication of her disapproval and disbelief. She was holding back on something, using her laughs as cover.

I had brought this up on purpose, to see their reaction—the expressions they would wear. I needed to know if there was any chance at all that they would accept my feelings for Vlad. But with the way Mom was acting up, I didn’t think I’d get any approval.

“How did you two meet?” Dad asked me.

“He was staring at a painting, and I was drawn to him—I mean, to it—the painting, not Vlad, obviously,” I answered, stumbling on my words with a stutter.

“Oh, God,” Mom whispered to herself, her face bent over and shoulders sagging under the weight of my words.

Dad looked me straight in the eye, quietly chewing on his dessert. “What did you guys talk about?”

“Stuff,” I said casually, sipping my drink.

“Anything particularly interesting?”

“Not really?” I replied, intentionally going round and round.

“Oh, for goodness’ sake,” Mom grumbled under her breath.

“Well, half of the time, we talked majorly about the painting and how we both interpreted it,” I replied, poking my lobster with the tines of my fork.

“And the other half, what did you two talk about?” Dad inquired.

I was about to respond when I caught Mom glaring at him as if to say , stop it, you’re indulging her .

“What?” I asked her, confused as to the meaning of that look. “What is it?”

She didn’t respond, and her eyes were still fixed on him.

“Can someone please tell me something? What is going on here?” I demanded an answer.

He hesitated for a moment. “It’s nothing, my dear.” He placed a palm on the back of my hand. “Don’t worry about it.” Dad smiled and faced his dessert.

I turned to face her, and she struggled to squeeze out a smile.

“Mom?” I called out, narrowing my eyes at her.

“Hmm?” She looked at me, pretending like she didn’t know why I called her

attention.

“What’s with all this tension at the mention of Vlad?” I asked.

“Tension?” She scoffed. “What’re you talking about? There’s no tension here, is there, Paul?”

He shook his head.

“It’s nothing, sweetheart.” She reached out and touched my hand with a smile she’d managed to muster.

They were both hiding something, but Dad was handling it better. The news about my encounter with Vlad had them riled up, but Dad was acting like he was cool with it.

Mom, on the other hand, had a whole lot of work to do on her acting skills because her efforts at deception were painfully transparent. She tried to pretend, to feign nonchalance, but she couldn’t look me in the eye, and her posture was stiff: a testament to her discomfort.

It was obvious that Mom was worried about me, but why was she trying so hard to hide it?

Page 8

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:51 am

Hands clasped around the steering wheel, I fixed my eyes on the road, but my mind was flooded with thoughts of Sienna.

It had been a while since I'd driven myself around, and despite Simon's and Fyodor's insistence on tagging along, I maintained my stance about wanting to be alone.

"At least have the chauffeur drive you," Simon said from the head of the steps at the entrance to the mansion.

"I'll be fine," I replied, getting into the driver's seat.

"Remember, you don't really know your way around New York!" he shouted after me, his voice laced with concern.

"There's something called GPS," I replied, starting the engine.

I had my own plans, and I knew where I was going, contrary to what they might have thought.

"Turn left," Siri instructed.

I obeyed, rolling the vehicle down a street. Glancing at the digital map on my dashboard, I realized that I was almost there: the restaurant Sienna had recommended two days ago.

According to her, the food there was great, and that I would love it. She also mentioned that she often went there to eat—every weekend, to be exact. This was the

weekend. Would I be lucky?

It didn't take long to locate the diner and pull over by the parking lot.

I killed the engine and checked out the scene through the diner's big window. It was hustling and bustling inside; folks were sipping coffee, munching on burgers, chatting, and laughing.

However, there was no Sienna.

I unbuckled my seatbelt and stepped out of the vehicle, heading straight for the glass door. It jingled and opened; then, I walked in, my eyes scanning the space.

"Hi, there." A waitress approached me with a courteous smile. "Welcome to Josie's. What can I get you?"

I was about to reply when I spotted the prettiest girl in the diner sitting alone in a corner.

Right then, I felt my lips curl up into a sly smile, and I couldn't take my eyes off her.

"Sir?" the waitress called my attention.

"It's alright. I'll be fine," I replied without looking at her.

Sienna hadn't seen me yet; she was scrolling through her phone, a hand under her chin. She would occasionally look out the window as though she was expecting someone.

With a stealthy silence, I glided toward her, both hands tucked in the pockets of my pants. For seven long seconds, I loomed over her like a ghost, unnoticed.

She raised her head and faced the window again, then sighed, still unaware of my presence.

Sienna looked so beautiful—innocent yet mischievous at the same time—and it was almost impossible to tear my gaze from her.

“Oh, my God!” she yelped, her palm flying to her chest in a jiffy, as if to prevent her heart from jumping out. Her eyes went wide with shock, and she jerked in her seat, startled at the sudden sight of me.

It was amusing watching her react the way that she did, and I couldn’t help but crack a smile.

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to scare you like that,” I said.

She chuckled, her face lighting up with a grin. “It’s okay. I, uh....” She cleared her throat. “I wasn’t really scared, you know. It’s just that I didn’t hear you coming, so you sorta....”

“Startled you,” I finished her sentence.

She looked at me and then nodded slowly with a welcoming smile.

“Apologies,” I said, gesturing at the vacant seat opposite her. “May I?”

“Yes, of course, please. Silly me.” She chuckled playfully, her eyes sparkling with amusement.

I took a seat, savoring her beauty for a moment. “So, what’s a pretty girl like yourself doing, sitting all alone in a diner this evening?”

She looked me dead in the eye and cast a grin at me, a flirtatious one, however faint.
“Well, I’m not alone anymore, now am I?”

I relaxed in my seat, my face stretching into a goofy smirk.

Careful, girl. You’re playing a dangerous game here, I thought to myself.

“So, you finally decided to come around and try the food that I recommended,” she said.

“It would appear so.”

Her eyes crinkled at the corners, and she leaned forward, hands on the table between us. “Is that the only reason you’re here? For the food?”

I was quiet, watching her closely; she was flirting with me.

“Maybe,” I answered. “Maybe not.”

She smiled at my last statement.

“You were looking out the window before I came over here,” I said, spilling my observation. “Are you expecting someone? That friend of yours, perhaps?”

She adjusted in her seat without breaking eye contact. “Maybe. Maybe not.” She flashed a cocky grin.

I scoffed, seeing what she did there. That’s a good one.

Her response hinted at the fact that I was the one she’d been looking out the window for. She must have been expecting me to come around, just as I’d been expecting to

spot her here.

“So, that’s how it is?” I said, attempting to play on her conscience and coax her into answering me.

“I haven’t looked out the window since you arrived. What does that tell you?”

“Do you always answer questions with questions?”

“Does it bother you?” She smirked, squinting her eyes.

Not at all. It didn’t bother me one bit. I liked that she could hold a conversation with me.

She was good at this, and I was impressed by her ability to so conveniently flirt with me. It was remarkable.

The air was filled with the alluring scent of her perfume, and her radiant smile, so contagious, melted my stone-cold heart. Her lips, glossy and cherry-red, seemed inviting, curling up to reveal a glimpse of her pearly whites. A soft blush bloomed on her cheeks, accentuating her vulnerability, and her body language exuded approachability.

I was so captivated by her that we stayed quiet for a while, looking into each other’s eyes.

Sienna had a hold on me that was impossible to escape; moreover, I didn’t want to escape. I loved being under her spell. I was enthralled, and for the first time, I felt powerless, powerless to resist her charm. Her influence over me was unshakable, and I was trapped in the web of her seduction.

A waiter walked past us with a bottle of wine on a tray, but he had barely taken two steps behind me when his feet tangled in a sudden misstep. The bottle teetered precariously on the tray, threatening to crash to the floor.

Time itself seemed to slow down as the bottle spun in the air, its trajectory tracing a lazy arc. With lightning speed, I shot out a hand, my fingers closing around the neck of the bottle.

Sienna's jaw dropped literally; her brows shot up, and her eyes widened at the scene.

The glass chilled my palm as I held it steady.

Shocked, the waiter walked over to me, his hands trembling as I handed the bottle to him.

"Thank you, sir." He accepted it, gratitude flickering in his eyes.

I hadn't done it to gain recognition; it was an act of self-preservation. If that bottle had hit the floor, the contents would have splashed on my pants and shoes. I couldn't guarantee how I would have reacted if that had happened. So, by catching the bottle, I was actually saving him from my own wrath, not just the wine owner's.

"Wow!" Sienna said softly. "Nice reflexes."

I responded with a faint smirk.

As the waiter left, another materialized to take our order. It was the same girl that had approached me earlier.

"Hi, again," she said to me, her tone polite and respectful. "Hi, Sienna."

“Hi, April,” Sienna replied.

“What can I get you today?” April asked.

Sienna looked at me as if to ask what I wanted.

“You place the order. You’re the regular here, not me—besides, I trust your food judgment,” I said.

She faced April, who was waiting with a notepad and a pen in her hand. “Okay, just get me the usual.”

“Turkey Club, then?”

“Yep,” she replied, “but without the lettuce, tomatoes, and mayonnaise—just the good stuff, basically.”

“So, turkey, bacon, cheese, and bread?” April asked to confirm.

“Exactly.” Sienna winked at her.

“Got it.”

Sienna looked back at me. “You’ll love it, I promise.”

“I don’t doubt that.”

She exhaled sharply and leaned in closer. “Can I ask you something?”

I had a pretty good idea of what she was about to ask, but I wanted to hear her say the words.

“Sure,” I replied. “Ask away.”

“Why did my grandmother act so cold toward you back in Russia?” She looked into my eyes. “My parents don’t want me hanging around you, and I don’t know why. It’s like they’re afraid of you or something. And believe me when I tell you that they would not be happy with this.”

“What did they tell you?” I asked.

“Nothing much, really,” she replied. “A little bit of this, a little bit of that, but in the end, it all amounts to nothing.”

I adjusted in my seat, leaning forward. “Do you remember what I told you about that painting the other day?”

“About the darkness in your life?”

“I’m not a good guy, Sienna,” I declared. “Amongst the sheep, I’m blackened. I am what others call an embodiment of evil.” I relaxed in my seat. “I’m sure your grandmother must have filled you in on the details.”

“Like I said, little bit of this, little bit of that. But she did say that you were...mafia.” A slight pause came when she lowered her voice.

“And do you know about the mafia?” I asked, curious to know how much she knew. “What do you think we’re known for?”

“Very dangerous things,” she replied, but there was no iota of fear in her voice or her eyes; in fact, all there was was intrigue. “From my research, you guys are into a whole lot of bad stuff.”

My brows rose. “And that doesn't scare you?”

“No,” she replied, shrugging her shoulders.

I shook my head. “You know this, and you still wonder why everyone in your family who cares about you doesn't want us hanging out together?”

“I'm a big girl now, a grown woman who can make her own decisions,” she replied sternly.

“What if your decisions would lead you down a dark path, a dangerous and treacherous one?” I asked, waiting for her response.

She went silent for a while. “Even in the deepest darkest, Vlad, there's always a glimmer of light. All you have to do is find it.”

I scoffed, impressed that she still had that philosophy. “That's cute. But I'm not the type of man you'd want to be associated with,” I objected calmly.

“Am I the type of woman you'd want to be associated with?” she asked, throwing the question right back at me.

I drew a deep breath. “We're different, you and I. You know that by now.”

“Yet here I am. Here you are.” Her eyes were telling me something, but I wasn't focused enough to get it.

“You're stubborn,” I blurted, shaking my head with a silent scoff.

She smiled. “That's one of my many unique qualities.”

“Why aren’t you afraid of me?” I asked. “You know who I am, what I am capable of. Your parents are against you meeting up with me, and yet, despite all of this, you’re still comfortable around me. Why is that?” I anticipated her response, watching her body language and taking note of even the slightest facial expressions.

“You say you’re bad,” she began. “But what if I told you that I was drawn to the bad ones?” She had a cocky smirk on her face, and her eyelashes batted at me in a way that was rather flirtatious.

“That’s highly unlikely.”

“Why do you think that?”

“Because we’re different, Sienna.”

“Yeah, you keep saying that. But what do they say about opposites, Vlad?” Her gaze was fixed on me.

On that note, we weren’t so different.

Unlike terms attract .

She just admitted her attraction to me; now, everything was about to change. I was certain about how she felt, and I wasn’t sure how long I’d be able to hold myself back now that the cat was out of the bag.

We stared deeply at each other, tension crackling in the air. Our silence was loud, and the unspoken words between us were signals that we both caught.

The waitress returned with our order, and I had to admit, the aroma was mouthwatering, a great distraction from the passion that was swelling up within me.

“Thanks, April,” Sienna said to her.

“You’re welcome. Enjoy,” she said before vanishing.

Sienna took a bite and looked at me. “Go on. Try it.”

I picked up my fork and dug into the meal. One bite, and the flavors exploded on my tongue. It was like my stomach opened up, eager to devour the dish.

“It’s good, isn’t it?” She smiled.

“Hmm. It is, actually,” I said, savoring the sweetness in my mouth.

“I told you you’d like it.”

As we ate, we occasionally stole hidden glances at each other. I caught her eyes a couple of times, and she caught mine, as well.

This feeling was overwhelming, and I knew that the longer I stayed around her, the more intense it would become.

Once we were done eating, I covered the bill and glanced at my watch; it was getting late already.

We walked out of the diner together. It wasn’t until we stopped by my car that I realized she’d been holding my hand.

I couldn’t let her go home by herself, but at the same time, it was risky to offer her a ride home, especially with my hormones going haywire. I didn’t trust myself enough to keep it together should she get in my car.

The choice was mine to make: let her head home alone at this hour or offer to drive her myself.

“Thanks for your time,” she said, smiling.

“No, thank you, ” I said. “I enjoyed the meal.”

“I’m glad you did.”

What’s it gonna be, Vlad?

“Can I take you home?” I asked, finally making my choice.

Her face lit up in approval. “I’d love that.”

This was a terrible idea, but I’d made my choice, and so had she.

I helped her with the passenger door, and she got inside.

Fuck!

Page 9

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:51 am

It was quite thoughtful of him to take me home this evening, and I was glad he'd offered to drive me back.

He was at the wheel, focused on the road, his cologne seeping into the air around me. He'd glance at me every now and then, his eyes flashing with a hint of lust.

I knew he found me attractive, although he hadn't said so. The charge between us was palpable; the tension was so strong that we couldn't deny it even if we tried.

It was seemingly impossible to resist him—to tear my gaze off the handsome man who had me spellbound. He was driving me back home, but a part of me didn't want to return to the house just yet.

I'd had so much fun hanging out with him this evening, and it was such a shame that it was all over—at least for tonight.

If it were up to me, we would still be together, talking, laughing, and getting to know each other better. I really enjoyed his company and didn't want the night to end.

I sat in silence in the passenger seat, my mind imagining several scenarios, ninety-eight percent of which were about us being intimate.

Stop this madness! I tried to caution my thoughts, but I was failing in my attempts to brush off the sexy images playing in my head. His scent wasn't helping, either; the fact that his cologne was all I could smell made it more difficult to stay focused.

The man was in the very air that I breathed. His essence was all over me. How was I

supposed to stay strong in such an atmosphere?

I stole a glance in his direction, and my eyes settled on his lips the moment he turned to me. They looked succulent, and I bet they would be so soft.

Jesus, Sienna.

I wanted him. I'd wanted him since the first day I'd seen him. Now, I thought I was losing my mind; he was so hot, and everything about him was seducing me.

"You okay?" he asked, shooting me a quick look.

"Yeah...I am," I replied.

Lies .

I was far from okay. It was like I was boiling from his hotness. For real, I was starting to overheat. My heart was racing, and a tingle traveled between my legs.

"I've been meaning to ask," he began, "you seem to know a lot about art. How come?"

Thank God, something to discuss—a perfect distraction.

"Art is my major," I replied.

"Really?" His brows rose, his eyes flickering in my direction once again.

"You seem surprised."

"I am—very," he confessed. "That's amazing."

For some reason, his words made me blush.

“Thank you.” I jerked my eyes toward him. “The truth is, I aim to pursue art with everything in me, and hopefully, someday, I’ll have my own art gallery—just like Caspian Nightingale.”

“Interesting,” he said. “You’re a brilliant young woman; something tells me your dream will become a reality sooner than later.”

He smiled.

My heart melted in my chest. “Thank you. It means a lot to me.”

“Tell me, what art movement resonates with you the most?”

I didn’t even need time to consider my answer.

“Impressionism,” I replied with a wide grin. “I’m very much intrigued by it.”

“Fascinating,” he said. “I should have known, considering how captivated you were by ‘Whispers in the Dark’ during the gallery opening.”

I laughed lightly. “It was like the painting was calling out to me.”

“Yeah, me, too. I like to see myself as an art enthusiast.”

“I think you are an art enthusiast.”

He chuckled, taking a careful turn down a street. “What makes you so sure?”

“Well, only an enthusiast would be drawn to Nightingale’s ‘Whispers in the Dark,’” I

replied. “Plus, you did talk about the portrait being inspired by Degas’ ‘Echoes of the Night.’ Only an art enthusiast would know that.”

“Impressive. You’re very observant,” he noted. “I find impressionist art quite relatable. In fact, I am so fascinated by it that I have some collections back at my place.”

“No way! Shut the front door!” I let out a squeal of delight, my eyes widening in a mix of excitement and surprise. “Which do you have?”

“A few, like Monet’s ‘Water Lilies....’”

“1921?”

“1919, actually,” he corrected with a smile.

My heart was filled with joy, practically beating out of my chest. All I could manage was, “Cool.”

“I also have Cassatt’s ‘Little Girl in a Blue Armchair,’ Degas’ ‘Dancers at the Bar,’ and, I think, Pissarro’s ‘Red Roofs.’ I don’t know for sure, but I think it’s there.”

I was officially blown away; my mouth wouldn’t shut, and my brows remained raised. A thrill ran through me like a rollercoaster rush, and my heart swelled.

“For people who think we’re very different, we sure have a lot in common,” I said. “I want to see them—the collection.” The words had burst out of me without my permission.

I honestly thought that I’d said that in my mind. I hadn’t planned to say them aloud, not yet, at least. But I was really looking forward to seeing those pieces. He’d piqued

my interest. Now, all I wanted to do was set eyes on those paintings.

“Can I see them, please?” I repeated.

He squinted at me, lips pursed. “Are you sure?”

I nodded.

“You do remember where I said I have the collection, am I right?”

I nodded again. “Yes.”

I was basically asking him to take me to his place. It wasn't a good idea, but I couldn't help it.

He watched me for a moment before finally budging. “Alright,” he conceded, right before he hit the brakes and turned the car around.

Are you really sure about this? Mom and Dad would freak out if they knew what you're doing right now.

I ignored the voice in my head, channeling my thoughts to the art pieces that I'd see at his place.

Only the art pieces...that's all you wanna see?

Sia, this is a bad idea, said my voice of reason. You're attracted to this man. Going to his place at this time of night will not end well. Turn back now that you have the chance.

She's definitely going to get laid, the other voice said.

Quiet, you two! I said to them.

He drove through the gates to his mansion, and he pulled over by the entrance. We both stepped out of the car under the cold and distant stars, the home towering over us like a mausoleum, all white marble and gilded classical architecture.

There were a couple of armed men stationed at different sections of the house, but they didn't scare me. I was with the boss.

The state-of-the-art interior design matched the opulence of the exterior, exuding wealth and power, though it wasn't so over-the-top that it appeared ostentatious. Once in the doorway, we were greeted by a maid whom he addressed in Russian. With her bright smile and warm eyes, she seemed nice.

"Hello," she said to me, her accent glaring in her tone.

"Hi," I replied with a slight wave.

He said a few words in Russian, prompting her to nod before leaving.

"Come," he said to me, grabbing my hand. "I have a mini gallery upstairs."

He has a mini gallery. Wow.

I grinned, and he led me up the stairs to a large room filled with a variety of art pieces hanging on the walls—some also placed on shelves and others positioned on the marble floor.

"You weren't kidding," I gasped, looking around in awe. "I thought that I was an art enthusiast, but this...." A scoff escaped my lips. "This is on a whole new level."

“You like?”

“Are you kidding me? I love it,” I replied, walking toward a portrait on the wall. “It’s beautiful.”

“So that’s where it is,” he said, joining me. “That’s Pissarro's ‘Red Roofs.’ I didn’t think it was here.”

His collection of pieces impressed me, and I spent the next few minutes feasting my eyes on their elegance. Each piece was unique in its own way, reflecting the emotions of the artists, and they enamored me.

“These are amazing, Vlad,” I said, shifting my gaze across the paintings.

“Thank you,” came his reply.

One step backward, and I tripped, losing my balance. My arms flailed in the air as I almost hit the ground. Luckily, he was fast enough to catch me.

His hand was wrapped around my waist, keeping me off the floor as he stared into my eyes.

It was so theatrical that it looked like a scene from a romantic movie.

I gulped, unable to take my eyes off him. The heat and tension that had been sparking between us were rising in full force. I could feel it. He was too close, and now, my heart was racing, and my pussy was beginning to tingle again; the sensation jolted across my system. His scent was turning me on, especially as I realized his gaze was traveling to my lips. He drew closer as if to kiss me, and my hormones were suddenly all over the place. I was longing to feel him, to taste him....

Vlad cleared his throat and helped me regain my balance. "I'm sorry. That was inappropriate."

Our eyes locked in the heat of passion, and I could tell he wanted me just as much as I wanted him.

He was right, though. It was inappropriate. But did I give a damn? No, I didn't. As a matter of fact, I wasn't even thinking straight. I wanted him so badly.

He tore his gaze off me and attempted to step away when I reached out and pulled him to myself. He scanned my eyes, as though he was searching for something. Vlad obviously saw the desire burning there.

Shit. It's about to go down, I thought.

The moment he held my neck with a gentle touch, my breath ceased, my body tensed, and my heart skipped a beat.

Are you sure about this, Sia? my voice of reason asked. If you do this, there's no going back.

Shut up, she's about to have a good time. Don't ruin it for her, the other voice said.

Vlad and I stared deeply at each other, overwhelmed with a powerful, sexual hunger. Seconds later, as if in sync, we rushed at each other's lips, kissing passionately.

Mom and Dad would raise hell if they found out, but I didn't care.

His hands were all over me, caressing my body and fondling my breasts. I could feel the heat, the warmth of our connection. The more he kissed and touched me, the more that fire inside me burned, threatening to consume us both.

He was a very good kisser, and honestly, I'd never been kissed like this before. My entire body was craving him.

He pulled me to himself, and I could feel his erection brushing against my groin. That shit made me wet, and I was swooning in ecstasy.

A gasp escaped my lips when his hand glided up my thigh, slowly teasing me and causing my body to tremble. His fingers caressed my underpants before shifting them aside. I moaned softly when his middle finger slipped into my entrance. My eyes were shut, enjoying the magic of his finger.

I rubbed my hand against the print of his cock, basking at the size of it underneath his pants.

Gosh! It was huge, and I couldn't wait to have him deep inside me. This was happening already; things were heating up and moving way too fast.

He pushed me against the wall, and I struggled to take off his coat while he quickly undid the zipper of my dress. He unhooked my bra and took my breast into his mouth. It felt so good—how he sucked my titties, biting my nipples deliciously. I couldn't help moaning.

I unbuckled his belt and dipped my hand into his pants. When I withdrew his cock, my eyes widened in shock; it was bigger than I thought.

He left my breasts and returned his lips to mine while I stroked that hard cock, gliding my thumb over his precum.

Vlad inserted his finger back into my slippery mound, his eyes glued to mine. I knew that he was savoring the look on my face as I writhed at his touch. He was gentle yet in charge. I loved it.

He kissed me again, this time going down my neck with his finger relentlessly digging into my pussy.

I moaned and moaned and moaned.

He went down on his knees, and with both hands, he yanked my panties off entirely, raising my leg above his shoulder.

My moan was softer and more intense when his tongue settled on my entrance. I was wet already; now imagine the sensation when my wetness mixed with his saliva.

Fuck!

He was an expert with his tongue, eating me up so well that I couldn't get enough. My body was tense, and my breath was difficult to catch while my eyes were rolling backward. I pushed his head deeper between my legs, caressing his soft hair.

The icy mint of his tongue as it played with my clit was driving me nuts, especially when he started to finger me simultaneously.

I was losing my mind.

What's he doing to me? Fuck! This feels so good.

By the time he was done using his tongue, he got back to his feet, and I reached to kiss him, meeting him so fervently.

I was ready to be fucked right now.

He whisked me up, and I clasped my feet around his waist, my hands going around his neck as he walked over to a table somewhere in the room. Vlad set me down

gently, spreading my legs apart.

I was breathing heavily as I watched him position his cock at my entrance, his eyes locked on mine.

Slowly, Vlad penetrated me; I threw my head backward, moaning as my pussy swallowed him up. His thrusts were gentle at first; then gradually, he quickened the pace, his groin slapping against mine.

His cock was hitting places that had never been hit before, and I felt him deep inside my stomach. It was a wonderful feeling.

I sat up on the table, my arms around his neck as he continued to ram into me hard and fast. It was too good to hold in, so I lay back on the table in complete surrender to him.

His thrusts made my titties bounce, and my legs trembled; my body vibrated at the sensation coursing through me.

He was killing me.

Vlad withdrew, and I got up, bending over with a knee on the table. He grabbed my hair and pulled it, fucking me from behind.

Yes, yes! Give it to me! This is how I want it!

I had been starving and didn't realize it until now. The man was really good—experienced and skillful. He was handling me like a real man, and I felt like a woman.... I felt alive.

Yes, give it to me.

As though he could hear my thoughts, he continued to plunge in deeper.

Faster, go faster!

This was our first time fucking, so I wasn't free enough to say these words to him. But he seemed to possess the power to read my mind.

Vlad didn't stop, and I couldn't stop moaning. All those bottled-up feelings were being released, and our hunger was being satisfied.

He jerked me off the table, his strong arms holding me from beneath my legs as he stood firm, his feet planted on the ground. His cock slipped into my cunt, and he gave me the best stand-and-carry fuck I'd ever gotten in my life. His endurance was remarkable, and his thrusts were hitting my G-spot, sending volts of electricity through my body.

My grip around his neck tightened as he continued to ram me hard while I moaned with shut eyes. He rushed to the wall, and I felt my back against it as he set me down on my feet. With a leg raised in the air, he penetrated my entrance with rapid thrusts that made my titties bounce.

I threw my hands into my hair, biting my lower lip as the sensation coursed through my body.

He seized my hands, and interlocking his fingers with mine, he threw them over my head, trapping them underneath one of his.

I was restrained from using my hands, and that bondage was erotic, I had to admit. I loved it. All I could do was moan, and I did that to the best of my ability. I could tell he was enjoying my soundtrack because he wouldn't stop banging me.

Vlad pulled out for a second and spun me around so my chest would press against the wall. In that position, he plunged into me from the back.

He fucked me like he wouldn't get the chance to do so again. Like a real man, Vlad showed me true pleasure; he rammed me so well that I felt like I was cumming.

Yep, I was. And from the thickness of his groan, I knew that he was about to cum as well.

Yes, I want it. Please, give it to me, I begged him in my mind, craving to feel him inside me.

He let out a grunt and exploded, filling my pussy with his load. It was so warm and creamy.

Vlad collapsed on my back for a moment, and I let out a satisfactory sigh, feeling good and fulfilled.

Fuck, this really happened!

Page 10

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:51 am

A warm glow from the morning sun spread across the room as my eyes fluttered and opened. I was awake, my heart filled with delight like never before. Her scent lingered in the air, a gentle reminder of our amazing night together.

I drew in a deep breath, enjoying the satisfaction that coursed through my body. It was a marathon last night, and the effect this morning was a few aching bones. But it was all worth it in the end.

She looked so beautiful and innocent as she slept beside me peacefully. Her nakedness was alluring, attracting my eyes to her perfect frame; her figure was to die for.

She sighed softly but didn't wake as I caressed her hair with a gentle touch. Her skin was so soft and smooth as I ran my hand along her curves.

She was gorgeous!

I didn't understand why a smile was playing on my lips, but I couldn't help it; she was a beauty to behold, and I could spend an eternity watching and adoring that beauty.

The sex last night was better than I had imagined, and she was wild, reserved but wild. I knew it would happen the moment she asked to see my art collection, and I was glad that it did.

It was a remarkable first time together.

As I watched her sleep right now, I recalled how possessive I'd been with every inch of her body last night, how we both burned with desire, unable to get enough of each other.

Her soft, cherry-red lips tasted so good, and she was such a great kisser. The feeling of our tongues twirling in our mouths only seemed to fuel my hunger for her. The kiss had threatened to cease our breaths, gluing us to each other in an unbreakable bond. The pull was too powerful to resist, the tension overwhelming.

I had never wanted a woman so badly before, so when we kissed, the passion that washed over me was a realization of how much I'd been craving her.

Neither of us held back; we unleashed the passion, the bottled-up emotions buried deep down.

She'd been clean inside and out; her shaved pussy had been delicious, so edible that I ate her up with my whole mouth, not just my tongue. Her juice seemed tasty at that moment, and I was unable to hold back. I didn't bother trying anyway because it was enjoyable, going down on her.

Her moans! Fuck, she had the sweetest tone—the most arousing sound that made me want her more.

The way she writhed, twisting and twirling at my touch, had me going crazy for her.

When I'd finally penetrated her wet pussy, it was like I had just passed through a portal to a realm of sheer pleasure. She was so warm and slippery, creamy. With that, my thrusts were effortless as I fucked that throbbing mound, her moans charging me up.

By the time we finished, it was already late, and it wouldn't have been wise to take

her home at this time of night. So, I proposed that she stay the night, and she agreed.

My mind drifted to the events that unfolded as the evening went by.

Sienna had just taken a shower and had stepped out of my wardrobe in a shirt that I gave her to change into. It was oversized cloth and accentuated her sexiness, making her look like a hot model.

I couldn't take my eyes off her as I sat on my bed in a pair of boxers. She was staring at me like she wanted to go again, and I wanted to as well. It was impossible to resist, so why try?

"You're so manly," she said, walking up to me with gentle and seductive steps, her voice low and enticing. She sat astride me, running her manicured fingers over my broad shoulders, her eyes darting across my build. "So hefty and big," she whispered into my ear.

My erection was growing harder by the second, especially as she pressed against it, grinding in slow motion.

She cupped my face in her soft palms and kissed me, her tongue gliding in sensually. The kiss was slow and intimate as her hands ran along my body.

She left my lips and got off, settling on her knees in front of me.

"You used your tongue in ways I didn't think possible," she said, her eyes fixed on mine. "Let me return the favor." Sienna buried her hand in my boxers without breaking eye contact. Carefully, she withdrew my cock and looked down at it with a smile. Stroking it, she said softly, "It's so big."

I groaned lightly at her skills; she was good with her hands and her mouth. Her

tongue rolled over the cap of my cock, sending volts of electricity to my brain. Her saliva mixed with my precum, and the feeling was shocking. It was warm in her mouth, and despite her sloppy moves, no teeth grazed my flesh. Impeccable!

She raised her head, watching me react to her hands sliding over my slippery dick. Both hands clasped around it with one purpose only: to pleasure me, and I felt pleasure, indeed.

Sienna rose to her feet and quietly unbuttoned the oversized shirt on her. Moments later, those perky breasts came into view.

She bent over and pushed me back on the bed, kissing my nipples through to my abs before climbing on top of me.

As she gradually sat on my cock, allowing it to travel deep inside her, her eyes shut, and her body tensed. Finally, she was seated, and the ride to ecstasy began.

My goodness! She was good at this. Slow and steady, she ground down, hands all over my chest. Her wetness made the ride smooth and comfortable.

We were tangled in a web of passion, swimming in a sea of delightful pleasure.

She was in charge, twisting in the direction and with the speed suitable to her. She threw both hands into her hair while her groin continued to brush over mine.

Her moans were music to my ears, and I reached for her breasts, fondling them and softly pinching those nipples. The feeling was overwhelming; the tension was building, and she was starting to move fast. Her moans were growing louder by the second.

The faster she fucked me, the closer I came to cumming. I was groaning, and so was

she.

Fuck! Her speed was amazing.

“Oh, my God, I think I’m cumming,” she blurted out, increasing her tempo.

I felt the same way but had to hold mine back, at least for the next few seconds. I couldn’t be selfish. She was almost there, and it would be unfair to deny her that feeling by releasing my load. Not yet.

Sienna gave a loud cry, and her body started to tremble. “My God, I’m cumming!” she announced, her eyes turning white as she expelled her juice.

“Fuck!” I grunted with a thick groan, still fucking her vigorously.

“Give it to me, please. I want it,” she said, her voice barely audible.

I groaned, and with that, I filled her up with my load. The smile on her face was evidence of her satisfaction.

Sienna exhaled sharply and fell on my chest, exhausted and out of breath.

My thoughts were interrupted by the buzzing of my phone, and I reached to pick it up off my nightstand.

I froze at the sight of the message from Paul: We need to talk .

Shit!

Sienna groaned slightly, pulling up the sheets, still asleep.

The idea that Paul wanted an audience with me was alarming because I knew what this was about. As drawn to Sienna as I was, it was wrong to have acted upon my feelings for her. She was still young and probably naive in some respects, but I knew better. I was stronger, and I should have acted as such, but I let myself fall. Now, I'd have to face my best friend.

Fighting a rival organization was suddenly a lot simpler than reaching out to Paul, but I had to.

I sighed softly, massaging the bridge of my nose as I got out of bed. With steady steps, I headed to the balcony, feeling the chill of the marble floor beneath my feet.

Bathed in the warm glow of the rising sun, I gazed at the horizon, hands on the railing. I dialed Paul's number and heard it ring on the other line.

"Hey," he said as soon as he answered.

"I got your text. What's going on?" It was hard to say those words, pretending like I had no idea what was happening. I felt like I had betrayed my best friend, and the guilt was gnawing at me.

"It's Sienna," he said, going straight to business.

My heart skipped a beat, and I reflexively shut my eyes, feeling the weight of my betrayal.

"What about her?" I asked, rubbing my eyes. "Is she okay?"

"Yeah, she's alright," he replied. "But whether or not she stays that way depends on you."

“What do you mean?”

He sighed. “She’s been talking about you lately. Like a lot.”

“Okay...” I drawled, masking my impatience. I needed him to spill whatever he had to say. “Is there something you want to tell me, Paul?”

“Is there something you wanna tell me , Vlad?” he said, throwing the question back at me.

I was quiet, turning to face Sienna, who was still napping like an angel.

“Look,” he began, “I know my daughter has a crush on you. Natalie and I have spoken, and....” He paused, then continued, “You know the type of life you lead, Vlad. It’s a dangerous one, and we don’t want our daughter getting wrapped up in all that death and chaos. You two are from different worlds, and I don’t want anything from your world to corrupt my baby girl.”

As he spoke, I listened in silence. His words were sharp as daggers, but I’d been cut multiple times before.

“What do you want from me, Paul?” I asked.

“To stay away from my daughter.”

Instantly, I felt like I’d been stabbed in the heart.

“If you ever valued our friendship, you’d honor this request; please, Vlad, stay away from my daughter. I’m begging you.” Then, without another word, he ended the call.

I put my head down, massaging my temples in an attempt to soothe this sudden

headache that plagued me. This message came a little too late, considering I had fucked his daughter just last night.

I'd put folks in the hospital and sent hundreds to an early grave, but none of those acts had made me feel as guilty as I felt now.

"Is everything okay?" Sienna asked, approaching me with the white sheets wrapped in an alluring way around her body, a part of it sweeping the floor like a bridal train.

I put the phone down and looked at her, admiring her elegance and mesmerized by her beauty. She was so sexy this morning that I was tempted to grab her and fervently kiss those lips. I could feel my cock rising and getting hard.

She had a radiant smile on her face, and her skin was simmering in the morning sun. Her eyes sparkled like diamonds, and her hair, despite being ruffled, cascaded beautifully down her back. In simple terms, Sienna was glowing.

I felt struck by the urge to yank her off her feet and fuck her so well. I really wanted to give in to this temptation because everything about her was calling out to me. It was like I was standing before a goddess who had me trapped by her charms. I was enchanted, struggling to break free from her spell, to tear my gaze off her enticing body.

"What's wrong?" She stepped forward, her hand resting lovingly on my cheek.

Her voice was turning me on, and my body was pushing me to pull her close and fuck her here on the balcony, under the soft glow of the rising sun, where we could bask in the euphoria of her moans echoing across the horizon.

But Paul's words still lingered on the fringes of my mind. I showed my weakness last night, but no more. Paul was right; Sienna shouldn't be dragged into the darkness of

my world.

It would hurt to let her go, but I had to.

I pulled her palm off my face and wore a blank expression so she wouldn't read any emotion off me.

Her look of fear and confusion at my reaction broke my heart, but it was necessary. She had to learn to see me as the cold-hearted bastard everyone knew me to be. It was the only way to keep her at bay.

"The chauffeur will take you home."

I walked away, leaving her on the balcony.

"Wait, is that it?" She followed me back in, her voice laced with disbelief.

I knew she was hurt; it was evident in her voice. "You're just gonna send me home, like I'm some random chick you met at a nightclub?" she asked, pissed but composed, or at least trying to be composed.

"Go home, Sienna. I have work to do." I headed to the bathroom.

She scoffed and muttered, "This is unbelievable."

I ignored her and got into the shower. As the water washed over my body, I wished it could wash away this pain and guilt. I had successfully hurt both my best friend and the girl who'd captured my heart.

Way to go, Vlad.

I was willing to trade in my happiness for my friendship with Paul, and this was a hard thing to do, especially since I had to hurt Sienna in the process. The disappointment on her face would haunt me for a long time, but the pain I had caused her was something I would have to live with.

By the time I stepped out of the shower, she was already gone, but a piece of her still hovered in my room: her scent.

I lowered my head in dismay, thinking how swiftly things had taken a drastic turn. Just last night, we'd been having the time of our lives; now, we were back to being complete strangers.

I wanted her so badly, but Sienna was someone that, unfortunately, I couldn't have.

Page 11

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:51 am

It had been a whole week already, and Vlad still hadn't even tried to reach out to check on me at least. It was radio silent on his end, like I meant nothing to him. Things hadn't ended well between us the last time we were together, which was ironic, considering how blissful everything started out.

Our connection was so strong, our conversations and interests so perfectly aligned that it never occurred to me—not even by the slightest of chances—that he would shatter my heart the way he did.

Now, I was sulking in bed, replaying the incidents in my head over and over again, trying to make sense of why he would treat me like that. Nothing reasonable came up. Was I missing something? What did I do to him?

I sniffled, holding back the tears that welled my swollen red eyes from lack of sleep and too much thinking. Pulling the sheets over my body, I tightened my grip around my pillow, which was literally the only shoulder I could lean on now.

I thought we'd had chemistry, like we had something good going on. Why the sudden change?

Vlad had fucked me so well that night at his place; he made me feel stuff I'd never felt before—fuck! He freaking made me cum!

I smiled at the thought of my body shivering in ecstasy while I expelled my juice. His touch was magical, and the effect on my body was a sweet sensation. He'd been a good lover who handled me like a real man and made me feel like a woman.

No one had ever fucked me the way that he did—none could match his skills and experience.

The smile on my face transformed into sadness as that glimpse of bliss was immediately overwhelmed by a shadow of despair. My heart was heavy and bleeding, and my head was aching from all that thinking.

I'd been trying to figure out what it was I did wrong, but so far, my efforts had been futile, and now, I couldn't help but blame myself. Maybe I'd been too forward; maybe I threw myself at him, and then he took advantage of that.

He was so attractive, and I wanted to feel him inside me so badly that I hadn't stopped for one minute to think about the speed of my pace. Everything was happening so fast, and I thought we were on the same page.

I was so stupid and naïve.

What the fuck were you thinking? I slapped my forehead, embarrassed. Babushka warned you—she told you that he was bad—hell, Mom and Dad clearly didn't want you associating with him, but you didn't listen. You never do; that's your problem, Sienna. You always do what you want regardless of what anyone else thinks or says about it.

In a way, that's a good thing, another voice in my head said.

Is it, though? the previous voice asked. Because right now, she's sulking in bed, crying her eyes out.

Well, technically, she's not crying yet, the one said.

Stop indulging her. She fucked up.

Of course, she did, and she knows that—stop being too hard on her.

I'm sorry, but I can't. That's my job as her voice of reason.

I groaned at the constant voices in my head, threatening to drive me crazy.

“Please, be quiet for one second and let me think!” I said aloud.

For a moment there, it was silent in my head, and I let out an exhausted sigh.

Why are you so hurt anyway? It's not like he didn't tell you he was a bad guy, and bad guys do bad stuff, like breaking a pretty girl's heart. You know that.

“I do,” I muttered, rubbing my eyes.

So, why are you so upset?

Because she feels used.

The other voice wasn't wrong. That was exactly how I was feeling.

Vlad had treated me like a one-night stand, like a little fling. I thought he had some respect for me, considering how gentle he was with my body. I thought I was different from other girls—special. But I was wrong. I was just another name he'd crossed off a long list of girls.

His cold words resounded in my head: Go home, Sienna. I have work to do.

It wasn't what he'd said that hurt me; it was how he'd said it. His tone was cold and indifferent, evidence of his disregard for my feelings. That was what hurt me. To make matters worse, his expression was unreadable, and I knew then that I truly

meant nothing to him. I was just some used trash to be disposed of.

I tried to give him the benefit of doubt, but it had been seven days already, and still no word from him—that was one-hundred sixty-eight hours, ten-thousand eighty minutes, and six-hundred four-thousand eight-hundred seconds. If you asked me, that was long enough.

Alright, enough sulking, Sienna, my voice of reason said. Vlad's been such a sick dick to you.

True. That was a dick move.

Clearly, he didn't want me around anymore; he'd gotten what he wanted from me.

The connection I thought we'd shared was one-sided by the looks of things, although the attraction was real. We'd acted on it, and he got more than enough.

You're hurting. But you need to get over it, the other voice said. He's moved on like you never existed. You should do the same.

Hold on, my voice of reason chipped in. What if you're wrong? What if Vlad hasn't moved on like you think? What if there's something more to this that meets the eye?

Are you on his side now? the other voice asked, prompting me to frown.

I'm not. I'm only pointing out a possibility that we're leaving out of the equation.

Part of me wanted to believe that this was true—that maybe there was a perfectly reasonable explanation for his behavior. But I couldn't put my heart on the line for a possibility. No, I wouldn't; it wasn't worth it.

My phone buzzed on the nightstand, and I glanced at it.

Maybe it's him.

My eyes widened in anticipation.

Don't get your hopes up, the other voice warned sternly.

I stretched out my hand and snatched the phone; my shoulders dropped in disappointment when I realized the caller was Fiona.

Told ya.

Fiona had been so supportive since the incident with Vlad, and she'd been helping me cope with this heartbreak. She vouched for him for at least five days, urging me to be positive. But two days ago, she concluded that he had done that on purpose and that he was a playboy; Mr. Bad Boy were her exact words.

"Hi, Fi," I said, my voice low and faint as I rubbed the bridge of my nose.

"Hey," she replied with a soft, soothing tone. "How are you?"

I yawned, stretching. "I'm fine."

"How are you really?" she insisted.

"Fi, I'm fine."

She was quiet for a moment on the other line. "Okay, then, I guess you won't have a problem with who I saw last night."

My eyes narrowed. “Please, don’t ask me to guess,” I said, unwilling to do that with her today.

“Uhh...okay,” she replied as though that was exactly what she had in mind.

“Fi, what is it?” I demanded.

“Don’t freak out,” she said; that was a heads-up.

“Why would I do that?” I asked, my curiosity piqued.

“Well, I was at a hotel bar with Jack last night, and you wouldn’t believe who I spotted.”

I had a good idea who she had spotted, and that made my heart skip a beat. Slowly, I pushed the sheets to the side and sat upright. “Who did you spot?”

She paused for a minute. “It was Vlad.”

My eyes shut reflexively at the mention of his name; it was as if my heart had been ripped apart by a fucking dagger. I was speechless, unsure of what to feel about this. He was at a bar, so what? I knew that he’d moved on already.

“Sia, you there?” she asked.

“Yeah. Yeah, I am,” I replied. “What was he doing?” Now, I sounded like an obsessed girlfriend keeping tabs on her man. Ridiculous!

“Uhm...first, you have to promise not to go ballistic,” she said, her cautious tone suggesting that she was about to drop a bombshell that would test my ability to remain composed.

Okay, this was definitely going to be juicy—and not the good kind.

“Fi, what was he doing?” I asked through gritted teeth, feeling a rush of anger surge through me.

“I don’t know, but he was surrounded by a bunch of women,” she said. “And other men, of course.”

A bunch of what now?

I was suddenly so pissed that I could feel my nails sinking into my flesh as I balled a fist. He was out with some men and surrounded by women; that sounded a lot like he was having fun. Of course, he was, and I was here sulking in bed because of him.

I told you he wasn’t worth it, my inner voice said.

“I took some pictures. Would you like to—”

I cut her off. “Send them.”

“Okay. Just don’t do anything irrational.”

A few seconds later, my phone chimed, and I lowered it, looking at the photos she’d sent. Filled with rage, I pursed my lips, glaring at the images on my screen as I scrolled through them. My breath was rapid, and my face scrunched up as I tightened my hold against the poor sheets.

In all of the photos, there was this one woman that was all over him, like a moth to a flame. He was seated on a sofa, impeccably dressed up in a nice, tailored suit with a stick of cigar hanging off his lips. The woman’s proximity made my brows furrow, and I clenched my fist.

I scrolled through to the next photo. Vlad was leaning on the couch, sipping from a pitcher with the same woman leaning in his arms. They both seemed cozy, laughing, chattering, and having a good time.

From the angles these pictures were taken, Vlad looked super handsome, and the camera really captured those dashing eyes of his.

Still thinking there's something more about his behavior than meets the eye? one of the voices asked.

Okay, I take it back. He's just a total asshole, my voice of reason admitted.

He'd used me to satisfy his urge, to quench his desires. I was a fool to expect more from a man who viewed the world from a broken lens. He'd warned me against being too close to him, and I hadn't listened.

I cast a piercing stare at the woman in the photo, feeling sorry for her because he'd just spend the night with her and then dump her the morning after.

My parents had been right. Babushka had been right. Vlad was bad news.

"That's Lily, the woman in the pictures," Fiona said, drawing back my attention. "She's a famous escort."

Lily was beautiful, with a pretty smile and black hair that cascaded down her shoulders. Her pale blue eyes matched the color of her sexy gown, with a long slit that revealed her alluring thighs.

He clearly had a type—the hot ones—and I wondered what neat trick he'd use to lure her into his bed, if he hadn't done that already.

He'd caught me with his love for art; what would he use on her this time?

I guess you'll never know, a voice said.

Remind me not to fall so stupidly ever again, I thought.

We got you, the voices said at the same time. Now what? What's your plan?

"Sia, you with me?" Fiona asked. "Look, I'm sorry if this upset you or if I shouldn't have taken the photos—I just thought that you deserved to know so you'd stop beating yourself up, worrying about Mr. Bad Boy, who's obviously having a time of his life even after how he treated you," she said in a rush. "He doesn't deserve you, Sia. He doesn't deserve your tears."

I took a sharp intake of breath. She's right; he doesn't.

While I'd been stuck in here, obsessing over the situation, Mr. Bad Boy was out there, busy crossing names off his list.

With that, I got out of bed, headed to the windows, and parted the curtains.

"Sia?" Fiona called, worried about my silence.

"There's no need to apologize, Fi, you did me a solid," I replied. "How's your Friday gonna be?"

"Uhm, I'm not sure yet. Why?"

"Because I want us to go clubbing. I need to get my mind off a lot of things," I blurted.

“Amazing!” she exclaimed. “That’s perfect. You’ve sulked long enough. Time to have some fun.”

I was done wallowing in self-pity. Since Vlad was having the time of his life with other women, I shouldn’t isolate myself from the rest of the world because of him.

I flashed a sly grin, my lips curling up at the corners. “We’re gonna party hard!”

The thumping bass and infectious beats of the DJ’s music seemed to echo in my head as if I were already in the club.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:51 am

“Well, hello,” Kostya said, whistling low and flashing a flirtatious grin at a female stripper walking by.

She smiled back and wiggled her fingers at him as she continued down the steps away from the lounge where we were seated.

His light blue eyes trailed her until she was out of sight, blending with the crowd downstairs, where the DJ’s lively beats filled the air and dancers moved to the rhythm.

I leaned back in the plush chair, with a glass of whiskey in my hand; Fyodor and Simon, who were beside me, exchanged glances and smirked as Kostya silently roamed his eyes downstairs, searching for her.

“What?” He turned to face us. “I like beautiful things. And she is beautiful.”

I smirked and slipped my whisky.

Kostya was my cousin: a dashing, tall young man with dark hair and a chiseled physique that always got the ladies’ attention. He was charming and witty, with a great sense of humor. However, once crossed, his demeanor would change in an instant, revealing a very dark and ruthless side. Everyone in the mafia world knew not to mess with him; he was, by the way, a Wolkov.

Kostya had recently moved from Mexico to New York on Maksim’s command to take care of business here, just like me. Being the type that loved being around beautiful women, it had been his idea to chill and enjoy the evening in this high-class

club.

I was still dealing with the Sienna situation, and this was a perfect distraction. The last time we'd been out, a couple of days ago, it didn't necessarily help much, but it wasn't bad either.

Kostya sipped his vodka and crossed his legs, relaxing in his seat. "You've only been here a couple of weeks, but I see how the business is already booming. Well done, cousin," he said to me.

"And it will be even better now that you're here," I replied. "With our combined efforts, our profits will be off the charts."

"Cheers to that," he said, nursing his glass. "I guess Pakhan always knows what to do when it comes to business." He had a sly grin on his face.

I nodded.

"I've seen the numbers, Vlad. The Bratva is in good condition here, and we must ensure it stays that way," he said, sipping his vodka.

"I've met with a couple of our associates in the city. Trust me, it will stay that way," I replied.

A smile played on his lips.

"Mr. Wolkov," a voice called softly.

I raised my eyes to see the man standing in front of me in a blue suit and a flashy red tie.

“Oh, come on; be more specific next time. There are two Wolkovs here tonight,” Kostya quipped, realizing the man was referring to me, not him.

“Apologies,” the man said to Kostya and faced me. “Nice to see you again.”

My eyes narrowed at him as he sounded like we’d met before, but he was a complete stranger to me.

“You don’t recognize me, do you?” he asked, his expression blank.

Indeed, I didn’t.

He stretched out his hand. “My name is Andy. We met back in Russia some time ago.”

My gaze flickered to his hand, then back to his face. He didn’t look remotely familiar in any way. “Don’t recall.” I shook his hand.

“It’s okay,” he said. “Wasn’t expecting you to.”

There was a look in his eyes that I couldn’t quite place, a familiar expression that I was yet to understand—like a memory that was out of reach.

We stared at each other for a moment before Andy broke the silence. “Well, I just wanted to say hello. Have a wonderful evening.” He adjusted his tie and walked away.

“What was that about?” Simon asked.

I turned to him, casually shrugging my shoulders. I was used to being known, recognized by men I’d never seen. So, maybe this Andy man was someone who

fancied my work. But the aura that emanated from him was rather mysterious.

He took one last look at me before walking down the steps, and he had that unreadable expression etched on his face again. I hadn't even given much thought when I was interrupted by Lily's voice.

"Hey, handsome." She slid into the seat between Simon and me, her eyes glued to mine in a sultry gaze. "You look absolutely ravishing tonight—I could devour you!" She flashed her manicured nails at me with a flirtatious grin, her voice laced with playfulness and her eyes sparking with mischief as those lashes battered at me.

Lily was my escort, and she'd been going a little beyond her boundaries these days. Simon had told me she was definitely into me, and I could see that in her every move. It was glaring 'cause she wasn't hiding it. Lily was charming and attractive, lovely to hang around, and I was sure most guys would want to get between her legs. Not me, though. She wasn't even close to being as attractive as Sienna was.

She gently placed her palm on my chest, running her fingertip over my undershirt and biting her lower lip very seductively.

I seized her hand, clutching it in mine. "Behave."

Disappointed, she withdrew with a silent hiss.

She wasn't Sienna, and her touch was repulsive—the exact opposite of the reaction it should have had on me.

What have you done to me, Sienna? Why can't I look at another woman without comparing them to you?

It was hopeless, holding on to a forbidden passion that would most likely never be.

Yet, I was still harboring thoughts of her every now and then. She was all that I thought about at the slightest opportunity.

I knew that I had hurt her; I hadn't wanted to, but I had to. It was a necessary evil. If I truly believed that it was a necessary evil, why, then, was I still being haunted by the look of disappointment in her eyes when I'd said those words. She must have felt so stupid, thinking that I'd taken advantage of her. I wouldn't blame her.

Sienna was the one person who'd somehow managed to make me see things from a different perspective, and I truly believed that she had the potential to bring out the best in me. Her light was so powerful that it shone in my deepest darkness.

I had tried so many times to reach out to her, to tell her that I hadn't meant to treat her the way that I had. But if I did that, then I'd be reopening a door I was trying so hard to keep shut. I was used to physical pain—it meant nothing to me. But this type of pain, the one that constantly stabbed my heart.... I was yet to get used to it.

She must hate me now; she must probably be regretting everything, saying her parents had been right about me all along. Maybe they had been. Maybe she should hate me.

Can you deal with that? I asked myself. Can you handle it when you see her and realize that she despises you?

I shoved my whiskey down my throat and ruffled my hair lightly.

We'd come out here to have a good time, and it seemed like the others were having some fun while I was sulking about Sienna. I wanted to loosen up, but no woman there intrigued me.

My heart leaped in my chest when I smelt that familiar perfume. Of course, I'd

recognize it anytime, anywhere; the scent was registered in my head, plastered over my sheets. I had lost my composure because of it, so how would I forget?

I jerked my eyes, and there she was: the most intriguing and attractive woman I'd seen all week. I swallowed, suddenly feeling hot inside.

She was so gorgeous, and time seemed to stand still so I could savor her divine beauty. Her wavy black hair whipped sideways to reveal her face, lit up with an amazing smile that made my cock flinch in my pants. Her friend was with her, and they were both climbing up the stairs.

Kostya whistled, his eyes fixed on them. "My God, what a beauty!"

He better not be talking about Sienna. I'd forget we're family and knock his teeth out. I traced his eyes to the other woman, the friend.

Sienna's glittering purple dress was so tight that it hugged her skin, revealing her perfect curves and contours. There was a slit that ran along it all the way to the hem, exposing her alluring thigh.

Fuck! She's smoking hot.

On those heels, she walked so elegantly to a corner with her friend, where they slid into a couch, chatting and laughing.

I was taken aback both by her beauty and by the fact she was here in this club. Why was she here? What was she up to? And why was she dressed so hot? Who did she want to impress? Was she here, waiting for some guy?

I balled a fist, feeling a rush of anger at the thought of another man having his way with her.

I'll kill the bastard.

My teeth gritted, accentuating my fury.

“Hey, check out those two,” Kostya said to me and Fyodor, pointing in their direction.

Simon was engrossed in a conversation with some random chick beside him. He had that horny look in his eyes, and I knew he'd definitely fuck her before the night would end. He was too focused to care about these two.

“Isn't she just lovely?” Kostya asked, relaxed with his legs crossed, his gaze fixed on the girls.

“Which of them?” Fyodor asked without taking his eyes off the girls.

“The one with the green eyes,” he replied with a smile.

“They both have green eyes,” Fyodor said.

“Well, I'm talking about the shorter one, the one with the light brown hair. She's magnificent,” Kostya clarified.

That was Sienna's friend.

“Well, I find the other one more attractive...sexy,” Fyodor said.

“Keep your fucking attraction to yourself,” I snarled at him, frowning. The only reason he hadn't taken a punch yet was because he wasn't just anybody.

“Ooh, temper,” Kostya teased.

Fyodor threw his hands in the air, an indication that he had backed down from any plans of making further moves at the damsel.

I had my eyes fixed on her with only one thought in my head. How should I approach her?

She turned in my direction, and our eyes locked in that moment. She didn't flinch, nor did she acknowledge my presence. I guess her hatred for me ran deeper than I thought.

A tall, lanky guy approached the girls, focusing on Sienna as he slid in by her side. She smiled at him and looked me dead in the eyes as if to say, watch this .

I did watch her, and my fists clenched as she pulled him to herself and kissed him, allowing his hands to traverse her body. My hold over the glass in my hand tightened, and soon, it shattered, pieces of the broken glass stinging my palm.

I sprang to my feet and headed over there, fuming profusely. She'd done that on purpose, but it still hurt. I pulled the boy away from her.

"What the hell, man?" he exclaimed right before my fist connected with his face.

The force was so strong that it knocked him down to the floor.

"What is wrong with you?" Sienna snapped, pushing me away, her hands feeling light against my chest.

"I think he broke my nose," the boy whined, his nostrils bleeding.

I'd created a scene for everyone to watch, and I didn't give a fuck.

“Why did you do that?!” She raised her voice, but I didn’t respond.

I simply grabbed her wrist and pulled her with me.

“Where’re you taking me? Let go!” She struggled to squirm her hand out of my hold, but my grip was firm.

I took her to a room I’d booked and locked the door behind us.

She glared at me. “What is the meaning of this, Vlad?”

I grabbed her neck and pushed her to the wall, but despite my anger, I was careful enough not to hurt her.

Her back connected with it, and a soft, sexy sigh escaped her lush lips.

“Your little game won’t work on me,” I said, my voice low and husky.

“Are you sure about that?” She flashed me a sweet smile, desire flickering in her eyes. “Because I think it’s already working.”

I looked at her; her heart was racing at our proximity. It was obvious. Her lips were trembling, and her body was tensing at my touch.

I wasn’t sure how she’d react, but I dared to slide a hand down her panties, and a light moan came forth.

She wants it.

Her breathing was heavy, and her lashes were battering at me.

“Aren’t you gonna ask me to stop?”

She looked at me and just bit her lower lip with a mischievous grin etched on her face.

I rushed at her lips, kissing them so fervently as she responded with the same energy. I shifted her panties to the side and slipped in my finger.

“Naughty little girl. You’re wet already,” I said softly, pushing deep inside her.

She moaned, wrapping her arms around me in pleasure. I yanked off her panties and lifted her leg as she quickly undid my zipper and withdrew my cock.

We could feel the tension brewing, the sexual flame burning so brightly. I’d missed her more than I thought, and it made my heart race. With the way she was all over me, it was clear that she’d missed me as well. She let out a pleasurable sigh as I penetrated her mound.

I grabbed both her hands in one of mine, pinning them over her head, and with the other hand, I raised her leg while fucking her vigorously. Each thrust was harder than the previous one as my anger seemed to take control.

Sienna didn’t mind the rough sex; in fact, her reaction—her moans and writhing body—was proof that she was enjoying it. She was unable to use her hands, but with her tone and the look on her face, she expressed the sensation coursing through her.

It felt so good being inside her again, and I wasn’t ready to share her with anyone. “You’re mine, you hear me? You’re fucking mine .”

She was too carried away to reply, so overwhelmed that her eyes were turning white as her breasts bounced to the rhythm of my thrusts.

I let go of her hands and spun her around so her front was pressed against the wall. Pulling on her hair, I rammed her hard from the back, my groin slapping against her butt cheeks.

Her sounds were music to my ears, and I was overcome by the feeling of ecstasy. “I fucking own you,” I declared, and her response was a sweet moan.

Her body was jerking, and I wouldn’t stop fucking her. Faster and faster, I plunged into her until I started to run out of gas.

With a deep groan, I shot my load, emptying it inside her. Our voices quieted, and I struggled to catch my breath.

It felt really good being intimate with her again; it was as if I’d been starving all this while.

Page 13

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:51 am

I didn't think I'd run into him at the club, but now that fate or whatever had brought us together again, I couldn't hold back from getting on his nerves and eventually getting laid.

When he gripped my hand and pulled me away from the crowd, my heart skipped for a moment in fear of what he was going to do to me. Making him jealous was a bad idea, and Fiona had warned me against doing that seconds before I kissed that guy. Funny, I didn't even catch his name; the poor boy was just a pawn to get the big fish mad. And it worked.

After he took me to a room and shut the door, Vlad turned to face me with those blazing eyes, red with anger. I swallowed hard but managed to remain composed. His hand went around my neck, and the way he glared at me somehow turned me on. I smirked faintly, recognizing the look in those eyes when he pushed me to the wall.

His words were watering the ecstasy growing within me, making me weak in my knees.

He was fucking horny, and that made me wet, excited. His desire to take me was palpable in his gaze, and my heart started to race; I knew what would happen next, and I wanted it. I wasn't supposed to fall for his charms after how he'd treated me, but at that moment, I wasn't thinking straight. All I wanted was to get fucked. I wanted it so badly.

The hardness of his erection was brushing against me, and my goodness, that sent shivers down my spine. The man was dashing, angry yet ravishing at the same time, and his furrowed brows didn't detract from his rugged attractiveness.

My body jerked at the feeling of his finger inside me, and I didn't necessarily care that he'd find out how wet I was for him.

"You naughty girl." His baritone melted my heart.

I shut my eyes the moment he rushed at my lips, kissing them with so much fervency. This prompted me to reciprocate the gesture with the same energy, and soon, we were both swooning in a heated passion.

His tongue was twirling in my mouth and mine in his while he simultaneously fingered me with rapid movements.

All I wanted was his cock, and as soon as he plunged it into me, a gasp escaped from my lips. Standing on one foot with the other hanging above his arm, he rammed into me without holding back. His words were laced with possessiveness as he claimed ownership of my body.

Fuck. It felt good having him inside me after so long. I'd honestly missed him; I'd been really starving, and now I couldn't curtail my moans.

His huge cock was working its magic, its length traveling deep inside my wet pussy while I was pressed forward against the wall. With a handful of my hair, he pulled in a way that was both gentle and rough at the same time.

The sound of his groin slapping against my ass was so hot that it got me wanting more hits. His pull on my hair hurt a little, but I liked the sweet pain that came with it. His thrusts were rough and hard—a direct contrast to the last time we'd fucked. Maybe he was fucking me angrily. Yes, he was.

I had pissed him off by making out with that random guy, and now the rage from his jealousy was the fuel burning his drive. It was almost like he was punishing me for

being such a naughty girl.

It was rough sex, and frankly speaking, I didn't care about the motive behind this. I was basking in the euphoria of this punishment; the anger was mutual, and I just wanted him to fuck me.

My warm pussy was filled with his cum, and he pushed deeply into me with heavy groans. Seconds later, he pulled out and stepped backward away from me.

Just like that, all that attitude of his that I'd ignored came rushing back into my head. The moment of bliss was over, and the hatred was sinking in again. I was satisfied, and my senses had returned; I could think straight now.

I picked up my panties and slipped into them, adjusting my dress as I felt his gaze on me. Without a word, I walked away and headed to the door; then, I took one last look at him.

He was standing there, watching me in silence, his hands buckling his belt.

The sex was great, and I enjoyed it, but this was going to be the last time I'd ever let it happen again. I hoped that he had his fun because he wouldn't get that with me ever again. I was done with him, and this time, I meant it.

Vlad was toxic, and I deserved better; I deserved better than being treated like trash after sex. Yes, he was a good lover who made me feel things I'd never felt before, but I was obviously not the only woman he'd made feel that way. He'd fucked me and dumped me, then got himself another woman. As though that wasn't enough, he still had the guts to get upset over seeing me with another guy.

He didn't even bother trying to hide his discomfort; no, he went ahead and caused a scene, breaking the poor boy's nose with a single punch. He was a jealous man with

anger issues. Big red flag. Hell no!

I couldn't deal with that. Truly, I was done with Vlad.

The door squeaked open at my pull, and I walked out, slamming it shut behind me. Heading down the steps, I drew in a deep breath and let it out slowly. My mind was made up; staying away was a good idea. It felt peaceful, and with the way I left him, I'd say we were even now. I smirked.

It had already been a few days since our last encounter at the club—a few days of healing and constant reevaluation.

Yes, a part of me was having a rethink on the decision I had made, and this was because I'd been getting text messages from an unknown number, and the content of the messages indicated that they were from Vlad.

It had been a difficult battle, trying to convince the voices in my head that I was done with him. The inner struggle with this concept had been quite challenging, but I didn't want to overthink things. My mind was made up already.

Vlad had hurt me, and this was simply a coping mechanism for me.

It was a new day, and I was seated at the table in my room, surfing the internet. I'd just gotten off the phone with Fiona not long ago, and although she supported my decision, I could tell that she didn't trust my judgment. We talked about a couple of other things since I didn't want to dwell on the 'V' subject, as Fiona tagged it.

Since the club, she'd been referring to him as you-know-who. I found it hilarious but never showed it. Vlad, a name that once made my body shiver and my heart skip a

beat, now sounded a lot like Voldemort in my ears, hence the reason she stopped saying his name.

I was trying not to think about h, but nothing I attempted to do to distract myself from this gnawing situation worked.

A funny video was playing on the screen of my laptop but I just sat there, watching it but missing out on the humor.

I buried my face in my palms, letting out a frustrated raspberry at my inability to think straight. Hell, I couldn't even enjoy a fucking funny video about hilarious cats, and that shit always cracked me up.

My phone chimed, and another text came in.

Don't bother checking. It's definitely him, a voice said to me.

At least check to know what he wants this time—besides, you're not even sure it's from him, my voice of reason said.

Oh, that text is from him, alright, the other voice said.

I reached out for the phone and saw the message: We need to talk .

It was him.

Told ya.

There was nothing to talk about; why wouldn't he just leave me alone? He'd done enough already, and I'd made a decision to do what was right by me.

He's got it out for you, and trust me, he's not gonna stop, my voice of reason said.

Whose side are you on, anyway?

This isn't about sides; it's the truth. The man is obsessed. Did you forget what he said while fucking you back at the club?

Well, if that were true, then why was he suddenly showing it now? It was already too late. Maybe if he'd shown this much concern after treating me like trash the first time, things would have been different between us.

Wanna know what I think? the other voice began. I think he's just upset that you had the last laugh. You bruised his manly pride. So, there's an 80 percent chance that he'll shatter your heart—again—if you fall for his tricks.

That made sense. It was a bit awkward, but it made sense. What if that was the plan, to get me back so he could have the last laugh?

Fool me once, shame on you, fool me twice...? Well, I wasn't going to let that happen.

But you want him back, don't you? my voice of reason asked.

You need to stop whispering these hints of possibility where there's none!

And you need to stop being so pessimistic all the goddamn time. It's my job to make her see reason even when there isn't any.

It was a war zone in my head, and those pesky little voices wouldn't quiet.

Look, he's too dark, okay? She deserves better!

What happened to always finding the light, even in the deepest darkness?

My voice of reason was seriously kicking it hard, and it was so annoying.

It's different this time.

"Fuck!" I threw my hands into my hair, smoothing it back as I got out of my chair, frustrated. "Time out," I said, shutting the voices out. "Jesus Christ!"

My head was so full and heavy from the constant thoughts that overlapped themselves in my mind.

"Arghh!" I groaned, massaging my temples. It was like I was losing my sanity, and all I wanted to do was scream.

I needed to express these sickening feelings that had me riled up, so I grabbed my paints and brushes.

On the canvas, I let my emotions out, unleashing them all as I painted the darkness, the hatred and love that caused turmoil inside me. Each brushstroke, lighter than the last, seamlessly eased me of these overwhelming emotions, freeing me from their weight.

In no time, the once blank canvas was covered in multiple colors of paints and intricate patterns that conveyed my inner conflicts.

I exhaled sharply, looking at the piece before me. I was no Edgar Degas, but this was my own art. A portrait that came from a dark place, inspired by a mix of pain and pleasure, hatred and love.

I tossed the brush aside and lowered my head, rubbing my eyes then my temples in an

attempt to soothe this terrible headache.

For days, a persistent heaviness in my head had plagued me with an occasional migraine that threatened to kill me.

I winced at the pain, pressing my thumbs into my temples in a futile effort to alleviate the throbbing agony. Suddenly, I was hit by a wave of nausea, forcing me to stumble toward the bathroom, my palm flying to my mouth. I pushed the door open and collapsed on my knees in front of the toilet, my body convulsing as I vomited.

What the hell?

I brushed a hand over my mouth, wondering what I ate that might have upset my stomach. Nothing came to mind. Then what was it? Why did I throw up?

Your emotions are heightened, you're experiencing constant migraines, and now, you just vomited, my voice of reason listed.

Then, it hit me.

Hold on a minute.

I recalled what date it was.

Fuck! I'd missed my period by a month.

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:51 am

I leaned back in my chair, a hand under my chin as I narrowed my eyes at Sergei sitting across the table in the conference room. My associates were present as well as we deliberated on the welfare of the business.

Sergei was telling me about the businesses that had paid for our protection services and was filling me in on the progress so far.

Drumming my fingers on the mahogany table, I watched him in silence, and I could see the discomfort in his eyes. He tried to stay composed, but I'd been in the business long enough to know when my presence was making people nervous. He seemed nervous, with good reason anyway.

Sergei was a regional manager, one of the lowest ranks in the organization, and I was...well, I was me. There weren't too many people above me save for the Pakhan, of course. This was the reason Sergei was nervous.

He must have heard about me, and the stories were why he was so uncomfortable. His fear was glaring, but I admired his ability to press on without so much as a stutter.

Sergei was portly with balding hair, and it seemed to me like he was in his mid-fifties. I'd only just met him when the meeting began, but with the way he spoke, I knew the region he managed was in good hands. Notwithstanding his nervousness, he seemed to know what he was doing. We needed more people like him, and that alone earned him my respect.

"From what I can tell, everything seems to be in place," I said to Sergei.

He paused for a moment. “Not everything, sir.”

I squinted, waiting for him to continue.

He did. “There’s a...uhh.” Sergei cleared his throat. “There’s a minor resistance from a rival organization who are threatening the businesses that paid us protection fees.”

“If they paid us protection fees, then why are they not being protected from this....” I paused and continued almost immediately, “What organization are we talking about anyway? The Italian Mob? The Chinese Triad?”

“None of those. They know better,” he replied.

“Then who?” I asked, a little curious.

“They call themselves the White Lions,” one of my associates chipped in.

My brows rose instantly at the ridiculousness of the name. “The what now?”

Sergei had a faint grin on his face; clearly, he considered it ridiculous as well. It was by far the lamest name of a gang I’d heard in a long time.

“They must be new in town ‘cause I’ve never heard of them,” I said.

“Yes, they are,” he replied. “Which is why I wasn’t sure how to deal with the situation. Should this resistance have come from another rival organization that’s already rooted in the system, then it’d be an all-out war,” he explained.

I drew in a deep breath, already feeling sorry for those unlucky bastards. “I take it they don’t know who runs this city.”

He shook his head. “I don’t believe they do.”

I scoffed. “Kids. That’s what they are: children. And since they’re stupid enough to play with fire, they’ll get burned.”

“What are our orders?” Sergei asked me.

“Round them, beat some sense into them, and educate them on who owns this turf. Let them learn the hard way,” I said. “Go easy on them, though, since they haven’t really overstepped yet. Let’s just assume they don’t know about us.”

He nodded.

“But if they want to be gangster so bad, see if there’s any of them that can be useful and bring them into the fold,” I added. “Anything else?”

“Well, there’s something else that I think you should know about,” he said.

“What’s that?” I asked, but honestly, I wasn’t really interested; I just needed to get this over and done with.

“A Silver Serpent who kidnapped and raped a daughter of one of our own,” he answered.

The Silver Serpents were a criminal organization known for their ruthlessness. I’d heard about them, and I also knew that Maksim had put them in their place a few years ago.

“She’s just thirteen, Boss—the girl he raped,” Sergei added.

Now, I was pissed, suddenly interested in meeting this rapist-slash-pedophile. My

fists clenched, and I felt a wave of anger wash over me. “Take me to him.”

“Gladly,” Sergei said and got out of his chair.

He led me to the basement where the man was tied up, both hands over his head, bound by a chain connected to the rafters. His face was swollen, and his eyes were barely open.

As I walked in, the men standing guard slightly bowed their heads in reverence, but my gaze was fixed on the man hanging in the middle of the dimly lit room with only the tip of his toes brushing against the floor. He looked exhausted, worn out from all the beatings he took.

I stood before him with gritted teeth as he struggled to breathe. He had the guts to go after a daughter of one of the members of the Wolkov Bratva; wrong move.

“How did it feel taking advantage of that poor girl?” I asked him.

He managed to raise his head, and the moment he saw me, his body jerked in fear as though he recognized me. “Oh, God,” he whispered softly, his voice laced with fear. “It’s you.”

He looked terror-stricken, like he’d seen the devil, and that was who I was at the moment: the devil whose path he’d crossed. “I swear to you, I didn’t know who she was at the time. Please, show mercy,” he pleaded, shedding tears.

“She was thirteen,” I said. “Did you know?”

He swallowed hard, shaking his head as he muttered words that were inaudible.

“Take off his pants,” I instructed.

“What?” His eyes widened in fear.

My men, without hesitation, rushed at him, and one of them stripped him naked from the waist down.

He was protesting, struggling, but to no avail.

“What are you going to do to me?” His voice shuddered, overwhelmed with fear of the unknown.

I stretched out a hand, and a dagger was placed in my palm.

“No, no, no, no, no!” The words came out of his bloody mouth in a nervous rush. His eyes looked like they were about to bulge out of their sockets. “Please, don’t...don’t do this. I’m begging you. I’m sorry—I’ll never do it again; I promise.” His voice grew higher the closer I drew to him.

“I know,” I replied, halting before him. “That’s because I’ll make sure of that.” I seized his cock, squeezing on his balls.

His screams pierced the air, and the room was filled with his pleas for mercy. I was certain that the poor girl must have screamed and begged him to stop, as well, but he’d had his way with her anyway. Why, then, should I show him mercy?

I looked him dead in the eye, and he knew that my mind was made up. The words coming out of his mouth produced no sound, and tears filled his eyes, but I was unphased by all that.

With one precise slice, I cut his cock off, dismembering it from his groin.

He wailed at the top of his voice, and his body reacted with a violent quake. Blood

gushed out like water from a fountain, and soon, his head fell weightlessly on his chest. He was out like a light.

Sergei placed two fingers on the man's neck, searching for his pulse. He looked at me. "He's still alive."

"I didn't want him dead," I replied. "He'll live the rest of his life in that condition; that way, he'll never rape anyone ever again."

"I can't think of a punishment worse than that," Sergei said.

I wiped my palms with a white handkerchief. "When he wakes up, send him on his way. Let him tell his people what I did to him, and if they're stupid enough to come seeking revenge, then hell will freeze over."

I walked away.

Outside the building, my car was waiting for me; I got into the backseat and exhaled softly. I withdrew my phone from my pocket and stared at the text that I'd sent Sienna. Still no response. I locked the screen and tossed it aside, my fingers rubbing my eyes.

I was desperate to hear from her, and now I realized how she must have felt when I hadn't reached out after our first night together.

So that's how it feels.

It sucked.

To honor my friendship with Paul, I had been rude to Sienna, cold and distant. And now, I feared I might have pushed her away for good.

The incident at the club made me realize just how deeply I cared for her, just how much she meant to me, and after that sex, it was as if my eyes had opened. There was no point holding back on my feelings now; I'd tried, but I couldn't; instead, I ended up making things worse.

I could still smell her perfume, could still feel the taste of her tongue in my mouth. I replayed the sex over and over again, and the thought of it made me hard. She was all I could think about; staying away at this point was going to be next to impossible.

But she wasn't replying to any of my texts.

Did she hate me that much? Did that mean that I'd lost her for good?

I sighed heavily and smoothed my hair back, hoping that I hadn't screwed this up.

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:51 am

“My God, you’re beautiful,” a random guy I’d never seen before said to me, his eyes scanning me from head to toe—not in a creepy way or anything. He simply had admiration plastered on his face.

I smiled. “Thank you.”

He nodded and walked past us, me and my parents.

“That’s the fourth guy in, what, two minutes?” Dad asked, beaming with pride, a hand tucked in the pocket of his black pants.

Mom glanced at her golden watch. “Hmm. A minute and twenty seconds, to be exact.” She smiled at me.

I chuckled, my cheeks turning red. “Come on, it’s not like I’m the most beautiful woman here today.”

“Nonsense,” Mom said, her heels clicking against the marble floor as we headed toward the silver doors. “Did you not look in the mirror? You’re amazing, sweetheart. Isn’t that right, honey?” she asked her husband, whose elbow her hand was locked in.

“Absolutely,” he replied, smiling at me.

I didn’t know what it was exactly about me that seemed to draw much attention, but I liked it. The dress I had on wasn’t in any way alluring or sexy. This was a charity event, and I was wearing a long red dress—a pretty one, though.

We walked into the grand ballroom, filled with the who's who of high society, all gathered for this prestigious charity gala. The air was filled with soft strains from a live orchestra, and the atmosphere was alive with refined conversations between elegantly dressed men and women.

Dad's tux made him look twenty years younger, and so did Mom's golden gown adorned with tiny pearls that shimmered under the chandeliers.

A couple of tuxedo-clad gentlemen and bejeweled women approached us with warm grins.

"Paul and Natalie Summers," one of them, an old man with gray hair and a white trimmed beard, said to my parents. "It's so lovely to see you again. It's been ages."

Dad shook his hand. "Indeed, Mr. Winston." He looked at the young woman beside the man and nodded subtly.

She was no older than I was, a brunette with blue eyes that complemented her dress. Her slightly tanned skin was glowing, and the diamond pearls around her neck glistened beneath the warm glow of the lights above.

"Mrs. Winston," Dad greeted, acknowledging her as the man's wife.

"Hi, Mr. and Mrs. Summers," she said, her voice sweet and melodious.

The other associates with Mr. Winston greeted my parents, and they all exchanged pleasantries.

"Sienna, look at you, glowing in elegance," Mr. Winston said to me, laughing lightly.

I replied with a smile, uninterested in the nature of this conversation, but I couldn't be

rude, so I just pretended to indulge him.

“I don’t believe you’ve met my new wife,” he said.

It was the way he’d said it, my new wife , that almost made me scoff out loud. It sounded like she was another car he’d just recently acquired. But no, I had not met this one yet.

Mr. Winston had a reputation for his six failed marriages in ten years, each ending in a divorce. Mom always said he had a weakness for gold diggers, women who were only after his wealth and status. That wasn’t so far-fetched.

“Emily, meet Sienna. Sienna, meet Emily, my new wife,” he introduced us.

Yeah, I get it, so please stop saying new wife , I thought to myself.

“Nice to meet you, Sienna,” she said, shaking my hand.

“Pleasure’s all mine,” I replied, forcing out a smile.

Emily was a beauty; that was a fact. No wonder he’d fallen for her charms. Although I did notice something weird. While the men were talking, Emily had her eyes on my dad. I recognized that look, and the girl didn’t even hide her desire; it was so fucking glaring.

I caught my mom’s eyes, and I knew she was upset but didn’t want to create a scene, so she just held on to her husband so tightly as if to say, He’s mine, bitch .

Emily still didn’t care; her eyes never left my dad, and I was so tempted to slap that stupid smirk off her pretty face. She had no regard for my mom, nor me, and definitely not for her husband by the looks of things. She was a selfish brat.

“Hey, Em,” Mom called to get her attention. “Can I call you Em?”

“Sure.”

“Piece of advice: Keep your eyes on your husband. Some of us women can go the extra mile to protect ours.”

That was a stern warning, and I loved the way she’d put the girl in her place.

“What—what’s she talking about?” Mr. Winston turned to his wife.

“I don’t know,” she said, placing a hand on his beard before he could utter another word. “Come on, let’s just go.” She led him away.

“Uh, Paul, we’ll talk some other time,” he said, following her with a corny smile on his face.

“I hope not,” Dad said under his breath. “Ow!” he exclaimed softly as Mom hit his arm.

“Did you not see the way that Emily girl was looking at you?” she grouched.

He laughed lightly. “What was I supposed to do?”

“What were you supposed to do?” She frowned, saying words that I immediately blocked out.

Dad was laughing all through, though, attempting to make a joke out of the situation, and it was working. He knew how to calm her down.

I scoffed and shook my head; their banter was so adorable. At least they’d found

love. What had I found? A man who was only obsessed with my body.

Gradually, darkness crept into my heart, occupying every nook and cranny as my parents' chatter was now almost indistinct. My mind was drifting away, and depression was starting to sink in.

I was pregnant, and the father of my unborn child was my father's best friend, the same man that I'd been asked to stay away from. How messed up was that? I knew I couldn't keep this quiet for long, and I was only delaying the inevitable, but I wasn't ready to come clean with anyone just yet.

My parents would freak out; that was for sure. They'd be heartbroken, especially because I'd done the exact opposite of what they'd asked. I could imagine their reaction to the news when they found out, the look of disappointment they would wear. There was no scenario in my head where this ended well.

I lowered my head, pressing my fingers over my eyes with a soft sigh. A waiter was passing by, and I helped myself to a glass of champagne from his tray. I needed that.

Just as I was about to take a sip, my dad's voice caught my attention. No, let me rephrase that: The name my father mentioned caused my heart to skip a beat.

"Vlad," he said. "I wasn't expecting to see you here."

"Me, neither," he said.

Fuck! It's truly him. He's here for real. Are you kidding me right now? This is bad. Okay, get your shit together.

My mind was flooded with thoughts of what to do next. The conversation between him and my father was happening behind me, and I was tempted to turn around.

Just walk away, Sia. Just walk away.

I drained the glass of champagne in one swift motion and turned around to face him even though everything inside me was screaming that I shouldn't.

There he was, the dashing man who had left me in this dilemma and put me in the family way. He was so handsome in that impeccable suit as he locked eyes with me.

I couldn't fall for his charms anymore; I shouldn't .

His eyes were fixed on me, and mine were on his. My heart was racing, and I felt my tear glands charging up at the thought of all that I was hiding, all that his attitude had put me through. This situation with me and Vlad was so messed up that I couldn't even think straight anymore.

There was an awkward silence until I broke it, clearing my throat. "Excuse me," I said, drawing in a deep breath. "I need some air." I walked away, leaving them behind, but his gaze still followed me, lingering on my figure; I could feel it.

Truly, I needed a bit of fresh air, a private space where I could be myself and try to think clearly. A lot was on my mind, and the weight of it was crippling me.

I thought about going to the balcony, but it seemed crowded in that direction, and a crowd was the last thing I needed right now. I turned around and rushed out to the garden, away from the main event.

It was cold out here, and my sleeveless dress wasn't helping at all. Despite the cold, though, it was quiet and peaceful.

I found a weathered wooden bench and sat on it, surrounded by a display of lights that illuminated the lush garden. Right above my head, soft string lights cast their

warm glow, twinkling like diamonds. Pathway lights that looked like tiny mushrooms lined the walkway leading to a fountain that was draped in a spotlight.

In an attempt to warm myself, I wrapped my arms around me, my fingers rubbing against the soft fabric of my dress.

I was so confused and didn't know what to do next. Seeing him again had ignited something in me, something that I wanted to bury. Why couldn't I just hate him? But that was the least of my problems right now; this baby inside me was at the top of my list.

"It's cold outside."

I heard his voice, prompting me to my feet.

I looked at him as he sauntered up to me. I'd always admired his confidence and composure.

"How did you know I was out here?" I asked, glaring at him.

"I saw you coming over here and decided to follow."

"And it didn't occur to you that I might need some time alone?" I asked, struggling to hold back the tears that welled my eyes. "You know what? Don't answer that."

I turned and started walking in the opposite direction.

"Sienna, wait," he said, following me.

I increased my pace without looking back at him. "Leave me alone, Vlad."

“We need to talk.”

“I have nothing to say to you,” I said bluntly.

He grabbed my hand and spun me to face him. “But I do,” he said, trying to catch my eyes.

“So, now you wanna talk, huh?” I squirmed out of his hold. “After all this time, you finally decided to talk, and you want me to listen. Is that it?”

He was silent, his eyes locked on mine.

“You don’t get to sleep with me and then treat me like trash the next morning, then ghost me for weeks and expect everything to be all rosy between us like nothing happened,” I lashed out at him, my voice rising and falling as I spoke. “I...I sincerely thought we had something good going on. I guess the joke’s on me.” I was trying so hard to fight back those tears.

“I know you’re angry—”

“Angry?” I scoffed, rudely cutting him off. “No, Vlad.” I rapidly clicked my tongue, shaking a finger in the air. “Anger is nowhere close to what I’m feeling right now. Like ghosting me wasn’t enough, you went around sleeping with other women....”

“Other women...?” His brows rose immediately, and his lips pulled into a frown, like he truly had no idea what I was talking about.

What a great actor.

“Oh, please don’t play dumb with me, Vlad. Own it.”

“Own what? What are you talking about?”

“I saw the pictures, goddammit!” I snapped.

Again, he appeared puzzled.

“Pretty face, blue eyes, brunette—ring a bell?” I listed the physical qualities of the woman he was with at the club.

He thought for a moment. “Hold on, are you talking about Lily...my escort?” His eyes widened in shock.

With that look of you can't possibly be serious etched on his face, I couldn't help but think that maybe there was nothing going on between them.

“I don't care who she is or what you've done with her. All I care about is how you made me feel; you hurt me, Vlad.” Now, those tears finally won the battle and broke through my walls. “I trusted you, and you hurt me.”

He took a step forward and tried to hold my hand, but I yanked it away. Vlad reached out and tugged me back to face him.

“My parents warned me, but I didn't listen,” I said, sniffing.

He placed a palm on my cheeks, and with his thumb, he wiped my tears. “I'm sorry, Sienna, but I had to. It was the only way to keep you away from me.”

My brows furrowed, knitting in confusion. “What're you talking about?”

“Your dad reached out to me the morning after our first night together. He begged me to stay away from his little girl if I ever cared about our friendship. It's not like I had

a choice,” he explained, and there was a hint of pain in his voice.

It made sense, but that wouldn’t do it for me.

“Yes, you did have a choice, and you made it.” I wiped my tears and turned to leave, but he wouldn’t let me go. “What do you want, Vlad?” I faced him, my voice weak and tired. “You already made your choice. Why won’t you leave me be?”

“Because I like you, Sienna. I really do,” he confessed.

I held my breath for a moment, and my brain stopped functioning for about three seconds. His words hit me like a bullet, causing me to step back with a dropped jaw.

“You’ve managed to unlock something in me, something I didn’t know I had: compassion.” He drew closer. “You taught me to search for the faintest light in the dark.” He grasped my hands, his eyes telling his story alongside his words. “You, Sienna, taught me that life isn’t black and white, that I could see things from a different perspective.”

That’s actually very sweet, coming from you, and I want to believe you. I really do. But I can’t.

My tears wouldn’t stop pouring, and my heart was bleeding. He seemed genuine, but I couldn’t risk it; I couldn’t trust him again.

“I want you, Sienna.” He cupped my face and fixed his gaze on me.

I want you, too, Vlad. And you have no idea how much I really like you. I wish this could work. I really do, but how can I trust you with my heart again after how you treated me? I’m pregnant, Vlad, but I can’t tell you because I don’t trust you. I don’t even know if you’ll accept the child or if you truly mean what you’re saying, and I

can't risk finding out your reaction. So, I'm sorry.

I grabbed his hands and pried them off my face, even though all I wanted to do was kiss him so badly and show him how much I'd missed him.

Without saying a word, I turned around, ready to leave, my fingers slipping from his grasp. My heart was heavy, filled with anguish, and I sped away with tears in my eyes, not looking back once.

Page 16

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:51 am

I leaned back in my swivel chair, unable to focus on the task at hand. There were issues that I needed to address, businesses to preside over, and files on my laptop to go through. Yet, I couldn't concentrate; it seemed impossible to do so.

Damn it! I thought to myself, pinching the bridge of my nose.

Fingers drumming over the surface of my table, I tipped my head toward the ceiling with a sigh, as though the air held the answers I was searching for.

My mind was crowded with thoughts of Sienna and our last conversation, which revealed the pain and hurt that she'd been bottling up inside her.

I shut my eyes and drifted to the events of that evening.

Fyodor had told me about a charity gala happening that evening and that my presence there would be a means for further networking since the elite members of society were going to be there.

I didn't think it was so important to attend this gala, considering how many gatherings I'd attended since I landed in New York. But I knew it would be good for my mental state, so I agreed to go.

When I walked into the grand ballroom, I looked around, taking in the A-list attendees, from Hollywood stars to philanthropists to those who claim to be humanitarians but were actually wolves in sheep's clothing. A lot of business moguls were present, conversing in small groups with smiles on their faces like they truly gave a shit about charity. Most of those money-driven sickos were there for their

selfish interests, under the guise of charity.

I recognized some politicians, and, of course, the elections were around the corner. This, to them, was just a show to gain the votes of the masses at the appointed time. Greedy bastards.

“Vladimir Wolkov,” a man called from behind me.

I turned, recognizing the one-eyed black-suited man with a bear’s broad stance and blond hair: Maximiliano Quintero, aka, Mad Max, a ruthless boss of a Mexican cartel.

Three years ago, we had a bitter feud that led to a brutal confrontation between our two organizations, a blood bath, if you may. Our battle was so intense that Maksim and Miguel, Max’s boss, had to step in to prevent further damage. Their intervention was the only reason he was still breathing. Since then, the tension between us had been palpable, and we were never in the same room at the same time, never seeing eye to eye.

“I didn’t think you’d be here,” he said, his voice laced with resentment. “Last I heard, you were back in St. Petersburg.”

“Last I heard, you were back in Mexico,” I replied with the same resentment in my tone.

For a minute there, we glared at each other, but despite his madness, Max still knew better than to try anything stupid here and now.

“Everything alright?” Simon walked up to us, sensing the tension. His hand was reaching for the gun tucked away in his pants.

Fyodor soon joined us, frowning and ready for however Max wanted this to end tonight.

Max laughed lightly, looking around at the innocent people chattering and smiling, unaware of the impending danger that loomed over the hall. “I see you still hide amidst your bodyguards,” he said to me.

“And I see you still have one eye...thanks to him,” Simon said, nodding at the patch over his left eye.

Max’s fists clenched, and his brows furrowed at the reminder that I was the one who’d taken out his left eye with one clean shot.

“I’ll have my revenge, Vlad,” he said through gritted teeth.

“Looks like I struck a nerve,” Simon teased with a smirk that only infuriated Max all the more.

His men had noticed his discomfort and headed toward us, their hands subtly reaching for their weapons, waiting for his command.

I found solace in the idea that Max hated me so much but could do nothing about it, not a goddamn thing.

“Do you really want to do this, here and now?” I asked him, bringing to his notice how stupid that would be.

He was fuming profusely, and I was staring with an annoying grin.

He discreetly signaled his men to stand down, and they did. “This isn’t over, Vlad.”

I inhaled softly, toying with my cufflinks. “Our feud ended three years ago, Max. Get over it.” I walked away, leaving him to his rage.

Fyodor and Simon followed behind me, their eyes roaming the hall for anything out of place.

I stopped by a fountain and helped myself to a glass of champagne from a waiter’s tray. Simon joined me. “I’m safe, Simon. Max might be crazy, but he’s not crazy enough to attack me here.”

“I know,” he replied and looked away, still not leaving my side.

About two minutes later, I heard him say, “My God, she’s beautiful.” I was looking elsewhere, but his words prompted me to trace his gaze.

There she was: Sienna Summers. She was with her parents, and they seemed engaged in a conversation with some people.

My attention was fixed on her.

Fuck! She was a damsel, a goddess whose spell had me mesmerized. I was glued to her and couldn't tear my gaze away.

Her smile seemed to shine brighter than the chandeliers above, and her green eyes sparkled like diamonds. Her skin was glowing, and her face was radiating like the sun.

My hand flew to my chin, stroking it absentmindedly as I focused on her.

I wanted so badly to talk to her, but she was with her family. Paul was my friend, and that was the perfect excuse to approach them.

She had turned around, back in my direction, and was helping herself to a glass of champagne from a waiter's tray.

I gulped mine, handed the glass to Simon, and then headed over to the Summers family.

After Paul and I greeted each other, and she turned to face me, my heart paused for a second, especially because I couldn't understand the expression she wore. So, when she left us and headed out, I knew this was a lot worse than I'd thought. I needed to talk to her, but I had to play it cool around her parents and not let them see that I was desperate to be around their daughter.

It took a while, but I was able to leave the Summers without raising suspicion. Simon nodded toward the garden after he noticed that I was looking around for her.

Sienna's outburst in the garden under the cold and distant stars was the confirmation of her pain and hurt. I hadn't realized how much she was hurting until she snapped at me.

I was speechless, and although she was wrong in some of her assumptions, I couldn't help but feel a wave of guilt wash over me. Sienna was in pain because of my behavior.

Watching her tear up was a hard thing to do; it was a sight I couldn't stand, but what broke my heart was how she pulled away from me. It was as if my touch repulsed her.

I rubbed my eyes, drifting back to the present moment in my office, where I was staring at the ceiling, thinking how I shouldn't have let her go.

She was all I could see each time I closed my eyes, and, in my heart, there was an

emptiness, a void that only she could fill.

I guess it's true what they say: You only know you love her when you let her go .

Sienna had captured my mind, heart, spirit, soul, and body. Was this some sort of witchcraft? If it was, then I loved being enchanted, but not when it was one-sided. Why couldn't I get her out of my mind?

I'd never been this scared of losing someone before—never. I was used to being on my own, taking only my business with much seriousness. Then, she'd waltzed into my life with her glimmer of hope and shining light.

The reason for my fear was because I hadn't thought she was the kind to get so emotional. She always managed her feelings and had a way of keeping them in when she wanted to. But the fact that she'd had an outburst was really scary, and now I couldn't stop myself from wondering if she hated me. I wouldn't blame her if she did. I might have overdone it, and by doing so, I'd pushed her away, the one good thing in my life.

But was I going to give up on her, on what we shared? No. There was something in her eyes that I saw that night in the garden. It was faint, but it was definitely there: a hint that she still cared. But there was something else, like she was hiding something.

Sienna had taught me to find the light even in the deepest darkness, and that was my plan. I knew what I saw in her eyes even though it was clouded by pain.

My thoughts were interrupted by the knock on my door.

I sighed softly. "It's open."

Simon walked in and quietly shut the door behind him. I adjusted in my seat as he

approached me, his expression exuding a mix of emotions.

“I’ve got news, Boss, updates on Sienna,” he said.

I had asked him to keep an eye on her for me, telling him to get the best of my men and have them covertly trail her every move. I needed to know what she was doing at any point in time, where she was going, and who she was spending her time with.

Maybe this would help me understand her behavior and help me find out if she was seeing someone else. I frowned at the thought of her with another man. I was a jealous man who didn’t like to share. But also, a part of me was worried about her safety, and with my men keeping tabs on her, she’d be protected.

“Why the long face?” I asked, squinting as I wondered what was on his mind.

“Because I’m afraid it’s no good news,” he replied.

I gritted my teeth, feeling my blood boil as I assumed he’d seen her with another man. Jealousy kicked me, and I balled both hands into fists.

So, this was the reason she’d walked away from me, the reason she’d not been replying to my messages. I knew that I’d hurt her, but moving on so fast with another man? That was cold of her.

In my head, this man—whoever he was—was as good as dead because he’d messed with the wrong person. I would have him butchered and keep his heart as a trophy if he decided to keep seeing her.

“Who is he?” I asked, my brows furrowing to accentuate the frown on my face.

“Who is who?” Simon asked, puzzled.

“The man she’s seeing. Who the fuck is he?” I snapped, boiling with rage as I sprang to my feet, glaring at him as though he was the man seeing Sienna. I was so pissed that I was tempted to slam a fist into my table and put a hole in it. “Tell me everything you know about him, and don’t fucking leave out any detail.”

“Boss, there is no man,” he said calmly.

“What?” My voice was low, mixed with relief.

“She’s not seeing anyone.”

I scoffed at my overreaction, sitting back down. “Why, then, did you say it isn’t good news?” I asked, now with an open mind.

“I’ve been watching her for days now, as you instructed, and I realized that she’s always visiting a particular clinic,” he replied.

Instantly, I started thinking the worst, and my mind flooded with worry. “Clinic? Is she okay? Is she hurt? Did anything bad happen to her?” I realized now just how much I deeply cared for her.

“I guess she’s okay,” he said.

“You guess ? Simon, I’m not paying you to guess,” I snapped, getting impatient.

“Yes, she’s been going to a clinic, but it’s an obstetric clinic,” he said.

My breath ceased for a moment, knowing the meaning of what he was saying.

“She’s pregnant, Boss,” he further clarified.

She's pregnant?

The world and everything around me seemed to be at a standstill as I took some time to process this news. This was a game-changer. A baby was involved, meaning things were about to get more complicated now.

Page 17

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:51 am

I was staring at the professor and the board as he taught the class, but I wasn't necessarily paying attention. My mind was drifting back and forth, mulling over the situation that I had landed myself in.

There was a freaking baby inside of me, and that alone scared the shit out of me. I was completely lost in my thoughts, and nothing going on around me was significant at the moment.

It was a lot to take in, and the longer I kept this secret, the longer I carried the weight all on my own and the closer I came to breaking down. It was so heavy that I could barely breathe sometimes, and more often than not, I would be lost in thoughts, as I was right now, while a class was ongoing.

I remembered the last time I'd met Vlad and how I'd rejected his efforts to reach out and make amends. He seemed like he was sorry for the way he acted even though he didn't literally apologize.

Maybe he was right about Dad asking him to stay away, but the choice to actually heed Dad's words were his. He could have told me about it, and we'd talk about it, figuring it out together, but he'd decided to ghost me and treat me like I was nothing.

"Miss Summers?" My professor's voice pulled me out of my thoughts.

I shift my gaze to him, his eyes darting toward me through those glasses.

"Would you like to tell the class the last thing I said?" he asked, frowning at my absent mind.

“Uhm...no, not really,” I replied despite knowing it wasn’t really a question.

He took a step closer. “Miss Summers, please tell the class the last thing I said.”

I was tempted to reply with “the last thing I said” because it was technically the truth. I had no idea what he’d been talking about before this, and Professor McCall wasn’t one to be toiled with. My grades had been slipping since this whole Vlad situation, and the last thing I needed was to get into Professor McCall’s black book.

I parted my lips to respond with God-knows-what when Fiona spoke on my behalf. “She’s...uhh...she’s feeling a little under the weather today, professor.”

“Is that so?” he asked, directing the question at me.

I nodded, still trying to get my shit together.

“What are you down with?”

“Cold,” I replied.

“Flu,” Fiona said at the same time.

He cocked his head at us with a disbelieving look as we exchanged glances. We spoke again, switching our answers this time.

“Flu,” I said.

“Cold,” she offered.

He shifted his gaze between the both of us, and we did the same.

“Both flu and cold,” we chorused, and I faked a sneeze.

“Bless you,” Fiona said, her hand gently rubbing my back.

He narrowed his brows at us, contemplating whether or not to believe our little drama. After a few seconds, he brushed off whatever thoughts he was having about us and turned back toward the board.

I reached out and touched her hand. “Thanks for the save.”

“Anytime,” she replied.

Soon, the bell rang, and we packed our stuff, leaving the class.

“This thing with you-know-who is taking a serious toll on you, Sia,” Fiona said as we walked down a rowdy hallway. “Wanna talk about it?”

I pinched the bridge of my nose, thinking for a moment, and before I’d said anything, I heard my phone buzz in my hand. Flipping the screen over, I realized who was reaching out.

That’s strange; he’s never called me before. Sure, he’s texted a couple of times, but that’s it.

Anxiety started to creep into my heart.

“It’s him, isn’t it?” Fiona asked.

I looked at her and nodded, then hit decline on my screen.

“I don’t think that’s such a good idea,” she said.

I shook my head. “Let’s just go.”

Before we stepped out of the building, he’d called me four more times, but I still didn’t answer. Standing outside, he called again, and I stared at my screen.

“Just answer it, Sia,” she beseeched.

I hesitated until it ended, and then he called back.

“Uhm, Sia, I think Voldemort’s here,” Fiona said, softly tapping my thigh without taking her eyes off the direction she was facing.

I traced her gaze to the parking lot, and my heart skipped at the sight of Vlad leaning against his black car. We locked eyes, and he gestured for me to pick up the phone.

He seemed desperate to talk to me, and that alone was something I found rather interesting. I was curious, so I picked up, my eyes fixed on him.

“It’s important that I speak with you now,” he said over the phone, his tone laced with urgency.

It had to be pretty goddamn important, considering how many times he’d called my phone in the last few minutes.

What did he want to talk about so badly?

My curiosity was piqued.

I ended the call and turned to Fiona. “Excuse me.”

“Sure,” she said. “Just be careful.”

I nodded and headed toward his car.

“Get in,” he said, walking around to the driver’s door.

Rude, but okay.

I opened the passenger door and got in, arms folded across my chest.

He started the engine and glided the car out of the parking lot.

I turned to him. “Where are we going? I thought you said you wanted to talk.”

“We’ll talk, just not here,” he replied, driving away.

All through the journey to wherever, I was silent, and so was he. I should have been alarmed, knowing the type of man that he was and having no idea where he was taking me, but for some reason, I wasn’t.

Occasionally, we would stare at each other until one of us broke eye contact. This was dangerous, though, especially since he was at the wheel, so I stopped looking and focused my attention on the scenery outside.

He pulled over near a beach and killed the engine. I heaved a sigh as he turned to face me.

In my head, I had been wondering what it was that he wanted to speak to me about that would require him to drive all the way out here. I was nervous, but I wouldn’t let him see that.

“Have you been lying to me?” he asked, and immediately, my breath ceased.

“What?” I raised my brows, my heart racing faster than a galloping horse.

He scoffed and rephrased, “Is there something you would like to tell me, Sienna?”

Wait a minute...does he know? No, no. Oh, God, no. I hope this isn’t what I think it is.

I was panicking, but I knew I had to play it cool. “Something like what?”

His gaze pierced through me, and I felt exposed, as though he could see everything I was hiding. “Don’t play games with me,” he warned. “Is there anything that you would like to tell me?”

It’s a fucking trap. He knows, and he’s giving you the opportunity to come clean. Stop pretending and just tell him the truth, my voice of reason said.

“I...I...I don’t...I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I stuttered.

“Sienna, I’m gonna to ask you again.” He cocked his head to the side, his teeth gritting. “What are you keeping from me?”

Don’t you fucking lie, Sia. Can’t you see that he knows the truth? This is a trick question. Stop making this harder than it already is.

I swallowed, unable to provide an answer.

It was obvious that he’d somehow found out about what I was trying so hard to keep from him, and I didn’t know what to do. I hadn’t been expecting to have this conversation with him, at least not yet, anyway.

“Are you pregnant?” he asked keenly.

The words were sharp as a knife, and they daggered my heart, leaving me in a state of discombobulation. All I wanted to do was yank the door open and make a run for it, but I controlled myself.

“Answer me, dammit!” he snapped, fresh out of patience.

I flinched at his reaction, and the next thing I knew, I was already tearing up; my lips were trembling, and my eyes were rapidly blinking in an attempt to hold back the river within.

“Yes,” I finally admitted. “I’m pregnant. And it’s yours.”

Of course, he already knew, but hearing me say it had some sort of effect on him. He exhaled sharply. “How long were you planning on keeping this from me?”

“For as long as I could,” I replied without remorse. “I was going to raise the baby on my own, and no one had to know who the father was.”

He shook his head, casting a disbelieving look at me. “That’s my fucking child we’re talking about, Sienna. Why the hell would you wanna do that?”

“Because, Vlad, there is no future for the two of us. Can you not see it?” I raised my voice, my hands flying to my hair. “Argh! You don’t care about me, and honestly, I’m still not even sure that you care about the baby, so why would I bother with you?” The words rushed out nervously.

“Is that what you think?” he asked, his voice calm and low.

“It’s not what I think, Vlad. It’s what I know,” I blurted. “You...you don’t feel anything for me, so why did you deserve to know? What good would that little piece of information have brought you?”

He said nothing, and his eyes didn't leave mine.

I continued. "You're too busy living your life, fucking your escorts, and I cannot—I will not—put that fatherly responsibility on you, you got that?" The first tear dropped, giving way to the next ones that trickled down my cheeks uncontrollably. "It'll hurt, but I'll eventually move on; I—I'll find someone who loves me, and I'll build with them," I sniffled, drying my tears, but they wouldn't stop pouring.

It was like my heart had been cut open and ripped out of my chest.

"Sienna, listen—"

"Don't Sienna, listen me, Vlad," I cut him off. "When I wanted to listen, you weren't there. What makes you think that I'll listen now?" I broke down, fully giving in to my tears. "I hate you, Vladimir Wolkov. I hate you with everything inside me."

No, I didn't hate him. I was just hurting, and I didn't mean the words I was saying. Maybe I wanted him to feel a fracture of the pain that I was feeling.

"Do you know how difficult it is living with this secret?" I asked. "I have a fucking baby inside me, and I can't even tell my parents about it. Do you know how painful that is?"

He reached out and held my hand, and despite me struggling against his advance, he didn't let go. There was something in the way he looked at me that said he could truly feel my agony.

"I understand your pain, Sienna," he said, drying my tears with his thumbs as he cupped my face in his palms.

"No, you don't." I shook my head.

“But I do,” he replied, trying to catch my eyes, and soon he did. “I do understand.”

His touch, together with his words and the way he was looking at me, gradually helped me calm down. I was impressed by his composure, despite my drama. Our eyes were locked on each other’s, and ironically, I found peace in that position. The anger, rage, and hatred I thought I’d felt all slowly started to dissipate as his fingers caressed my hair.

A wave of relief overwhelmed me, and I felt so light, like a load had been lifted off me. I realized then that venting out my feelings was the reason for this peace. All those bottled-up emotions had been the weight pulling me down. I felt better now that my feelings had found expression.

He pulled me closer and gently kissed my lips. I hesitated, but eventually, I kissed him back, finding comfort in his arms.

He withdrew and looked at me. Then, he said, “I’ll marry you.”

My eyes widened in surprise. This was the most shocking thing I’d heard all week. “What?”

“I’ll marry you,” he repeated.

“Vlad....”

“I can’t have a child out of wedlock, Sienna. I’m a traditional Russian man, a firm believer in the old ways, and as such, I can’t have a bastard,” he explained, looking me dead in the eyes. “So, you’re going to become my wife, and we’re gonna raise this kid together,” he said with finality.

I was speechless, my mouth agape as I stared at him. His confidence was admirable,

but even if I decided to marry him, there was still one obstacle that he hadn't yet considered: my parents.

Shit just got real.

Page 18

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:51 am

Dinner at my place started out with an awkward silence as Paul sat across from me at the table, eyes on his plate.

The air was filled with the sounds of clinking cutlery, thick with a subtle unease and heavy with the weight of unspoken words.

Occasionally, he would jerk his eyes and glance in my direction and then return to his meal, which he seemed to be enjoying.

I had invited him over to my place so we could discuss the current situation on ground: the thing with me and his daughter. But I hadn't brought it up yet.

We'd been eating for the past ten to fifteen minutes, and neither of us had said anything to the other except for the few words of pleasantries we'd exchanged when he honored my invitation.

"This is good," he said finally, chewing on the bacon in his mouth. "You make it?" He grinned faintly.

That was a clear play on words, maybe to ease the tension that hovered over us like a dark cloud on a rainy day.

"Yes, I did," came my reply, indulging him.

"I see." He sipped out of his wine glass. "If you're a chef, then I'm the director of NASA."

I laughed lightly. “Your lie is super glaring.”

“You started it.”

I’d missed this: casually talking to my childhood friend. It was nice, and now, I was about to ruin it with this news, this bombshell. This was tougher than I’d thought, and my brain had abandoned me the moment Paul walked in.

“Strange,” he said, looking around.

“What is?” I asked, knowing exactly what was on his mind.

Paul had worked for me at the Bratva in the past; the legal matters were his area of expertise, though—nothing more, nothing less. Being a member of the brotherhood meant he had to pick up on a few things. For instance, paying fucking attention to his surroundings.

I had dismissed my bodyguards and asked my maids to spread out to other parts of the house before his arrival. So, it was rather empty here today, no external voices, no third party, nothing. It was just the two of us. I knew this meeting would not end well, and no one else had to witness it; it wasn’t their fucking business.

“Where’s everyone?” he asked, his eyes roaming the house. “I don’t even see Simon around, and he never leaves your side.”

“I didn’t want anyone disturbing us,” I said dismissively.

He cast a suspicious gaze at me but said nothing, even though I knew he had something to say about it. There was a lot on his mind; that much I could tell. He might be dealing with a lot, like every other man catering for his family. But it was beyond that; he seemed worried about something.

“What is it?” I asked.

“I should be asking you that,” he said. “You were the one who invited me over.”

“We’ll get to that,” I replied. “But something’s eating you up. What is it?”

I was truly concerned about my friend, but at the same time, I couldn’t help but wonder if it had anything to do with Sienna. If it did, then what did he know? What was he suspecting? Having him talk would help me better understand how to delve into this situation, considering how delicate the matter was and what serious damage it could do.

He sighed, setting down his napkin after wiping his mouth. “It’s Sienna.”

Alright, here we go.

His words stabbed my heart, and guilt washed over me; however, I remained composed.

Leaning back in my chair, I asked, “What about her?”

“Listen, I know I asked you to stay away from her, and I’m grateful that you did....”

Fuck.

Now, that guilt became so overwhelming that it threatened my composure, but I struggled against it. The fact that he believed I’d stayed away from his daughter after he asked me to just made this confession even more difficult. He would feel betrayed; I was certain because I felt like I had betrayed him.

I had never felt so guilty before, and in a moment of weakness, I was tempted to

brush off the real reason for this meeting. He would hate me after today, and even though I had told Sienna that I would marry her, I feared I might lose her, as well.

This was a fucking hazard: a potential disaster, an impending doom. It was a storm that I wasn't well prepared for.

Sleeping with Sienna the first time was defensible; he hadn't warned me to stay away just yet. But doing so the second time, after his warning...that was a low blow coming from me.

Paul continued, "Telling you this is a little weird, but you're my friend. I feel I can share it with you."

His words were sharper than my sharpest daggers, and they pierced my heart without mercy. It was torture, listening to him address me like a good friend.

Keep it together, Vlad. You got this .

I suddenly felt so weak, and it was like cowardice was starting to creep in, but I wouldn't have it. I might have been many things, but a coward wasn't one of them.

"She's zoning out, Vlad." Paul's voice snapped me out of my thoughts.

I raised my eyes, looking right at him.

He continued, "Lately, she's been eating less, she's been distant...." Paul dropped into the backrest of his chair with a deep breath. "She's starting to grow pale, and she's weak all the time. Her mother thinks that she's...." He couldn't say the word.

"Pregnant?" I helped him say it.

He nodded subtly. “I don’t want to believe it, but I can’t argue with the signs—nor can I argue with her mother.”

Well, there it was. Both parents were already suspecting, so keeping quiet would only delay the inevitable. It was time to let the cat out of the bag.

I cleared my throat and adjusted in my chair, bracing myself for what would come next after my confession. “I’m sorry, my friend.”

“Sorry for what? That she might be pregnant?” he asked, clueless at first. “You don’t have to be. It’s not like you’re....” Paul paused immediately, shooting me a glare.

I was quiet, my eyes fixed on him in a way that conveyed a silent message: a message that he received. He leaned forward, his hands resting on the table. Paul didn’t shift his gaze as he studied me, waiting for my next response. He looked like he was hoping that he’d misread my countenance and misunderstood my reply.

“Natalie wasn’t wrong to think Sienna was pregnant,” I said, locking eyes with him.

Paul furrowed his brows, his breathing growing more and more audible as he anticipated what would come out of my mouth next.

“She is. And I’m the father of the child she’s carrying.”

He stared at me without a word.

“I got her pregnant, Paul,” I blurted out. “And now, I intend to marry her.”

I watched his teeth grit and his hands ball into fists, but he was still quiet, boiling with rage. Next thing, I saw his fist flying toward my face from across the table, and I could so easily dodge the advance or deflect it, but I didn’t. His knuckles landed on

my cheek, turning my head to the other side.

It hurt. But I deserved it.

“Fuck you,” he said, rising to his feet.

Here we go.

I wiped the back of my thumb over my lower lip and noticed it was bleeding. He got me good. But I didn’t punch back; I couldn’t. His reaction was to be expected.

“I told you to stay away, Vlad—I fucking begged you in the name of our friendship to leave her the fuck alone!” His voice rose on the last statement. “How could you do this? What the fuck were you thinking?” He placed both hands on his waist, pacing back and forth. “You fucked up, Vlad, and I didn’t think that you, of all people, would do something as stupid as this, knowing full well what’s at stake.”

He said the words in an angry rush, and his tone was laced with resentment, accentuating the glaring disappointment in his gaze.

I was silent, absorbing all the words that cut deeper than an enemy blade.

“Do you know the implication of what you’ve done?” He faced me. “Do you know how messed up this is? Fuck!” He tipped his head toward the ceiling. “I fucking trusted you, Vlad. I knew I shouldn’t have, but I did anyway. I gave you the benefit of the doubt, thinking that you knew how wrong it was to have anything to do with Sienna.”

I finally managed to speak, and the only thing I said was, “I’ll marry her, Paul.”

He snickered in disbelief. “Do you think I’m mad because you got her pregnant out of

wedlock?” Paul scoffed. “Vlad, this is Sienna we’re talking about, and you know why this is so complicated, or have you forgotten what you did twenty one years ago?”

I frowned at his reminder, as the feelings I’d buried up for a long time all came rushing back to the surface.

He could tell that I was upset, but he didn’t care because he was equally upset himself.

However, even in my present state, I couldn’t deny the fact that this was more complicated than I had initially thought.

Paul had every right to be mad because now, there was a ticking time bomb, and it would go off very soon.

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:51 am

I'm so fucked up , I thought to myself, laying on the bed, eyes fixed on the spinning fan hanging off the ceiling.

My mind was a myriad of thoughts, all overlapping like a tidal wave and crippling my ability to think straight.

What's the plan? What are you going to do now? a voice spoke in my head.

There's nothing to do. You have to come clean with Mom and Dad, period, my voice of reason said with finality. Mom is already asking questions, and you see the way she looks at you lately. She's a woman, and she knows this kind of stuff.

True. Mom had had her eyes on me recently; she'd been watching my every move, asking questions that hinted at her suspicion. And although I always brushed off the subject, saying that I was fine, I could tell that she didn't buy anything I said.

These days, I'd been avoiding her because her gaze each time she saw me was starting to make me feel so uncomfortable. She would always look at me as though she was trying to figure me out. And sometimes, she'd ask if there was something—anything at all—that I wanted to share with her. On several occasions, I was tempted to come clean and just let her in on what was going on, but I couldn't.

It's not that simple, I thought.

But it was that simple sleeping with Vlad, wasn't it?

Okay, time out, the other voice chipped in. You're not helping here. Can't you see

she's torn between everything?

I can see that, and that's why I'm proposing that we get this over and done with. Sia, you're kicking the can down the road. Your silence is only a temporary reprieve.

"Argh!" I buried my face in my pillow, banging on the bed in frustration.

This isn't gonna help. Get off your ass and do what needs to be done. That's the only way you can find peace.

You make it sound so easy, but you know it's not, the other voice said.

It is, actually. It's very easy. Sia, all you have to do is damn everything and take full responsibility for your actions. You're a grown woman. What's the worst thing that can happen?

I could think of a few, but that pesky little voice in my head had a valid point. Mom was already suspecting that something was off about me, and I felt terrible lying to her, but it couldn't be helped. I wasn't ready yet.

Telling Mom and Dad that I'm pregnant is one thing; telling them that Vlad is the father of my unborn child...that's an entirely different thing altogether, I said to the voices in my head.

They'd freak out, yeah—maybe throw some tantrums—but they'll get over it. Just talk to them, Sia, my voice of reason replied.

I got out of bed and paced around the room as I thought about what to do next. I was so confused that it felt like my head was literally on fire. My eyes were heavy, and it was as if there was a blending machine turned on in my head.

Going over to the drawer, I helped myself with some aspirin and a cup of water. It didn't kick in immediately, but it would, eventually. In the meantime, I would have to bear the aches.

What about Vlad's proposal, you know...the marriage thingy?

Yep, there was that—the other problem.

I massaged my temples and stared at my reflection in the mirror with a soft sigh.

Vlad was...well, he was Vlad.

I was so deeply attracted to the man that I had done silly things around him on multiple occasions. He used to make me happy, stirring up butterflies in my stomach, and my goodness, he was great in bed, an expert in pleasuring a woman. And even though we had different opinions about life in general, I still thought we were compatible. I still thought unlike terms attracted.

But right now, I wasn't so sure anymore. Now, I was starting to question everything because forever was a long time to spend with the wrong person.

You don't think he's right for you? one of the voices asked.

Honestly, I don't know.

A few weeks ago, I would have answered this question with a positive response without hesitation, but things were different now.

Vlad's cold attitude toward me was the driving force that had pushed me away, and the space he once occupied in my heart was now vacant...maybe not entirely, but still.

You still love him, don't you?

I exhaled sharply, looking in the mirror. Love was a strong choice of word at the moment, and I wasn't sure how I felt. How could I marry someone who I wasn't sure how I felt about?

My parents weren't perfect, but I'd always admired their relationship, the love and understanding they shared. I couldn't settle for less.

Vlad was a very powerful man, a dangerous one at that....

You knew that when you slept with him. Why's he suddenly so bad in your eyes?

I really wished I could strangle that annoying voice of reason that wouldn't, for once, take my side.

You love him. You're just hurting, and that's why you can't make a decision right now, the voice added.

I stared at my belly; it wasn't protruding yet, though. Gently, I rubbed my palm over it, thinking about the life inside.

"Hey, sweetheart. Mama's really confused right now. She doesn't know what to do. Any ideas?" I said softly.

Yes. Come clean.

I ignored the voice and drew in a deep breath, imagining thoughts about what the baby would be like—who it would take after, me or the father? Would it be a boy or a girl?

I found myself smiling because, somehow, the thought of the baby being born was peaceful and comforting.

It would be nice keeping it, and honestly, I wanted to keep it. I wanted to have the baby, to watch them grow and have their own life. But on the other hand, I was worried about Vlad's ability to be a father. Considering the type of man that he was, I had my doubts about him being a good, loving, and caring father to the kid. Would he even have the time to teach them stuff? Would he ever be present? Judging by the way he saw the world, I didn't think he'd make a great father, and that scared the shit out of me.

I tossed myself into my chair and smoothed my hair back. This dilemma was threatening to drive me insane. I really wished I could talk to Mom about this.

You can. You're just choosing not to. You don't have to go through this alone, you know. Hold on. How about you talk to Vlad?

Hell no! the other voice objected. That's terrible advice coming from the voice of reason.

I looked at my phone, resting on the table, and the temptation to reach out was building by the second.

Don't even think about it. It's a bad idea.

Think about it; it's a good idea.

Fuck! Those voices were driving me nuts, and frankly speaking, it felt like I was losing my fucking mind; they just wouldn't quiet.

I reached out and snatched the phone, blocking out the voices as I typed a text, ready

to send to him : Hey, can we talk? I want us to talk.

I stared at the message, my thumb hanging over the send button.

Hit it.

Don't hit it.

For the next few seconds, these voices were busy arguing about what I should or should not do. My head was about to explode from all that thinking. With a single fling, I tossed the phone back on the table and sprang to my feet, throwing both hands in my hair.

Wise choice.

Dumb move.

“Shut up, for Christ’s sake—shut the fuck up!” I snapped, clasp my hands against my temples.

Uh-oh, she’s pissed.

“You’re damn right I am,” I said out loud. “Fuck! Now, I’m talking to myself. Great.”

Just then, there was a knock on the door, startling me a little. I got a grip of myself after a few seconds and shot a glance at the entrance.

It was Mom. Dad had been out for a while. Or wait, was it him? No, it was Mom. It had to be. She must be back from the store.

Now is your chance, Sia. Tell her. Sit her down and come clean. You might be surprised at her reaction; she just might take it well.

I'm with the reasonable one on this, Sia.

I summoned the courage to finally damn the consequences and tell her everything. She was already suspecting, anyway.

With a sharp intake of air, I headed to the door, and as I grabbed the knob, a thought crossed my mind.

If my mom was the one at the door, why didn't she call my name as she usually did, considering I didn't respond when she knocked?

Hmm. That's worth wondering about.

I opened the door, and my eyes widened at the masked man standing outside my room.

"Hello, Sienna," the man said with a distorted voice, like he was using a voice modulator.

"What the...?"

Stranger danger. Run! the voices chorused.

I tried to slam the door shut, but he held it with one hand, and with the other, he injected something into my neck.

The effect was immediate, and I felt so dizzy; the world around me started to swirl, and my legs could no longer carry my weight. My eyes were heavy, and my vision

was blurry. I staggered back into my room, feeling too numb to even scream for help. My legs turned to jelly—literally—and I collapsed to the ground.

His footsteps echoed in my ears as I saw a hazy figure approaching me. His boots were the last thing my eyes caught before I drifted into unconsciousness.

Page 20

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:51 am

Paul was still raging, venting his anger and disappointment as I sat there, watching him. I understood his annoyance and got the point he was driving at.

I was trying to hold in the memories of twenty-one years ago, but they wouldn't stop gnawing at my mind.

“Let's say I believe you; say I believe that you truly want to marry her.” He looked at me. “Do you have what it takes to be a husband...a good father?”

Pissed at his question, I rose to my feet and stepped toward him, glaring at him as he glared back, as though he stood a chance if I chose to pick a fight. He knew that by mentioning the idea of fatherhood, he'd stirred up the rage I was struggling to keep inside.

He knew how close I'd been to my father; he knew what had transpired twenty years ago—what had led to it and how it had affected both of us. He dared question my ability to be a father?

I stood in front of him, both hands balled into fists. It was tempting to strike him in the face, but to what end? I was trying to make peace, not start a war.

He was afraid of my next move, but as a man, he tried to keep it together, tried to act brave in the face of danger.

Paul had been a good friend to me, loyal even when he didn't have to be. I respected him for that, and it was the reason I wasn't making any moves to put him in his place.

I saw things from his point of view, just like Sienna would. Paul was in pain, emotional pain, and most times, people do or say things they don't mean when they're hurting.

“What're you gonna do, hit me?” he asked, looking right into my eyes.

His courage was admirable.

I turned away from him and pinched the bridge of my nose with a soft exhale. “The deed has been done, Paul. And my mind is made. I'm marrying her.”

He scoffed. “Why do you have to be so arrogant all the fucking time?”

“What do you want me to do, Paul?” I turned to him, my voice raising a bit higher than normal. “Grovel at your feet and plead for mercy?”

He was quiet, shooting a glare in my direction. Then, he finally spoke. “You don't get to do this, Vlad; you don't get to call the shots this time.”

“This isn't about who's calling the shots here, Paul. It's about doing the right thing,” I said.

“Oh, please don't gimme that,” he replied. “The right thing would have been to stay the hell away from Sienna as I asked you to—then we wouldn't be here, trying to manage a situation that could have been avoided!” he blurted out.

“Well, now we're here, whether we like it or not. So, instead of going back and forth, I suggest we talk and get to the bottom of this.”

“Yeah, that's easy for you to say.” He placed his hands on his waist and turned away, facing me again seconds later. “You're not her father; you're not gonna be the one to

feel the pain of her reaction when the truth comes out.”

I saw fear in his eyes, and before I could utter another word, his phone rang. He put his head down for a moment in an attempt to calm himself, and with a deep sigh, he buried his hand in the pocket of his pants and withdrew the buzzing phone. “Hey, honey.”

That was definitely Natalie on the other line.

I couldn’t make out what she was saying, but she sounded upset—scared, maybe—and the look on Paul’s face was concerning.

“Whoa, whoa, Natalie. Slow down and talk to me,” he said, tense.

I narrowed my eyes at him, trying to understand the situation, and when he turned to me, the previous fear I saw in his eyes had now doubled, and worry was etched on his face.

“What do you mean she’s been kidnapped?” His hands and lips trembled.

What? Are they talking about Sienna?

There was helplessness in his eyes, and I knew mine had to be burning red with rage.

“Put it on speaker phone,” I said, and he immediately did so.

“I came back from the store, only to find that she’s gone!” Natalie’s troubled voice, laced with fear and anxiety, boomed through the device. “I checked the CCTV, and I saw that a masked man had broken into the house and abducted our baby girl.” She wept over the phone.

While her husband was trying to console her, telling her to stay calm, I withdrew from him, raging. I was so angry that nothing would stop me from killing whoever was unfortunate enough to have taken Sienna and my unborn child. Oh, the things that I would do to them.

My bride-to-be and the child she was carrying were in harm's way, and that had me riled up with a mix of anger and worry, turning my stomach as my blood boiled. I feared for the safety of both of them, and I couldn't afford to lose them. I wasn't going to.

"Vlad." Paul's voice was low, filled with concern as he looked at me like I was his only hope. "We can't let anything happen to her and that baby." He shook his head, his breathing growing heavier by the second.

"We won't," I replied through gritted teeth. "I'll stop at nothing until we find her. I promise." I placed a palm on his shoulder. "No one will harm her or our unborn child."

He inhaled deeply, nodding in affirmation; he found comfort in my words.

I took out my phone and called Simon. "Hey, I need you to round up the men."

"How many...?"

He hadn't even finished talking when I cut him off, snapping, "All of them! Sienna's been kidnapped, and I want all hands on deck. She must be found today!"

I lowered the phone, seething silently as I sought solace in the pain I would inflict on the bastard responsible for this. They would pay with their life.

"You really do care," Paul said, watching me fume.

“She’s family, Paul, and nobody messes with my family. Nobody ,” I replied, clenching my fists.

One of the benefits of being a man like me was the fact that I had eyes and ears everywhere, and my empire practically owned half of the city.

I would find her, and when she was safe, I would attend to her abductor.

“Boss.” Simon walked into the room with Fyodor and all the men in the compound, dozens of them for now. “What do you want us to do?”

Paul and I exchanged glances, and I could see the relief on his face; at least he was certain that something would be done about the situation. He took a few steps forward and stood beside me as I addressed my men.

Page 21

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:51 am

With a slight groan, my eyes fluttered open as I regained consciousness. My vision was still blurry, and there was a ringing in my ears. My head hurt like this was the morning after a late-night party—it felt like a hangover but worse. My body was weak, and all my bones seemed to be aching.

The heaviness of my head was literally weighing me down, affecting my ability to think. Wincing at my aches, I tried to reach for my temple but realized that my hands were zip-tied to the chair I was strapped to.

“What the hell?” I struggled with the restraints but to no avail.

What’s going on? Where am I?

I was fully conscious now, panicking as I took in the surroundings. I was alone in a dimly lit room with only one source of light: the small window behind me, through which dusky rays penetrated. A few paces in front of me, there was a red door, and it turned out that I had roommates, a few rats scurrying here and there. I hated rats. The room reeked so terribly, like I was down in a sewer, and it was nearly impossible to breathe.

Okay, what’s going on here? I wondered, shaking with fear.

It would appear that you’ve been kidnapped, Sia, one of my voices said.

What?

What’s the last thing you remember? the other one asked.

Shit.

The last thing I remembered was the man who had injected me with...whatever the hell that was.

That explains why you're so weak.

Wake up. You're dreaming, Sienna. Wake up, I thought to myself.

Unfortunately, you're wide awake, and you've been kidnapped, my voice of reason said. The question is: Who would want to kidnap you, and why?

I think what we should be thinking about right now is how to get her out of here—she's pregnant for Christ's sake, said the other voice.

You're right, the reasonable one agreed. Okay. Where do you think we are, and how the fuck do we get free from these zip ties? Then there's the issue of who's outside that door....

"Hello, Sienna," a thick voice said, interrupting my thoughts.

It came from a shadowy corner to my right, and I jerked in my chair, alarmed. "Who's there?"

The air was filled with the scent of cigarettes, mixed with a rich smell of cologne—although the foul stench of the room was stronger.

I could see the red tip of the man's cigar burning in the shadows, and soon, he let out a puff of smoke.

"Who are you?" I asked, fear-stricken. "Why did you kidnap me?"

I watched him step out of the shadows, unmasked, with the cigar hanging off his lips. He was no older than Vlad or my dad. The man was huge, with a pair of gray eyes that matched the color of his hair. His beard was perfectly trimmed, and he was dressed up in a black jacket over a pair of jeans.

“Who are you?” I repeated, now knowing that he was a complete stranger.

“My name is Andy,” he replied.

I swallowed hard, knowing this was not a good sign. He’d shown me his face, and now, he’d just told me his name. This meant he had no plans of letting me live after this.

My heart was pounding in my chest as though it was about to jump out of my ribcage.

“What do you want with me, Andy?” I managed to ask.

“You?” He took a step closer, a twig snapping beneath his boots. “Nothing. I have no beef with you.” He unsheathed a blade.

I flinched, pulling away as he flashed it in my face.

“You’re not the enemy, Sienna,” he said.

For a second there, I felt a wind of relief, but then again, it didn’t make any sense.

He bent over and pointed his dagger at my stomach. “The Wolkov in your belly is.”

“What?” My eyes widened instantly, and reflexively, I resumed my struggle to get out of the chair, even though it seemed impossible.

He laughed and stepped back. “Try all you want. You’re not getting out of that chair.”

I continued for the next few seconds and then paused and glared at him, angry and afraid at the same time. “Why are you doing this?!” I snapped.

“You’re a fighter; that’s good,” he replied. “At least this is gonna be fun.”

“Fun?” I narrowed my brows at him. “You kidnapped a pregnant woman and are planning to harm the child in her womb, and you call that fun ? Why would you do that?”

“To get back at Vladimir Wolkov!” He raised his voice so high that I trembled at the reaction.

“Hang on...Vlad?” Shock flickered in my gaze. “What’s he got to do with this?”

“Everything,” he growled. “Vladimir Wolkov is the reason you’re in this situation...you and that thing in your belly.” He pointed that knife in my direction again.

All I could see in his eyes was anger, rage, and resentment. The man seemed to be carrying a lot of pain, and that was the fuel of his hatred.

“I will show no mercy to you or your unborn child...just like he didn't show any mercy when he killed my brother, Joshua, and his one-month-old child,” he said, his voice biting.

“What?” I couldn’t believe my ears.

“You’re pregnant with the baby of the devil himself, Sienna,” he said. “You see, Vlad

has no heart, and he is incapable of love. I'll be doing the baby a favor by not letting it meet its father."

The name Andy had mentioned rang a bell in my head, and I was trying to recall where I'd heard it; then, it clicked. My mind raced back to the old picture of Dad with Vlad and a young man Babushka had said was called Joshua but that he had died early.

"Wait a minute, Joshua, as in Vlad's friend? They were friends, weren't they?" I asked.

He laughed. "Last time I checked, friends don't kill each other. Vlad knows nothing about friendship, and for someone who's so keen on loyalty, he lacks it."

"I saw their picture—"

"I don't care what you saw in the photo!" he snapped. "Vlad killed my brother... murdered him in cold blood, and he didn't stop there. He killed his one-month-old baby as well. He's a monster!"

I knew Vlad was cruel and ruthless, but killing a baby? That was next-level wickedness. Was he truly heartless? How could he do such an inhumane act and still shut his eyes at night to sleep?

My heart was bleeding at this shocking revelation, and tears welled in my eyes. My lips quivered as I struggled not to break down crying. There was a pit in my stomach, and it was growing deeper by the second.

"Do you know?" he continued. "We didn't even find their bodies. He must have burned them and warmed up his hands in the cruel, cold weather. Is this man you want to father your child?"

His question struck me like lightning, and I immediately started to have a rethink. If Vlad was capable of killing an infant, he truly was far gone.

This explained my grandmother's resentment toward him; he was evil, and the man who I'd once felt safe around was suddenly the devil I didn't want to have around me.

Vlad may be the devil himself, but right now, Andy is no angel. He's going to kill you and the baby you're carrying if you don't do something real fast, my voice of reason said.

But what can I do now at this point? I'm strapped to a fucking chair.

"Listen, Andy, you really don't have to do this. You don't have to hurt anyone to prove a point."

"Oh, but I do," he said, coming closer. "You see, Vlad isn't the only person you're connected to that's involved in this." He bent over to look me in the eye. "Looks like dear old Dad isn't the man you think he is, either."

My dad? No!

"What—what're you talking about?" I stuttered.

"Your father isn't just Vlad's best friend; he was his accomplice in the murder of my brother and his child."

Hearing him say those words hurt more than I thought it would, and I couldn't hold back my tears anymore. Everything was happening so fast, and it was scary. I loved and idolized my dad, so you can imagine how shocked I was to find out that he was just as bad, just as guilty as Vlad. This ripped my heart apart and messed with my

head.

I tried to fathom what was happening, but I couldn't—tried to find and make excuses for my dad, but there were none. Now, me and the baby in my womb were in grave danger for something we knew nothing about. We were at the mercy of this man, but with how much rage I saw boiling in his eyes, I knew he would show everything but mercy.

I had to do something—to try something, at least.

He rolled the blade over his fingers, and I watched the killer in him take the wheel. His face was squeezed into a frown, and his grip around the hilt of his blade tightened.

“The sins of the father have caught up with you,” he said with finality.

As he raised his hand over me, ready to strike, I was overwhelmed by a survival instinct. I didn't know I'd done it at first, but with the adrenaline pumping through me, I kicked him hard in the groin. He groaned, reflexively dropping the knife as he bent to grab his balls in pain.

Considering how close he was to me, I threw my head back, and with everything in me, I slammed my forehead into his face. The impact was so powerful that he dropped to the ground with a loud thud .

The collision had hurt my head, but it hurt him more, and I could see that he was in pain, serious pain.

“Bitch! You fucking broke my nose,” he grunted, slapping a hand over it as it bled uncontrollably.

I struggled with the chair, but to avail.

He rose to his feet, burning with anger as the will to kill glared in those eyes.

Uh-oh, now he's pissed.

"You're feisty, I'll give you that." He wiped the back of his hand over his nose, spat out a glob of blood on the ground, and stepped forward. "But nothing and no one can save you from me now!"

He launched an attack at me—a defenseless woman, tied to a chair.

I knew there was no hope for me.

I shut my eyes as he raised the dagger in the air. Any second now, I'd be dead; my life would be cut short, and all my dreams would be gone in a flash. My aspirations would vanish just like that, poof, into thin air. But it wasn't really myself that I was worried about; I was more concerned about the child in my womb. This innocent child wouldn't even get to be born; its life would be terminated as vengeance for the sins of its father.

I'm so sorry, sweetheart, I thought, tears trickling down my cheeks, but it looks like this is the end. I'm sorry you don't get to grow up, you don't get to meet me, and I don't get to pamper and spoil you. I'm so sorry.

I had never been so scared in my life before; why wouldn't I be? I was face-to-face with death, and there was no hero coming to save me.

They say there's a white light when you're about to die, but that wasn't my case; all I saw was darkness.

That instant, the door burst open, and I heard a series of loud clattering and banging sounds, like a SWAT team had found me.

“Get away from her!” a familiar voice hollered.

It sounded a lot like... Dad?

I opened my eyes, and the first thing I saw was Vlad throwing a series of punches at Andy.

Dad dashed over to me and picked up Andy's knife from the floor; with it, he set me free.

Vlad left the man he'd knocked down and rushed to hold me, worry flickering in his eyes. “Are you okay? Is the baby okay? Did he hurt you?”

I still had tears in my eyes, and the revelation about his inhumane act hadn't fully sunk in yet.

“Talk to me,” he said, searching my body with his eyes, probably looking for any injuries.

“Sienna, baby,” Dad called softly, stepping forward. “I'm so relieved we found you on time—God only knows what this maniac would have done to you.”

I frowned at him and squirmed out of Vlad's hands.

“He's a maniac?” I asked, fuming. “That rich, coming from you, Dad.”

He looked at Vlad, and they both furrowed their brows.

“What’re you talking about, sweetheart?” Dad asked, attempting to hold me.

I pulled away. “Don’t touch me.”

“What’s going on?” he asked, puzzled.

“What did you tell her?” Vlad snapped at Andy as his men held him down.

“He told me the truth!” I blurted out, looking right at Vlad, who was looking back with a squint. “Did you really kill an innocent man and a one-month-old baby?”

I watched as his countenance changed upon my question, but he didn’t say a word.

“Answer me, Vlad!”

“Sienna, you don’t understand,” Dad chipped in.

“Of course, you’d take his side,” I said with a scoff. “I mean, you were an accomplice in the act, which makes you just as guilty.”

They were both standing in silence, exchanging glances.

“How could you, Vlad?” I asked him, hurting deeply. “Joshua was your friend. How could you take his life without even thinking twice? And like that wasn’t enough, you went ahead and murdered an infant...an infant , Vlad!” I still hadn’t come to terms with his inhumanity. “Jesus Christ, are you that cold? Do you even have a conscience at all?”

Finally, Vlad spoke. “You’re judging me without hearing my own side of the story. How’s that fair?”

As much as I hated to admit it, he was right, but I doubted that there would be any justification for his actions.

“Joshua was my friend,” he agreed. “And I killed him, true. But that’s because he betrayed me and killed my father. Killing him was hard, but I had to get my pound of flesh. He killed my old man, Sienna. Why would my friend do that?”

I was confused at this point. Andy hadn’t told me this part of the story.

“Okay, say I believe you. That doesn't justify killing an infant,” I said.

Vlad glanced at my father and took a step away.

“He didn’t kill the baby, Sienna,” Dad said. “She’s alive and well.” His voice cracked and his eyes became teary all of a sudden.

That was a relief, but why was he so emotional about it?

Dad continued, “In fact, that baby is right here with us as we speak. She’s looking at me, wondering what it is that I’m trying to say to her. Her mind is racing at the possibility that the man she’s known as her father for the past twenty-one years might not actually be her biological father.”

All at once, I froze, my entire body stuck in place.

“What are you saying, Dad?” I managed to choke out, my heart dropping as I got the message.

Still, I needed to hear him say it.

He wiped his tears and sighed heavily. “I’m saying that you’re that infant, Sienna.”

My legs could no longer carry me, so I sat back in the chair that had held me bound minutes ago. With a palm on my chest, I put my head down, struggling to breathe. My shoulders heaved with quiet sobs, and my throat was so tight that I could scarcely breathe.

“If I’m that baby, then that means Joshua was my father, and you’re....” I glanced up at him, his form blurring through the tears streaming down my cheeks.

He, too, had tears in his eyes.

Fuck!

With nothing else to do, I wept.

Chapter 22 – Vlad

I may have been a heartless son of a bitch, but even then, I wouldn’t react without first being provoked. Cruelty was a part of the job—ruthlessness, as well—but I always knew where to draw the line, especially when it came to family and those I called friends. However, drawing that line was the reason I’d gotten sloppy, the reason I’d denied all the facts in front of me, and that had gotten my father killed.

If I had listened to my gut and acted when I should have, maybe he’d still be alive today. What hurt me more wasn’t who pulled the trigger; it was who had figuratively pointed the gun that claimed my old man’s life.

I’d never had a mother’s love, but I’d had my father’s care and training; he was extreme with me growing up, but that was the traditional way of the Bratva. I’d hated it at first, but as I grew older, I had a better understanding of why he’d been so hard on me. He taught me everything I knew, made me the man that I was...the man whose name caused his enemies to tremble in fear.

We'd become so close before his murder, so when the assassination attempt on his life had been successful, I was blinded by rage, and all I wanted was vengeance.

Twenty-one years ago...

“Baba, are you sure about this?” I asked my father in our native Russian tongue.

Being a man rooted in his culture and tradition, he barely spoke any English at all, only when absolutely necessary. So, around him, we only spoke Russian.

We were seated in the front row in a conference hall, and he was about to be called upon to give a speech. The audience were mainly businessmen and politicians, hence why the space was heavily guarded, but I couldn't shake off the feeling that something was wrong. We'd known for a while now that there was a mole in our organization who'd been leaking out our secrets to a rival organization, and I'd received word that my father's life was in danger. But the old man was so goddamn stubborn; he wouldn't listen.

“With the attempts on your life, I don't think it's wise to go up that podium,” I said to him, leaning close to whisper to his ears alone.

He laughed. “I can't hide forever, Vlad. When death comes, there's nothing anyone can do about it. Every decision you make trying to stop it will only lead you to the inevitable.”

“Does your life mean nothing to you, Baba?” I questioned, failing to understand his calmness about this.

He looked at me and smiled. “I've seen a lot in this line of work, Vlad. I've made

enemies more than I've made friends, which means with every day that passes, I come closer to my death. If today is the day I die, then so be it." He placed a hand on my shoulder and smiled.

The man was sick, obviously. His old age might have gotten deeper into his head than I'd thought.

He was called upon, and a heavy round of applause erupted from the crowd. My father was a very influential man, well-known in St. Petersburg and beyond.

I rose to my feet, watching him wave as he mounted the podium. My eyes roamed the hall, and even though everyone was clapping for Udinov Wolkov, I knew half of them hated him for one thing or another.

"Keep an eye out," I said to my head of security who was standing by my side. "I have a bad feeling about this. Tell your men to stay sharp. All eyes on my father, got it?"

He nodded and shifted, talking into his radio.

I adjusted my suit and checked my watch. Joshua was supposed to have been here an hour ago. I was always comfortable when he was around, safe. Joshua wasn't just my friend; he was my right-hand man, the only person in the criminal underworld who I trusted with my life, aside from my father, of course.

Both my friends, Paul and Joshua, had their roles to play in the business. Paul handled the legal aspects of the business, and he had my full trust. Joshua was like my second-in-command; he was in charge of everything in my absence, meaning he knew stuff that even Paul had no idea about. He knew all of my secrets and those of the family business. But I didn't fret about it because he was a loyal soldier.

My father was talking, addressing the crowd, and everything seemed okay, yet this feeling of unease wouldn't leave. As I looked around, I spotted a couple of cleaners creating a scene at the back of the hall as security stood in their way, probably telling them that they couldn't be in there.

That was rather suspicious, but before I could give it much thought, I noticed a man in the crowd glaring at my father. Soon, he dug his hand into his pants and withdrew a gun.

My eyes widened as I bolted up to the podium. "Baba, get down!"

The man pulled the trigger, and the loud bang disturbed the peace of the hall, causing the crowd to scatter in fear and confusion.

I slammed into my father, knocking him down before the bullet could hit him. "Are you alright?" I asked, shielding him with my body.

By now, the entire hall was in chaos, people screaming and running around.

"Get off me, boy," he groaned, pushing me away. "It is not your job to keep me safe; it is mine to keep you safe!"

I got back on my feet, ignoring the man as a gun fight soon ensued. It turned out that the cleaners weren't cleaners but camouflaged assassins.

"Take him to safety!" I ordered the bodyguards that surrounded him.

Before they could move, two of them were gunned down by the enemy, and I retaliated with three precise shots, each bullet taking down a target. As I ran to aid my father, I froze at the sound of a gunshot that hit his chest; then came another that struck his stomach. My breath ceased for a second as his blood splashed on my suit.

“No,” I said softly, watching him drop, his hands flying in the air. With lightning speed, I caught him before he hit the ground. “Baba, stay with me. You’ll be fine,” I said.

For the first time in my life, I was on the verge of shedding tears.

He coughed, and all that expelled from his mouth was blood. My hands rested on the wounds he’d sustained in a feeble attempt to stop the bleeding. He struggled, wheezing, and he strained to speak.

“Shh. Save your breath,” I said, watching my old man’s body shudder, the life in him slowly leaving. He was trying to tell me something, but he couldn’t; his throat was flooded with blood from his punctured lung.

The chaos around me didn’t matter at all; my focus on this man was dying in my arms. Tears welled in my eyes and almost dropped, but I held them in.

He reached out with his bloody hand and placed his palm on my face. “Live,” he finally said with a voice so faint that I could barely hear it.

Seconds later, his hand fell off my cheek, and he drew his last breath.

I shut my eyes, and those tears dropped into his wound as he lay lifeless in my arms, his blood spreading across the floor. I boiled with rage, my grip around his cold fingers tightening in anger, and I swore then to find who had been behind this and make them suffer before taking from them what they’d taken from my father.

It had been two days since the assassination, and still no word from Joshua—nothing at all. The assassins had been captured by my men and were undergoing tremendous

torture, but none of them had broken yet. I knew that they would, eventually. And then I'd know who had hired them and all those who'd had a hand in my father's death.

I was sitting in my father's office with Paul in the chair across the desk when the door opened and Simon Olegov, head of my security detail, walked in. He was with one of the assassins who'd been beaten up to the point where his face was disfigured.

"Boss," he greeted me and pushed the man forward. "Tell him what you told me."

My heart broke into a million pieces when he told me that Joshua was the mole his organization had been walking with and that my right-hand man—my friend—had played a major role in the death of my father.

He was still talking when I pulled out my gun and shot him five times in the chest. Paul flinched at my reaction, shutting his eyes. The revelation hit him just as hard.

I got out of my chair, rubbing my chin as I fumed, struggling to understand why Joshua would betray me the way that he had.

"Leave us," Paul said to Simon, who nodded and dragged the body out of the office. "What're you going to do?" Paul asked me.

"What I'd do to any enemy who killed my father," I replied, turning to face him. "He's an enemy now. So, I'll treat him as such."

Later that day, Simon revealed that the assassin I'd killed had given up Joshua's location. He handed me the address, and I stared at it in my hand, wondering what I'd do when I saw him.

"I'll get the men," he said to me.

“No,” I objected. “I’ll handle this alone.”

He nodded.

“I’m coming with you,” Paul said, looking at me.

I said nothing and walked toward my car; he followed up behind me, and we got inside; then, I drove away.

In no time, we arrived at the location, and I kicked the door open to find Joshua stripped from the waist up as he fooled around with some naked whores in bed. The women yelped at our intrusion and hopped off the bed, covering their nakedness.

“Get out,” Paul said to them.

Without any resistance, they picked up their littered clothes and rushed to the door.

“Listen, Vlad, I’m sorry about your father. I was going to come around later—”

“Cut the crap, Josh,” Paul interrupted him. “We know.”

His countenance changed immediately, and he slowly got out of bed, showing no remorse whatsoever. “It took you this long to find out, eh?” He smirked.

“Why?” I asked him, seething.

“Why?” He scoffed. “Did you really ask me why?”

There he was, the traitor who had gotten my father killed.

“All my life, I’ve lived in your shadow, putting up with your bullshit, taking orders

from you!” His voice rose. “I got fed up with being your errand boy, Vlad.”

“So, you had my father killed because you’re jealous?” I balled a fist in both hands.

“I am better than you, Vlad—I deserve to live your life and not the other way around,” he said arrogantly. “My only regret is that they couldn't kill you, as well.” He frowned.

With that, it was sealed; he was my enemy—the friend I’d used to know was long gone.

I rushed at him, and the two of us started to exchange blows. He claimed he was better than me, but I was angrier, and I used that rage to my advantage.

He was a formidable foe, and his punches hurt, but I was stronger, faster. First, I trapped his arm in mine and snapped it from the elbow joint like it was a twig. He screamed. With a quick movement, I seized his head and slammed his skull into the nearest wall.

I went on and on, bashing his head against the concrete; even as his eyes were popping out, his nose bleeding, I didn’t stop. The memory of my father laying lifeless in my arms fueled my rage.

The wall was painted red, and his blood splashed with each dent, staining my suit, some of it sprinkling on my face. Yet, I wouldn’t stop.

Paul had always been weak at heart, and though he was behind me, I knew he wasn’t looking.

It wasn’t until his skull had cracked open that I stopped, panting as I stepped away from his now limp body.

He was dead, but I still felt empty inside; the pit in my stomach was not yet filled. I'd had my pound of flesh, but it wasn't enough.

I threw my head toward the ceiling and let out a frustrated shout. but even that didn't help. This was so fucked up, and his betrayal had released the beast trapped inside me.

My attention was drawn to a woman standing outside the room with a crying baby in her arms.

She stood frozen in place, looking like she was about to throw up at the sight she beheld.

My eyes met hers, and she gulped, fear coloring her gaze. "Please, don't kill me," she said softly as I walked toward her.

"Who are you?" I asked.

"I...I'm...I'm the nanny hired to take care of the baby," she stuttered, her lips trembling as she tried to take her eyes off the dead man.

"Joshua has a baby?" I asked through gritted teeth.

"Yes...but he didn't want it. The mother left as soon as the girl was born, and he said he was going to drop her off at an orphanage," she replied.

"So, she has no one?" Paul asked.

The nanny shook her head.

Paul walked over to her and took the baby from her arms. He carried her gently,

smiling at the infant, who had stopped crying as soon as he took it.

“Hi,” he said softly, staring at the baby in his arms.

“Leave,” I said to her. “And if you say anything about what happened here today, I will find you, and trust me, you wouldn’t want that.”

My threats had her pissing her pants, and she was already shedding tears.

“Do you understand?”

She nodded quickly and ran out immediately.

I understood Paul’s affection for this infant; his wife had delivered a baby just yesterday, but their child was a stillborn. He and Natalie were mourning at the time, and with the way he took the baby, I knew exactly what his plan was.

“I’m taking her in, Vlad. I don’t care what evil her father has done; she’s innocent of that,” he said. “Natalie and I will raise her like our own.”

I was quiet; his decision was to be expected considering what was going on in his life at the time.

“I’m done,” he said. “I can’t keep living like this. I’m tired of the bloodshed, Vlad. I don’t wanna end up dead, not now that I’ve been given another chance at being a father. I’m out.”

I sighed. He was right; this life wasn’t for him—this wasn’t his calling. He’d been a good friend, loyal and true, even though he was weak at heart. He deserved to be happy, to start his own family with the woman of his dreams.

“I’m not going to stop you from leaving, Paul,” I said. “You’ve always been free to do as you wish.”

“Thank you,” he replied. “I’ll be leaving St. Petersburg with Natalie and the baby.”

I nodded subtly. “You do that. I wish you all the best.”

And I’d truly meant it.

Chapter 21 – Sienna

With a slight groan, my eyes fluttered open as I regained consciousness. My vision was still blurry, and there was a ringing in my ears. My head hurt like this was the morning after a late-night party—it felt like a hangover but worse. My body was weak, and all my bones seemed to be aching.

The heaviness of my head was literally weighing me down, affecting my ability to think. Wincing at my aches, I tried to reach for my temple but realized that my hands were zip-tied to the chair I was strapped to.

“What the hell?” I struggled with the restraints but to no avail.

What’s going on? Where am I?

I was fully conscious now, panicking as I took in the surroundings. I was alone in a dimly lit room with only one source of light: the small window behind me, through which dusky rays penetrated. A few paces in front of me, there was a red door, and it turned out that I had roommates, a few rats scurrying here and there. I hated rats. The room reeked so terribly, like I was down in a sewer, and it was nearly impossible to breathe.

Okay, what’s going on here? I wondered, shaking with fear.

It would appear that you’ve been kidnapped, Sia, one of my voices said.

What?

What's the last thing you remember? the other one asked.

Shit.

The last thing I remembered was the man who had injected me with...whatever the hell that was.

That explains why you're so weak.

Wake up. You're dreaming, Sienna. Wake up, I thought to myself.

Unfortunately, you're wide awake, and you've been kidnapped, my voice of reason said. The question is: Who would want to kidnap you, and why?

I think what we should be thinking about right now is how to get her out of here—she's pregnant for Christ's sake, said the other voice.

You're right, the reasonable one agreed. Okay. Where do you think we are, and how the fuck do we get free from these zip ties? Then there's the issue of who's outside that door....

"Hello, Sienna," a thick voice said, interrupting my thoughts.

It came from a shadowy corner to my right, and I jerked in my chair, alarmed. "Who's there?"

The air was filled with the scent of cigarettes, mixed with a rich smell of cologne—although the foul stench of the room was stronger.

I could see the red tip of the man's cigar burning in the shadows, and soon, he let out a puff of smoke.

“Who are you?” I asked, fear-stricken. “Why did you kidnap me?”

I watched him step out of the shadows, unmasked, with the cigar hanging off his lips. He was no older than Vlad or my dad. The man was huge, with a pair of gray eyes that matched the color of his hair. His beard was perfectly trimmed, and he was dressed up in a black jacket over a pair of jeans.

“Who are you?” I repeated, now knowing that he was a complete stranger.

“My name is Andy,” he replied.

I swallowed hard, knowing this was not a good sign. He’d shown me his face, and now, he’d just told me his name. This meant he had no plans of letting me live after this.

My heart was pounding in my chest as though it was about to jump out of my ribcage.

“What do you want with me, Andy?” I managed to ask.

“You?” He took a step closer, a twig snapping beneath his boots. “Nothing. I have no beef with you.” He unsheathed a blade.

I flinched, pulling away as he flashed it in my face.

“You’re not the enemy, Sienna,” he said.

For a second there, I felt a wind of relief, but then again, it didn’t make any sense.

He bent over and pointed his dagger at my stomach. “The Wolkov in your belly is.”

“What?” My eyes widened instantly, and reflexively, I resumed my struggle to get

out of the chair, even though it seemed impossible.

He laughed and stepped back. “Try all you want. You’re not getting out of that chair.”

I continued for the next few seconds and then paused and glared at him, angry and afraid at the same time. “Why are you doing this?!” I snapped.

“You’re a fighter; that’s good,” he replied. “At least this is gonna be fun.”

“Fun?” I narrowed my brows at him. “You kidnapped a pregnant woman and are planning to harm the child in her womb, and you call that fun ? Why would you do that?”

“To get back at Vladimir Wolkov!” He raised his voice so high that I trembled at the reaction.

“Hang on...Vlad?” Shock flickered in my gaze. “What’s he got to do with this?”

“Everything,” he growled. “Vladimir Wolkov is the reason you’re in this situation...you and that thing in your belly.” He pointed that knife in my direction again.

All I could see in his eyes was anger, rage, and resentment. The man seemed to be carrying a lot of pain, and that was the fuel of his hatred.

“I will show no mercy to you or your unborn child...just like he didn't show any mercy when he killed my brother, Joshua, and his one-month-old child,” he said, his voice biting.

“What?” I couldn’t believe my ears.

“You’re pregnant with the baby of the devil himself, Sienna,” he said. “You see, Vlad has no heart, and he is incapable of love. I’ll be doing the baby a favor by not letting it meet its father.”

The name Andy had mentioned rang a bell in my head, and I was trying to recall where I’d heard it; then, it clicked. My mind raced back to the old picture of Dad with Vlad and a young man Babushka had said was called Joshua but that he had died early.

“Wait a minute, Joshua, as in Vlad’s friend? They were friends, weren’t they?” I asked.

He laughed. “Last time I checked, friends don’t kill each other. Vlad knows nothing about friendship, and for someone who’s so keen on loyalty, he lacks it.”

“I saw their picture—”

“I don’t care what you saw in the photo!” he snapped. “Vlad killed my brother... murdered him in cold blood, and he didn’t stop there. He killed his one-month-old baby as well. He’s a monster!”

I knew Vlad was cruel and ruthless, but killing a baby? That was next-level wickedness. Was he truly heartless? How could he do such an inhumane act and still shut his eyes at night to sleep?

My heart was bleeding at this shocking revelation, and tears welled in my eyes. My lips quivered as I struggled not to break down crying. There was a pit in my stomach, and it was growing deeper by the second.

“Do you know?” he continued. “We didn’t even find their bodies. He must have burned them and warmed up his hands in the cruel, cold weather. Is this man you

want to father your child?"

His question struck me like lightning, and I immediately started to have a rethink. If Vlad was capable of killing an infant, he truly was far gone.

This explained my grandmother's resentment toward him; he was evil, and the man who I'd once felt safe around was suddenly the devil I didn't want to have around me.

Vlad may be the devil himself, but right now, Andy is no angel. He's going to kill you and the baby you're carrying if you don't do something real fast, my voice of reason said.

But what can I do now at this point? I'm strapped to a fucking chair.

"Listen, Andy, you really don't have to do this. You don't have to hurt anyone to prove a point."

"Oh, but I do," he said, coming closer. "You see, Vlad isn't the only person you're connected to that's involved in this." He bent over to look me in the eye. "Looks like dear old Dad isn't the man you think he is, either."

My dad? No!

"What—what're you talking about?" I stuttered.

"Your father isn't just Vlad's best friend; he was his accomplice in the murder of my brother and his child."

Hearing him say those words hurt more than I thought it would, and I couldn't hold back my tears anymore. Everything was happening so fast, and it was scary. I loved

and idolized my dad, so you can imagine how shocked I was to find out that he was just as bad, just as guilty as Vlad. This ripped my heart apart and messed with my head.

I tried to fathom what was happening, but I couldn't—tried to find and make excuses for my dad, but there were none. Now, me and the baby in my womb were in grave danger for something we knew nothing about. We were at the mercy of this man, but with how much rage I saw boiling in his eyes, I knew he would show everything but mercy.

I had to do something—to try something, at least.

He rolled the blade over his fingers, and I watched the killer in him take the wheel. His face was squeezed into a frown, and his grip around the hilt of his blade tightened.

“The sins of the father have caught up with you,” he said with finality.

As he raised his hand over me, ready to strike, I was overwhelmed by a survival instinct. I didn't know I'd done it at first, but with the adrenaline pumping through me, I kicked him hard in the groin. He groaned, reflexively dropping the knife as he bent to grab his balls in pain.

Considering how close he was to me, I threw my head back, and with everything in me, I slammed my forehead into his face. The impact was so powerful that he dropped to the ground with a loud thud .

The collision had hurt my head, but it hurt him more, and I could see that he was in pain, serious pain.

“Bitch! You fucking broke my nose,” he grunted, slapping a hand over it as it bled

uncontrollably.

I struggled with the chair, but to avail.

He rose to his feet, burning with anger as the will to kill glared in those eyes.

Uh-oh, now he's pissed.

“You're feisty, I'll give you that.” He wiped the back of his hand over his nose, spat out a glob of blood on the ground, and stepped forward. “But nothing and no one can save you from me now!”

He launched an attack at me—a defenseless woman, tied to a chair.

I knew there was no hope for me.

I shut my eyes as he raised the dagger in the air. Any second now, I'd be dead; my life would be cut short, and all my dreams would be gone in a flash. My aspirations would vanish just like that, poof , into thin air. But it wasn't really myself that I was worried about; I was more concerned about the child in my womb. This innocent child wouldn't even get to be born; its life would be terminated as vengeance for the sins of its father.

I'm so sorry, sweetheart , I thought, tears trickling down my cheeks, but it looks like this is the end. I'm sorry you don't get to grow up, you don't get to meet me, and I don't get to pamper and spoil you. I'm so sorry.

I had never been so scared in my life before; why wouldn't I be? I was face-to-face with death, and there was no hero coming to save me.

They say there's a white light when you're about to die, but that wasn't my case; all I

saw was darkness.

That instant, the door burst open, and I heard a series of loud clattering and banging sounds, like a SWAT team had found me.

“Get away from her!” a familiar voice hollered.

It sounded a lot like... Dad?

I opened my eyes, and the first thing I saw was Vlad throwing a series of punches at Andy.

Dad dashed over to me and picked up Andy's knife from the floor; with it, he set me free.

Vlad left the man he'd knocked down and rushed to hold me, worry flickering in his eyes. “Are you okay? Is the baby okay? Did he hurt you?”

I still had tears in my eyes, and the revelation about his inhumane act hadn't fully sunk in yet.

“Talk to me,” he said, searching my body with his eyes, probably looking for any injuries.

“Sienna, baby,” Dad called softly, stepping forward. “I'm so relieved we found you on time—God only knows what this maniac would have done to you.”

I frowned at him and squirmed out of Vlad's hands.

“He's a maniac?” I asked, fuming. “That rich, coming from you, Dad.”

He looked at Vlad, and they both furrowed their brows.

“What’re you talking about, sweetheart?” Dad asked, attempting to hold me.

I pulled away. “Don’t touch me.”

“What’s going on?” he asked, puzzled.

“What did you tell her?” Vlad snapped at Andy as his men held him down.

“He told me the truth!” I blurted out, looking right at Vlad, who was looking back with a squint. “Did you really kill an innocent man and a one-month-old baby?”

I watched as his countenance changed upon my question, but he didn’t say a word.

“Answer me, Vlad!”

“Sienna, you don’t understand,” Dad chipped in.

“Of course, you’d take his side,” I said with a scoff. “I mean, you were an accomplice in the act, which makes you just as guilty.”

They were both standing in silence, exchanging glances.

“How could you, Vlad?” I asked him, hurting deeply. “Joshua was your friend. How could you take his life without even thinking twice? And like that wasn’t enough, you went ahead and murdered an infant...an infant , Vlad!” I still hadn’t come to terms with his inhumanity. “Jesus Christ, are you that cold? Do you even have a conscience at all?”

Finally, Vlad spoke. “You’re judging me without hearing my own side of the story.

How's that fair?"

As much as I hated to admit it, he was right, but I doubted that there would be any justification for his actions.

"Joshua was my friend," he agreed. "And I killed him, true. But that's because he betrayed me and killed my father. Killing him was hard, but I had to get my pound of flesh. He killed my old man, Sienna. Why would my friend do that?"

I was confused at this point. Andy hadn't told me this part of the story.

"Okay, say I believe you. That doesn't justify killing an infant," I said.

Vlad glanced at my father and took a step away.

"He didn't kill the baby, Sienna," Dad said. "She's alive and well." His voice cracked and his eyes became teary all of a sudden.

That was a relief, but why was he so emotional about it?

Dad continued, "In fact, that baby is right here with us as we speak. She's looking at me, wondering what it is that I'm trying to say to her. Her mind is racing at the possibility that the man she's known as her father for the past twenty-one years might not actually be her biological father."

All at once, I froze, my entire body stuck in place.

"What are you saying, Dad?" I managed to choke out, my heart dropping as I got the message.

Still, I needed to hear him say it.

He wiped his tears and sighed heavily. “I’m saying that you’re that infant, Sienna.”

My legs could no longer carry me, so I sat back in the chair that had held me bound minutes ago. With a palm on my chest, I put my head down, struggling to breathe. My shoulders heaved with quiet sobs, and my throat was so tight that I could scarcely breathe.

“If I’m that baby, then that means Joshua was my father, and you’re....” I glanced up at him, his form blurring through the tears streaming down my cheeks.

He, too, had tears in his eyes.

Fuck!

With nothing else to do, I wept.

I may have been a heartless son of a bitch, but even then, I wouldn’t react without first being provoked. Cruelty was a part of the job—ruthlessness, as well—but I always knew where to draw the line, especially when it came to family and those I called friends. However, drawing that line was the reason I’d gotten sloppy, the reason I’d denied all the facts in front of me, and that had gotten my father killed.

If I had listened to my gut and acted when I should have, maybe he’d still be alive today. What hurt me more wasn’t who pulled the trigger; it was who had figuratively pointed the gun that claimed my old man’s life.

I’d never had a mother’s love, but I’d had my father’s care and training; he was extreme with me growing up, but that was the traditional way of the Bratva. I’d hated it at first, but as I grew older, I had a better understanding of why he’d been so hard on me. He taught me everything I knew, made me the man that I was...the man whose name caused his enemies to tremble in fear.

We'd become so close before his murder, so when the assassination attempt on his life had been successful, I was blinded by rage, and all I wanted was vengeance.

Twenty-one years ago...

“Baba, are you sure about this?” I asked my father in our native Russian tongue.

Being a man rooted in his culture and tradition, he barely spoke any English at all, only when absolutely necessary. So, around him, we only spoke Russian.

We were seated in the front row in a conference hall, and he was about to be called upon to give a speech. The audience were mainly businessmen and politicians, hence why the space was heavily guarded, but I couldn't shake off the feeling that something was wrong. We'd known for a while now that there was a mole in our organization who'd been leaking out our secrets to a rival organization, and I'd received word that my father's life was in danger. But the old man was so goddamn stubborn; he wouldn't listen.

“With the attempts on your life, I don't think it's wise to go up that podium,” I said to him, leaning close to whisper to his ears alone.

He laughed. “I can't hide forever, Vlad. When death comes, there's nothing anyone can do about it. Every decision you make trying to stop it will only lead you to the inevitable.”

“Does your life mean nothing to you, Baba?” I questioned, failing to understand his calmness about this.

He looked at me and smiled. “I've seen a lot in this line of work, Vlad. I've made

enemies more than I've made friends, which means with every day that passes, I come closer to my death. If today is the day I die, then so be it." He placed a hand on my shoulder and smiled.

The man was sick, obviously. His old age might have gotten deeper into his head than I'd thought.

He was called upon, and a heavy round of applause erupted from the crowd. My father was a very influential man, well-known in St. Petersburg and beyond.

I rose to my feet, watching him wave as he mounted the podium. My eyes roamed the hall, and even though everyone was clapping for Udinov Wolkov, I knew half of them hated him for one thing or another.

"Keep an eye out," I said to my head of security who was standing by my side. "I have a bad feeling about this. Tell your men to stay sharp. All eyes on my father, got it?"

He nodded and shifted, talking into his radio.

I adjusted my suit and checked my watch. Joshua was supposed to have been here an hour ago. I was always comfortable when he was around, safe. Joshua wasn't just my friend; he was my right-hand man, the only person in the criminal underworld who I trusted with my life, aside from my father, of course.

Both my friends, Paul and Joshua, had their roles to play in the business. Paul handled the legal aspects of the business, and he had my full trust. Joshua was like my second-in-command; he was in charge of everything in my absence, meaning he knew stuff that even Paul had no idea about. He knew all of my secrets and those of the family business. But I didn't fret about it because he was a loyal soldier.

My father was talking, addressing the crowd, and everything seemed okay, yet this feeling of unease wouldn't leave. As I looked around, I spotted a couple of cleaners creating a scene at the back of the hall as security stood in their way, probably telling them that they couldn't be in there.

That was rather suspicious, but before I could give it much thought, I noticed a man in the crowd glaring at my father. Soon, he dug his hand into his pants and withdrew a gun.

My eyes widened as I bolted up to the podium. “Baba, get down!”

The man pulled the trigger, and the loud bang disturbed the peace of the hall, causing the crowd to scatter in fear and confusion.

I slammed into my father, knocking him down before the bullet could hit him. “Are you alright?” I asked, shielding him with my body.

By now, the entire hall was in chaos, people screaming and running around.

“Get off me, boy,” he groaned, pushing me away. “It is not your job to keep me safe; it is mine to keep you safe!”

I got back on my feet, ignoring the man as a gun fight soon ensued. It turned out that the cleaners weren't cleaners but camouflaged assassins.

“Take him to safety!” I ordered the bodyguards that surrounded him.

Before they could move, two of them were gunned down by the enemy, and I retaliated with three precise shots, each bullet taking down a target. As I ran to aid my father, I froze at the sound of a gunshot that hit his chest; then came another that struck his stomach. My breath ceased for a second as his blood splashed on my suit.

“No,” I said softly, watching him drop, his hands flying in the air. With lightning speed, I caught him before he hit the ground. “Baba, stay with me. You’ll be fine,” I said.

For the first time in my life, I was on the verge of shedding tears.

He coughed, and all that expelled from his mouth was blood. My hands rested on the wounds he’d sustained in a feeble attempt to stop the bleeding. He struggled, wheezing, and he strained to speak.

“Shh. Save your breath,” I said, watching my old man’s body shudder, the life in him slowly leaving. He was trying to tell me something, but he couldn’t; his throat was flooded with blood from his punctured lung.

The chaos around me didn’t matter at all; my focus on this man was dying in my arms. Tears welled in my eyes and almost dropped, but I held them in.

He reached out with his bloody hand and placed his palm on my face. “Live,” he finally said with a voice so faint that I could barely hear it.

Seconds later, his hand fell off my cheek, and he drew his last breath.

I shut my eyes, and those tears dropped into his wound as he lay lifeless in my arms, his blood spreading across the floor. I boiled with rage, my grip around his cold fingers tightening in anger, and I swore then to find who had been behind this and make them suffer before taking from them what they’d taken from my father.

It had been two days since the assassination, and still no word from Joshua—nothing at all. The assassins had been captured by my men and were undergoing tremendous

torture, but none of them had broken yet. I knew that they would, eventually. And then I'd know who had hired them and all those who'd had a hand in my father's death.

I was sitting in my father's office with Paul in the chair across the desk when the door opened and Simon Olegov, head of my security detail, walked in. He was with one of the assassins who'd been beaten up to the point where his face was disfigured.

"Boss," he greeted me and pushed the man forward. "Tell him what you told me."

My heart broke into a million pieces when he told me that Joshua was the mole his organization had been walking with and that my right-hand man—my friend—had played a major role in the death of my father.

He was still talking when I pulled out my gun and shot him five times in the chest. Paul flinched at my reaction, shutting his eyes. The revelation hit him just as hard.

I got out of my chair, rubbing my chin as I fumed, struggling to understand why Joshua would betray me the way that he had.

"Leave us," Paul said to Simon, who nodded and dragged the body out of the office. "What're you going to do?" Paul asked me.

"What I'd do to any enemy who killed my father," I replied, turning to face him. "He's an enemy now. So, I'll treat him as such."

Later that day, Simon revealed that the assassin I'd killed had given up Joshua's location. He handed me the address, and I stared at it in my hand, wondering what I'd do when I saw him.

"I'll get the men," he said to me.

“No,” I objected. “I’ll handle this alone.”

He nodded.

“I’m coming with you,” Paul said, looking at me.

I said nothing and walked toward my car; he followed up behind me, and we got inside; then, I drove away.

In no time, we arrived at the location, and I kicked the door open to find Joshua stripped from the waist up as he fooled around with some naked whores in bed. The women yelped at our intrusion and hopped off the bed, covering their nakedness.

“Get out,” Paul said to them.

Without any resistance, they picked up their littered clothes and rushed to the door.

“Listen, Vlad, I’m sorry about your father. I was going to come around later—”

“Cut the crap, Josh,” Paul interrupted him. “We know.”

His countenance changed immediately, and he slowly got out of bed, showing no remorse whatsoever. “It took you this long to find out, eh?” He smirked.

“Why?” I asked him, seething.

“Why?” He scoffed. “Did you really ask me why?”

There he was, the traitor who had gotten my father killed.

“All my life, I’ve lived in your shadow, putting up with your bullshit, taking orders

from you!” His voice rose. “I got fed up with being your errand boy, Vlad.”

“So, you had my father killed because you’re jealous?” I balled a fist in both hands.

“I am better than you, Vlad—I deserve to live your life and not the other way around,” he said arrogantly. “My only regret is that they couldn't kill you, as well.” He frowned.

With that, it was sealed; he was my enemy—the friend I’d used to know was long gone.

I rushed at him, and the two of us started to exchange blows. He claimed he was better than me, but I was angrier, and I used that rage to my advantage.

He was a formidable foe, and his punches hurt, but I was stronger, faster. First, I trapped his arm in mine and snapped it from the elbow joint like it was a twig. He screamed. With a quick movement, I seized his head and slammed his skull into the nearest wall.

I went on and on, bashing his head against the concrete; even as his eyes were popping out, his nose bleeding, I didn’t stop. The memory of my father laying lifeless in my arms fueled my rage.

The wall was painted red, and his blood splashed with each dent, staining my suit, some of it sprinkling on my face. Yet, I wouldn’t stop.

Paul had always been weak at heart, and though he was behind me, I knew he wasn’t looking.

It wasn’t until his skull had cracked open that I stopped, panting as I stepped away from his now limp body.

He was dead, but I still felt empty inside; the pit in my stomach was not yet filled. I'd had my pound of flesh, but it wasn't enough.

I threw my head toward the ceiling and let out a frustrated shout. but even that didn't help. This was so fucked up, and his betrayal had released the beast trapped inside me.

My attention was drawn to a woman standing outside the room with a crying baby in her arms.

She stood frozen in place, looking like she was about to throw up at the sight she beheld.

My eyes met hers, and she gulped, fear coloring her gaze. "Please, don't kill me," she said softly as I walked toward her.

"Who are you?" I asked.

"I...I'm...I'm the nanny hired to take care of the baby," she stuttered, her lips trembling as she tried to take her eyes off the dead man.

"Joshua has a baby?" I asked through gritted teeth.

"Yes...but he didn't want it. The mother left as soon as the girl was born, and he said he was going to drop her off at an orphanage," she replied.

"So, she has no one?" Paul asked.

The nanny shook her head.

Paul walked over to her and took the baby from her arms. He carried her gently,

smiling at the infant, who had stopped crying as soon as he took it.

“Hi,” he said softly, staring at the baby in his arms.

“Leave,” I said to her. “And if you say anything about what happened here today, I will find you, and trust me, you wouldn’t want that.”

My threats had her pissing her pants, and she was already shedding tears.

“Do you understand?”

She nodded quickly and ran out immediately.

I understood Paul’s affection for this infant; his wife had delivered a baby just yesterday, but their child was a stillborn. He and Natalie were mourning at the time, and with the way he took the baby, I knew exactly what his plan was.

“I’m taking her in, Vlad. I don’t care what evil her father has done; she’s innocent of that,” he said. “Natalie and I will raise her like our own.”

I was quiet; his decision was to be expected considering what was going on in his life at the time.

“I’m done,” he said. “I can’t keep living like this. I’m tired of the bloodshed, Vlad. I don’t wanna end up dead, not now that I’ve been given another chance at being a father. I’m out.”

I sighed. He was right; this life wasn’t for him—this wasn’t his calling. He’d been a good friend, loyal and true, even though he was weak at heart. He deserved to be happy, to start his own family with the woman of his dreams.

“I’m not going to stop you from leaving, Paul,” I said. “You’ve always been free to do as you wish.”

“Thank you,” he replied. “I’ll be leaving St. Petersburg with Natalie and the baby.”

I nodded subtly. “You do that. I wish you all the best.”

And I’d truly meant it.

Page 23

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:51 am

I still can't believe this is my reality now , I thought to myself, trying to process the whole situation that had me on the edge. My life was like a scene straight out of a Hollywood movie where I was a sunshine girl who had gotten entangled in the web of a Russian mafia boss.

I thought things were complicated between Vlad and me, but then things took a drastic turn for the worse. Now, being pregnant with Dad's best friend's baby was the least of my problems.

Looking out the window, I watched Vlad's armed men roaming about my house like commandos—their sharp eyes scanning the surroundings for any sign of threats or residual danger.

I spotted one so big that he reminded me of Arnold Schwarzenegger from The Terminator .

Being pregnant with Vlad's child meant I had a bullseye plastered on my back, making me a target for his enemies.

I stepped away from the window, thinking how messed up it was that the people I'd thought were my parents for twenty-one years weren't actually my parents. To make matters worse, the man who I was attracted to, the father of my unborn child, was, in fact, my biological father's killer.

Yep. That's so fucked up.

I had been lied to my whole life, and that sucked. I hated everything happening, but

was there anything I could do about it? No.

There was a knock on my door, and my heart skipped a beat from the trauma of what had happened the last time—how Andy had abducted me. But that wasn't the case. He had been apprehended and I was safe...I hoped. At least there were commandos all around, so that helped.

“Honey, it's Mom,” she said from outside the door.

I frowned at her voice, unwilling to talk to her or any of them, for that matter.

“Can I come in?” she asked, her tone laced with skepticism.

She wants to talk, said my voice of reason.

I know, but I don't wanna talk to her.

You're hurting and disappointed, but just hear her out. I believe there's a reason why they did what they did.

I knew she had a reason, but I wasn't ready to listen yet because then I'd understand, and I didn't want to understand.

It's Mom, Sia. Listen to her.

I drew in a deep breath and said, “Come on in. It's open.”

The door squeaked open, and she walked in. “Hi, honey.”

I didn't respond, just turned away with my arms folded across my chest.

“You’re angry, I get it—really, I understand. But just gimme a chance to explain,” she said softly, her voice filled with remorse.

“Explain what, Mom?” I turned to face her.

She had tears in her eyes, and that just broke my heart.

“You lied to me...for twenty-one years,” I blurted out.

“I know.”

“Were you ever gonna tell me the truth if this hadn’t happened?” I asked, looking right at her.

She sighed but didn’t respond.

“I didn’t think so,” I grumbled.

“Sienna, honey....” She stepped forward and held my hands, her eyes locked on mine. “This doesn’t change anything; you’re still my daughter, and I am still your mother.”

“That’s not the point, Mom,” I said, breaking out of her hold. “You withheld the truth from me all my life.” I stepped back, being all stubborn and emotional.

“What was I supposed to do, honey, tell you that you’re not my biological daughter and that your dad found you as an infant and decided to take you in?” she asked, trailing behind me.

I stopped and faced her again. “Maybe not like that, but yes.”

“Really?” She cocked her head at me. “You mean like you told me about your pregnancy?”

Wow. That’s a good one, Mom. You got me there.

I was speechless for a minute, allowing my mind to take in my hypocrisy. Judging her for doing something that I had done also was so unfair.

“You understand how difficult some things can be to talk about, don’t you?”

“It’s different, Mom. I would have still come clean with you sooner or later, but that’s not the case with you and Dad—you had decades to come clean but didn’t,” I replied.

“You’re right,” she admitted. “We did have a lot of time to tell you the truth, but to what end?” She continued, “We didn’t see the need to tell you the truth because, no matter what the truth is,” she held my hands again, “you, Sienna, are and always will be a Summers. You know why?”

I was silent but listening.

She continued, “It’s because a day after I lost my baby, the universe handed you over to Paul, and he brought you home.” Mom smiled. “It was like my loss was replaced—like my baby was reborn.”

Her words were so comforting to hear, and the look in her eyes charged my tear glands. “I’m so sorry you had to bear that pain,” I whispered. “I can’t imagine how you must have felt.”

I had no idea that she’d had to go through that, and now I felt so silly and inconsiderate, I felt I wasn’t sensitive enough to her pain earlier—I was selfish to think it was all about me.

“You’ll never have to feel that pain,” she said, pushing a stray strand of my hair behind my ear. “But once you’ve given birth, you’ll understand that a mother’s love for her child knows no bounds.”

The air around us was filled with tension and a mix of emotions, mostly sadness, which caused us to break down in tears.

“We might not be related by blood, but I love you with all my heart.” She placed a palm on her chest and went on, “And nothing will ever change the fact that I am your mother, okay?” The tears in her eyes had started trailing down her cheeks at this point. “I am so sorry that you had to find out the way that you did. It was a painful way for the truth to come out, but like I said, this doesn’t change anything.” She searched my eyes. “At least not for me, anyway. Do you hate me now?”

“Hate you?” I wiped the streaks of tears trickling down my cheeks. “No, I don’t. I’m just sad and angry and depressed and confused, but I’d never hate you, Mom. Never,” I said amidst sobs.

“Come here,” she said in almost a whisper, her arms wide open.

I slipped into her warm embrace as she stroked my hair. “I know that it was hard, but I’m just hurting, Mom,” I confessed.

“I know, sweetheart. I know.”

I let go, and she placed her palm on my cheek. “It’s a lot to take in,” I said with a sniffle. “This whole situation just has me riled up, you know.”

“Wanna talk?” she asked. “I’d like to listen.”

I dried my tears. “I’m confused, Mom. I don’t know what to do about the situation

with Vlad.”

She pulled me by the hand, and we both sat on the bed, her gaze never wavering.

“This whole thing with Vlad has me concerned; I’m not sure that I should go ahead and marry him—I mean, he killed my biological father. What kind of daughter would that make me?” I asked, eager to hear her response.

“You don’t think that you should marry him, or you don’t think that you want to marry him?” she inquired.

I squinted, confused.

“It’s a question of motive, sweetheart. Do you want to marry him but think that you shouldn’t, or do you think that you should marry him even though you don’t want to?” she added. “It’s a bit tricky.”

I heaved a sigh. “I want to marry him, Mom, but there’s a million reasons why I shouldn’t; he’s Dad’s best friend, he’s dangerous, he hardly sees the good in people...and to top it off, he killed my father.” The slight pause came when I lowered my voice.

She reached out and held my hand. “Since we’re talking and we’re being honest, I’ll tell you this,” she said. “Your father wasn’t a good man, Sienna, and Vlad didn’t kill him without a good reason.”

“But they were friends,” I said.

“Yes, they were,” she replied. “And that’s what made your father’s actions more hurtful. You see, Joshua and Paul both worked for Vlad back in the day, but Vlad had more trust in your biological father, Joshua. Vlad never hid anything from him,

nothing at all, but it turned out that Joshua wasn't the friend that Vlad thought he was. In fact, he was a spy for a rival organization and aided in the plot that claimed Vlad's father's life. Vlad was there; he watched him die in his arms."

As she spoke, my resentment for Joshua started to grow by the second, notwithstanding that the man had been dead for twenty-one years.

"Udinov Wolkov was a good man, too good to be a Bratva boss. He was cruel and ruthless, as well, but only when absolutely necessary."

"You talk like you knew him," I said.

Mom nodded. "I did," she continued. "You see, Vlad didn't have a mother as a kid. His father was all he knew. He loved his father and was so close to the man that they were practically inseparable. Hard to picture that, isn't it?" She chuckled.

I tried to imagine it, eventually agreeing with her statement.

"So, he's capable of love? I didn't know," I teased.

"You'd be surprised what pain can turn a man into," she added, and the little smile on my face gradually vanished. "He became the man he is today after finding out that his right-hand man, Joshua, was in fact that spy he'd spent a long time looking for. The worst enemy you can ever have is one who was once your friend—one who knows all of your secrets, all your tactics, and all your clever moves."

My heart was racing as she narrated the story.

"That was the case with Vlad. His real enemy was closer to him than anyone else. So, when he found out, he took Paul with him, and they confronted Joshua, but he wasn't remorseful. He admitted to his involvement in Udinov Wolkov's death and also said

that his only regret was that the assassins did kill Vlad as well.” She sighed.

I was so pissed at the man who had brought me into this world, and I had never been more embarrassed to be associated with someone before.

“Joshua wasn’t a friend of Vlad’s—he was only pretending to be one,” Mom said. “Anyway, Vlad, as any mafia boss in his shoes would do, killed the man that killed his father—the enemy.”

It was too much for my fragile brain to handle. What kind of man was that? “So, you’re saying that I am the daughter of a traitor, a backstabbing bastard?”

“No, Sienna,” she replied. “You are the daughter of Paul and Natalie Summers. Period.”

I smiled, sniffing.

“Joshua didn’t deserve a daughter like you. He was a coward who wanted to drop you off at any orphanage, according to the nanny carrying you in her arms that night.”

“Both my parents didn’t want me?” My heart broke, and my shoulders dropped in dismay as I wondered if I’d been so ugly as a baby that my biological parents rejected me.

“It’s their loss, sweetheart, and I’m glad that the woman who gave birth to you wasn’t courageous enough to take you with her. How, then, would I have been blessed with such a lovely daughter?”

I couldn’t stop smiling despite the tears in my eyes.

“I know it’s selfish, but that’s how I feel,” she said, and we both burst into a bout of

laughter. “I love you, Sienna. Always have and always will.”

“I love you, too, Mom.” I hugged her again.

“Talk to Vlad,” she said. “Look, I know I do not approve of his Bratva business and all the violence that comes with it, but now you're connected to him by a powerful bond: a baby.”

My hand flew to my stomach as I thought about the child I was carrying.

“If there’s one thing I know Vlad will do excellently well, it’s keeping both you and the baby safe,” she said.

I glanced out the window where his goons were roaming the house. He was, indeed, capable of protecting us, and I had seen something in his eyes when he found Andy—something fatherly. Maybe marrying him wouldn’t be such a bad idea; besides, I was so attracted to this man, and I couldn’t keep lying to myself anymore.

“Can you talk to him?” Mom said, her voice beseeching. “Have a long conversation with him. I know, deep down, you feel something stronger than just a liking for him. Correct me if I’m wrong, but I think you’re in love with him.”

No comments there. She was right, and as I was about to respond, Dad’s voice caught my attention.

“Am I interrupting? I can always come back.”

“No, uhh....” I composed myself and faced him. “Mom and I were just talking. You can come in.”

“Thank you,” he said, shutting the door behind him.

I couldn't look him in the eye, not after boning his best friend and getting pregnant in the process. It was so embarrassing.

"You don't have to shy away from me, Sienna," he said, his voice reassuring.

"I...I can't," I said. "You asked me to stay away, but I didn't listen. Now look where we are."

"It's okay, sweetheart. There's no need to feel guilty," he answered.

Slowly, I turned, and our eyes finally met; he was smiling.

"I had a talk with Vlad," he began. "What's done is done, and right now, you need to think about your future—you need to decide what you want. He's told you about his marriage proposal, but he can't force you to accept it. The ball is in your court now."

"What do you think I should do?" I asked him.

"Search your heart," he replied. "It never lies." Dad stepped forward. "As ruthless and cruel as Vlad is, the man does care for you and the baby. I wasn't sure at first, but watching his reaction when you were kidnapped was all the convincing that I needed. He's taken you in as family, and Vlad doesn't joke with his family; he protects them at all costs."

No one could make this decision for me; it was mine alone. But their contributions were very much helpful and appreciated. They reminded me of something that I was choosing to ignore.

"Sienna, listen," Dad said, "I'm sorry about the secret we kept from you, but trust me, nothing can ever change the fact that you're my daughter— our daughter—and that we love you so much...."

He was still talking when I got off the bed and rushed to hug him tightly. “I know. I know.”

Dad wrapped his arms around me, and I found peace in his warm embrace.

I couldn't have asked for better parents.

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:51 am

“I gotta admit, it’s so refreshing being out here,” Sienna said while we walked along the seashore.

Her skin radiated a gentle glow in the evening sun as it cast its warm golden light. The air was filled with the sweet scent of sea spray and distant sounds of laughter from folks scattered here and there—some sat on benches while others were in the water, having a good time.

She’d been home for days since the incident, and my men had their eyes on her. Nothing and no one went in to see her without my knowledge. Of course, the family did have their private moments together. But other than that, nothing was out of sight.

Sienna was the woman I wanted to settle down with; she was the mother of my unborn child, and as such, she had to be protected at all costs.

Her kidnapping had made me realize just how much she meant to me and how miserable I’d be if anything happened to her and our baby.

Paul and I had a serious talk, and he suggested I did the same with Sienna. I wasn’t sure how this conversation was going to turn out in the end, but Paul reminded me the talk was long overdue. He’d accepted my proposal, and we took some time to settle our differences.

I had come over to the house earlier today, ready to speak with her, but decided on second thoughts to take the talk somewhere private.

“Where are we going?” she asked when we were left alone.

“Where do you wanna go?” I asked, and she replied with a smile.

“I miss this,” she looked at me, “being out in the open again.” She shut her eyes and drew in a deep breath.

“I’m glad you like it,” I said. “But why the beach?” I asked.

“Why not the beach?” She flashed me a faint grin. “It’s a beautiful place, inarguably one of the safest places to talk.” She pushed her hair behind her ear.

I really missed that pretty smile of hers, and the fact that, so far, we were having a decent conversation like two grown-up adults was comforting.

“I almost forgot how beautiful you are,” I said, my voice barely above a whisper.

She paused in her tracks and faced me, her cheeks turning red.

Is that a blush I see? I think we’re making progress.

“Thank you,” she replied with the same tone.

We locked eyes for a moment, but neither of us said a word. I was taking my time to savor her beauty as we stood facing each other. There was a lot to discuss, but for now, I just wanted to appreciate this marvelous piece of art.

Beneath our feet, the ocean waves caressed the shore with a soothing melody. Her hair, a tangle of curls, danced in the ocean breeze, strands escaping to frame her face like a halo, and her eyes sparkled like diamonds.

At the same time, we said, “Listen, I—”

She chuckled softly.

“You go first,” we chorused again.

I scoffed, pinching the bridge of my nose at this silly coincidence that made us look like children on a playground. “Okay, you go first,” I said, looking into her eyes.

She sighed softly. “I don’t know what to say...I mean, I thought I had it all planned out, but right now, I’m out of words.”

“Why don’t you start by telling me exactly how you feel?” I suggested. “That would help.”

She shook her head. “No, I don’t think that’s a good idea, Vlad. I don’t wanna go down that road.”

“That’s why we’re here, Sienna—to go down that road,” I said. “We’ve long avoided this talk, and I think now is the time to settle this once and for all.”

Her eyes started to go dim, losing their iconic sparks. Her shoulders dropped, and her carefree countenance was gradually fading away. She took her focus off me and fixed her gaze on the horizon. Her eyes were rapidly blinking as though she was fighting back her tears, and her feet were crossed, one behind the other.

I could see how much she was struggling with the feelings she’d bottled up all this while, and it was obvious she was afraid that she’d break down.

She turned back to me. “This is hard for me, you know that. Don’t you?”

I nodded subtly.

“I’m trying to let go of the hurt, the pain, and the trauma—I really am—but it’s more difficult than I thought,” she said, her lips trembling.

“I wasn’t kidding when I told you that I wanted to marry you,” I said.

“Why?” she asked. “I recently learned from my mom that the motive behind something matters a lot. So, why do you want to marry me, Vlad? What’s the real reason? Do you feel obligated to do so just because I’m pregnant?” She blinked rapidly in an attempt to hold back her tears.

I stepped forward and reached out to hold her hand. “You think so little of me, Sienna.”

“Would you blame me?” she asked but didn’t pull away. “After everything that I’ve seen, everything that I’ve heard about you....”

“I understand your skepticism,” I said, placing a palm on her face. “I do. But I’m not marrying you out of a sense of duty. No, I want you to be my wife because I....”

She stared at me, breathing heavily as she anticipated the words that clung to my throat. “That’s the problem, Vlad.” Sienna gently pulled away. “You don’t know how you feel. How am I supposed to trust you when you can’t be true to yourself?”

“I’m not a man of many words, Sienna,” I said calmly, watching her fight to stay composed, but her feelings seemed overwhelming.

“I’m not asking for many words, Vlad. I’m asking for the truth about why you want to marry me,” she explained, her arms spread apart as the hem of her dress twirled around her legs in a mesmerizing rhythm. “Is that too much to ask?”

The tears in her eyes hurt me, but she wouldn’t let me explain.

“This is what you do. You act like you care—and you’re so good at it—but when it’s time to prove it, you go mute.” The words rushed out her mouth. “I hate that I love you, Vlad.” She sobbed. “It sucks to love someone and not be loved in return.”

“What sucks even more is to love someone and not be able to tell them how you feel,” I replied softly, catching her eyes.

She looked at me in silence as she tried to process what I’d just said.

“We’re two different people, Sienna, and we have different approaches to stuff,” I said, halting in front of her. “The things you can say freely are sometimes very difficult for me. I wasn’t trained to love or express any emotion at all.” I wiped away her tears, my thumb brushing softly over her cheek.

She seemed calmer this time, and her body tensed at my touch, at our close proximity.

“But with you, things are different,” I continued. “You taught me to see things from another perspective, to always find the light in the dark. You have successfully snuck your way into my heart, Sienna, and all I do all day, every day, is think about you.”

“What...what are you trying to say?” she stuttered.

“I’m trying to say that this isn’t one sided.” A sigh came forth, and I caressed her hair, my eyes deeply locked with hers. “I love you, Sienna Summers.”

Tears rolled down from her eyes the moment I said those words. “Please, don’t lie to me,” she begged. “I’m too fragile for that right now.”

I gently pulled closer until our bodies collided, and we could feel each other’s breaths. With a hand around her waist and the other on her face, I said softly, “Tell

me if you think this is a lie.” I leaned forward and planted a gentle kiss on her soft cherry lips.

Seconds later, she kissed back, and soon, our tongues were involved, with our heads cocking sideways in the flow of the passion directing us.

I rested my forehead against hers. “I want you, Sienna. Wanted you since the first time I saw you in St. Petersburg. You are the light in my dark, and without you, my world will be filled with emptiness. There’s a space in my heart that no one has ever occupied, but you filled it so effortlessly.”

She sniffled, and I dried her tears.

“There’s nothing in this world that I want more than to have you as my wife—to raise our child together and build our own home,” I said, meaning every goddamn word.

She chuckled softly. “You know, for someone who doesn’t say much, you sure are a smooth talker.”

“I’m just being honest.” I smiled. “I can’t risk losing you simply because I’m unable to express how I feel. For you, I’d do anything to wipe away your doubts.”

She stared into my eyes as if searching my soul.

I buried my hand in my pocket and withdrew a ring. Her palm flew to her mouth as I went down on one knee.

“Sienna Summers, will you marry me?” I asked, holding up the ring and hoping that she didn’t let me down.

“Yes,” she said amidst chuckles.

Tears were in her eyes, but I assumed they were now tears of joy.

I smiled. “Yes?”

She nodded, excitement coloring her gaze as those sparks in her eyes returned.

I got back on my feet, and she kissed me.

Yes, she kissed me .

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:51 am

And...I said I do .

This was the most thrilling day of my life, the day I tied the knot with Vlad. I was so emotional that it took everything in me not to cry; our story was messed up at some point, and I didn't think was going to be possible, yet it was my reality.

The church doors parted after the ceremony, and we both walked out, arms intertwined as the newlyweds. Familiar faces smiled at us, wishing us well in our lives together.

As we headed down the steps outside the church building, my eyes teared up, and my hand hurt from all that waving.

It was a wonderful day to be a bride, to be Vlad's bride.

Mom and Dad couldn't hide their pride that morning, and I had to warn Mom not to cry because I would've done the same if she had. It was a struggle, but she managed to hold the tears back. She'd spoken from her heart, not her head, during her speech, and her words were sweet and thoughtful—I didn't expect anything less from a mother who loved her daughter unconditionally.

Fiona, who had been with me throughout this journey, despite the ups and downs, was my chief bridesmaid. She proved to be more than just a friend, and in her, I found a sister. The bridal shower was a huge success because of her, and she made sure that today was perfect for me. She'd told me how strong she thought I was and that she was so proud of me, of the woman that I had become. I'd asked if her mission was to make me cry on my wedding day. Fiona had laughed and said she

couldn't have me ruin my makeup on such a big day.

"You alright?" my husband asked, leaning toward my ear while we were in motion.

My husband, that was what he was now, and I'd have to get used to that, although I had a feeling I'd adapt so fast, considering how much I loved this man.

"I'm fine," I replied with a smile.

"Watch your head," he said, helping me get into the backseat of the car.

Such a gentleman.

He carefully shut the door and walked over to the other side.

I spotted Mom and Dad with Fiona standing by their side as they waved at me from the top of the steps.

"I love you," Mom mouthed, blowing me a kiss.

"I love you, too," I whispered to myself.

Vlad got in, and the door was closed beheld him. He held my hand, smiling as he looked so lovingly at me. He was so handsome in that tux that I couldn't stop staring at him all through the ceremony. It was embarrassing because I caught a couple of eyes watching me, but who cared? He was my husband, and I could stare at him however I wanted.

"Take us home," he instructed the driver, and immediately, the car was in motion.

Watching my family and friends, along with Vlad's relatives, bid us farewell as the

car drove away was a reminder that I was no longer Sienna Summers, but Sienna Wolkov. I was Vlad's wife now, and our lives were intertwined—forever.

It had only been a month ago that I said yes to him at the beach, and today, I was officially Mrs. Wolkov. Wow!

As I sat there by his side in that moving vehicle, I recalled all that had happened before this day, all that had led to this point in time. My mind flew back to the very first time I saw him in St. Petersburg and how his presence had made my legs turn to jelly.

I turned to him with a wide grin, and the look in his eyes was telling me that he couldn't wait to devour me. The sexy expression was turning me on, and I enjoyed the feeling—the process of getting wet for him.

It had been a while since we were intimate, and I was already craving his cock; my blood was boiling with passion. This was the reason I couldn't stop staring at him back at the church; my mind was filled with the dirty things he'd do to me tonight.

Honestly, right there at the altar, I hadn't fully paid attention to the clergyman's words. Vlad's sexiness was distracting me, and I was busy painting nasty pictures in my head, pictures that got me turned on. Maybe it was wrong to have harbored those thoughts in such a moment, but it couldn't have been helped.

Beyond the sexual attraction, though, I was so much in love with Vladimir Wolkov, and I couldn't stop thanking the heavens for sending him my way.

A few months ago, this wasn't possible; yet today, what felt like a dream had become a reality—my reality. Despite all that we'd been through—all the pain, hurt, and misunderstanding—love still conquered all in the end.

Later that night, after all the stress and fun-packed activities of the day, we were finally alone. He yanked me off my feet and carried me in his strong arms.

“Now, what?” I asked, biting my lower lip.

“You’ll see,” he replied with a mischievous grin as he climbed up the steps to our bedroom.

The door opened, and we stepped inside. Then, he put me down. It was beautifully decorated with candles and petals of roses shaped like a heart on the bed. The room was dimly lit with fancy lights that added to the ambience of the cozy space. Above, the ceiling was adorned to portray a beautiful night sky, with twinkling stars that looked like diamonds.

“Wow, this is lovely,” I gasped, admiring the decor.

He wrapped his arms around my waist from behind. “Not as lovely as you, unfortunately.”

I melted into his embrace and drew in a deep breath, savoring the sweet candy-like scent that filled the air. My eyes caught a painting hanging off the wall across from me, and I recognized it.

“Wait a minute,” I said, breaking out of his arms in surprise. “Is that what I think it is?” I looked at him, my smile widening by the second.

“I don’t know. Go see for yourself,” he said softly.

I rushed over to the wall, and my palms flew to my mouth reflexively. It was

Nightingale's "Whispers in the Dark."

"This is the piece that brought us together, the one thing in that gallery that caught both our attention," he said, halting beside me.

"How did you...?" I was short of words, my heart filled with joy.

"I have my ways," he replied and turned to me. "See that look on your face? That's priceless." He smiled. "I know you love the portrait, so I decided to get it for you."

"That was quite thoughtful, Vlad. Thank you." I placed a palm on my chest, overwhelmed by gratitude.

"Think of it as a wedding present—a symbol of our love and our unity in holy matrimony."

"Hmm. I like the sound of that," I said, flinging one hand around his neck.

"Is that so?" He grabbed my waist, swaying with me gently.

"Absolutely," I replied, my flirtatious voice barely over a whisper. Rubbing my other hand against his erection, I smiled at the size and hardness of his cock. "Just the way I like it."

"You naughty little girl," he said, pulling me to himself possessively.

"A naughty little girl that's now yours and yours alone," I whispered into his ear and felt his cock swell at my words. "You smell like candy." I shut my eyes and dragged a sniff along his neck. "Wanna see what I do with candies that smell nice?"

"Please, show me," he replied, undoing the buttons of his white vintage shirt.

“Gladly.” I slid all the way down, settling on my knees as I unzipped his pants and dipped my hand to withdraw his cock.

He groaned slightly, and I took it out, holding the heavy organ in my hand. The sight of it always threw me off; its size and weight never ceased to widen my eyes.

I kissed the cap, stroking its length with both my hands as I looked up at his face. “Do you like what I’m doing?”

He nodded subtly, throwing his head toward the ceiling with a groan that made my nipples stand erect.

I took his cock into my mouth and started gliding over it, my movement slow and steady yet sloppy. The reward for my action was the thick sounds of his moans that had a way of making me feel steamy.

His hand pushed my head deeper into his groin, and I gladly obliged, choking on the incredible length of his cock. He pulled my head off and yanked it up in his direction as I gasped, drooling.

“Fuck my mouth,” I said with a voice so low that it was hardly audible, but he heard me. “I wanna be nasty tonight, daddy.”

“That’s what you want, eh?”

I nodded, opening my mouth.

He put it back in and began thrusting. Despite his excitement while pleasuring me the way that I wanted, he was still careful not to hurt me in the process. His thrusts were rough yet smooth, just the way I liked it.

Once I'd had enough, he picked me up effortlessly and laid me down on the bed, inside the heart-shaped red petals. He climbed on top of me, and we kissed fervently, my hands rubbing his head and neck.

A sudden gasp escaped my lips when he ripped my dress apart like a hungry beast and swallowed my breast, sucking with his entire mouth while fondling the other. My body was tensing as I yearned for him, feeling the electricity that jolted across my system. I moaned deeply at the warmth of his mouth on my breast and the movement of his fingers over my nipple.

He kissed me all the way down to my navel, then slipped both hands under the hem of my dress and caressed my pussy with his thumbs.

I was so fucking wet, and the feeling of his fingers gliding over my soaked panties sent shivers down my spine. He teased me for a while, rubbing against my swollen clit without slipping through my entrance.

Soon, he dipped his head between my legs, and with his teeth, he removed my panties.

I spread my legs apart, allowing him access to my honey pot. My head dropped to the pillow beneath it the moment the icy mint of his tongue touched my clit as he licked it while his finger traveled up and down my cunt.

Fuck! He was killing me softly.

Vlad took his time to eat me up, his tongue sticking deep into my pussy. He was so good at this that I didn't feel his teeth even though it felt like his entire mouth was involved in the process.

I arched my back, squeezing tightly against the sheets as I moaned without restraint.

Ecstasy was threatening to consume me, and I was burning with desire, unable to get enough.

My eyes were rolling backward, and the world was turning black, with nothing but sheer pleasure overwhelming me. I was drowning in this sea of ecstasy, and I didn't want to be saved. My heart was racing, pounding, and my legs trembled.

"Yes, right there," I moaned as his tongue hit a spot that gave me goosebumps.

Seconds later, he went off course.

"A little to the left—yes!"

He was quick to get back on track, and on that path, he continued. His hands flew over to my chest and fondled my breasts simultaneously.

"What're you doing to me?" I moaned abruptly as his tongue slid down to my ass, the tip licking up my hole. It felt like my entire nervous system was shutting down as my body vibrated.

The pleasure was growing more and more intense by the minute, crippling my legs and freezing my brain.

It felt so good, and he wouldn't stop; he kept licking until my asshole was slippery enough to accommodate his finger.

"Fuck," I said, twisting and twirling as he pushed his finger deep inside my ass.

His mouth returned to my cunt, and he resumed eating me up while fingering my ass at the same fucking time. He sucked my pussy with rapid movements and dug faster into my ass as if to stimulate my pussy into....

“Oh, my God, I think I’m gonna cum!” I announced.

With his free hand, he rubbed his fingers over my clit, troubling it until....

“Fucckk!” I dragged the word out as my pussy expelled its juice.

My legs were trembling in the air, and I was shaking from all that pleasure.

Did he just make me cum with his fingers and tongue?

Without waiting a moment longer, he climbed on top of me and penetrated my hot pussy. It was practically on fire, but I wanted his cock deep inside me. He fucked me in that position, and I clasped my legs around his waist with my arms around his neck.

“Fuck me harder, daddy!” I said, pleading with my eyes.

The bed itself was shaking, as if about to tip over.

“Yes, faster!” I raked my nails into his back in a bid to curtail the feeling invading my body.

He lifted my leg, clutching it in his elbow as he hit me the way I wanted, harder and faster.

My moans were growing louder and louder, and so he sealed my lips with a kiss that I could not resist. The heat of passion was overwhelming, and I just couldn’t get enough of that cock.

“It’s so deep,” I cried, tearing my lips from his.

He continued to thrust at a quicker pace, his cock constantly ramming against my G-spot.

“Don’t stop! Keep going! Please, don’t stop!” I begged, feeling like I was cumming again. “I’m almost there.”

“Me, too,” he replied, fucking me so fast that my titties bounced like they were about to fall off my chest.

He groaned deeply, and I knew he was climaxing; so was I.

“Fuck! I’m cumming!” he said, his voice thick and so masculine.

“Yes, please. Do it inside me. I want it. I want it all,” came my reply.

He was my husband now; he could freely cum in me whenever he wanted.

With a loud cry, my pussy started to squirt, the liquid splashing as his groin slapped against mine.

He let out a husky groan, and I clung to him so tightly, my feet locking behind him as he filled my pussy with his load. Deeper and deeper, he pushed inside me, and I received every drop of cum he deposited.

The tension died down, and we were both out of breath, dampened in our sweat.

He caressed my hair and kissed my forehead, then my lips.

“I love you, Vladimir Wolkov,” I said, wiping his moist face.

“I love you, too, Sienna Wolkov,” he replied.

“ Sienna Wolkov does have a ring to it; I like the sound of that.” I laughed.

Vlad kissed me again, then tickled my armpits, and I let out a belly laugh, squirming beneath him.

I wanted to laugh with him forever.

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:51 am

Everything had happened so fast and now I wasn't just a father-to-be; I was a husband to the most beautiful woman I'd ever set eyes on. Life as I knew it was no longer as it used to be.

So far, it had been peaceful and undeniably amazing. I didn't think it was possible to love someone as much as I loved this woman, and to me, nothing else mattered.

We'd gone on several dates since our wedding because I was willing to spoil and pamper her, the one who had brought out this side of me that I never knew existed.

I got her gifts upon gifts just so I could see that smile on her face. I knew I was doing too much, but I didn't mind. All I wanted was for her to be happy all the time. I loved seeing her excited; she deserved to be, considering everything she'd had to endure, everything I put her through.

No amount of care, love, and attention could be enough to make up for her pain and her hurt.

She'd once teased me to dial it down with the gifts, but she'd done that with a smile that said she loved them.

Sienna was already in her trimester, and I was counting down to the big day: the day our mutual guest would arrive. In the meantime, though, she needed all the love and attention that I could give.

A happy woman, they say, is a happy home, and I was determined to make my woman happy—for my sake and the sake of the baby to come.

“Here you go,” I said, setting a tray of fruits on the table.

“Aww. How sweet,” she said, blushing on the couch she was seated on, watching TV.

“But I just ate barely thirty minutes ago.” She chuckled.

“These are fruits,” I said, sliding in beside her. “No harm has ever come from eating fruits.”

She laughed. “Who are you, and what have you done with Vladimir Wolkov?”

I picked up a strawberry from the tray and fed it to her. She took a bite, munching quietly on it as I watched her.

“Have I told you that you have an amazing smile?” I asked, my voice low and husky.

Her cheeks flushed, and her face lit up with a wide grin.

“That right there is priceless,” I said, gesturing at the smile she had on.

“If your plan is to make me blush, then I have to admit, it’s working,” she replied, her grin spreading across her face.

“What if it’s to make you wet?” I smirked, caressing her thigh.

She giggled, and her breath ceased when my hand traveled up her dress.

“Did you know,” I began, leaning closer with a whisper, “that constant sex when a woman is pregnant has an important role to play during delivery?”

She chuckled in between soft moans. “I hear you, Dr. Wolkov.”

I kissed her, and she returned the favor. I withdrew my hand from underneath her dress and caressed her hair with it. Our kiss wasn't heated, but we could feel the passion dancing around us.

"Is this what being married feels like?" she asked, staring lovingly into my eyes.

"It's what we can make it feel like," I replied.

"I see you, Vlad," she said, her tone so tender. "I see how hard you're trying to make me feel loved and cherished." She smoothed my hair back. "But you don't have to try too hard. I know how you feel about me and about this baby in my womb."

"You deserve everything and more, Sienna," I replied, my gaze fixed on her amazing eyes. "You're worth doing much for."

She touched her chest and blushed. "Thank you."

"No, thank you, " I said.

"What for?" She squinted, her eyes narrowing at me.

"For showing me that I could be better, that my life wasn't overwhelmed by utter darkness as I'd thought," came my reply.

"Well, I'm glad I did that." She slipped into my arms.

Lately, I'd been thinking about Joshua a lot and how ironic it was that I had ended up with his daughter. With how I hated him, I wouldn't have thought, twenty-one years ago, that I'd share a room with anyone related to him. But things took a turn for good, and the unexpected had happened.

A part of me wished that he hadn't betrayed me, that I wasn't forced to end his life. Maybe things would have been different today. But the deed was done, and in the end, I still got all I wanted.

Sienna's ability to shove aside the past and forge ahead with her father's killer was baffling. But it was proof of her maturity and her love for me. Paul and Natalie Summers did raise the perfect child; they did a better job than Joshua and Sienna's biological mom could have ever done.

I was proud of the woman she was, even though we were still two separate entities, but like I've always said, unlike terms attract.

Despite how she had affected me positively, I was still the same man when it was time for business. I learned to balance family and work without mixing up the two. At home, I was a loving husband, but at work, I was the cruel and ruthless boss I was known to be.

Simon believed I was on the right track, that the balance I had struck was perfect; he'd told me two days ago that with Sienna, I'd hit the jackpot.

"She's a rare gem, that one, Boss." His voice resounded in my head. "And I believe you two were meant for each other."

He was right to believe so, and with every single day that passed, I was grateful that I'd met her when I did and that things turned out this way.

Sienna was someone I could never replace; she was perfect for me regardless of our differences. Nothing she did was wrong in my eyes, nothing at all, and sometimes, I felt like I was bewitched. She had crawled under my skin and occupied every nook and cranny of my mind.

She was an amazing person all round, and with her, I'd found peace; I'd found love. I was happy around her, and seeing her happy all the time was satisfactory.

There was a knock on the door, pulling me out of my thoughts.

"Are you expecting someone?" she asked, eating a strawberry.

I pondered for a moment. Not really. Although there was this one guy who'd been pestering me to see Sienna. Could it be him at the door?

"I'll get it." I kissed her forehead, rising to my feet.

I opened the door, and there he was, standing on the other side with a bouquet of flowers in his hands.

"Zdravstvuyte , Vlad," Andy said, literally meaning, Hello, Vlad . He was dressed up in a nice suit, just as he was the night we'd first met at the club.

"Zdravstvuyte , Andy," I replied, my expression blank.

"Is Sienna home?" he asked. "I'd like to speak with her if that's okay with you."

I glanced at the bouquet in his hands and returned my gaze to his face, where regret was plastered all over.

He would have had a lot of explaining to do as to why he'd brought flowers for my wife, but I knew better.

Andy had reached out to me two days earlier, begging to have a talk with Sienna. I knew he had some things to let off his chest, but a part of me was still mad at him for the stupid stunt he'd pulled on her life.

The only reason he was still breathing, still walking this Earth, was because Sienna had asked me to spare his life.

I'd had him holed up at a secret facility where I'd planned to torture him slowly for attempting to hurt my wife and unborn child.

After Sienna's plea to spare his life, I thought about him and realized his actions were driven by rage, considering the cycle of violence we were trapped in. He knew I'd killed his brother, and he wanted vengeance. Same as me when I took Joshua's life.

In the end, Andy and I were not so different, after all; we were both victims of our rage, and we let it drive us, control us.

"Please, let me see her," he begged, pleading with his eyes. "You know I wouldn't be here if I didn't think it was important."

I sighed and stepped away from the door. "Come in."

"Thank you," he said, walking in.

"Hey, babe, who was at the...door?" The slight pause came when Sienna turned in our direction.

The shock in her eyes was subtle, but it was there.

With his shoulders hunched, Andy approached her, reeking of remorse. "Hello, Sienna."

She rose to her feet, looking at me. I nodded; then, she returned her gaze to him.

"I brought you these," he said, holding out the bouquet with a faint smile. "I didn't

know what kinds of flowers you liked, so I asked them to mix up the best of the best.”

She hesitated, but eventually, she accepted it. “Thank you.”

I walked over to my wife and stood by her side as she watched him in silence.

“I know you’re probably wondering why I’m here,” he said softly. “So, I’ll just get right to it.” Andy let out a sigh. “First, I’d like to apologize for the pain I put you through, the trauma you must have suffered because of me. Kidnapping you and threatening to harm you and your baby was too extreme. You have my sincere apologies.”

She heaved a sigh, blinking back the tears in her eyes, and I slipped my hand into hers. “It’s okay. At least no life was lost,” she said, her voice almost a whisper.

“Despite what I did, you still stood up for me. Thank you for saving my life, Sienna. If you hadn’t stopped Vlad when you did, I’d have been dead by now, so thank you.”

She nodded gently but didn’t say a word.

“The second reason I’m here is to ask a favor of you,” he said.

Sienna stole a glance at me, then said, “Ask away, Andy.”

“I recently just learned that you’re my late brother’s daughter—and the guilt of what I did to you has been eating me up since then. This means that you’re my niece, my blood.” He took gentle steps forward. “You’re the only living relative that I have now, Sienna. And I’m glad that Vlad showed up when he did and stopped me from making the biggest mistake of my life.”

For some reason, his words made her emotional, but she wouldn’t give in to the tears

that welled her eyes.

“All I’m asking, Sienna, is your permission to be a proper uncle to you and to be a part of the baby’s life. I want to make up for the harm that I caused you,” he said, regret coloring his eyes.

She sniffled and managed to squeeze out a genuine smile. “Alright, Uncle Andy. I’d like that, too.”

“Really?” His eyes widened. Maybe he wasn’t expecting her to agree so easily.

“Really.” She nodded. “To be honest, I don’t blame you at all. It’s this life of violence that makes people do the unthinkable. But I’m way past that now. So, let’s bury whatever happened behind us and move on—start a new chapter in our lives, one that’s free of hate for one another, a chapter where we’re all united as a family.”

I’d never been more proud of my wife; her goodness and understanding was beyond my comprehension. She was such a gentle soul, so kind and thoughtful.

The world needed more people like her because her type would make it a better and safer place for all.

“That’s so kind of you,” he said, spreading his arms with a grin. “Can I hug you—with your permission, of course.” The last statement was thrown to me.

I scoffed and nodded; then, Sienna slipped into his embrace.

“Thank you for being different,” he said to her.

She smiled and exhaled softly.

“Alright, then,” he said, letting go of her. “I better be on my way. My job here is done.” He flashed her a grin and nodded at me before turning to leave.

“Uncle Andy,” she called.

He stopped in his steps and looked back at her. “Yes?”

“Would you stay for dinner?” she asked.

“I...uhh....” He was speechless. “I wouldn’t want to impose.” He looked at me.

“She wants you to stay for dinner,” I chipped in. “Do you really want to turn her down?”

“Not in a million years,” he replied.

She smiled. “It’s settled, then.”

Andy walked back to the living and joined us. There, we talked at length on random subjects with Sienna at the forefront of the conversations.

It was all worth it to see my wife so happy.

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:51 am

“Oh, my God, this is magnificent!” Ms. Crowley said to me, her eyes widening in astonishment as she gazed at a portrait on the wall.

“I call it ‘Love in the dark,’” I replied with a smile, standing by her side.

She smiled back. “It’s amazing, Sienna.”

This was one of the many praises I’d received since the opening about an hour ago.

My husband, ever supportive, had encouraged my passion for art these past three years, and now that I was done with school, we decided that it was time to take a step forward. I’d always envisioned owning an art gallery just like Fiona’s cousin, Nightingale.

Vlad thought it was a fantastic idea and funded the whole thing from start to finish. He said all I had to do was create my beautiful designs.

“You focus on doing what you do best. Leave the rest to me,” his voice resounded in my head.

Today, my dream was a reality; we were all gathered here at my exclusive art exhibition at the Wolkov private gallery, where my art was being showcased on the walls.

The expansive space was filled with the elites of society, the who’s who and art enthusiasts, all dressed to impress. Vlad, being a well-connected man in the city, had his own guests; mafia members, politicians, philanthropists, Hollywood stars, and a

few other public figures.

Waiters moved amidst the crowd with trays of champagne and canapés in their hands. As one walked by, I reached out and helped myself to a glass, hoping a couple of sips would help ease my nerves.

“You know, drinking at your own art exhibition isn’t really a good idea.”

I knew I recognized that voice, that smooth English laced with a Russian accent. A smile brightened my face, and I turned to face the speaker. “Sasha?” My brows rose. The last time I’d seen my cousin was three years ago when I first visited St. Petersburg.

“Surprise!” She embraced me. “Oh, my God! Look at you.” She checked me out from head to toe.

“You haven’t aged a day since the last time I saw you,” Dmitry said, joining us, clad in a fine jacket over a pair of jeans.

“This is a pleasant surprise.” I chuckled, unable to uncontrol my excitement.

“Yeah, we figured since we missed the wedding, we wouldn’t miss this, too,” he replied, hand tucked in his pocket.

“How’s Babushka and the rest of the family?” I asked.

“Who are you calling the rest of the family ?” a familiar voice chimed in from behind me.

My heart was about to explode from my chest as I slowly turned to face the speaker. “Aunt Natasha!”

“For the fifteenth hundredth time, honey, it’s just Natasha—I’m not that old.” She smiled widely, pulling me into her arms. “Come here!”

She was Dad’s older sister, but she seemed to have aged in reverse since the last time I’d been in Russia. My hot aunt embraced me tightly, a testament of how much she’d missed me and vice versa. I had never been so happy to see my relatives.

“How—how are you guys here?” I stuttered.

“First, where’s baby Zachar?” Natasha asked.

“Mommy!” My three-year-old boy hopped out of the nanny’s arms and rushed to my feet.

“There he is!” I smiled, picking him up.

“My God, he’s so handsome,” Natasha said, leaning closer to play with him. “He has your eyes.”

Zachar was the spitting image of his father: same dirty blond hair, porcelain skin, and charming smile, plus a pair of green eyes he got from me. The boy was a symbol of our love.

“Zachar, say hello to Aunt Natasha,” I said to him, shifting his attention to her.

“Zachar, darling, pay no attention to your mother. You can call me Natasha,” she said with a broad grin.

Dmitry and Sasha joined her, and they all admired my boy.

It turned out that Vlad had reached out to them a few days ago after I casually mentioned that I had missed them. I had no idea he’d taken it seriously, but I was

glad that he did.

I locked eyes with him as he conversed with a small group of men. “Thank you,” I mouthed, a hand on my chest and he raised a glass with a faint grin.

“Hold on, what about Babushka? How’s she coping now that you’re here?” I asked Natasha.

“Oh, she’ll survive a day or two with your Uncle Ivan,” she replied, smiling at Zachar as he played with her hair. “Where are your parents?”

“They’re somewhere around,” I replied.

“I’m proud of you, Sienna. And this place is amazing— you’re amazing.”

“Thank you, aunty,” I answered.

She let out a sigh. “I’ll have to get used to that.”

We both laughed.

I caught Fiona standing at a distance, waving at me. “Excuse me,” I said and attempted to leave when Zachar began to cry.

“I think he wants to go with you.” Natasha handed him back to me.

I accepted him, and he slipped into my arms.

“Hi, Sia.” Fiona smiled as I approached her. “Hey, Zachar.” She playfully touched his cheeks.

“You made it,” I said to her.

“I wouldn’t miss this for the world,” she replied. “You’ve waited long for this day, and I’m glad that it’s finally here. I’m really proud of you, Sienna.”

“Aww. Thank you, Fiona.” I slightly hugged her. “You look beautiful, by the way.”

She was wearing a stunning long red gown with a pair of heels, a silver necklace around her neck.

“Not as beautiful as you are, obviously,” she said modestly, admiring me with her eyes.

Just like Fiona, I was wearing a long gown that almost swept the fine marble floor; it was green, and it complemented the color of my eyes. At least that was what my husband had said earlier this morning.

Fiona and I were still talking when Zachar started whining, and he wouldn’t shut up. I tried everything that I could, but nothing was working. My best friend offered to help, as well, but the boy was persistent with his wailing.

I caught Fiona laughing as she watched me struggle with my three-year-old. “Don’t get too cocky; you’ll be a mom one day, too,” I said.

She chuckled. “Until then.”

“Did someone call the cavalry? ‘Cause they’ve arrived,” Vlad said, halting beside me.

“Oh, thank God you’re here.” I let out a sigh of relief.

“Hand him over.” He smiled, and I didn’t hesitate doing so for a second.

The moment Zachar lay his head on Vlad’s shoulder, it was like he found peace, and

all that whining gradually stopped.

“Hi, Vlad,” Fiona greeted him.

“Hi,” he replied, gently caressing the baby’s back, willing him to sleep.

“I’ll uhh...I’ll leave you two to it,” she said, excusing herself. “Later, Sia.”

I hugged her, and she smiled before dematerializing. Returning my gaze to my husband and child, my heart melted as I watched him rock the baby to sleep, holding him like he was an egg.

Since the birth of Zachar, Vlad had proven to be the best father that he could be, the best husband who was hell-bent on building a happy home for his wife and kid. Watching him now, being all cozy and sweet with Zachar, brought a bright smile to my face and filled my heart with gladness.

Soon, Zachar fell asleep, and I beckoned the nanny to come over. When she arrived, Vlad quietly handed him over to her.

“Make sure he sleeps peacefully,” he said to her.

She nodded and walked away.

“Father of the year.” I smiled at him.

“Just doing my job,” he said, reciprocating the gesture.

“Mrs. Wolkov.” A woman approached us and engaged me in a deep conversation about my work.

Vlad kissed my forehead and excused himself, leaving me with this art enthusiast

who was obviously a huge fan. I loved talking about my work with people who appreciated good stuff. I later learned that her name was Gloria Salvador, a wannabe artist with a knack for impressionist art.

As the evening unfolded, I lost count of the number of times I'd caught Vlad staring at me mischievously. I recognized the look in his eyes; he wanted me, and that only made me wet. Each time we locked eyes across the hall, I'd feel my pussy tingle between my legs. I wanted him so badly and couldn't wait until the day was over to have him fuck me. I literally couldn't wait.

He was handsome, so hot and sexy in his usual impeccably tailored suit that revealed his build.

I was talking to a group of admirers when our eyes locked again, and he cast a flirtatious grin at me. Discreetly, I bit my lower lip, slowly running a finger around the rim of the glass in my hand.

He smirked and said a few words to his company. The fact that he was feet away from me meant that I couldn't make out what he had said to them, but it sure seemed to me like he'd excused himself.

I watched him leave the group and head upstairs with a pointed stare in my direction. This was it, my opportunity to fuck him. He'd done that to call me out; it was a silent signal, and I was smart enough to get the message.

"I, uhm..." I said to those around me, clearing my throat. "I need to take care of something important. I'll be back." I drained my glass, set it on the nearest table, and followed my husband up the stairs.

I walked through the crowd, smiling and nodding at my guests, but deep down, I was hoping that no one would engage me in any conversation right now. I was burning with desire for my husband, and all I wanted was his dick inside me.

Increasing my pace, I rushed up the stairs, leaving the exhibition below. The hallway was empty and quiet, except for the sounds of my heels clicking against the floor.

The door to the art studio was partially open, and I smiled, looking back to make sure no one was following me.

That instant, I was pulled into the room by the wrist, and once inside, the door was slammed shut with my back resting against it.

“Naughty, naughty. You had me turned on downstairs,” Vlad said, pressing himself against me.

I moaned softly at his erection brushing against my legs. “Oh, yeah, what’re you gonna do about it?” I asked, teasing him with a low, sexy voice.

His cologne mixed with the smell of paint as I struggled to regain my breath.

“Why don’t I show rather than tell?” he replied with a husky tone, pressing his lips against my neck while gently caressing my curves.

“I’d like that,” I whispered, letting out a moan as his hand traveled up my thigh.

Vlad kissed my lips, and, at the same time, his fingers shifted my underpants to the side before sliding in. “Looks who’s wet already,” he teased with a thick voice that made my body tremble.

Vlad went down on his knees and stuck his head under my dress. His tongue was chilly as he licked my cunt and rubbed my clit.

“Yes,” I moaned in silence, shutting my eyes.

When the pleasure started getting to my brain, making me lose my senses, I covered

my mouth with my palm in an attempt to muffle my moans.

He rose to his feet, lifting me in his strong arms as he walked over to a table beside a nearly completed portrait.

The room was dimly lit, with a lot of my work hanging here and there; it was my studio, and this wouldn't be the first time we fucked in here.

He set me down on the table and engaged me in a very hot kiss that left us both breathless. I sat there, legs spread apart, as I struggled with his belt while still twirling my tongue in his mouth. Finally, I unbuckled the damn thing and undid his zipper. My blood was boiling with passion and desire, and in no time, I withdrew his cock. The weight of it in my hand never got old, and it always made me smile.

He grabbed my neck as if to choke me, and I stuck out my tongue, stroking his cock, my thumb smearing his precum over his cap. He bent over and kissed me while simultaneously fingering my pussy.

I lay on his cock, positioning it at my entrance with an inviting look etched upon my face.

Vlad pushed himself inside me, and we both moaned like two starving beasts. His thrusts were fast and hard, and I was trying not to scream out. The feeling was so overwhelming, and as usual, he was hitting the right spot.

My whole body was tensing, craving this man whose cock I could never get enough of.

His hands were all over my body, caressing my contours, as I felt hotter by the second. It was as if I was losing my breath and possibly my mind as well. The pleasure was too much to hold in, but I had to; there were people downstairs, and they could fucking hear us.

He turned me around, ramming my pussy from behind. I knew he was tempted to pull on my hair like he always did in positions like this, but he didn't. I figured he couldn't risk making a mess of my curls.

I winched at the pleasurable pain of his palm slapping my ass. I liked that; it was fucking hot, and he did it again and again and again. I was pretty sure that spot had turned red by now with his fingers imprinted on it.

I covered my mouth tightly, taking in his deep thrusts that traveled to my stomach. My eyes were turning white, and my breasts were pressed against the table below.

With a deep groan, he announced his arrival, filling my pussy with his load as I dragged out my moans, accepting all of it, every drop.

We let out a mutual sigh of satisfaction, and he pulled out of my slippery cunt.

He turned me around and kissed my lips. "Did I tell you that you look so beautiful today?" he asked, his breath heavy from all that banging.

Yes, he did, more times than I could count.

"I'm not sure," I said, lying through my teeth.

He smiled and picked up a brush, then dipped it into a bowl of red paint. "You are the most beautiful woman alive, Sienna Wolkov." He said, raising the brush with the paint dripping down.

I blushed, wondering what he planned on doing with that.

Gently, he raised my curly hair and spun me around. Seconds later, I felt the cool paint on my skin, caressing the back of my neck in one single stroke.

“This is a symbol of my undying love for you,” he said, clarifying his action.

I felt a thrill of excitement jolt through my body, making me more sensitive to the power of his love. I faced him again and took another brush, dipped it into the same red paint, and marked him on the back of his neck, somewhere below the collar of his white undershirt. “Now, we both are marked by this paint,” I said, wrapping my hand around his neck.

We spent the next few minutes kissing and giggling at his jokes.

“We should return downstairs before someone notices we’re gone,” he said, pulling his pants back up.

“Yeah, good idea,” I concurred, adjusting my gown.

After we finished getting dressed, he held my hand, and we left the studio together.

“There they are,” Mom said, smiling as we walked down the steps, hand in hand. “I’ve been looking all over for you two.”

We halted before her and the rest of my family, exchanging glances.

“Where were you guys anyway?” Sasha asked us.

Dad looked at me and Vlad with a mischievous grin. “Trust me, you don’t wanna know,” he replied.

It took her a couple of seconds, but eventually, she got it. “Ooh! I see.” Her eyes widened at the realization, and she smiled. “God, I need a man in my life.”

We laughed, and soon, Fiona joined us.

I stood beside my husband, our fingers clutched between one another as I watched my family laugh and make merry. The air was filled with love and happiness, prompting a wide smile to brighten my face.

Gratitude enveloped my heart, and tears of joy almost dropped from my eyes as I appreciated how my life had turned out in the end.

I looked at Vlad with a smile.

Surrounded by the people I loved and adored, I drew in a deep breath, ready for the next chapter of our lives.

THE END