



The Pakhan's Sold Bride (West Coast Bratva Pakhans #1)

Author: *Deva Blake*

Category: Urban

Description: I'm sold off as the Pakhan's forced bride.

Daddy betrayed the Bratva and sacrificed me to settle the debt.

The Pakhan takes one look at me, picks me up, and carries me away.

I'm locked in his mansion and expected to give him an heir.

He rules San Francisco with an iron fist and a past drenched in blood.

He's more than a decade my senior, and now I'm his little, innocent bride.

I'm forced to sign the wedding papers as he tells me I'm his.

I'm dragged to his home as he tells me I can't escape.

Nightmares come to claim me, but he soothes me, and I forget.

I forget that I must struggle against his claim on my body.

I forget that I must stop his possessive hands on my curves.

I'm soft and warm in his strong arms, and my body is getting bigger and bigger.

Can I give myself to the Pakhan?

Total Pages (Source): 26

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:28 pm

The views stretch out from the top floor of my mansion across the San Francisco Bay Area. Gorgeous, endless ocean views that run as far as the eye can see.

San Francisco belongs to me. This is my city.

Nothing happens here without me knowing about it or having a controlling factor in it.

The West Coast is run by five families. Five unchallengeable strengths, each dominating one city. We work together to make sure things run the way they should, to keep everyone in line, and allow the flow of business within the city to be fair and economical for those we allow to be involved.

This network of alliances creates a good web of support. We give and receive and build together. By maintaining this alliance, we maintain our own power. And my power is unquestionable.

Which is why it pisses me off to indescribable heights when my stepbrother insists, over and over again, on testing my patience and understanding.

Miron has been on a relentless track to try and overthrow my throne. He thinks he has what it takes to overpower me. To take over San Francisco. He has no idea what he's getting himself into. And my patience is wearing thin.

“He didn't get the last warning?” Ulyana asks. She sits on the sofa with her legs draped over the arm of the chair. She has the latest copy of her favorite fashion magazine in her hand, but it's closed as she scrunches her face towards me. “He can't

be that stupid.”

My sister is twenty-two, twelve years younger than me. But she’s sharp, sassy, and street smart.

“I don’t need you worrying about Miron. You need to focus on college. When do you go back?”

She’s been staying with me during her summer break.

“At five. But are you going to be okay here without me? Who is going to remind you to eat your vegetables?” she teases.

I snort. “I’m sure I’ll manage.”

Huffing loudly, she opens the magazine again, and I pace near the window, waiting for the call from Roan, my right-hand man. I want to know what the hell Miron got into now.

“Miron the Moron, is an idiot if he thinks you don’t know what he’s doing,” Ulyana says from behind her magazine. “Him and his stupid father.”

“I know. I don’t know why our mother married that guy. You and I tried to accept him, we’ve given them both a fair chance, I’d say. But I’m over it now. Miron and his father need to go. I think Sergei married Mom for the power, not love. I wish she could see that.”

“Mom’s smarter than you think, Nestor,” my sister says.

“I hope so. The times I’ve tried to talk to her about it, she hasn’t exactly wanted to hear what I had to say.”

Giving up on waiting for the call, I toss my phone onto the table near the window and sit down.

“Did you have lunch yet?” I ask Ulyana.

“I did. Hey, you know what I was thinking? You should find a girl and get married.”

Laughter rolls from my chest in a loud outburst. “Married. Why the hell do you think I’d want to get married?”

“No, listen, this is a good idea. If you get married, you make babies. Little heirs to the kingdom. Miniature Nestors. Then there’ll be no more mistaking who takes over after you, and Miron and his father can get lost.”

I clench my jaw. I hate to admit it, but she’s on to something. An heir would solve a lot of problems for me. The bloodline would continue, and the kingdom would stay in the family. Questions about who is next in line would vanish.

“I guess I’ll get right on that. Finding a wife. I’ll put it right at the top of my list,” I say sarcastically.

Ulyana picks up one of the throw pillows from the sofa and lobs it at me. I catch it, chuckling.

“You’re an asshole. You just don’t want to admit that your little sister is smarter than you and came up with the idea before you.”

“No, I can admit it. It’s a good idea. Just not practical right at this moment.”

“Well, you better hurry and make it happen.” She stands from the sofa and stretches.

“I’m going to pack.”

I watch her walk away. She looks just like me, except way prettier; dark blonde hair, bright hazel eyes, tanned olive skin, and a wide smile.

Oddly, neither of us looks like our mother, so I assume we take after our father; having never met him, there's no way to know.

My mother fell for that idiot twice—once when she had me, after which he bailed on her, not wanting to be a father.

Then he came back into her life very briefly when I was twelve, wanting to rekindle the lost love.

I was away at boarding school at the time. Thank goodness, because I might have tried to kill him.

They were together for all of three weeks, during which she got pregnant again, causing him to freak out and bail on her. Again.

Needless to say that after that, she cut him off for good.

His brother, my uncle, took us in. At the time, he was running San Francisco, and he wasn't able to have sons, so he was more than happy to teach me everything and treat me as his own.

He's my father. Even in his older years now, I still ask him for advice at times. I have great respect for that man.

I wish my mother had married him.

My mother appears to have a steady reputation for choosing the wrong men.

I rub my hand over my jaw, feeling the shadow of stubble, rough beneath my fingers.

This situation with my stepbrother, Miron, is a delicate one.

Sergei is still married to my mother, and every time I've tried to speak to her about it, she's shut me down.

She's as stubborn as I am. I guess I do get some things from her.

I spoke to Roan last week. We're redirecting our efforts.

The goal now is to find proof—unquestionable evidence of what Miron and Sergei are up to.

I need to take something tangible to my mother, and to show my allies when they question why I'm turning against my own family.

Not that they would question me. It's more of a diplomatic move.

My thoughts drift towards what my sister said.

I've never wanted to get married. It seems troublesome and pointless. But the idea of an heir is tempting. I can't believe I'm even entertaining this, but I have to look at all my options.

My phone rings.

"Finally," I mutter, reaching for it.

With it pressed to my ear, I clench my jaw and listen to Roan, my right-hand man, my eyes and ears and everything else out there on the streets.

Because of the position I hold, I have to keep myself out of the watchful eyes of the law. I don't get involved in the day-to-day, but I still need someone watching over it.

He's been my trusted friend and colleague for as long as I can remember.

"We have a problem, boss," he says, sounding tense.

"What did Miron do this time?" I huff.

He chuckles. "For a change, it wasn't him."

"Oh," I say, surprised. "What's going on, then?"

"One of our vendors fucked up, and the entire operation was a failure because of it. I can't say for sure, but I think he did something to the product."

"Who was it?"

"Anton Abakumov."

"Fuck. That asshole has only managed to stick around this long because he was tied to my uncle."

"I know. But listen, this fuckup has cost us."

"How much?" I groan.

"Ten million dollars. We owe it to Black Hats."

I sigh loudly, pressing my fingers into my eyes to try and push away the headache growing behind them. I thought today was going to be a good day. It had that vibe

when I woke up this morning.

“Look, I can smooth things over with the Black Hats, but I want you to track Anton down so that I can have a word with that fucking idiot. I’m done with him. He needs to pay for what he’s done this time.”

Roan laughs. “You’re in luck. I have the devil right here with me. My men were just questioning him.”

“Great. Put me on speaker,” I demand.

Roan flicks the call to speaker, and I hear the background noises of Anton being questioned rather intensely.

The man groans each time a fist thuds into his abdomen.

“I’ll get it back, I’ll sort it out, I swear,” Anton whimpers.

“Hold up, the boss wants to speak with him.”

Shuffling.

“Go ahead. He’s listening,” Roan confirms.

“Anton, what the fuck were you thinking? Trying to weasel out of something to clear your gambling debts? Or was this part of one of your shady side jobs? Actually, don’t bother answering that—I don’t fucking care to hear your long, bullshit stories today.”

“Boss, I swear, I can fix this. I can—” A loud thud as the air is knocked from his lungs.

“The boss said, shut up. Listen. You only speak if he asks you something,” Roan snarls.

“How exactly do you plan to fix this?” I ask, knowing that Anton doesn’t have a cent to his name.

He squanders away every cent he makes, betting on horses, fights, slot machines—anything to give himself a little thrill.

It never pays off. And if it does, he bets again and loses it anyway.

I don’t really care about his gambling addition—not until it starts to impact my business, and this isn’t the first time his bullshit choices have done so.

“Ask Maliki. He’ll tell you. I’m good for my word,” Anton pleads, not answering my question.

“My uncle is not in charge anymore, Anton. And your word means shit to me.”

“I swear, if you give me a chance, a few hours, I can make it right.”

Laughing bitterly, I shake my head. “Roan, let him go. Give him two hours. Let’s see what this idiot can come up with.”

“Boss, he doesn’t have anything—”

“I know. But it’ll be entertaining. Cut him loose. But Anton, understand this: if you’re not in my office in two hours with a solution, you’re dead.”

“Thank you, thank you, boss. Thank you so much.”

I hang up the phone, already knowing Anton has nothing to offer. But the right thing to do is to give him a chance. Then, once he comes back with nothing, I will be justified in whatever it is I plan on doing.

He's not smart enough to run. His friendship with my uncle, even though it hasn't really been a friendship for years now, gives him enough of an ego to think he can talk his way out of things.

Well, in two hours, he's going to learn that his time is up.

I stand looking out at the ocean again.

I guess I'm headed into the office today, after all.

I'll arrange a driver for my sister to the airport and say goodbye now before I leave. We never make a big deal about her coming and going; she'll be back on her next holiday.

My office is on the top floor of a building I own in town—one of the many pieces of real estate I own throughout the city.

I park in the underground lot beneath the building, but instead of taking the elevator, I walk out to the front of the building, onto the street, enjoying the sun on my face as I head towards the main entrance.

Roan is waiting for me in the lobby.

“Boss, Anton is on his way here now.”

“The men been tailing him?”

“Yeah, you know this whole thing with giving him two hours was a waste of time.”

“It’s okay, it’s only his time we wasted.”

“True.”

Roan punches the elevator button, then once inside, punches a code into the security panel. The elevator has access to every floor of the building, but the top floor requires a key code that very few people know.

He stands with his arms folded over his chest.

I glance over him. He’s a bulky, solid man—someone very few people are stupid enough to mess with.

“You can tell the security guards to let Anton up as soon as he arrives. Do we know what actually happened that cost us so much money?” I ask.

“We tested the product. He cut it. I don’t know what he did with the other part, but he diluted the product he delivered with powdered sugar of all shit.”

“Fucking idiot. That’s embarrassing. And the Black Hats—they obviously test on delivery. He knows this. Why would he be so stupid?”

“Exactly. Purity was down fifteen percent,” Roan says, with a look of disapproval on his face.

“Fifteen percent of ten million dollars. That’s a good amount of money Anton was trying to slice away for himself. Did he say what he was going to do with it?” I huff,

agitated.

“I didn’t ask. Probably clearing his ever-growing list of debts. Who the fuck cares? I say we end his miserable existence.” Roan taps the gun at his hip.

“It does seem like the most likely outcome today. Did you set up a meeting with Igor for me?” Igor is the man who was supposed to receive the product that Anton messed with. I’ll have to make things right with him.

“Yeah, Igor is a good ally. I made sure he understands that Anton was not working on our instructions and that he will be dealt with internally. But obviously, a face-to-face and offer of peace from you will go a long way.”

“Good.” The elevator comes to a stop and quietly slides open.

We step out and walk into a massive open space, modern and bright, surrounded by two walls of windows that run the entire perimeter of the building.

I like open spaces. It lets me think more clearly.

It’s why I love San Francisco and living next to the ocean.

I never feel crowded the same way I do when I’m inland.

I can breathe easier knowing there is open space next to me, instead of more buildings and more people, scurrying around like ants infesting the city.

On our right is the receptionist, a mousy girl who answers calls, fetches coffee, and minds her own business. I still don’t know why she’s here. I’d rather have the space to myself. Roan says it gives the office a more convincingly above-the-board vibe.

I nod in greeting at her, and she nods back. I can never remember her name. We've hardly spoken. Roan is the one who deals with her.

Walking towards my desk, in the far corner at the meeting point of the two windowed walls, Roan's phone pings. He pulls it out of his pocket. "He's here."

I sneer. I don't want to be dealing with Anton today, but here I am, forced into this position because again, he fucked up.

"Perfect timing," I answer.

I take my gun out of the holster resting against the small of my back and shrug the black suit jacket off my shoulders.

"Send him up," I say, putting the gun down on my mahogany desk.

"You should just let me meet him downstairs and end this."

"No, we'll do this the right way. We gave him two hours. Let's see what he came up with in that time."

"I'll tell you what he came up with. Nothing," Roan groans.

I smirk. "Most likely."

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:28 pm

Lifting the piece of paper, I sigh loudly and place it on the already too-high pile of unpaid bills that I somehow need to find the money to cover. It's another reminder from the hospital of what we owe.

What I owe.

After my mother passed, after a two-year battle with leukemia and endless medical bills that were only partially covered by her insurance, my father made thousands of promises to help me get the debts sorted—but instead, he ended up stealing the money that paid out from her life insurance and blowing it on his stupid gambling addiction.

It's been two years since I lost her.

And instead of the debts going down, they only seem to be getting worse. Six months ago, my father somehow managed to get access to my savings account, and all the money I was planning to put toward the doctors' bills—he stole it.

I lift another bill and place it on the 'unpaid' pile.

I'm fighting tears of frustration by the time I've gone through all of the statements and invoices for this month.

Working three jobs and some odd jobs here and there, I'm not making anywhere near enough to ever be rid of this debt. It's astronomical. It's way too much for one person to deal with.

The debt collectors are hounding me daily, and my stress levels are through the roof.

“Lara, did you finish up that section I sent you this morning?” Tammy asks, sticking her head around the wall of my small cubicle.

I quickly place a file over the pile of bills I was sorting on my lunch break.

I don’t want my boss to think I’m using company time for personal things. I need this job.

“I did. I sent it to your e-mail about thirty minutes ago.”

“Oh, thanks, sorry. I was out for lunch, I haven’t actually checked yet,” she smiles, tilting her head to the side.

“No worries. Don’t forget to send me the new batch of data. I can get started on it this evening.”

“I’ll send it in a few minutes when I’m back at my desk.”

She disappears, her high heels clicking loudly on the wooden office floors.

This is my afternoon job: a data analyst for a massive import and export corporation in San Francisco.

In the mornings, I do filing and basic accounting for a legal firm.

And then most evenings I do translations on technical documents—I’m grateful my mom had a passion for languages, which I inherited from her—and on the weekends I take pretty much any odd job I can get my hands on.

That could mean anything from dog walking to helping old ladies with their shopping or babysitting for the wealthier side of the city.

But even with all of that, I'm still struggling to pay off my mother's bills, and the debts my father keeps adding to them.

I hardly speak to him anymore. He's made far too many promises—all broken and useless. He's never helped me financially. Not even once. I'm tired of holding on to any hope that he ever will.

Glancing at my watch, I see it's already getting late. I'll pack up soon and start heading home.

Grabbing my sorted piles of bills, I shove them all into a folder and shove that into my purse.

I live in a small, slightly damp apartment near the docks.

It's not the nicest area, but I had to get away from my father and his toxic habits.

He won't even get a proper job. I have no idea what he does for money, but every cent he gets, he wastes on gambling.

I had to put distance between us because I couldn't deal with his lies anymore.

The afternoon sun is warm on my skin when I step out of the building. I tilt my face upwards and close my eyes for a moment to enjoy it. I love the warm weather; sunshine gives me energy and makes me happy. I love winter, too—it's cozy and the rain always soothes my thoughts.

Turning left outside the building, I head towards the bus stop, hoping I won't have to

wait too long for one to arrive.

There was some kind of protest yesterday, and all of the buses got delayed. I got home so late I didn't have time to do any extra work.

My phone vibrates in the front pocket of my purse, and I lift it out to see who's calling. It might be another job opportunity.

Except the name on my screen makes my stomach knot.

Anton.

My father.

He lost the privilege of being called Dad a while ago.

I clench my jaw, trying to figure out if I'm in the mood for a conversation with this idiot today. Finally, I give in and answer, knowing I can hang up anytime.

"What do you want, Anton?" I say coldly.

"Hi, sweetheart. How are you? I told you to call me Dad," he says.

"I don't have any money for you," I sigh, knowing that is the most common reason he calls.

"Oh, no, I don't need your money. Things are going great at the moment. I did a good job this week, and work is paying out big time."

Work. What a joke. It was probably gambling.

“How nice for you. Try not to blow it all at the track tonight. Listen—I’ve got to go,” I say, already regretting answering because of how it’s making my stress levels spike.

“Wait,” he shouts, his voice tainted with urgency.

“What, Anton?” I huff.

“I called because I did well, sweetheart. And I want to help you.”

I close my eyes, stopping my hurried walk towards the bus stop. I hate it when he does this. Makes promises he has no intention of keeping. I hate getting my hopes up.

“I’m not interested in your false offers,” I say miserably. “They never pan out. I’ve got to go.”

“Lara, please, this time is different—”

“That’s what you said last time,” I groan.

“I know. I’m an idiot, sweetheart. I really am. I’m a horrible father. I know it. I do. But please, let me help you. I really can this time. It’s a lot of money, Lara. Enough to clear your mom’s medical debts.”

He sounds so sincere, almost desperate for me to believe him.

I press my fingers against my closed lids and try to reason with myself.

But the problem is that I’m desperate, too.

He’s never made a promise this big before.

It's always been a hundred here or there, a hundred that never actually came through in the end, but never a proper decent amount.

Maybe he really did win big. Maybe he got lucky.

"Lara? It has to be now. Can you meet me now?" he asks.

"Of course it has to be now. We both know if I don't come through now, there won't be any money left by the morning," I blurt out, angry and agitated.

I have no choice. If he really does have money and he's willing to give it to me, I need to see him now.

This isn't something I can take my time to think about.

"Will you come?"

"Where are you?" I sigh.

"Oh, that's great news. Yes. I'm near the beach, there's an office block, it's massive. The Rostov building. You can't miss it. Number Seven on Beach Boulevard."

"I'm on my way."

I hang up before he can say anything else and before I can change my mind.

You don't have a choice, Lara.

But this is the last time.

If he fucks this up, I will never speak to him again.

I will never, ever answer his calls. I can't keep doing this to myself.

Even now, the hope that's flooding me is overwhelming.

If he really can clear my mother's debts, my entire life would change so drastically I can't even imagine how wonderful it would be.

I could get a nice, clean apartment. A place where I could leave my dinner on the kitchen counter and not worry about the roaches finding it.

I wouldn't have to work every hour of every day. I wouldn't have to answer twenty calls a day from debt collectors threatening horrible things.

I type the address into my phone and realize it's not that far from where I am now. Waving a cab down, I climb into the back seat.

"Good afternoon, young lady," the driver says cheerfully.

"Hi, can you please take me to the Rostov Building?"

"Beach Boulevard?" the driver asks, glancing over his shoulder.

"That's the one," I nod, settling in for the short drive. "Do you know what kind of building it is?"

He smiles into the rearview mirror. "It's an office block. Very fancy place."

"I've never seen it before," I say, looking out of the window at people walking along the beachfront.

San Francisco is such a beautiful place.

I wish I had time to enjoy the beaches like other people do.

Maybe, after today, I will have more time.

If Anton really has the money, I can live a normal life.

I can have some free time. I might even start studying again.

When Mom got sick, I left college and focused on her, being there for her as much as I could.

After she passed, I took some short courses, just to get the jobs I have now.

My life will be completely different if I can clear those debts.

“We’re here,” the driver says.

“Oh, that was even quicker than I expected.” I tap my phone against the payment tab on the console in his cab. On the app, I add a ten percent tip.

“Thanks, young lady, you have a wonderful afternoon.”

“You too,” I say, already climbing out of the car.

My stomach is knotting at the idea of seeing my father.

I just want to get this over and done with.

Outside the building, I look up. It’s big. And it’s really sharp.

There are slick, glossed black letters on the front of the mirrored glass

walls—ROSTOV.

With one last deep breath to try and ease my nerves, I walk into the foyer.

There is a black marble desk with a pretty blonde girl sitting behind it. I walk over to her. “Hi, I’m here to meet with my father. Um, Anton Abakumov.”

“Hi, you must be Lara, you can go right on up to the top floor. This is your temporary key code for the elevator. It will only work once.”

“Oh, um, thanks,” I say, taking a very crisp piece of white paper from her that she’s printed five numbers onto.

“Instead of selecting a floor number, just type this into the keypad,” she nods when I look up at her, confused.

“Okay, thank you.”

The elevator is like a sensory deprivation chamber. Its black mirrored walls and black marble floor are ominous and sleek. It matches the foyer.

I punch the code into the keypad as she instructed, and the doors slide closed. A smooth, but robotic voice says, “Thank you. Top floor.”

I wonder what in the world my father is doing in a place like this.

For a moment, I wonder what it would be like to actually have a dad again.

When I was much younger, he was my favorite person in the entire world. When Mom got sick, he changed, and when we lost her, he changed even more. Now he’s not someone I want to be around. He uses people and manipulates everyone around

him.

He's selfish.

I wish I could just have that dad back, the one I knew when I was young. But then again, maybe I was too young to see who he really was back then. Maybe he was always this selfish asshole that he is now.

The elevator doors slide quietly open, and I step out into a massive open-plan space.

Whoever designed this building loves power and black.

But despite the very masculine decor, clean and minimalist, the long wall of windows floods the entire place with bright, natural light.

As soon as I step into the place, I feel a sense of openness. Like I can breathe for a moment.

In the distance, there are three men talking.

One of them is my father.

The other man, standing much taller than my father, is the one who has my immediate attention. He's scowling, his eyes piercing into Anton, his arms folded across his broad, muscular chest. The tone and shape of his body press against the fabric of his white shirt.

Black leather suspenders sit snug against his chest, over his shoulders, and down his back.

The sleeves of his shirt are rolled up over his thick, taut forearms.

His dark blonde hair is cut short and neat, his beard only a shadow of stubble across his square jaw and his eyes are piercing and bright, even from this distance.

He's oozing sex appeal and danger. Just looking at him is making my heart race. For a moment, I'm frozen in place.

Across the open space, my father's voice carries towards me. "I can pay the debts if you just give me a chance."

"You've already had your chance, Anton. We're tired of giving you chance after chance," the third man says, scowling. "How do you plan on paying this amount back?"

"Roan, please, I-I-I—"

The gorgeous man shakes his head. "Roan, I'm done talking to him." His voice is deep and dark and sends a shiver running down my spine. My heart races, and I press my lips together, reminding myself to breathe.

To my left, a young woman calls my name. "Hi, are you Lara?" she says, drawing my attention. I walk over to her desk.

"Hi, um, I'm here to see my father, that man over there." I gesture towards where they're standing on the other side of the space.

"Mr. Rostov is just busy talking to someone at the moment," she says sweetly.

I chuckle. "Yes, I know . He's talking to my father ," I say more insistingly. "I'm here to see my father."

"Oh, right, um—sorry. Yes, you can go through."

On her desk, a small speaker cracks to life. “Samantha, take the afternoon off,” a voice demands.

“Yes, Roan. Do you or Mr. Rostov want anything?”

“No, just pack your things and go. We’ll see you in the morning again. Thank you.”

I narrow my eyes. The atmosphere is tense and uncomfortable.

“You can go through,” Samantha says, gathering her purse and walking around me towards the elevator.

I bite my lower lip.

“Thanks,” I grumble, walking towards the three men.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:28 pm

Of course, Anton arrived with no plan and no way to repay the new debts he created for my business.

I can't believe this asshole, his arrogance.

The sheer gall of it, to walk back into my office with nothing to offer.

He has no idea who he is messing with—or he knows and thinks his old friendship can save him.

But not this time. Not anymore. He's played that card far too many times and used it up.

This time, he is being treated just like everyone else.

He'll pay for the arrogance.

I'm not particularly worried about the debts. I can smooth things over with my business partners; they know me well enough. Our relationship is secure enough to handle this hiccup. It's a shitload of money, though; not a hiccup. More like an explosion.

The main issue here, though, is that Anton has pushed his luck one too many times, and I am not going to let this time slide.

His greed and his willingness to fuck other people over to make himself a quick dirty buck is not something I will tolerate or allow anymore.

His days in my city are over. His life is over.

Roan is still talking to him, even though I've already decided that I'm in the mood for bloodshed this afternoon.

I might even make a spectacle out of him. Use him as a message for anyone else who tries to play me. Word will spread about what he's done. I can't have people thinking he got away with it without paying some kind of price. And he clearly has nothing to offer except his life.

I step forward, shaking my head. I'm over this. "Let's finish this."

"Wait," Anton pleads.

"Last words, Anton," I warn him, letting my fingers brush over the gun on my desk. I won't use this weapon. Roan will wrap a cord around his neck and strangle him. It's cleaner, less mess to deal with afterwards.

Roan is on the line to the receptionist girl. I want her out of here before we do this. She's never seen anything especially incriminating, and I don't want to start exposing her now.

"My daughter. You can have my daughter in exchange for the debt."

"Your daughter," I snort, laughing loudly. "What the hell makes you think I want your daughter, Anton?"

"You need an heir. You can marry her. She's strong and healthy. She'll give you lots of children."

I narrow my eyes at him.

“What the fuck is up with everyone suggesting I get to work making heirs? People need to learn to mind their own business,” I snap, annoyed, but curious why it’s the second time today this suggestion has come up.

I’m not blind to signs from the universe.

Perhaps I do need to start looking into the idea of creating some heirs. But I can almost guarantee that I don’t want to be doing that with Anton’s daughter—this scum of the earth can’t possibly have the type of daughter I’d be wanting to have children with.

Roan returns, already wrapping the cord around his hands, pulling it taut.

“Kill him,” I say to Roan, with a nod.

Roan steps forward, but just as he does so, movement catches in the corner of my eye, and I turn towards the front of the office to find a woman walking towards us.

“Wait,” I demand, holding my hand up.

Roan follows my gaze to see what I’m looking at.

She’s the most beautiful girl I’ve ever seen in my life.

She’s petite, with golden blond hair that hangs in loose curls over her shoulders, a narrow waist, and curved hips hugged by the tight skirt she’s wearing. Her features are sharp and feminine, her eyes piercing as she stares at me with confidence.

I told my arms across my chest, unable to hide the grin on my face.

In my life, I’ve never seen someone more beautiful than her.

“Who is this little fox?” I ask quietly.

“Anton?” she calls out, sounding annoyed.

I look at Anton in disbelief. “You know this girl?” I demand.

“That’s Lara. That’s my daughter,” he stammers, shifting awkwardly, trying to move away from Roan.

“Are you fucking kidding me?” Roan says, also shocked to his core. “ That’s your daughter? Not in a million years...”

“You can have her. In exchange for my debt,” Anton pleads. “Please, let me go.”

“What kind of a father tries to sell his own daughter?” I growl, angry at him, but already latching on to the idea of making her my wife. Why shouldn’t I claim that magnificent creature as my own?

Even though she’s probably just like him—a con artist, here to try and talk the talk to get her father out of shit. I wonder if she knows her father would sell her. Or maybe this is all some plan they are in on together.

Well, the joke will be on them when I do marry her and don’t let her escape the commitment.

I smirk, glancing from her to her father, then back at her. She narrows her eyes, and I can tell by her expression that she hasn’t heard what we’ve been discussing.

Anton presses his lips together, his dark brown eyes giving nothing away. Nothing except fear for his own life—and a willingness to do whatever it takes to save his own scummy existence.

“Nestor?” he asks, knowing that his life depends on my answer.

I shrug and look at Roan.

“Everyone keeps telling me I should have kids,” I muse.

Roan looks at the girl who has almost reached us. His brows rise and he tilts his head to the side. “Can’t say I’d turn that down,” he smirks.

“Yeah, I agree. I think this is an offer I’m willing to take a risk on,” I mutter, then turn to Roan. “Get this asshole out of here.” I wave my hand through the air towards Anton. “Anton, you are banished from this city. If I ever see you again, I will kill you. Do you understand?”

“Oh my word, yes, thank you, thank you,” he blurts out, scampering left and right for a second, ready to run in any direction just to get away from us. He’s like a rat in a trap. I can’t look at him for another second.

I turn towards the girl, Lara. With a smirk on my face, I shove my phone in my pocket and tuck my gun back into the holster. Then I march towards her.

“Hello, I’m here because of my father and whatever he promised...”

Anton. I heard you talking about the debts?

Does he owe you money? Has he discussed a way to settle it?

” she asks, her voice sweet like honey, but her eyes tinted with a fierceness that suggests she’s angry.

Livid, in fact. She looks around the same age as my sister, perhaps a year or two

older.

She folds her arms across her chest, waiting for my response.

So, she does know about his promise? She is in on the marriage exchange. What other promise would she be referring to? Interesting. Between the two of them, this must be a hustle. An attempt to trick me.

She raises her brows expectantly.

I don't reply. Instead, I bend down, wrap my arm around her petite waist, lift her over my shoulder, and hold her there with my hand wrapped around her inner thigh, slipping beneath her skirt, my fingers brushing over her warm, smooth skin. My cock stirs at the contact.

The girl squeals in horror, wiggling and panicking. Her scent washes over me. Vanilla and rose. Feminine and divine. It sends a thrill racing through my body.

The easiest way to tell if you are compatible with someone is to breathe in their scent. Someone's scent is like a written script of their DNA. Pheromones and attraction, all in a single breath of air.

I didn't need to smell her to know how much she turns me on—but now that I have, it's ten times stronger than it was before.

"What the hell are you doing? Put me down," she shouts, bashing her fists against my back in a useless attempt to negotiate with me.

I continue to ignore her, enjoying how she feels beneath my hands. The more she fights me, the higher my hand slides up her leg. I'm certainly not complaining.

I carry her into the elevator and press the button to take me to the lower level parking area beneath the building.

If she's anything like her father, and I'm assuming she is, then talking to her is pointless.

She'll be spinning me some ridiculous tale filled with lies and false promises.

I've heard enough bullshit for today. I have nothing to say to her.

What's been promised by her father must be honored by her.

As we ride down in the elevator, with my free hand, I slide my phone out of my pocket and message my contact at the private courthouse.

I have connections everywhere, and this guy can get things done for me immediately.

I pay him enough to deal with these random legal issues, so I expect an instant response.

I don't want to waste any time or give Anton or his daughter a chance to sneak out of this deal.

Lara is going to be my wife within the hour, whether she agrees to it or not. The money she and her father stole was mine, and they will both pay for it by honoring this deal.

I type into the messaging app, Argyle, I need a favor. It has to be now. I need an officiator to sign off on a marriage. I'm on my way to the courthouse now. Meet me there. Or have someone ready for me who can handle this.

Argyle: I'm here now. Come through. I'll prepare everything. Is it for you? I can draw up the paperwork in the meantime.

Me: Yes. It's for me. The girl is Lara Abakumov. I'm sure you can find her details on your own for the documentation.

Argyle: Consider it done. See you in a bit.

Satisfied, I slide my phone back into my pocket. Lara is busy pleading to be put down. She's given up physically fighting me, perhaps realizing that if I drop her, it's going to hurt. Or maybe she just realized she was wasting her energy. She's so tiny I can hold her down with one hand.

"This isn't funny," she complains. "Please, tell me what is going on? Where are you taking me?"

The elevator doors slide open in the underground parking lot.

Good thing I didn't park outside today. It would have created a bit of a spectacle to have to carry her out to my car. I would have had to borrow Roan's or take one of the spares we keep parked here.

I smile in amusement at my own thoughts. I don't like to draw attention to myself, and a man walking with a gorgeous girl thrown over his shoulder is definitely going to do that.

Turning out of the elevator, I walk towards my car. My footsteps echo in the underground area.

Yanking the door open, I duck down and set her ass onto the passenger seat.

“What are you doing?” she squeals, trying to move away from me when I click the safety belt in place. She quickly unclicks it and throws me a death glare.

A low growl of annoyance rumbles from my chest. It makes her pause, her eyes going wide with fright and her lips parting in surprise.

Mm. She has perfect lips. I wonder what she tastes like .

My cock stirs again, imagining what it would be like to create heirs with her.

Lara bites down on her lower lip and I glare at her, my eyes filled with warning as I click the belt back in place, locking her into the seat.

She’s going to be fun to break in.

This time, she doesn’t touch it, and I step away from the car and slam the door closed.

Marching around to the driver’s side, I climb in.

I glance at her, my eyes tracing over her legs.

Her skirt is hitched up over her thighs.

She doesn’t seem to notice until she sees me enjoying the view.

Then she huffs loudly, her cheeks flushing bright pink, and she quickly tugs her skirt down self-consciously.

Who could have imagined that a rat like Anton could produce a daughter like this? It seems impossible. But I’m going to make the most of it.

The engine growls to life when I press my finger against the button next to the steering wheel.

The courthouse is about twenty minutes from here, and we should just miss traffic.

I'm about to get married. I grin, pulling out of the parking area onto Beach Boulevard.

It's the perfect day for a wedding.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:28 pm

This guy hasn't said a damn word to me.

And who does that?

Who throws someone over their shoulder and just carries them off like that?

He's crazy.

He's ridiculously hot— but he's completely crazy.

My father must owe him a lot of money, and for some reason, he thinks I can pay.

I have no idea why he thinks carrying me, slung over his massive shoulder, is the way to have a conversation about it, though.

“Can you please just let me go? I don't know what my father owes you, but I can't help him pay it. I don't have any money,” I say.

He stares straight ahead, out at the road in front of us, not saying a word.

I huff loudly. My frustration has a deep undercurrent of fear. I know how dangerous these debt collectors can be.

Although this guy doesn't look like a typical debt collector, he's way too classy for that. The debt collectors I've dealt with have foul mouths and dress like they're trying to show power, but they just look dodgy and scummy.

This guy exudes power without saying a word, and his aura is one of pure danger. Despite that, I'm getting impatient and verging on starting an argument with him.

My stress is quickly turning into full-blown anger.

His car growls as he accelerates out of a corner. I roll my eyes. Stupid men and their stupid overpriced toys.

The car is clearly expensive, as in more expensive than any house I could ever afford. But I don't know enough about cars to say what it is.

"Is that what this is all about? My father owes you money?" I ask, looking directly at him. My patience is wearing thin.

My eyes trace over his profile. The strong, angular lines of his face, his clean-cut look with masculine features.

I get annoyed with myself for perving on this guy again. Someone so rude and obnoxious doesn't deserve to be that good-looking.

But I can't tear my eyes away from him.

He has a tattoo over the side of his neck; it's a detailed moth, with its delicate wings curved over a skull, and it looks like it moves down over something like a moon, but his shirt is covering too much of that part for me to be sure.

"Is that a luna moth?" I try another tactic to get through to him. "They are beautiful creatures." I'm doing my best to keep my voice steady and calm. "What does it mean?"

Nothing.

Silence.

Cold.

Empty.

Except it's not empty. I can feel tension radiating from him. Annoyance, or anticipation of something. What is he planning?

I look out of the window and try to work out where in the city we are.

We're near the main street, the business district. "Where are you taking me?" I ask, leaning closer to the window.

We pull off the main road just as I ask, and he drives beneath a very ornate building that looks almost gothic in design.

"Is this the courthouse?" I mumble to myself. My heart is racing. The palms of my hands become damp with sweat, and I keep chewing on my lower lip, anxiety flooding through me. Is my dad in legal trouble?

Surely they can't expect me to stand in front of a judge on behalf of my father. I didn't sign or agree to anything.

This is nuts.

"Please, just tell me what this is about?" I plead again, but his stonewalling continues.

"You're so rude," I huff angrily, trying to stop myself from letting tears escape. There is no point in letting this guy see me cry. He doesn't care about anything except what he wants. He doesn't even care that he's terrifying me.

Who the hell is he?

The car comes to a stop in a parking bay near the elevators.

“Get out,” he snaps, his deep voice making me jump after such a long silence.

I push the door open and climb out. I look left and right, wondering if I should try and make a run for it. But there really isn't anywhere to go, and I've already been given a fine display of his brute strength and the force he's willing to use to keep me close.

I'd rather walk than be carried over his shoulder again.

I clench my jaw and allow him to wrap his massive hand around my upper arm and pull me close to his side.

I'm pretty sure that if I put up a fight, I'll be a sack of potatoes again. I'd like to retain my dignity.

At least at a courthouse, someone will explain to me what's going on.

There will be someone else to talk to besides this asshole.

Maybe they'll let me know what my father owes and what they expect from me.

I'm kind of relieved to be here instead of at some bookie's private home. This is at least legal.

He pulls me towards the elevator, and we stand inside in silence. The space feels incredibly small next to the massive bulk of muscle that is his body. And he's so freaking tall.

I catch a glimpse of myself in the mirrored walls and hurriedly brush my fingers through my hair. Even though I've just been practically kidnapped by this guy, if I am about to stand before a judge to defend myself, I should look respectable.

The doors chime politely and slide open. The guy pulls me out into a bright, clean hallway with carved stone alcoves and white marble floors. Our footsteps echo through the open space as we make our way down, past several large hand-carved wooden doors.

This building is gorgeous.

If I weren't so full of panic, I would want to stop and admire the beautiful details of it.

He stops outside one of the wooden doors and knocks with three loud thumps of his knuckles.

"Come in," a voice calls from inside.

He pushes the door open, and I'm dragged into the room with him.

It's an office.

A very large, luxurious office with beautiful views of the city from the wide windows.

"Nestor, good to see you again, my friend." The guy sitting behind the desk stands and comes around to shake my captor's hand.

Nestor. The guy has a name.

“Argyle, thanks for arranging this on short notice.”

My eyes trace up and down Argyle. He looks like a lawyer or a judge or something very official. “I’m ready whenever you are. The paperwork is prepared, and we can go right ahead.”

“We’re ready. The sooner the better,” Nestor confirms.

Ready for what?

I can’t seem to get my tongue to form words at the moment.

My mouth is dry, and my throat is tight.

I’m overwhelmed with the formality of this place.

I’ve never been inside a courthouse like this one.

The one I went to was less fancy, a government building filled with lines of people waiting to sort out some issue or another.

“You two can stand here.” Argyle gestures towards an open space near the window. He comes to stand there as well, holding some documents which he places on a tall standing table, just big enough for a book and a cup of coffee.

“Alright, are there rings?”

Rings?

“No, I will sort that out tomorrow.”

“No problem.”

Argyle starts talking and my heart drops to the pit of my stomach.

He’s going through the process of officiating for us.

We’re getting married?

What the hell?

This can’t be real.

I stare in horror from Argyle to Nestor, who is calmly listening and nodding.

No, this can’t be real. This isn’t happening. This is absurd. There is no way that this is what’s happening right now.

Yet Argyle is still talking. “Do you, Nestor Rostov, take this woman to be your lawfully wedded wife?” he asks, looking directly at Nestor.

Rostov. That was the name written on the front of the building. Does he own that building? Why would someone so powerful want to marry me? What the hell is going on?

“I do,” Nestor says, firm and deep.

“Do you, Lara Abakumov—”

“No, no, I don’t. This is some kind of a joke, right? This isn’t real? This is a stupid joke,” I blurt out angrily, my cheeks hot with rage as I yank my arm away from Nestor’s grip.

He sneers at me, his hazel eyes flaring with rage.

I step away from him, looking to Argyle for support or help. "I'm not marrying him," I say desperately.

Argyle's expression doesn't change. He's calm and patient as he waits for my outburst to come to some kind of conclusion.

"You can't make me marry you. There isn't even a witness."

"The documents say otherwise," Nestor says with disinterest.

"Why in the world would you do this? I don't understand the point of this," I say, my eyes pleading, stinging with tears.

Nestor, to my surprise, starts laughing. It's a dark, malicious sound that sends a cold shiver running down my spine. He's taunting me. He's mocking me somehow.

"What are you laughing at?" I scream at him. "This isn't funny."

His face floods with annoyance as he steps close to me and grabs me around the throat.

"Stop messing with me, girl. You can play cute and coy and innocent all you want. I know your father, and you are from the same line of liars and cheats. Stop wasting my time and get this over with."

"No," I say angrily. "I won't." Tears are flowing down my face now, but I'm not scared, I'm furious. I can feel the tension in my brows and the locked set of my jaw as I glare at him.

His hand tightens around my neck, and for a moment, the air is cut off. I gasp, then gag in panic, reaching up to grab his wrist and try to pull him off me.

“Listen to me very carefully, girl. I’m not playing games. I’m not fucking around. You can drop the act and stop pretending to be the victim here. I’m not falling for any of it. You will marry me. You will honor the deal, and you will stop wasting my time.”

His hand loosens, and I gasp for air, my head throbbing, screaming for oxygen.

“I-I can’t—” I stammer.

“You can’t? I see. Well, I tell you what—if you don’t marry me, I will kill you.

Then I will hunt your father down and kill him as well.

So, either you stop arguing, say the vows and sign the documents, or die.

It’s as simple as that. And if you know anything about me, you know not to test me, Lara. ”

The way he says my name, with that dark music in his voice, stabs fear into my heart.

I believe him.

I believe every word he just said to me.

He stares at me for a long moment, his fingers still around my throat, letting his words soak deep into my mind, making sure I understand that this isn’t some kind of game or joke like I accused him of.

Weakly, I nod.

I have no idea what is happening, or why it's happening, but there is no doubt in my mind that he will kill me if I don't go through with this.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:28 pm

Her eyes are wide and flooded with fear as she stares up at me.

I can feel her shaking, my hand wrapped around her throat, tight enough to hurt, but not tight enough to cut off her air anymore.

I've made my point. I can see that she understands me clearly.

This innocent act needs to stop.

Her playing the victim is not going to work on me.

She's fucking good at it, though.

Her words still loop in my mind, the first moment we spoke in my office that night. The night I was going to kill her father. She said she was there for her father's promise. She basically confessed to being in on his scheme.

This pretend shock. The tears. The shake in her voice and the heavy breaths. She's good at this.

My heart clenches in my chest. I'm staring at her for too long. Her fake innocence is getting to me. The softness of her eyes, the fear in her expression. It's not real, Nestor. Don't fall for it.

I shake my head and drop my hand away from her throat.

"Do we have an understanding?" I say roughly.

She reaches up to touch her throat, her delicate fingers brushing over the red marks on her skin. Her nails are painted a pretty shade of pink, bright and cheerful. “Yes,” she whispers, not looking at me.

I wave my hand towards where Argyle is waiting.

“Continue,” I say.

He goes on with the wedding as though nothing has happened.

Lara says her vows, makes her promises, and signs the documents without a single word of resistance.

She is subdued and quiet while I thank Argyle and tell him to file away the original paperwork. He slides a copy of our marriage certificate into an envelope for me, and the entire process comes to an end.

We are married.

It’s official.

I smirk, clutching the envelope in my hand.

“Come on, wife,” I say with amusement in my voice, chuckling as I set my hand on her lower back and push her towards the door.

She squeaks in protest but doesn’t argue.

If I weren’t so skeptical of her brilliant acting, I would say she’s in shock.

Although she doesn’t really need to act like she’s in shock, she might genuinely be in

shock that she couldn't talk her way out of this mess.

I bet she's manipulated her way out of many situations in her life.

Just like her father.

I wouldn't have killed her, though.

It would have been pointless. I didn't mean the threat, but I'm glad she took it seriously, because I was losing patience with her.

She's quiet all the way down to the parking area, and she's quiet as I hold the car door open for her and she climbs inside.

It's only when we pull out onto the road that she finds her voice again.

"Nestor, whoever you are, can you please, I'm begging you, please just tell me what this is about? Why did we just get married?" she asks, her voice small.

"I told you to stop this bullshit game, Lara. Stop playing the innocent victim. You know exactly why we got married," I snap.

"I don't," she shouts, her voice finding strength in her anger.

"Really? You don't anything about the shit that happened with your father. You just happened to arrive at my building right at the same time as he did. For no reason at all. Please, for crying out loud. Move on. It's done. Deal with it."

"But I didn't come to that building for whatever reason my father gave you. He lied to me to get me there," she says in desperation.

I snort. “Lying seems to run in your family, sweetheart.”

The evening rush hour has started, and we’re sitting in a line of cars waiting to turn off the main street. I sigh loudly, my temper wearing thin. It’s been a long day, and I’m bored with this conversation. She needs to take her bullshit somewhere else. It’s already done. Give it up.

“Nestor...Rostov,” she says, my name thoughtfully. “The tech company. Rostov Technologies. That’s you? You own that company?”

Fuck, she’s so good at this.

“I own three hundred and eighty-seven companies in this city alone, Lara. And you know that’s not the primary business.”

“Primary business?” she mutters, biting at her lip.

I roll my eyes and shake my head. “This conversation is over.”

“It can’t be over, because I still don’t know what’s going on,” she shouts, her fists clenched in her lap. She’s wavering between anger, frustration, and impatience. One moment she’s confused, and the next she’s shouting at me.

I don’t know what game she’s playing at, but I’m not falling for it. These questions are probably just her fishing for information from me. I shouldn’t engage, not until I can figure out what her hidden motives or plans are.

We pull into Sunset Strip, the road leading to my mansion.

She should be grateful I’ve taken her in. She’ll be living in a luxurious home, surrounded by servants, living a luxurious life. She should be thanking me. Not

complaining.

“What does my father owe you?” she asks me for the hundredth time.

“Stop. I told you this conversation is over,” I snarl angrily, driving through the security gates and up the long driveway towards my front steps.

Her eyes go wide as she takes in the home she is about to start calling her own.

“Get out. Don’t bother trying to run, there are guards at every exit,” I warn her, putting an end to that idea before she’s even formed it in her mind.

She stands frozen next to the car, the passenger door still open.

Impatiently, I grab her arm and tug her forward, slamming the door, then pulling her up the steps towards the front door.

My doorman pulls it open for me and nods politely. “Good evening, sir. It looks like we are going to have a wonderful sunset this evening.”

“It does, Pax. You can tell the chef to serve dinner on the upstairs balcony.”

“Yes, sir,” he nods again.

“Look, if you can just explain to me—”

I tug her harshly in front of me, holding her tightly and forcing her to look at me.

“Not another fucking word, Lara. I’ve had enough of this now.

I was going to have you enjoy dinner with me upstairs, but I think you need to go into

your room and think about how you really want to handle this situation.

For the last fucking time, this innocent victim act is not working,” I growl angrily, my face hovering inches above hers.

Her eyes are wide and sparkling with tears again.

I shake my head.

Enough is enough.

Dragging her up the stairs, I take her to the guest bedroom. I’ll need to have my men arrange some things for her, but for now, she can sleep in here. It has the basics. She can’t complain.

I shove her through the door, and she stumbles over the edge of the white fluffy rug, catching the corner of the bed to steady herself.

“Make yourself at home,” I say sarcastically.

“Are you always such a rude asshole?” she snaps at me, her blue eyes fierce, and angry, and beautiful.

“You have no idea,” I laugh, then slam the door shut, locking her in.

As I walk away, I hear banging and shouting from her room, but I ignore it. Tonight has been long enough already. I’ve got the problems with Miron to deal with, the problems with her father, the mess he made with my allies, the debt to settle with them—and now I’ve got to deal with her, as well.

I’m done for today.

The chef should have my dinner ready in the next thirty minutes. I have enough time to take a hot shower and try and wash away some of this stress, and then I'll watch the last of the sunset from my balcony.

The hot water from the shower soaks my body, easing the tension in my shoulders.

My muscles are tight. This marriage idea was such a spur-of-the-moment thing that I didn't even have a chance to think it through properly or prepare for it.

Now I have a beautiful woman living in my house, my wife , and I haven't processed it at all.

She is gorgeous, though.

This bullshit with the pretending not to know what's going on—it's getting old. It has to stop.

Her father is a compulsive liar, though. He will literally say anything to get out of trouble. Flipping from one story to the next, even if he contradicts himself in the same sentence. Everything she learnt, she learnt from him, so I have to assume the worst with her.

She might have been in on the idea with him, but I reckon she had no plans of actually becoming someone's wife today. Maybe she thought I wouldn't go through with it?

Well, she's just going to have to get used to it.

I wonder what she's doing now?

I flick the shower off and wrap a white towel around my waist, walking through to the bedroom and pulling my closet open. Maybe I should check on her.

Dammit.

I should just leave her. She's been enough of a pain today already.

No, I should check. I can invite her to sit with me for dinner if she's calmed down.

I pull on a pair of jeans and a black shirt. While I'm out, I strictly wear suits, but in the house I can be more relaxed.

Showered, feeling refreshed and less stressed, I head across the hallway to her room.

Lifting my hand to knock, I notice the door is slightly open.

What the fuck? I swear I locked it.

I push it and it glides open easily.

And the room is empty.

"For fuck's sake," I groan loudly.

Running downstairs, I call out for my head of security.

"Jake?"

"Sir?" he arrives quickly.

"The girl. She's not in her room."

“I was just coming to find you, sir. My men caught her in the back garden. They are escorting her to the front now.”

“Dammit. How did she get out of a locked room?”

“I’m not sure. You can ask her in a minute.”

There is a lot of noise and commotion as the guards pull Lara around the side of the house towards the front door.

“You have no right to keep me here,” she’s shouting at one of them. “I have a life, and a home, and I want to go there.”

“Lara, please calm yourself,” I say quietly. My voice makes her spin towards me, her eyes fuming.

“I won’t calm myself. You can’t lock me away and expect me to just sit there and accept it.”

I chuckle. “You have no choice. This is your new home now.”

She narrows her eyes at me, shooting daggers.

I know I’m antagonizing her, but I can’t help myself.

She’s cute when she’s angry, and now that I’m fresh and relaxed, I’m kind of enjoying her disapproval.

“Join me for dinner,” I demand, turning away from her.

“No,” she huffs. “I’m not hungry.”

I turn back to face her. Reaching up, I grab her jaw and pull her close.

“Sweetheart, I will force-feed you myself if I have to. We are not playing the hunger strike game today.”

Her eyes go wide, her lips part, and my body stirs to life watching her.

I clench my jaw and let her go. “Walk with me, Lara.”

She hardly touches her food at dinner and she hardly speaks at all. But I enjoy having her there with me, just to look at. In her silence, she is incredibly beautiful. After dinner, I make sure to lock her bedroom door properly this time.

But even after double-checking, I am still woken in the morning by the frantic voice of one of my guards, yelling outside my bedroom window. I hurry to the balcony and peer down into the garden.

Several men are shouting up at the back garden gate.

My heart sinks when I spot Lara, halfway up the metal feature, climbing over the steel bars.

“Fuck,” I shout, bolting out of the room in nothing but my sweatpants. Barefoot, I run across the garden towards the gate, my heart racing as I skid to a stop beneath it.

“Get down,” I yell at her.

“No,” she shouts back, almost at the top. But her hands are shaking. She’s scared. It’s not very high, but if she falls, it’s going to hurt.

“You’re going to break a leg if you fall from there, Lara. Stop being an idiot.”

“Leave me alone.”

Her foot slips, and she tries to grab the bar to secure herself, but her hand misses and she’s falling backwards. She screams loudly.

I step forward and catch her in my arms, angry that she put herself in danger.

Her body lands against my chest, and I wrap my arms around her.

She looks up at me with shock in her eyes, which quickly turns into fear and panic.

“Hey, calm down, you’re okay,” I say, holding her tighter.

Her breathing is sharp and fast. Her hand reaches out and grabs my arm, her fingers digging into me.

“Lara, look at me. You’re okay,” I say again. Her eyes meet mine.

Her body is soft against me, her scent washing over me.

She looks bewildered as I turn away from the gate, not willing to put her down because she feels too good in my arms.

She hasn’t said anything, and her eyes are still wide.

“Are you afraid of heights?” I ask, carrying her back towards the house.

“I-I-I shouldn’t have climbed the gate,” she whispers so softly I can barely hear her.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:28 pm

My heart is racing with panic. My skin is cold, and my head is spinning with fear.

I can barely get a breath of air.

My lungs are screaming and aching, and my vision has gone blurry.

That was so stupid of me. I could have hurt myself badly.

I don't know what would have happened if Nestor hadn't caught me.

His arms are wrapped around me right now—they feel so good. His body feels so good.

Oh my fuck, he's not even wearing a shirt. Okay, this is okay.

Don't panic even more now. Just breathe.

I close my eyes and the sensations of being held against him get more intense, distracting me, but not in the way I want to be distracted, so I quickly open them again.

He smells amazing.

Like pine forests soaked in fresh rain. And dark musk. Tempting and masculine.

“Are you okay?” he asks, his voice soothing and deep.

The panic is beginning to subside, and I manage to take a breath, my lungs filling with air.

But the memory of what happened all those years ago is too sharp in my mind.

“I broke my ankle,” I blurt out.

“Uh. No, you didn’t,” he says, confused, his hand drifting over my body, along my leg, and wrapping around my ankle as he carefully looks at it.

“Not now, I mean before. When I was younger, I think it was the first time in my life when I realized my father was selfish and didn’t always have the best intentions for me.

My father made me deliver something to this really horrible guy.

He had three massive dogs, nasty, biting dogs—and my father made me do the delivery because he didn’t want to go onto the property.

But he didn’t tell me that it wasn’t the right thing.

Whatever it was, I was dropping off. It wasn’t the right amount or something, and the guy got so angry he told his dogs to get me.

They all came snarling and running after me and I climbed a tree to get away.

I was crying and I wasn’t watching where I was going, and I slipped.

I broke my ankle. Since then, I’ve been terrified of heights—and falling—I was so stupid to try and climb that gate, I just—I just—”

My voice trails off.

Why in the world did I just tell him all of that? That had nothing to do with him. The memory just flooded through me now, and it spilled from my mouth without me having a chance to think about it.

Nestor pulls me close to his chest, running his hand up my back, along my neck, knotting his fingers in my hair. I close my eyes and rest my cheek against his shoulder. I forget my worries for a moment, enjoying his hands on me.

“You’re okay, little one,” he says gently. His voice vibrates in his chest, rumbling against my body.

I take a deep, slow breath and let myself feel safe. My heart is beating a little slower now, the fear subsiding.

It really was stupid of me to do that. I know I’m scared of heights. I was just so desperate to try and get away.

Nestor sits down on the single sofa in the living room, still holding me on his lap. I snuggle into him.

But then I realize what the hell I’m doing, and I bolt upright.

My eyes are wide with horror.

In a flash, I wiggle off his lap and onto the sofa next to him.

My cheeks are flushed bright pink.

His low chuckle annoys me. “Are you feeling better, little one?” he asks, his eyes

bearing into me.

“What do you care?” I snap angrily.

“Hey, don’t be angry at me. You’re the one who was trying to climb the damn gate, not me.”

“ And I wouldn’t have had to climb the damn gate if you didn’t lock me up in here.”

He rolls his eyes. “This again,” he huffs.

“Yes, this again. You have to let me go. I need to get to work. I have a job. I have to go home and change. I have to go to work like a normal person ,” I shout angrily.

“The only thing you need to do is calm down,” he says dryly.

“You might have the luxury of living in this crazy house and driving a ridiculous car, but I have bills to pay, and if I don’t work, I can’t pay them. You aren’t being fair.”

I fold my arms across my chest, glaring at him.

The corner of his mouth curls downwards, and a spike of fear shoots through me when he stands up. Not wanting to show my fear, I stand up too and face him boldly.

He tilts his head to the side.

I set my jaw tightly and continue to glare. “Let me go.”

The smile that spreads over his face is not friendly. It’s dangerous and it sets my heart racing, both with warning and desire.

I take a step away from him, but my legs are against the sofa and I can't move away anymore.

Nestor steps closer, the heat from his body warming over me.

My breath catches and I stammer for a moment. "Leave—leave me alone," I blurt out.

He reaches up and traces his fingers over my cheek, a gentle, slow movement that leaves a heated trail on my skin.

"I don't have to leave you alone, sweetheart. You belong to me. Don't you remember? We're married."

I press my hands into his chest and shove him hard.

"No, I refuse to accept that. You still haven't told me what any of this is about, but I will not be your wife," I shout. "Whatever my father owes you has nothing to do with me, and you need to let me go and deal with him directly."

He laughs at me, shaking his head.

"You already are my wife. And technically, your father owes me nothing," he muses, taunting me with scraps of information that don't make sense.

"What? I heard him talking about his debts to you. That doesn't make sense."

"He paid the debts—with you."

My brows knit together in frustration and confusion.

“What does that mean?” I say nervously.

“Your father sold you to me as payment to settle his debt. You are mine now, and your father’s debt is cleared.”

“No,” I say in shock. The word spills from my lips as nothing more than a breath of air.

Laughter rolls from his chest.

Nestor leans closer to me, his lips hovering inches away from mine. “You belong to me, Lara,” he says darkly. My body spikes with desire at the proximity.

He leans even closer, and I don’t move away. I’m frozen by his advances.

Even when his lips press into mine, the heat flowing into me, I don’t move.

The kiss happens so suddenly that I have no time to consider what’s going on, and instead of reacting with anger or pushing him away, I kiss him back.

My hand threads around the back of his neck as I stand on my tiptoes.

He growls against my lips, sending a heated shiver through me.

His mouth presses harder over mine and his arm slips around my waist, tugging me into his embrace.

I gasp, and he kisses me deeper.

Nestor’s hand brushes over my back, down my body, cupping my ass as he lifts me into his arms. Still, I don’t even consider stopping him. I’m completely lost in this

moment.

The desire I've had pulsing through me has blinded me completely, and all I can think about is the things I want him to do to me.

He wraps my legs around his waist and I almost lose my mind when I feel his massive cock, rock-hard and pressing into me through his pants.

My nails dig into his shoulder, and I moan softly against his mouth.

He pushes his hips forward, rubbing against me.

Heat pools between my legs.

The intensity of this moment blinds me to anything else.

All I want is him. I have never felt such a desire to be with someone before.

Nestor groans deeply, and the sound snaps me back to myself.

I gasp, this time in shock instead of desire.

What the hell am I doing?

I quickly unwrap my legs from around him and drop to the floor. When I look up at him, he appears just as shocked as I am. His eyes are wide and bright, the hazel appearing more yellow-gold than before.

“Um,” he stammers in disbelief.

We both step away from each other in awkward silence.

I brush my hands over my clothes, straighten my skirt, pulling my top down.

What the hell just happened?

My eyes rise and lock with his. We stare at each other, neither saying a word for the longest time. The longer I look at him, the angrier I get for what he did.

He needs to apologize for kissing me. That was completely out of line. He had no right to do that.

Nestor tilts his head to the side and narrows his eyes at me.

“Next time I want more than just a kiss,” he says, his voice so dark it stops my breath.

My mouth drops open in horror.

“Excuse me.”

He steps closer.

One corner of his mouth curls upwards as he reaches for me, his hand cupping my cheek. I turn my head away from his touch.

“You heard me, Lara. Your father’s debts were staggeringly high. I want more than a kiss.”

“You’re a psychopath,” I shout, bashing his hand away from me.

He chuckles, dangerous and delightful.

I can’t even look at him anymore. The conflicting emotions shooting through me are

driving me crazy.

He's making me completely insane.

Turning my back on him, I take a deep breath, trying to clear my head, but it isn't working.

How can I hate someone so much, but have my body screaming to be touched by him?

I storm away from him, desperate to create space between us before I do something stupid—again.

“Where are you going, little one? Why don't you stay and have breakfast with me?” his invitation is more of a taunt than anything else.

“Go to hell,” I snap, marching up the stairs towards my bedroom.

Over the next week, I try numerous times to escape, and it becomes a sort of game to him, which infuriates me.

He makes me feel like a little mouse in a trap, and he's the tiger, toying with me, letting me run to the edge before slamming his big paw down on my tail.

I think I am some kind of toy to him.

Nestor has filled my bedroom closet with beautiful clothes, my bathroom has the most luxurious products in it. Anything I could possibly dream of, he's provided. But I don't want to be here.

I'm not his pet.

I have to get away.

This can't be happening. People can't just kidnap other people without getting into trouble for it.

I'm so worried about my jobs—and my debts. And what the debt collectors are going to do to me when I eventually get out. I need to get back to my life before everything falls apart.

And more importantly, I need to stop being so attracted to this asshole. I still can't stop thinking about the stupid kiss, and it's left me wanting more, even though the last thing on this planet that I want is to be turned on by that man.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:28 pm

It's been almost a week since I kissed her, and I can't stop thinking about it. I thought I was just playing around with her when I did it—a power move of some sort. But instead, I got completely lost in it. In her. No one has ever turned me on like that.

It must've been because of the tension. The argument. Nothing else.

Except I know that's not true.

She's gorgeous. And she's driving me crazy.

And she hasn't given up trying to get away.

I imagine she wants to run straight to her father to update him on things. Or to feed him information about my home. I'm not sure, but she must be dying to get back to him. Possibly even just to let him know the plan worked. The debt is cleared, and she escaped.

Mm.

Perhaps I should put this theory to the test.

She's so desperate to get away—what if I let her think that she's won? That she's escaped.

I'm toying with the idea all evening. It's late and I've just climbed into bed. I'm lying in the dark, staring at the ceiling. My men are on high alert, expecting her to make another attempt.

With a smile on my face, I decide that tomorrow, whatever attempt she makes is going to be successful.

Pulling my phone out, I message Roan.

Me: Tomorrow, I want you to start looking into Lara's background.

I want to know everything about her. Also, I'm going to allow her next escape attempt to be successful, and I'm going to follow her to see what she is so desperate to get back to.

I assume it's her father, but it will be interesting to see why.

Roan: Yes, sir. I'll have the guys open an investigation into her tomorrow. Maybe she can lead us to where her father hid the missing 25% of our product.

Me: That's long gone. And he's paid his debts. Forget about it. Keep me in the loop about the investigation.

Roan: Will do. Have a good evening, sir.

When I roll over, my face against my pillow, and close my eyes, an image of her comes to my mind.

Her lips swollen from my kiss, her blue eyes glittering with expectation.

My cock throbs thinking of her and I groan in annoyance.

I can't keep doing this. Night after night, I lie here wanting to go to her room and have my way with her.

She is mine, after all. But that isn't the way I imagine being with my wife for the first time.

Although the idea of it turns me on wildly.

As predicted, in the morning, Lara is already hard at work with another escape plan.

All of the security guys have been told to turn a blind eye and let her slip past, and one of the side gates has been 'accidentally' left open and unattended after what looks like a delivery took place for the scullery.

Lara jumps at the opportunity, and in a flash, she's slipping through the gate in a pair of tight jeans and a dark hoodie.

Her bright pink high-tops are hardly the ideal pair of shoes for being stealth, but I assume she had no idea that she'd actually manage to get away today.

I'm ready and waiting, and as soon as she slips out of the gate, I'm tailing her.

I was even nice enough to leave a convenient pile of cash on the kitchen counter this morning. Nothing over the top. It looks like I just dumped some change there after cleaning out my wallet.

To my surprise, she didn't even take all of it.

But she has enough to wave down a taxi, and right now I'm sitting in my car, a block or two away from her, watching her climb into the back seat and tell him where to go.

The taxi pulls out onto the road and I keep my distance, but also a watchful eye on

them so that I don't lose her.

We drive far from my mansion into a very dodgy part of town.

“What are you doing here, little one?” I mutter to myself as the cab driver pulls over and she gets out, then turns to stare up at a crappy, derelict building.

Paint is peeling off the side of the building in massive chunks.

There is damp and mold soaking through the brickwork, and every piece of metal is rusted and crumbling.

Outside the building are piles of rubbish bags, tossed aside and forgotten, rotting on the sidewalk.

We're close to the docks; not the nice side where people sit on their balconies drinking cocktails and watching the yachts, this is the side where the trawler boats come in and dump their catch for the day. I can smell rotting fish guts mixed with the stench of boat fuel.

Is her father hiding here?

I park my car away from the building and walk down the road towards her on foot, keeping to the shadows, close to the buildings, out of sight.

Even a man like Anton would have better connections than this, though.

Besides, I got confirmation yesterday that he booked himself into a hotel on the other side of town.

I'm giving him thirty days to get his shit together and get out of here.

It's lenient of me, and I'm only allowing him that amount of time because of the deal.

So why is she here?

It's not to meet her father—so what is it?

As she's walking towards the entrance of the crumbling building, a man approaches her. A debt collector. I recognize his type straight away.

He blocks her path as she tries to step through the door.

Lara looks flustered and upset.

She throws her hands in the air in exasperation.

I duck down the side alley, close enough to hear the conversation.

"Please, I just need more time," she sighs.

"We've given you enough time. Where have you been? Hiding from your obligations?" he snarls.

"No, I had some issues. But I'm back now, and I'm going back to work, and as soon as I get my weekly pay, I'll get back up to date."

"Lara, the boss is tired of your excuses. It's taking too long. We want the money," he says.

She nods, looking broken and upset. "I know, okay. I know."

"You've got until the end of the week. This is your last chance, though. The boss says

no more after this.”

The man turns away and storms off.

What is he talking about? I wonder who she owes money to.

Lara hurries into the building, and I walk in after her, catching sight of her as she makes her way down a passage on the ground floor.

I have to duck out of sight when she glances over her shoulder.

I follow her to a brown door, coated in grime.

She slides a key into the lock and tugs a piece of paper off the front of the door. For a moment, she just stares at it. I can't be sure from here, but it looks like she's crying.

She crumples the paper and throws it angrily against the wall.

The door is stuck, and she has to kick the base of it to get it to open.

Once she's inside, she slams the door behind her.

I jog towards the piece of paper, grab it from the floor, and then jog away again, not wanting to be seen by her or anyone else.

Outside on the sidewalk, I spread the crumpled page open and my brows knit tightly as I read it.

Eviction notice.

Attention: Ms. L. Abakumov.

Rent not received.

Third and final warning already given on the 17th of the previous month.

All belongings are to be removed by no later than the 5th of the current month, or belongings will be forcibly removed.

My eyes skim over the information in disbelief.

This is where she lives?

It can't be.

This place is a complete shithole. How can she live here when her father has been staying in nice apartments in the city? This doesn't make sense.

I head back to my car, confusion setting in as I try to figure out what is going on.

Was that debt collector connected to the apartment? I doubt it. She's already been evicted, so they wouldn't be bothering to chase her down anymore.

A place as shit as this would be dirt cheap. Yet she's still been kicked out. I can't fathom it. If she's working with her father, she should be coining enough to pay for this dump. A lot nicer than this dump, actually.

Sitting in my car, I wait for Lara to come out of the apartment. When she does, she looks even more upset.

She climbs into a piece of shit car that she has to try four times to start before it splutters to life. When she drives, the back wheel wobbles, dangerously unaligned. It's a death trap on wheels.

I spend the day following her around town, from debt collector to debt collector, trying to smooth over the issues they clearly have with her.

She's not hiding from them—she's trying to assure them that she is planning on paying.

That she isn't running. But they are getting increasingly aggressive with her, which is pissing me off.

Regardless of whether she accepts it or not, she is my wife. And no one gets to talk to her that way.

If I weren't trying to stay hidden, I'd be breaking their jaws right now.

Lara has been on the go all day. She looks exhausted.

I feel exhausted just watching her go through this.

The more I watch, the more none of it makes sense.

She hasn't even tried to make contact with her father. She's staying in the dodgiest part of town, she's pleading with debt collectors, she's being evicted from her shithole apartment—where is the scam? The hidden money? The secret plot cooked up by her and Anton?

I'm in my car watching a massive man trying to intimidate her across the street.

He hasn't touched her, but if he does, I'm not going to be able to hold myself back. I'm tired of the way they've been treating her.

My phone rings and I grunt as I pull it from my pocket.

“What,” I snap, angry at the debt collector I have my eyes locked on.

“Sir, it’s Roan.”

“Yeah, sorry, man, what’s going on?”

“I have a report for you. The information we’ve gathered about Lara.”

“Go ahead.”

“She stays in an apartment near the docks, that shithole area where the crackheads hang out. It looks like she has high amounts of debt that she owes to numerous people across town, and the bookies are after her. She’s been stalked by a number of them after not paying on time. I think they’re pissed off.”

“So, she’s just like her father? What is it, a gambling addiction?”

“No, sir, nothing like that. Her debts are medical expenses at some hospital. The bills are in her mother’s name.

Her mother is deceased. And the remainder of the debts, the ones with the collectors, are actually her father’s debts that he managed to manipulate her into taking over.

All of the bookies have his name in the book, crossed out and then replaced with hers.
”

“Are you fucking serious? They aren’t her debts?” I snarl angrily, my hatred towards Anton tripling in a matter of seconds.

“Dead serious, sir. Also, she lost her jobs a few days ago because she didn’t show up at work without contacting them.”

“Jobs? Plural?”

“She had three different jobs, sir. One at a law firm, one as a data analyst, and one doing translation of various documents after-hours.”

“She lost all three jobs?” I sigh, knowing it was because of me.

“Yes, sir.”

“That fucking dickhead, Anton, has been using his daughter, tricking her into being responsible for his debts.”

“We aren’t really surprised, though, sir. Given the type of man he has proven himself to be over and over again.”

“I know, but I thought she was in on it. Doesn’t she know what her father does for a living?”

“There is nothing to indicate that she has any idea of her father’s ties to the mafia.

And she has no connections whatsoever, other than her connection to her father, which is apparently practically zero.

In her phone records, there is one call from his phone to hers over the past six months.

It looks like she’s cut him out of her life. ”

Shaking my head, I realize that her being at my office building the other night was another of her father’s ploys to dump his debts onto her.

That man deserves to be skinned alive. What kind of a father does that to their daughter?

Their own child? He has to know where she lives, too.

How can a man let his daughter live in a place like that?

It's so dangerous for her. Just stepping out her front door, she'd be at risk of some asshole taking advantage of her.

I don't know how she sleeps peacefully at night.

Even I'd want a gun under my pillow in a neighborhood like that.

This entire time, she hasn't been lying to me. All the times she was asking why I'd taken her and what her father owed me, she genuinely had no idea what was going on.

Guilt sears through me.

Not that this is my fault. I'm not the one to blame, here—her father is. No wonder she cut him off.

And it's not just her father's debts she's working three jobs to pay. It's also her mother's medical bills. Anton left her to deal with those on her own while eating at luxury restaurants and gambling away every cent he earns with his decent job. He's disgusting.

And suddenly I'm hoping that I do see him again, so that I can show him exactly what I think of him.

Across the road, the debt collector grabs Lara's arm and shoves her against the wall. She lets out a startled yelp. My blood hits its boiling point in an instant.

"I have to go," I say to Roan, then hang up and drop the phone onto the seat of my car as I climb out in a hurry.

The guy has her fully restrained against the wall, pressing his body into hers and making suggestive comments on how she can earn an extension on what she owes.

Her eyes are bright with tears and fear, locked onto the brute of a man, pleading with him to have patience.

I grab him by the back of his shirt and rip him off her, wanting to tear him to shreds for touching her.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:28 pm

“Well, honeycup, I know a way for you to earn a few extra days. A little extension on your payment plan,” Charlie says as he leans even closer. His breath stinks. It’s hot against my cheek as I turn my face away from his pockmarked skin and yellow teeth.

My heart is racing. These guys are dangerous. And in a place like this, no matter how loud I scream, no one will even blink an eye or try to help me. I’m on my own, and this is a very bad situation.

His hand drifts over the side of my body, and I shudder, repulsed by every inch of him.

“Please, I had to go away for a few days. It was an emergency. If you explain to your boss—”

“I’ll explain, but what are you going to do for me in return? If you drop down to your knees, I might have something you can suck that would change my mind about—”

His words are cut off mid-sentence and replaced with a startled grunt as the air is pushed from his lungs.

Suddenly, he’s gone. Ripped away from me.

There is no one pinning me to the wall, and the stench of his breath is no longer hot over my face. I blink in disbelief when I see the brute of a man spin around to face his attacker, and my mouth drops open when I see that the attacker is Nestor.

Charlie is going to rip him to shreds. These people don’t play around.

And someone like Nestor doesn't have a clue what this side of the city is about.

He's used to his luxury and his expensive tastes.

He's used to people respecting him and the power his money buys.

Here, people will knife you over an insult.

The only power they respect is fear. Brute force. Violence.

The man snarls at Nestor, but Nestor doesn't budge. His eyes grow dark, and he stands his ground. He doesn't even have a weapon in his hand. He's going to get himself killed, and it'll be another thing for me to worry about.

"Think twice," Nestor says coldly.

Charlie hesitates, his eyes narrowing towards Nestor. Then they shoot wide. It's like he recognizes him. But what connection would Charlie have to some fancy ass man in a crisp suit from the business sector?

Charlie has been a nasty, horrible, cold-hearted asshole to me every single time I've crossed paths with him. In fact, I've seen him break a guy's leg just for the fun of it.

He's not someone you mess with.

Yet here he is, backing away from Nestor.

He raises his hands in the air and shakes his head. "I don't want any trouble, sir," Charlie stammers.

Sir?

“Then fuck off,” Nestor answers calmly.

What the hell is going on? My brain is screaming in confusion.

“Yeah, sorry, man, the girl owes the boss money, man, I was just doing my job,” he says defensively.

“Looks to me like you were doing more than just your job,” Nestor snarls, threat touching his voice.

Charlie clears his throat. “I wasn’t going to—I was just—”

“I said fuck off. And do it before I change my mind,” Nestor interrupts him.

Charlie doesn’t waste a second. He bolts out of there as though a pack of wild dogs is chasing him.

I stand in disbelief, my back still pressed against the dirty wall.

“Come on, little one,” Nestor says, as though he hasn’t just faced down one of the most terrifying men I’ve ever met like the monster was nothing more than a puppy.

Nestor holds out his hand and gestures for me to move away from the wall.

I’m too nervous to argue with him, unsure now about who he really is. I walk behind him towards his car. How did he know I was here?

“Were you following me?” I ask quietly.

“Someone had to make sure you didn’t get yourself into trouble after you escaped the mansion,” he chuckles.

He stands holding the passenger door open for me, patiently waiting for me to get into his car. I do so in silence, my eyes locked onto him. Should I be scared of him?

Charlie certainly was.

The entire drive home, Nestor is relaxed and tapping his fingers on the steering wheel while he hums something I don't recognize. I have a million questions swimming in my thoughts, but no idea how to voice them.

It isn't until we are back inside his mansion that I blurt the first one out.

"Who are you?" I snap, shooting the question at him before I have a chance to stop myself.

I need to know.

But I'm so used to my father's lies and manipulation, I doubt I'm going to get any kind of truth from him.

Nestor turns towards me, folding his thick, muscular arms over his broad chest. He leans his shoulder against the wall.

"Nestor Rostov," he says matter-of-factly.

"Why am I here, Nestor Rostov?" I demand.

"Like I told you already. Your father owed me a great deal of money, more than he could possibly pay, and he negotiated with me by selling his daughter to me. Marriage in exchange for his debts."

"Why would you want to be married?"

“Because a man like me needs children to take over his empire.”

I shake my head, not sure if I should believe this.

I press my lips together, my brows knitted tightly. “And you think I am going to give you children?” I ask carefully.

He snorts, a short burst of laughter. “When you first got here, I thought you were involved in your father’s schemes, Lara. But after today, I’ve learned a few things. I understand that you are in a serious financial sinkhole. You owe a lot of very bad people a large amount of money?”

Biting the inside of my cheek, I contemplate how much I want to admit. But at the end of the day, I’m so screwed already, and he clearly knows things, what difference does it make?

“The debts weren’t mine. They were my father’s,” I say.

“I’m aware. And your mother’s medical bills. I am sorry you had to go through that.”

There is no answer that can ease the pain I felt after losing my mom, so I stay quiet.

Nestor pushes off the wall and slowly walks around me. He lets his hand brush down my back.

“I have a solution,” he says.

I roll my eyes. “Please, I’ve had enough horrible offers from men today—”

He grins, looking down at me as he stops in front of me. “No. Don’t ever compare me to the men you’ve been dealing with this afternoon.”

Guilt stings me. He's not like them. Even if he is hiding something, I know he's nothing like Charlie. "Sorry," I mutter quietly.

"My solution is this. And feel free to say no."

"Mm?" I wait, tension building in my stomach.

"I will clear all of your debts with the bookies. I will also clear the debts with the doctors and the hospital. In exchange, you will live with me. You will stop trying to escape every day."

"Live with you," I murmur, not believing him.

My father has made so many promises to pay off the debt, or even just to help with some of it, and it's never come through.

But on the other hand, I literally have nowhere to go.

I've been evicted from that horrible place.

I never once managed to call home, but it was home in a way.

Even if it was gross. I don't even have that anymore.

If I don't accept his offer, I'm literally out on the streets.

"Fine," I huff, with no other choice, and knowing that he won't possibly really go through with his end of the deal. But at least it'll buy me time to find other work and somewhere else to stay. "Can I get my phone back? And not be considered a prisoner?"

“Of course, but the trust goes both ways. You won’t leave without permission, and you will always tell me where you are going.”

“Fine,” I say again.

“Good.” He smiles, and the wicked beauty of it has my heart racing in a totally different way.

I quickly look away from him, ignoring the desire building inside me.

“Um. I’m going to shower,” I say hurriedly, and push past him, up to my room.

The shower helps me feel less tainted by the horrible people I had to face today. I scrubbed hard to get the sensation of Charlie’s hand off my side. It makes me gag just to think about what he was asking of me. If Nestor hadn’t been there...

No.

Don’t think like that.

What you need to focus on is how you are going to pay off those assholes so that people like Charlie leave you alone forever.

I wrap a massive, fluffy white robe around my body and walk back into my room, my mind full of worry.

On my bed is my phone, next to a black box.

I dive into my phone in relief.

I desperately need this so that I can start applying for new jobs.

I poke the black box, not trusting it.

Eventually, I give in and pull the lid off, only to find a brand new iPhone. The latest model. There is a folded piece of paper in the box with a handwritten note scribbled in messy boy-writing.

Lara,

Your phone belongs in the stone ages. Please accept this as a gesture of reassurance. Welcome to your new home.

Nestor.

A brand new phone.

I've needed a new phone for about eight years already. The one in my hand is the only phone I've ever had. I've never been able to afford to upgrade, and the damn thing has a battery that lasts no more than an hour.

Tears sting my eyes at his kind gesture, but I blink them away. I'm scared to fall for it in case it's another manipulation tactic. I can't focus on his kindness. I need to focus on finding a job and sorting my life out.

It takes me a full day to figure out how to move all my information from my old phone to the new one.

It's late at night, and I'm lying in bed, finishing everything up. Yesterday, I also sent

off a few job applications, and I want to get access to my email to see if anyone responded.

Except when I open my inbox, the first thing that pops up is an email titled 'Statement: Mrs. Abakumov / Dr. N. Binder.'

Dammit. I was hoping they were going to leave me alone until the end of the month.

Reluctantly, I click on it; I may as well get the reminder over with and make a note of the total I owe. I'll need a new notebook to start tracking the debts in.

But when it opens up on my screen, I am convinced there is a mistake.

Total owed: \$0.00

It can't be.

I quickly scroll up and zoom in on the statement section, and sure enough, a massive lump sum was paid to the account just yesterday.

Nestor didn't even ask me for the details of this account. How did he get access to the outstanding amount?

My hands start to shake with confusion and adrenaline.

I quickly scroll to my messaging app, and with nausea in my stomach, I type out a message that I send to every single one of the debt collectors. I hate contacting them. But I need to know.

Please confirm the total amount owed as of today.

The same message goes out to over eight numbers, and I stare at my phone, dreading the replies that are going to start pouring in. Threats and nasty things.

But one by one, the answers come in, and every single one of them is the same.

Zero.

Debt cleared.

Nothing.

He did it.

Nestor paid off my mother's medical debts and every single one of the debts my father dumped onto me.

But the amount—the money I owed—was more than I could have earned in nine years. I know because I did the calculation so many times, it's embedded in my brain.

Nine years.

Working three steady jobs and extra odd jobs and staying in that shithole apartment and hardly eating anything. Being hounded day after day by debt collectors and living a stressed, lonely life because I wouldn't have time for friends or anything but work.

Nine years and suddenly it's all cleared. Everything .

My body spins through a series of emotions.

Changing from shock, to confusion, to anger, back to shock—the overwhelming chaos inside me.

I toss the blankets off and slide out of bed with my new phone gripped tightly in my hands.

I storm straight to Nestor's bedroom, knocking loudly on the door once before bursting into the room.

"How did you do it?" I demand.

Nestor is standing next to his bed wearing nothing but a pair of gray sweatpants, and for a moment, I'm just staring at things I should not be staring at.

"How did I do what, Lara?" he asks calmly.

I tear my eyes off his package and back up to his face.

"Um. How. How did you—um. The debts. How did you know who they were with? How did you get access to my mom's medical debts? How did you know the right people to contact to get in touch with the debt collectors? I know what kind of people they are—"

"Lara, what does it matter? The debts are paid," he shrugs.

"Why was Charlie so scared of you, Nestor?"

That is honestly the only question I need him to answer. That question would probably answer all of my other questions at the same time.

Nestor smiles tightly.

I stare at him, waiting for him to give me something that will ease my worry about who he is.

My mind is screaming that I should be grateful that I no longer have to worry about the debt—that I am free of those collectors—but another part of me is worried about who I am in debt to now.

Who I promised to live with them as part of the agreement.

Did I sell myself the same way my father sold me for money? Did I do the same thing to myself?

“You should just be happy that you don’t have to worry anymore. And you don’t have to live in that dangerous neighborhood. Okay?” he says gently, walking towards me.

He reaches out and touches my cheek.

In that moment, I become very aware that I’m only wearing a very short pair of silk boxers and a cropped silk top. Oh my word. I was in bed. I wasn’t planning on being seen by anyone dressed like this.

My eyes trace over his toned torso, and I bite down, clenching my jaw and trying to focus.

“You’re right,” I stammer, stepping away from him. “Um. Thank you.” I take another step back, and his hazel eyes watch me as I walk backwards until I am out of his room. “Goodnight,” I murmur hurriedly before running down the passage back to the privacy of my own bedroom.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:28 pm

Lara's questions are still bothering me the day after she asked them.

She wants to know who I am.

I've been toying with the idea of telling her the truth, but I don't think she will take it well if she finds out I am the leader, the boss, of a complex crime syndicate running the entire city of San Francisco.

She probably won't enjoy hearing that she is living with someone in charge of the Russian mafia in this city.

I remind myself that she isn't even aware of her father's bratva connections. He's obviously hidden it from her.

Finding out from me would be a complete shock.

Totally unexpected.

I don't think she's ready for it.

The only dealings she had with the criminal underworld were through the debt collectors, and they were a nasty bunch. She will immediately associate me with them.

No. She isn't ready.

Perhaps one day I can approach the subject with her. But not yet.

For now, she can just carry on believing I am a businessman with some good connections. Money does buy most things, after all.

Lara is sitting outside in the garden, enjoying the morning sunshine on her bare legs. Her long floral dress is pulled up over her thighs as she stretches her legs out on one of the sun loungers near the pool.

I've been watching her all morning, admiring her quiet beauty, the way she shifts and bends her leg. The way her dress slips a little higher over her thigh when she moves the book she's holding.

She has such an elegant beauty, it's mesmerizing.

She's lost in thought.

Despite having a book in her hands and her eyes turned towards the pages, she hasn't actually flipped to a new page for the last thirty minutes.

She's just staring blankly at the black-inked words on the cream-toned paper.

I've been wanting to approach her for a while, but without any real reason to do so, I find myself hesitant.

"Lara?" I say her name quietly, trying not to give her a fright.

"Mm?" she lets out a soft breath, her blue eyes lifting from the book to meet my gaze.

"I made you some tea." I lean over the sun lounger, setting the tea down on the little table next to her.

"Oh, thank you, that's sweet," she answers, as though she's surprised I'd do anything

kind for her.

I smile, sitting down on the lounge next to hers.

“Are you okay here? Is there anything you need?” I ask.

I’m happy that she’s agreed to stay. Whatever she’s thinking about, whatever’s worrying her, I want to try and ease her concerns, because I want her to be comfortable here.

I want her to stay.

That’s why I offered to pay for her debts in exchange for her living with me and not carrying on with this escape nonsense.

We’re already married, so it makes sense. And I don’t want her to go back to her old life.

From a personal aspect, she intrigues me in ways no one has done before.

“No, I don’t need anything.” She smiles tightly.

“If you do, you’ll tell me?”

She nods.

She’s been a bit awkward towards me since I paid her bills. I think the unanswered questions are bothering her. And she might feel like she sold herself to me, but she doesn’t realize that what seems like a staggering amount to her, the debts I cleared for her, to me, is nothing.

Nothing in comparison to her agreeing to stay here.

My eyes trace up her legs, glowing from the warmth of the sun, over her narrow waist and across the low-cut design of her dress, showing off her beautiful cleavage.

She is feminine and beautiful.

Lara bites her lower lip as my eyes reach her face, and she shifts shyly. “Did you need something?” she asks, her hand moving self-consciously over her chest, making me aware of how blatantly I’ve been staring.

“No. Nothing,” I answer quickly, standing up. “The chef is making stir-fry for dinner tonight.”

“Lovely.”

The conversation is as awkward as it can be, and I throw her one more tight smile before I hurry away.

It’s not like me to feel uncomfortable around women.

It’s also not like me to be so captivated by someone. That kiss is still haunting my thoughts. I am both desperate to feel her lips against mine again, and definitely want to avoid it because of how much it affected me last time.

I’m not used to being out of control like that. The vulnerability she brought out in me was unexpected and new to me.

I didn’t like it. And I don’t want to give anyone that kind of power over me.

Over the next few days, the awkwardness between us doesn't get any better.

Seeing as Lara is now staying here voluntarily, the dynamics have shifted somewhat, and neither of us knows how to handle the other.

It's like we're choosing to live together, but we know nothing about each other.

There is a lot of tension every time we bump into each other, and sometimes I find it rather amusing, but other times frustrating. And the chemistry is starting to drive me crazy. No matter what she wears, she's too beautiful to keep my eyes off of.

It's late, or very early, depending on how you want to look at it—just past three in the morning on Thursday night.

I can't sleep, and I'm tired of tossing and turning and getting tangled in my blankets, so I get out of bed and make my way through to the kitchen in the dark.

The house is quiet. I enjoy it when it's like this. At this time of night, I feel alone in the world. No one is calling. No one is asking me for favors. My phone is mostly quiet, unless it's an emergency, and even then, Roan handles a lot of it on my behalf.

As I near the kitchen, I hear noises and smile, because it can only be one person.

I step inside and find Lara with her head in the fridge, leaning forward and rummaging around looking for something.

She's bent over and the long T-shirt she is using as pajamas is not quite long enough to cover her entire ass.

My lips curl into a smile, and I pause in the doorway, leaning on the frame.

“Looking for a midnight snack?” I chuckle.

She jumps up and squeals in fright, spinning around to face me with her hand pressed over her heart.

With a grin, I tease her, “You’re like a thief in the night, stealing my leftover pizza.”

“If you wanted the pizza that badly, you should have finished it when you had the chance,” she chirps back at me, leaning back into the fridge. “Do you always sneak around in the dark?”

“It’s hardly sneaking when it’s my house.”

“Mm,” she says, pulling the pizza box out of the fridge along with a can of flavored soda water.

“I knew it. I knew you were after the pizza.”

“If you’re polite to me, I’ll consider sharing it.” Her eyes glint with mischief as she carries the box to the microwave and sets it down.

She grabs a plate and throws two slices onto it, sliding it into the microwave.

Then she turns to stare me down with her arms folded over her breasts.

“So, what do I have to do to show you I can be polite?” I ask, walking towards her.

She shrugs, her eyes tracing up and down my body.

I’m shirtless, in a pair of sweatpants. Under the scrutiny of her eyes, I catch myself pulling my stomach muscles tighter, and then laugh inwardly, amused that I’m

worried about what she thinks of me.

I've seen her staring at me a number of times. I know she finds me attractive.

"Or maybe 'polite' isn't what you really want, Lara, and you're just too shy to ask for what you want." I step even closer to her, my eyes narrowing as dark thoughts fill my mind.

Lara instantly catches my drift and takes a sharp breath, biting her lip as her cheeks flush pink.

I notice a delicate silver chain around her neck that she wasn't wearing before.

Reaching out, I lift the tiny pendant with one finger.

"A rose," I say, admiring the detail as my fingers brush over her chest.

Her blush grows darker, spreading between her breasts.

"It was my mother's."

"I didn't notice you wearing it before."

"I wasn't. I only put it on this morning. I've been carrying it with me since her death, but it didn't feel right to wear it."

"Why does it feel right now?" I ask, letting the tiny silver rose drop from my fingers.

She reaches up and touches it.

"The debts are cleared. It just—it gives me a chance to remember her without that

weight on my shoulders,” she says, almost a whisper.

My heart tightens as I watch emotion flicker over her face.

The microwave pings loudly, and she jumps, giggling at herself as she turns to open it. “So, did you want pizza?” she asks, happy to change the subject.

“I think pizza makes the perfect midnight snack,” I answer, stepping forward to grab an extra plate at the same time as she steps away from the microwave.

“I’ll grab the chili sauce,” she says, turning straight into me.

Our bodies bump against each other, and she trips. I wrap my hand around her waist to steady her, her hands pressing against my chest. Instinctively, I pull her even closer. She looks up at me with those gorgeous blue eyes, and my heart beats faster.

“You should be more careful,” I grin.

“It wasn’t me,” she says, slightly breathless as her eyes study my face. “You’re the one who gatecrashed my pizza party.”

Her playful attitude is amusing and fun. The glimmer of mischief in her eyes teases me.

I lean down, my lips moving closer to hers.

My hand brushes down her back, over the smooth fabric of her oversized t-shirt. My mind taunts me with images of lifting her onto the kitchen counter and pushing her legs apart.

Of kissing her and pushing my tongue into her mouth.

My cock stirs at the memory of our lips against each other.

Suddenly, I remember how quickly I lost myself last time I kissed her. How she broke down my walls in an instant and left me confused.

I clear my throat, dropping my hand away from her body and taking a big step back.

“Um. So. Pizza,” I stammer.

“Oh, right,” she says, snapping out of the spell and turning away from me.

We both move around the kitchen, keeping a good distance between us.

She puts a slice of pizza on my plate for me and leans against the furthest counter from me. It’s annoying, but also a relief. If she were any closer, I’d be unable to control myself. Even as it is now, I’m struggling.

I practically swallow the pizza slice whole in an effort to get out of the kitchen as fast as possible.

She’s taking small, nervous bites and not looking at me.

I set my plate down in the empty sink.

“That was good. Thanks. I’ll see you in the morning,” I say hurriedly.

“Sleep well,” she smiles sweetly, taking another bite of pizza.

“Oh—I almost forgot. Tomorrow night, you should be ready for dinner at seven. We are going out.”

She tilts her head to the side, questions in her eyes. But she's chewing, and I need to get out of here.

I throw her one last smile and then hurry up the stairs back to my room.

I need to be more careful around her.

Last time I kissed her, I almost lost my mind. And it's still haunting me. I don't know what will happen if I get into that situation again.

I don't trust myself.

Page 10

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:28 pm

I'm tiptoeing around Nestor every day. I can't believe I agreed to stay with him if he paid my debts. It makes me ill to think about how I was fine with selling myself like that. Although he hasn't made any strange or awkward demands on me, and he's been keeping a polite distance.

I admit, my attraction to him is something I'm struggling with. He clearly feels the same way about me. There have been a number of very tense, very intimate moments, but both of us have been avoiding another situation like the kiss.

But now tonight he's taking me to dinner. There is no way to avoid being around him if we're out for the evening.

I'm standing in front of my closet, wrapped in a silk robe, fresh out of the shower.

My hair is already pinned up in a messy bun on top of my head, I did some light makeup, and now I'm trying to decide what to wear.

I toss another dress onto the bed, wondering what I'm supposed to make of all this. I have no idea where we're going, or if it's just us or if it includes other people, like business partners or something.

The more I think about it, the more nervous I get, because I literally know nothing about his life—where he likes to go, what his favorite foods are, the type of people he hangs out with. Or what he expects from me.

I toss a fourth and a fifth dress onto the bed and stare at them all, trying to decide which one might work for something fancy and something relaxed, seeing as he's

told me nothing.

Eventually, I settle on the little black number. It's always the trusted go-to when you can't figure anything else out.

Shrugging my robe off my shoulders, I let it fall to the floor.

I step into the black dress and wiggle the fitted style over my hips, slipping my arms into the long sleeves and then maneuvering with a bit of skill to try and grab the zipper at the back.

I hear a chuckle coming from the bedroom door and realize I've left it open. Spinning around in fright, embarrassed to be caught in this ridiculous position, I find myself looking right at Nestor. He's wearing black pants, a white shirt, and black suspenders, looking fine as all hell.

The top few buttons of his shirt are undone, and I can see the top of his skull tattoo on his chest. His sleeves are half-rolled, and his toned forearms flex as he shoves his hands into his pockets.

"Can I help you with that?" he asks, already walking towards me.

"Ok," I say, turning my back to him, relieved to be able to hide my blushing cheeks.

He first brushes his fingers down my bare skin, from the top of my neck, just below my hair line, over my spine, to the base of my back just above my ass. Then slowly he pulls the zip up. His fingers brushing against my skin all over again.

Goosebumps break out over my body, and a warm shiver of delight runs through me.

I close my eyes, trying not to focus on him, but it's impossible. My body is desperate

for more, despite my logic arguing against it.

“There you are,” he says, placing his hands on my hips and turning me to face him. He tucks a strand of hair behind my ear and smiles; it’s so delicious it makes my heart pulse faster, rushing blood through my veins and making my head spin.

“You look gorgeous, Lara,” he says, his voice a little deeper than before.

“Thank you,” I whisper.

“I’m ready when you are. Shall I wait downstairs?”

Where else does he want to wait?

“I’m just about ready, too. I’ll choose some shoes and then we can go.”

“Excellent,” he says, walking to my bed and sitting on the edge.

Oh. He’s going to stay and watch me.

Increasingly self-conscious, I hurry to the closet and grab two pairs of high heels, carrying them to the full-length mirror on the wall.

I slip one of each shoe onto each foot and look at the effect in the mirror.

“The one with the tassels,” he says, his eyes locked onto me, slowly tracing up my legs.

I turn to face him, so he can see better. “You think so?”

“I do, they’re really cute.” He smiles, his eyes dark as they drift over me.

The idea of him thinking I look cute has my mind racing. Or is it the way he's looking at me?

I kick off the other shoe and replace it with the black strappy heel with a tassel around the ankle.

"Perfect," he says, standing up. "Shall we?" he gestures towards the bedroom door. I grab my purse with my phone and a lightweight jacket and let him walk me down the stairs to the front door, and out to the car.

He's being such a gentleman, holding his arm out so that I can lean on him as I walk down the stairs, and gently placing his hand on my back as we leave the house.

He holds the car door open for me, and I can't help the grin that touches my lips. "Thank you," I say politely.

I watch out of the window as we drive around the city, and I keep expecting him to turn into the main vibrant area in the middle of the city, where all the popular restaurants are. But we seem to be getting further away from it.

Eventually, we're out in a much quieter neighborhood filled with gorgeous houses, and he pulls up a long driveway.

The security guard at the gate waves and nods when he drives through.

I bite the inside of my cheek, nervous. This is someone's house. That means we are meeting other people. Am I dressed well enough? What kind of dinner is this?

Doing my best to calm my thoughts, I push a smile onto my face as we walk up the steps towards the front door.

It opens before we get there, and an older woman steps out onto the front steps.

“Nestor, darling,” she says, spreading her arms to hug him.

“Mom.” He smiles and holds her tight.

Mom? Are you serious? I’m meeting his mother? Of all the possibilities, this is the least expected one.

“Mom, this is Lara, my wife.”

His mother does an excellent job of hiding the surprise on her face, but her voice does quaver a bit.

“Wife? Now, why in the world wasn’t your dear mother invited to the wedding?” she teases him, stepping towards me with her arms wide. I hug her, my entire body tense with nerves.

“Hello,” I say.

“This is my mother, Leticia.”

Leticia hugs me as though we’ve known each other for years, and it helps ease my anxiety.

She takes my hand and leads me inside.

“Your sister is going to give you an earful,” Leticia says, laughing.

“Ulyana is here?” Nestor says, his brows shooting up.

“I’m here.” A gorgeous girl, roughly the same age as me, walks boldly into the room and jumps into her brother’s arms. “Hey, idiot,” she laughs, hugging him.

“But I thought you went back to university?” he asks, confused.

“Yes, I was going to, but then I thought—maybe I just need a bit more time off.”

“Ulyana, that isn’t how it works,” Nestor says sternly.

“Oh, don’t you worry. I already lectured her,” Leticia says, shaking her head at her daughter.

Unfazed by either of their concerns, she walks over to me. “I’m Ulyana.”

“I’m Lara.”

“His wife,” Leticia says.

“Are you serious?” Ulyana doesn’t bother hiding any of her shock at all. “Since when?” she blurts out.

Nestor grins sheepishly. “Come on, let’s go get a drink and not hover in the entrance hall.”

He pushes his sister, and she rolls her eyes. “But I need all the details.”

Leticia and Nestor are deep in conversation, and Ulyana has pulled me aside near the bar in the living room.

“I can’t believe he got married without telling me.

And you're absolutely stunning. Wow. Where did you get this dress?

Perfect shoes to pair it with. What do you do?

Where did you come from? How did all of this happen?

"She shoots a string of questions at me, and I stare, dumbfounded, unable to keep you.

She starts giggling and shakes her head. "Sorry. I get a bit overenthusiastic. I'm very excited to meet you. It was just the other day I was telling my brother he needed to meet a nice girl and start a family. Do you want children?"

"I do. One day."

"I want five children. A whole house full of them. But not for a long time. There's so much I still want to do.

Not that having kids stops you from doing things.

I guess I need to meet a man first, before I think about children.

But good men are a lot harder to come by than you might think. "She winks at me, making me laugh.

"Here you go," Ulyana says, handing me a blue gin and tonic.

I get a fright when Nestor unexpectedly arrives behind me and slips his arm around my waist, pulling my back against his chest. "Is my sister giving you a hard time?" he asks with a tender edge to his voice.

“No, she’s lovely,” I laugh.

“See, I’m lovely ,” Ulyana says, pulling a face at Nestor.

“Come on, everyone, dinner is ready,” Leticia calls out after the chef comes in to inform her that dinner can be served.

Nestor slips his hand into mine and threads his fingers through mine, leading me to the dining room. I’m taken aback by how affectionate he’s being, especially in front of his family, whom I haven’t even met until now. He’s so relaxed and gentle with me, it’s like I’m with a different man.

I’ve only seen the slightest glimmers of this person. This version of him.

“Are you doing okay?” he leans close and whispers in my ear halfway through dinner. It’s the second time he’s checked in with me to ask if I’m comfortable or if I need anything.

My heart warms towards him. I even find myself leaning into him when he talks to me, and he places his hand on my leg beneath the table, sending a wild thrill of desire through me.

Why can’t he be like this all of the time?

As soon as I think the words, my mind snaps into action, lecturing me on being careful. I can’t be getting soft like this. I don’t know anything about him; he kidnapped me.

Yet still, I’m really enjoying myself.

“Can I dish up some more for you, darling?” Letica asks, standing up and offering to

take my plate.

“Oh, no, thank you, that was amazing.”

“Chef Bruno makes the best lamb shanks in the world. And I should know. I’ve been to many places.” She beams at me.

“Mom loves to travel,” Nestor explains.

“I hope to travel too one day,” I smile.

“Where have you been so far?” Ulyana asks.

“Oh, nowhere yet, but I want to go to Cambodia, to see those beautiful old temples in the jungle.”

“You haven’t been anywhere ?” she gasps in horror.

“Perhaps we can go there for our honeymoon.” Nestor’s eyes shine with mischief.

I grin but look down to hide it.

“Sorry, we’re late,” a loud voice booms into the dining room, and I look up to see two other people arriving.

“You’re past late,” Leticia smiles at the older man. “But you’re lucky there is still some food left, sit down.”

“Thanks, my love,” the older man says. “Who is this?”

I glance towards Nestor, sensing tension from him.

His face is scowling as he glares at the two men.

“This is Lara, my wife. Lara, this is Sergei, and his son, Miron.” Nestor gestures coldly towards both of them.

“I’m Nestor’s stepfather,” Sergei says, a hint of pride in his voice.

“Hello.” Miron nods, looking sour. He turns towards Nestor with a nasty expression on his face. “Wife? You snuck away and got married in secret? Were you too ashamed to get married in front of us?” he says coldly.

“It was an intimate affair, by invite only,” Nestor snaps.

“Mm. I can’t imagine I would have wanted to be there.” Miron sits down, his mouth pulled into a sneer.

“You would have been the last person on earth I’d invite,” Nestor growls beneath his breath.

I look to Leticia and Sergei, but they are chatting about something else and seem oblivious to this horrible tension.

Miron stands up again, slamming his fists on the table. “I’m not good enough for you? Is that what you’re saying? Your arrogance gets worse every time I see you, brother,” he snarls.

“Brother? Not in a million years, Miron. You are no family of mine.”

“Boys,” Leticia says, her face contorted with disappointment. “Please, we’ve spoken about this—”

Nestor stands up as well, leaning on the table and glaring at Miron. “This boy can’t keep his mouth closed long enough to show respect.”

“And you can’t—”

I stand up too, sensing how quickly this is going to get out of hand. “Nestor, I’m so sorry, are you able to take me home? I’m feeling a little lightheaded,” I say, interrupting them, reaching out to touch Nestor’s arm.

He turns towards me, at first surprised, but then realizes that I’m perfectly fine.

“Of course, are you okay?” He presses the back of his hand against my forehead. “You are a little warm.”

“Is she okay?” Leticia asks, worried.

“She’ll be fine. I’ll get her home, and she can rest. Thank you so much for dinner, Mom.” He turns to his sister. “Go to uni. Stop messing about here,” he says sternly. She sticks her tongue out at him and winks at me.

In a flash, Nestor whisks me out of the house and back to the car.

Once we’re inside, he takes a deep breath.

“Are you alright?” I ask cautiously.

Page 11

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:28 pm

In the car, I'm still fuming over Miron's audacity.

Every fucking time I see that little shithead, he causes trouble for me.

He can't even find it in himself to not make pathetic, childish comments or be rude to someone he's just met.

He had no right to make those comments about Lara. He knows nothing about her.

I want to rip his tongue out of his mouth and teach him some basic manners. I don't know why my mother can't see that he's twisted and manipulative. That he and his father are up to no good.

She believes Sergei loves her, and for some unknown reason, she loves him. I can't stand it. I want to shake her and scream at her to wake the hell up and see the truth.

She constantly defends Sergei, and Sergei constantly defends Miron.

My mother always lands up in the middle of our arguments; no matter how many times I've tried to warn her about those two and what they really want from our family, she insists on playing the mediator.

I huff loudly, my fingers tight around the steering wheel as we sit in the car, parked outside my mother's home.

"Are you alright?" Lara asks, her voice quiet, almost careful.

She reaches out and very cautiously touches my leg.

Her fingers brush over my thigh, and a trail of electricity travels through my body, emanating from her touch.

It's soothing and distracts me from the wild torrent of anger flooding my thoughts.

I reach out and place my hand over hers, and for a moment, I don't say anything, just savor her gentleness, her softness.

When I glance across the car at her, her bright blue eyes are locked onto me.

She looks worried about me as though she cares that I'm okay.

My heart stutters.

I'm so grateful that she saw what was going on and got me out of there.

"Thank you," I sigh, starting the car engine with the push of a button on a hidden panel.

"What for?" she knits her brows together.

"For getting me out of there. It could have gotten ugly." I turn to look behind us as I reverse.

She bites her lip and nods. "I could see that it wasn't headed anywhere good. Why did it get so tense? Is it always like that?"

A bitter smile touches my lips and I shake my head. "That asshole has had it out for me since the moment my mother married his father."

The car pulls out into the road, and I press my foot against the gas to build up some speed, heading in the direction of home, more relieved than Lara might understand that she gave me a good reason to leave with my poor mother stuck in the middle of it all but refusing to see the truth.

“Why, though?” she asks, encouraging me to carry on speaking.

I shrug and grip the steering wheel with one hand, watching my knuckles turn white.

“He’s trying to take over. My—uh, my businesses.

He didn’t build them up; he hasn’t offered any value to anything, but in his mind, he just deserves it.

He’s been trying to push me out of power for a long time.

He and his father work together, and I suspect that it was their plan from the moment Sergei met my mother. ”

“That’s terrible. But your poor mother, surely she should just kick them out?”

“She doesn’t see it as clearly as I do. She thinks Sergei loves her.”

“Oh,” Lara says, her brow furrowed, her heart clearly full of pain for my mother.

“That’s horrible.”

“I need to stay in control of these businesses because it’s how I take care of and protect my family. My mother and my sister. They mean the world to me.” I sigh loudly, pushing air out of my lungs in a huff.

She gently squeezes my leg. “I can see that—how much they mean to you. And

they're both wonderful." Her smile is warm when I glance at her.

A grin steals its way onto my lips as my eyes take in her beauty.

She's special.

In a flash, I realize just how much I'm opening up to her, and it catches me by surprise.

I don't talk to anyone about what's on my mind.

Roan knows me the best, but that's only from one business-related perspective.

He works with me on a daily basis, but I don't exactly share my fears and dreams with him.

A sense of vulnerability washes over me, and I clench my jaw, feeling the muscles feather over my face. Focus on the road, not on her.

"What does Ulyana think about all of it?" Lara asks.

"She hates Miron as much as I do. We both tried to give them a chance, for our mother's sake, but we're both over it now."

"Your mom is lucky she has you guys—and you're really lucky you have her," Lara says, and I feel her emotions shifting. She lifts her hand to softly touch the small pendant on her necklace.

"I can't imagine what it would be like to lose my mother," I tell her, knowing that's what she's thinking about.

“I’m glad she’s not in pain anymore, especially after last year.

It was horrible to watch. But I miss her terribly.

Every single day. Spending time with your family this evening reminded me just how much I miss her.

I really like your mom and your sister. They’re both so sweet. And they made me feel really welcome.”

“I knew you’d like them.” I smile, full of pride. “And I knew they’d like you, too.”

I reach my arm across the car and wrap my hand over her leg. Her skin is warm, soaking heat into my fingers. Her body feels incredible beneath my touch.

A bright, piercing light draws my attention to the right as tires scream against the tarred road, the loud, high-pitched sound aching in my ears.

Immediately, I lift my arm, pressing it over Lara’s chest to hold her in place as a car smashes into us, jolting us, spinning my car off the road.

Lara screams and lifts her hands to cover her face as the window crunches, and she expects it to rain glass over her—but it’s protected by a shatterproof, bulletproof coating.

The car skids to a halt, balancing awkwardly with one tire stuck on the edge of a pole.

“Are you okay?” I ask when the car comes to a stop.

Lara turns to answer me, her eyes wide with fear, and I see another set of headlights racing towards us.

I reach out and throw my body over hers.

The second car slams into us and our car flips.

Lara screams again and her voice breaks in the panic.

The car is still rocking as I unclip her from the seat. She slumps, upside down, onto the roof of the car, trying to maneuver herself around. I kick my door open, expecting gunshots to smack against it any second.

“Come on, we need to move,” I shout, dragging her from the wreckage.

She’s clearly in shock, but she nods, her face expressionless.

“Lara, can you hear me?” I ask.

She nods again, but her eyes are blank.

Not willing to take any risks, I lift her into my arms and start running.

We have to get out of here. This is a planned attack, very purposeful, and I don’t know how far they are willing to go. It could be a warning, it could be a full-on assassination attempt.

It’s obvious someone just targeted me, and in the process, he put Lara’s life at risk, too.

I run until I’m sure we aren’t being followed, then I duck into an alleyway and set Lara down on the road, pulling her face towards mine.

“Little one, look at me, are you hurt?” I ask, holding her face. My heart is racing, my

breathing heavy and fast.

She blinks once, twice, then takes a gasping breath, filling her lungs as she snaps back into herself.

“The car rolled,” she stammers. I touch her cheek gently. She looks lost and vulnerable. I want to hold her and tell her it’s all going to be alright, but I need to get us out of here before anything else happens.

“I know, Lara. Are you okay? Are you hurt?” I demand.

She brushes her hands over her sides. “No. I don’t think so,” she says, barely a whisper. With my hand wrapped around her waist, holding her steady against me, I pull my phone from my pocket and dial Roan.

“Track my location, send a car. We’ve just been run off the road,” I growl into the phone.

“Are you somewhere safe for the moment? Who was it?” Roan asks.

“We both know who it was. Yes, we’re hidden, but I want to get out of here. Lara is with me.”

“A car is on the way, stay out of sight. Five minutes tops.”

I tuck my phone back into my pocket. Then reach out and pull Lara against my chest. I wrap both arms around her and hold her, resting my chin on the top of her head. She hides her face against my shirt. Her body is shaking.

Neither of us speaks. We stand together quietly, with her letting me comfort her, and me finding comfort in the act for myself.

I can smell her beautiful scent as my hand brushes up and down her back, tracing the contours of her spine.

It takes the car less than two minutes to get to us.

We climb into the back seat, and he takes off quickly, fearing that someone might be watching.

“Are you both okay?” the driver asks. He is one of Roan’s team members. He’s very thorough about who he hires for our security. “I was working nearby, scouting, when Roan called and told me to come get you guys.”

“Thanks for getting here so fast. I appreciate it,” I say.

Lara shifts closer to me on the back seat, and I slip my arm around her. She nuzzles her cheek against my chest, and warmth washes over me, filling my heart.

I close my eyes and lean my head against the back of the seat, taking a few deep, slow breaths.

I can’t believe Miron was so bold, especially so soon after a family dinner. It makes it obvious that it was he and his father. It’s not like anyone else knew where I was this evening.

He’s getting too bold. Too arrogant.

I have to find proof against him sooner rather than later. I’ll need to have a meeting with Roan tomorrow to discuss this. We can increase the number of men tailing him, and put an extra private investigator on him as well. I need to know everything. I’m running out of time.

What if Miron starts getting bolder and goes after my mother, or my sister, or Lara?

There's no telling what he's capable of.

I'm powerful enough to take him down with the flick of my wrist, but I have to have proof to present to my mother before I do a fucking thing. It will tear my family apart if my mother doubts my actions.

I let out a heavy sigh of frustration, and Lara wraps her arm around the front of my chest. She holds me, comforting me as much as I am comforting her.

Again, I think about how she has the ability to make me vulnerable.

I don't even realize that I'm letting my walls down around her—they're just suddenly down.

And I'm sharing things about myself I wouldn't usually share.

Or letting her hold me, and allowing myself to feel comfort in that small, sweet gesture.

With her arm wrapped around me now, my problems seem fewer.

My eyes are still closed, but I slowly start to trace my hand up and down her back again, over her body. It's soothing.

I only open my eyes again when I hear the familiar sound of the gravel of my driveway.

“Roan asked if you would like us to increase home security for the evening, sir.”

“No, that won’t be necessary. Did you send someone to clear away the wreckage?”

“Yes, sir. The team is there now with a truck.”

Satisfied, I nod. “Thank you again for fetching us so quickly. Have a good evening,” I say, pushing the door open as he comes to a stop.

I lean in and offer my hand to Lara, who takes it and lets me help her out of the car.

“Let’s get you inside, we can run a hot bath, it’ll help with the soreness and muscle tension,” I say, sliding my arm around her waist as we walk towards the front door.

“What just happened, Nestor?” she asks, stepping into the house ahead of me.

“We were in a car accident,” I say, sensing her tension. I push the front door closed behind us. It clicks quietly, and my shoulders stiffen as she huffs.

“No, that wasn’t just a car accident. Tell me what happened, please.” She pulls away from me, turning to face me with her hands folded over her chest. She’s still badly shaken. It’s written all over her body. Her eyes are flaring, and her jaw is set tightly, her lips pressed together.

Shit .

The look on her face tells me she is not letting this go until I tell her everything.

And I’m not ready to tell her everything.

But what choice do you have? She should know what ’ s going on.

My jaw clenches tightly, aching the muscles over my face and down the back of my

neck. I reach my hand up and rub the back of my neck, tilting my head first to the left, then to the right.

Everything hurts.

I guess that's to be expected when you're inside a car that gets smashed into twice and rolls.

“Nestor, I need to know. I can't handle this anymore. I feel like I'm in a sinking ship, and I don't even understand why.” Her eyes are beautiful, rich with emotion, swirling blue like ocean waters and shining as she glares at me, waiting for an explanation.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:28 pm

I stare at him, waiting for an answer.

He looks nervous, or maybe I'm misreading it and he's just stressed from what happened.

But that wasn't an accident. Two cars don't smash into you by accident. And he was very quick in his reaction to get us as far away from the attack as possible. Because that's what it was—an attack.

My entire body is rigid with tension. I'm shaking, overwhelmed, confused, and now, because I don't understand anything that's going on, I'm starting to get angry as well.

I think the anger is a defense mechanism for the fact that I feel like I'm being pushed into a corner in a dark room.

I'm done with these secrets.

He never gave me a clear explanation for why the debt collector backed off so quickly, as though he recognized him. Since when does Charlie ever call anyone sir except for his boss when I overheard him on the phone—that creepy asshole I only met once.

Yet he was quick to call Nestor 'sir.'

It's been bothering me, but I tried to ignore it.

But he can't ask me to ignore this, too.

Nestor sighs heavily and looks away from me for a long while, obviously trying to pull his thoughts together.

“Nestor—I heard you say on the phone that you know who did it. You didn’t even sound surprised by any of it. As though this kind of thing is perfectly normal to you.” I pull his attention back to me with the insistence of my tone.

Nestor nods, he brushes his fingers through his short, dark blonde hair, and says.

“It was my stepbrother and his father.”

My blood runs cold. His stepbrother really wants him dead? Like dead -dead?

“Why?” I snap, my tone harsh.

“I told you why.” He knits his brows as he looks at me. “Lara, it’s because they want the businesses.” He takes a step towards me, and I step back.

“Don’t give me the same bullshit answer as before, Nestor. I’m tired of this. All the secrets, the half-truths. It’s not normal for your family to be trying to kill you over a business. What kind of business is it? Why is murder an acceptable solution? Why did I almost die tonight? ”

My throat goes tight around my words, and I choke back the tears threatening, stinging against my eyes.

“I’m so sorry,” he sighs.

“No, I don’t care about sorries or regrets—all I want is the truth. You married me. You got me to move in with you. And now my life is in danger because of choices that have nothing to do with me. I demand the truth.”

His shoulders slump down as his defenses drop.

“Okay.” Nestor closes his eyes, his face looking pale. “I’ll tell—I’ll tell you.” He sways slightly and grunts in pain as he clutches his side, slipping his hand beneath his jacket. We both look down at his hand, and it’s coated in blood from where he touched his ribs.

“Nestor?” I squeal in horror. “What happened? Are you hurt?”

“Uh.” He groans, swaying to the side. “I think, maybe—”

I rush forward and wrap my arm around his waist and pull his arm over my shoulders. He’s so much taller than I, but at least I can provide a little bit of support as I lead him to the sofa.

“Take me upstairs. I have a first aid kit in my bathroom.” His words are strained.

“I think the adrenaline wore off,” I huff, trying to hold his weight as we climb the stairs.

“You don’t have to hold me up, Lara, I can lean on the railing. Maybe I should’ve gone easier on those cakes after dinner,” he chuckles, but as soon as he laughs, his whole body goes rigid with pain.

“Stop making jokes,” I snap at him, guiding him into his bathroom. He sits on the edge of the bath, holding on to the vanity to steady himself as he lowers himself down while I fuss around him in panic.

“Are you going to pass out?” I ask.

“No, I don’t think so,” he groans.

Without asking, I start gently tugging off his jacket. He doesn't say a word, letting me do whatever I'm doing. I have no idea what I'm doing.

I slide the suspenders off his shoulders, letting them hang from his pants, then I unbutton his shirt, each loosened button revealing more of his perfectly formed body.

Clenching my jaw, I ignore the way my skin heats and my heart beats faster. The way my breath catches as I let my eyes wander over him.

Nestor is sitting on the edge of the bath in his black pants, slightly bent forward from the pain. Shirtless, his muscles taut.

"Sit up, I need to see what's going on. You might need stitches."

He sits up straighter. My eyes trace over his chest, and for a moment, I'm distracted by the number of scars I see drawn across his skin. I reach out and touch one, then realize what I'm doing, and my cheeks flush bright pink with embarrassment.

He notices and smirks at me.

"What happened?" I ask, distracting myself and him.

"Uh—that one was from a blade."

"A knife?" I say in horror. "Why?"

"It was just a disagreement," he says casually, avoiding answering me in any specific detail. It annoys me, but I need to focus on helping him right now.

I sit on my knees between his legs. He lifts his arm up, holding it behind his head so that I can look at the wound running over the front of his ribs. It's deep. A gash. And

there is a small piece of glass still stuck in there.

“Oh no. I need to get that out,” I say, feeling a bit queasy.

“It’s okay. It’s just a small piece. It’s not the one that did all the damage.

I think it’s from when I kicked the door open.

The kit is under the basin; you’ll find everything you need in there,” he explains, gesturing towards the vanity.

“There are painkillers in there, too. You can hand me a couple of them.”

Still on my knees, I lean towards it and open the door, finding the big red medical bag easily.

I pull it towards us, opening it so that he can see inside as well.

“There. The tweezers. And that brown bottle, that’s disinfectant.” He talks me through the items I need, and I pull them out, one by one, setting them in a row on the edge of the bath.

My eyes trace over his scars again, and I wonder how many times he’s done this before.

“What’s that one from?” I ask, touching a round scar, slightly raised, just above the line of his belt.

“A bullet,” he says. Nothing more.

“You got shot?” I snap in horror.

“They missed all the risky parts,” he grins.

I want to push him for more information. I still want an answer about what’s going on, but right now, the wound is the only thing that matters.

My hands are shaking slightly when I pick up the long-nosed tweezers.

“Move slowly,” he reassures me. “Get a strong grip on the glass.”

I grip the piece of glass, hesitate, flinch when he flinches, apologize, and try again.

This time, I hold my right hand steady with my left hand and grip the glass with more confidence.

“Good, now pull it out,” he says tightly.

It was a bigger piece than I thought, and I gag as it slides out of his skin, causing fresh blood to flow from the wound.

I splash disinfectant onto a piece of clean gauze and press it against the gash.

He grunts, holding his breath as the disinfectant seeps into his skin.

After disinfecting, I have to pour white powder over it to stop the bleeding. Then I clean everything around the wound, wiping the blood away. Nestor is very quiet, and his fingers are gripping the edge of the bath so tightly his knuckles have turned white.

“You okay?” I ask.

“Mm.” He nods, his teeth clenched together.

“It’s really bad. I think you need stitches.”

“No, there is a special tape in the bag. It mimics stitches. It’ll be fine. Find the one that’s called Second Skin Sutures.”

He talks to me through it.

It’s two pieces of tape with additional threads on the sides. A piece gets put on either side of the wound, then I have to pull the sides together using the threads, which interlock over each other. I’m surprised by how well it works to pull the wound closed.

I place a fresh white bandage over everything and tape that down, too.

“Done?” I ask, looking up at him.

He has his eyes closed.

“I think I need to lie down,” he grumbles.

“Come on, I’ll help you.” I stand up, slipping his arm over my shoulder again. His aftershave washes over me, his shirtless, gorgeous body wrapped around me. I clear my throat, trying to focus on helping him and nothing else.

I get Nestor to the side of the bed, and he sits down. Kicking his shoes off, he lets me pull the blankets back as he slips his legs beneath them, not caring to change. I think the less he moves right now, the better, anyway.

“Will you call me if you need anything?” I ask, standing awkwardly next to his bed.

“Actually, do you mind keeping an eye on me for a bit? I’ve lost a lot of blood.”

“Okay,” I say nervously.

“You can lie in bed, I’m sure you’re tired too.” He taps the bed next to himself.

I swallow hard, but nod.

To my surprise, as I lie down, Nestor wraps his arm around my back, pulling me towards him.

I roll onto my side and snuggle against his chest without a moment’s hesitation.

Nestor takes a slow, deep breath. “The painkillers are working,” he says with relief in his voice. “I’m already feeling better now that I’m relaxed.”

“That’s good.” My eyes are roaming his body again. The thick muscles of his biceps, the well-defined shape of his shoulders.

I reach out and touch a scar running from his collarbone down across his chest.

“What is this one?” I ask, almost a whisper.

“That one was a piece of shrapnel,” he says, his eyes closed but his brows raised for a moment.

“As in—shrapnel from a bomb ?” Every scar I ask about seems to get a worse answer than the one before.

“Mmhmm,” he nods sleepily.

I stare at the profile of his face. The perfect shape of his nose and jaw line, the shadow of stubble over his cheeks and chin, the thickness of his long lashes. I have a

million questions on the tip of my tongue, but he looks exhausted. Sighing softly, I brush my hand over his cheek.

“Get some rest, Nestor. You’ll feel better in the morning.”

He smiles, just a flicker across his face, because he’s already drifting off to sleep.

His breathing gets deeper, slower, and his chest moves smooth and even as it rises and falls.

I lift the blanket to peek at the bandages. There is no fresh blood seeping through them. I did a pretty good job with that whole thing. I’ve never done anything like that before, and clearly the bleeding has stopped, so that’s great.

Nestor is fast asleep, and suddenly there is no conversation to distract me from his arm wrapped around me and the smell of his skin, misted with cologne. The heat of his body soaks into me and I shift even closer to him, resting my cheek on his pec.

The accident flashes in my mind when I close my eyes and I wince.

Except, I remember what he did.

How he reached his arm out to protect me. How even as the car rolled he was more worried about me than himself. He was thinking of me in that terrifying moment when I could hardly think about anything.

My heart constricts.

What does it mean?

Does it mean he cares about me?

No. It was probably just instinct. He would have reached out to protect anyone.

But it wasn't instinct when he gently pulled me from the wreckage and carried me in his arms to safety.

He was so calm with me, so patient and gentle.

He took care of me the entire time, even in the car ride on the way home.

My body is alive, blood flowing, heating my skin as I lie next to him.

I brush my hand slowly over his chest muscles, along the solid curves, listening to his breathing.

Oh my word. I can't stay here in his bed. This is wrong.

Letting out a soft sigh of regret, I wiggle carefully away from him. I slip out from beneath the blankets and tiptoe from his room towards my own.

I sit on the edge of my bed for a long time, filled with confusion and a heavy sense of regret.

What is he hiding from me?

Does he care about me?

How do I feel about him?

Finally, I stand up, and with some effort, I manage to pull the zipper down on the back of my dress and slide it off my body.

I climb into my comfortable oversized T-shirt and then into the blankets of my bed. The sheets are cold, and they don't smell like him.

I close my eyes, and instead of being haunted by the accident like I thought I would be, I am haunted by him. By the lack of his body next to mine. I grab one of the spare pillows and wrap my arms around it, snuggling against it and telling myself to stop being silly.

I can't be getting feelings for a man I don't even know.

A man who is hiding secrets.

Page 13

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:28 pm

I roll over as I wake up, forgetting about the injury on my ribs. It shoots pain through my side, and I quickly roll back.

I groan loudly, pressing my hand over the bandages, neatly taped to my body. She did an incredible job.

I smile, remembering her vulnerability as she huddled against me.

Her beautiful body wrapped in my arms, her smooth, soft, warm skin.

She's no longer in my bed, but I can still smell her on the pillow next to me. I pick it up and press it over my face. The delicate scent of her perfume breezes over me, intoxicating me with desire.

My cock goes rigid.

Fuck .

She's got some strong hold over me. Over my body and my thoughts.

I react to her instantly, wanting her.

I toss the pillow away, annoyed that she has this effect on me. Last night at dinner, before all the shit happened, I was thinking about taking her home and making her scream in pleasure.

I could do it now. I could march into her room, rip her clothes off, and do incredible,

erotic things to her.

She might be reluctant at first, but I've seen the way she responds to my touch. She wants it as much as I do.

I groan louder than before as my cock throbs, aching to feel her.

Throwing the blankets off my body, I slowly sit up on the edge of the bed. Now that I'm fully awake, I can assess the level of pain in my side. It's not as bad as I expected. I think she helped me clean it and bandage it fast enough that it's already healing.

I've always been fortunate enough to heal fast.

I rub my hand over my cock, adjusting it as it sits awkwardly stiff in my pants.

Fuck. I want her. I need her.

Looking towards the bedroom door, a sly smile touches my lips. She's right there, across the hall.

I can't do it. I know that.

But it's a tempting thought.

No.

I'll get into the shower, nice and cold to blast these thoughts away, then put a fresh bandage over the suture tape. Once that's done, I'll be fresh and ready to start the day.

Lara is not from my world; she doesn't even know what she's been tangled up in here with me.

She's innocent and doesn't deserve to have that innocence taken away from her just because I can't control my cock.

Or because my stepbrother has it out for me.

She almost died last night because of me.

Dammit. She stopped asking questions when she realized I needed help. But those questions are still there. They will still need to be answered.

It isn't fair of me to hide things from her anymore.

She has to know.

Her innocence—that naive sweetness about her—will be broken when she is exposed to the real world. But there is no choice in the matter.

Besides, her father is the one who made the choice long ago; he is the one who is responsible for involving her in this world of mine.

I push myself to my feet, taking a moment to make sure I'm steady.

In the bathroom, I kick off my pants and carefully peel the outer bandage off, throwing it into the wastebasket.

I climb beneath the steady spray of water. It massages heat into my tense muscles. I hang my head forward, letting the water pulse over the back of my neck.

I'll take her to work with me today. It's the best way I can think to ease her into the idea of what I do. I'll tell her the truth piece by piece, so she doesn't get overwhelmed all at once.

Either way, it's going to be a shock for her.

After I've scrubbed my body and allowed the hot water to soak away my tension, I push the lever all the way to the cold side, and a fresh blast of icy water slams into me, stealing my breath away for a moment.

My mind goes silent. My thoughts freeze.

No worry, no stress, no concerns—just ice-cold water flooding over me.

By the time I climb out of the shower, it's like I've had a reboot.

I choose my usual business dress. Black slacks, a shirt, leather suspenders that cross behind my back to hold my gun, and a jacket.

Lara is in the kitchen when I get down there, eager for a cup of coffee.

She smiles when I walk in.

"Morning," I say.

My eyes trace over her body. Perfect, with her petite waist and wide hips. Those jeans look far too good on her.

I clear my throat.

"How are you feeling?" she asks, her bright eyes studying me.

“Much better than I expected. Hardly hurts at all. You did a brilliant job tending to it last night.” I tap my side, nodding.

“Don’t you think you should rest for a day or two? My body hurts just from the accident, never mind the fact that you got slashed by glass.”

“No, I’m alright. I don’t have a lot to do today, but I did want to ask.”

“Ask what?”

“If you’re up for it, do you want to join me? I’m heading to one of my warehouses, and I know you want to know what I do—so I thought maybe I could just show you.”

“Really?” she asks, perking up, setting her coffee mug down.

“Yes, really. I’m leaving once I’ve had coffee.”

She glances down at her jeans and cream lace blouse. “Do I need to change?” she asks, scrunching her nose, looking cute as hell.

I look at her bare feet, her little toe wiggling as she stands there, her nails painted pink. “Wear some comfortable shoes. Sneakers maybe. The warehouse can get chaotic.”

“Alright. I’ll be quick.” Lara bolts out of the kitchen, and I chuckle, enjoying her enthusiasm. I hope I’m making the right choice. But what choice do I have, really?

We arrive at the warehouse late in the morning.

I specifically brought her to this one because we have some product that has just arrived, and they'll be unpacking it.

She is close to my side when we step into the massive space. It's noisy, men shouting to each other, the clank of metal on metal, the beeping of forklifts as they reverse away from trucks holding pallets of goods.

"These two trucks arrived this morning. We're busy unloading the delivery, and it'll get taken to that side of the warehouse, where quality control checks it." I gesture towards the forklifts.

One of the drivers waves at me. "Hi, boss," he shouts.

"Hi, Tiny."

"Tiny?" she asks, scrunching her brows.

I grin. "He lost both his legs years ago when he was young and stupid and drove his motorbike too fast."

"How is he using the forklift, then?"

"We had one of them modified for him when we hired him. He's a good member of our team. It was worth it."

"That's nice of you," she says, looking around at the other guys.

"We need to trust everyone who works here, and the best way to do that is to give them a reason to want to be here. For them to be part of something that adds value to their lives."

“I guess every business needs to trust their employees.”

“Some more than others. Given the delicate nature of what I do...”

She knits her brows as she glances at me.

“Come, I’ll show you the quality checking area.”

We pass three guys carrying heavy rifles.

“Oh my gosh,” Lara whispers.

“It’s the truck’s security team.”

“What got delivered?” she asks, her eyes still locked on the weapons.

“I’ll show you.”

As we walk through the warehouse, I chat about how we cover the supply network for the whole of San Francisco. That I run several warehouses just like this one to keep up with demand, and our products come in from Mexico, sometimes even further away.

I hope that with everything I say, she is slowly piecing things together, especially with the number of guards she’s seen as we move deeper into the warehouse.

Lara is tense, her senses heightened, and a permanent scowl on her face.

“Here we go. Quality checking.” I gesture for her to walk ahead of me into another section of the warehouse.

She gasps when she walks inside, standing dead still for a moment as large, tightly packed bags of white powder move along a conveyer belt with people checking each package as they drift past.

“Is that...” She can’t seem to find the word, but I imagine she’s seen enough movies to know what it is. Lara turns towards me, her eyes flaring. “Are you a— a drug dealer?” she whispers, terrified that someone might hear her.

“It’s one of the products I move,” I nod, watching her closely.

She says nothing, almost as though she’s waiting for me to reassure her that this isn’t real.

“Lara, it’s more than that.”

“What do you mean more?” she blurts out.

“I’m not just—I’m—” I close my eyes for a moment. This is harder than I thought. I don’t want to see that disappointment in her eyes. Just tell her, Nestor. “I am part of the Russian mafia. But not just any part—I am the most powerful leader in this city. I own this city.”

Her silence is deafening.

I don’t know whether I should give her a moment to process it or try to explain more to her. She’s glaring at me with fire in her eyes and her fists clenched at her sides.

After what feels like an eternity, I say her name.

“Lara.”

“Take me home. Right now. I can’t believe you brought me here.

How dare you put me in this position. You didn’t think that maybe I might not want to see all of this?

How am I supposed to take this? Why would you do this to me?

I don’t want to be involved in your illegal, crazy, whatever the hell this is. ”

She’s furious. I get the sense that it’s more fear than anything else. Fear of the unknown. Terrified of the things happening around her that she doesn’t understand.

“Lara, just take a second, take a deep breath. We can finish the tour, and I can show you that it’s not as bad as you think it—”

“No. I don’t want to finish the tour, Nestor. I’m done here. I want to go home. Please.” Her eyes are glittering with tears, and her chest is heaving up and down. She’s panicking.

I reach out to touch her arm to try and reassure her, but she steps away, moving quickly out of reach.

“Take me home, Nestor,” she hisses.

Okay, this is going terribly.

“Alright. We’ll go,” I say, defeated. I will have to try and talk to her another time, once she’s processed what I’ve told her.

I wave my hand towards the door, and she’s about to rush through it when one of my employees walks in. “Sir, we have a bit of an emergency. I’m so sorry to interrupt.”

I glance at Lara. She rolls her eyes, her lips pressed together.

“What is it? Can it wait?”

“No, sir, it can’t, it’s Plato. He fucked up and got his hand caught in the machine.”

“Are you fucking kidding me,” I snarl, worried for him. “Lara, I won’t be long, I have to deal with this. Just stay close.”

“Fine,” she mutters under her breath, folding her arms across her chest, protecting herself from this place as she hurries along behind me.

I follow, jogging through the warehouse, towards a circle of workers huddled around one of the machines. It’s used to vacuum pack and press products, and Plato has his hand stuck in the press.

“Move, everyone move,” I demand, and they quickly step aside. “What the fuck, Plato,” I grumble at him.

He chuckles, his face as white as ash. “Sorry, boss, you know me, though, I can’t let a week go by without creating some kind of entertainment.”

“Is the machine pressed all the way down?”

“No, Jim managed to switch it off before it flattened my hand, but I’m pretty sure it’s broken.”

“Better broken than crushed. We’ll need to reset the machine before we turn it back on, otherwise it’ll finish the movement.”

“Yeah, that’s why we needed you.”

“Jim, stand near Plato, I’m pretty sure it’s going to hurt when it lifts.”

Jim steps close to his friend and colleague, wrapping his arm around the guy’s waist to support him. “You really are a fucking moron, you know,” he teases, trying to lighten the mood.

Plato grins. “I know it.”

I walk around to the back of the machine and punch in a reset code, press my finger against a red button, then gesture for someone to turn it back on.

“Go ahead.”

The entire crowd around Plato holds their breath as the switch gets flipped. The machine hisses and then releases, rising up to its starting position.

Thank fuck.

Plato staggers backwards, leaning on Jim, who guides him to sit down on the edge of a crate. I hurry over to him to check his hand.

Page 14

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:28 pm

The man falls backwards, his friend catching him and helping him to sit down as I stare in disbelief. Nestor is calm and attentive in taking care of the guy. He crouches in front of him.

“Let me see the damage,” he says, and fully trusting him, Plato holds out his injured hand, letting Nestor carefully turn it to get a good look.

“Definitely a few bones broken in there. I’m going to have to sign you out for the rest of the week, and we can see how you feel after that.”

“I don’t have any more sick leave, sir. I can still work.”

“Don’t be a moron. I won’t dock your pay, but I swear, you are the clumsiest guy on this floor,” Nestor huffs, standing up. “Jim, what are you busy with now?”

“Inventory, sir.”

“Okay, that can wait, take this fool to the hospital and get him sorted. I’ll call ahead and tell them to put it on my account.”

“Thank you, sir,” Plato says as Jim pulls him to his feet.

We wait for the two guys to make their way past us, giving them space to move safely.

The crowd slowly disperses, and another man comes to talk to Nestor.

“Why do you keep that kid on, boss? He’s a walking trainwreck. Last week, he almost crashed the forklift.”

“I know, that’s why he isn’t allowed on the forklift anymore,” Nestor huffs.

“I don’t think he should be on any heavy machinery.”

“I agree.”

“So then, he’s useless to you.”

“He’s got two kids, Reggie. I can’t just fire him. He means well. He’s always at work early, never complains about overtime. He’s just—”

“A moron?” Reggie grumbles.

“Yeah,” Nestor chuckles. “You’re the floor manager, Reg. Find him something safe to do. His family needs him to have this job. You know if I fire him, no one else will hire him.”

“Alright, I’ll figure it out. But honestly—I think you’re becoming a softie,” Reggie teases Nestor.

“If you tell anyone...” Nestor smirks.

“I know, I know. Swimming with them fishes at the docks.” He cracks up laughing.

They talk a bit more about a new guy who can start working the press, and my thoughts start drifting.

He genuinely cares for these people. And the longer I stand here taking it all in, the

more I realize they're all just normal people, trying to earn money for their families.

Families that Nestor clearly cares about as well.

It sounds like Plato should have been fired ages ago, and Nestor is just worried about his family and his life, shifting him from position to position until he can find something where the guy does well.

He cares.

And the way the floor manager is teasing Nestor, it seems that the workers have a soft spot and a lot of respect for Nestor, too.

But he's a freaking crime boss. The leader of the Russian mafia.

My hands twist and knot in front of me.

How the hell did I end up entangled in this world? How is it that I'm standing in a warehouse run by the mafia and listening to two guys joking and having a chat as though it's all normal?

To them, it is normal.

They're just regular people doing regular jobs.

Nestor was so calm. He's calm now, in this crisis, and he was calm when he took care of me during the car crash. Even though he was injured, he carried me all that way. He's compassionate. And the way he treats his mom and his sister, he doesn't seem like a crime boss.

He glances at me and smiles, a gentle smile, reassuring me that he won't be much

longer. I can see the words in his eyes that he's sorry, somehow.

I bite my lip, his eyes on me, making my heart race.

I can't stop thinking about how he took care of me, so gentle, so powerful.

He's so beautifully masculine. Everything he does has made me feel safe, not worried.

He's taken care of me and made sure I'm alright.

If he were a bad person, he could have done terrifying things to me already.

A dark thought flickers through my mind.

I would love for him to do dark things to me.

Reggie leaves, and it's just Nestor and me standing near the machine.

Nestor turns towards me. "You ready? We can go."

I nod, my body pulsing with desire because my thoughts run away from me. Why does it turn me on even more, knowing who he is?

The way he conducts himself makes sense now.

The power isn't just about his wealth. It's genuine power. Power and respect he has earned by being the man he is.

Nestor narrows his eyes at me as we walk towards the car. "Is something on your mind?"

Oh my word, if he knew what was on my mind. I shake my head. “No.” I can’t exactly tell him I want him to bend me over the hood of his car and do intimate things to me.

“You sure? I’ll answer any questions you have,” he says, opening my door for me.

“I’m sure, for now,” I say, my words sounding abrupt because I’m annoyed with myself. How can I be thinking that? How can I be lusting after him when I should be furious with him for hiding things from me?

All the way home, I’m tense, heat pooling between my legs, frustration growing by the minute. I lecture myself every time I look across at him to admire how gorgeous he is.

It’s just—I’ve never been around a man who is so capable, so darkly dangerous, and yet so gentle towards me at the same time.

As soon as the car stops outside his mansion, I climb out, not waiting for him, and storm towards the front door.

“Hey, Lara, wait up, talk to me,” he calls after me, jogging to catch up.

I burst through the door, into the house, spinning to confront him, no longer able to hold back the rage of emotions surging through me.

“You lied to me,” I shout.

“I didn’t lie, I just didn’t tell you everything. I wasn’t sure if you were ready,” he says cautiously.

“No wonder you were fine kidnapping me and forcing me to marry you.”

“Lara, that wouldn’t have happened with just anyone,” he says, confusing me for a moment.

“What do you mean?” I snap.

“You took my breath away the moment I saw you.”

My body goes weak. He really thought that about me? No. He’s trying to distract me.

“It has nothing to do with that,” I say, trying to focus on what I was angry about. “It’s because you’re a criminal and—and—and—”

He steps closer to me, his scent washing over me. Everything I wanted to say fuzzes in my head, and I can’t get my brain to put together a clear sentence.

“And?” he asks, reaching his hand up, he wraps it around my jaw, forcing my eyes to his. “And you’re furious?” he asks, his voice a deep growl, vibrating through me.

“Yes,” I whisper with barely any force at all. My legs want to collapse, my body wants to melt into him.

“And—you think I’m dangerous?” he asks, his tone rich with his own desire, his eyes flooding with it as they trace over my lips and he leans even closer to me.

“You are dangerous,” I breathe.

“But I think you might like it, Lara,” he says, his fingers tightening over my jaw as he pulls my face upward. His lips are hovering above mine, the heat of his breath teasing my skin.

“I…” Am I that obvious?

He closes the gap between us, and his lips press over mine, his mouth moving against me. His hand slips around my back, and he pulls me roughly against him, our bodies locked together.

Half of my mind is screaming to stop—less than half.

Almost no part of me wants to stop.

I gasp against his mouth as he slips his hand beneath my top. Reaching up, I wrap my arms around his neck and pull him even tighter against me, deepening the kiss. He growls, and it makes me wild with lust.

Nestor's hand slips from my jaw to my throat as he pushes me backwards until I'm pinned against a wall in the entranceway of his mansion.

His cock is throbbing, rock-hard, trying to tear through the zipper of his pants.

I can't take this anymore.

I've been so controlled, so careful around him—but I can't do it anymore.

My fingers find the first button of his shirt, and I tug it free, and his deep moan of satisfaction, knowing that I'm now encouraging this, rumbles through me like an earthquake.

I tug the next button free, and the next.

He stops kissing me, but only long enough to unclip his handgun, setting it on the nearby shelf.

He shrugs his shirt and his jacket off his shoulders, letting them fall to the floor.

When he steps close to me again, both hands slip beneath the front of my shirt, and he lifts it over my body, off me, throwing it aside.

His eyes savor the delicate lace bra I'm wearing, and a satisfied smile touches his lips.

"You are exquisite, Lara," his voice growls.

I bite my lip as my fingers trace over his belt. His eyes darken, staring down at me. I tug it free, then pull at the button of his pants.

He grabs my wrists and pins them both behind my back with one hand. My heart races when he slowly undoes my jeans and pushes them over my hips down to the floor, letting his massive hand brush all the way over my leg. I step out of my jeans and stand there in my panties.

Nestor shakes his head and closes his eyes, and I see a tremble running through him.

"What's wrong?" I ask nervously.

"I don't want to hurt you, little one," he says dangerously.

I gasp in surprise, my panties getting wetter at the thought of him taking me by force.

A small giggle spills from my lips, and he knits his brows in surprise at my reaction.

"I don't think I'm as delicate as you seem to believe," I say, in a whisper, a dare almost.

He lets out a grunt of mischief as he shoves me back against the wall and reaches down to lift me in his arms.

His kiss is much more forceful this time, claiming me roughly, no longer worried about holding back his desire.

He reaches between us and rip his jeans open, shoving them down far enough to free his cock.

It stands rock-hard against my pussy and I whimper, desperate to have him. There is nothing but the soft lace of my panties between us.

Nestor rocks back and forth, teasing me as he slips his tongue into my mouth. With one hand holding me up, his other hand finds my breast, tugging my bra aside and exposing my hard nipple to his fingertips.

I cry out when he squeezes it, shooting pain through me.

He rubs his teeth over my lower lip, and I tense, waiting for him to bite me. But he doesn't.

The hand wrapped around my ass shifts forward and he slips his fingers beneath my panties, dipping them inside my pussy.

I shudder with pleasure as he teases me, letting his cock rub over my clit while his fingers slide in and out of me.

But he's teasing himself, too, and his desperate moans are giving him away. His fingers slip out of me and something much bigger pushes against my pussy.

He thrusts forward and his cock spreads me open to the point where I can barely take a breath.

He pushes deeper, my muscles twitching, his throbbing desire pulsing through every

cell in my body.

He buries his cock all the way inside me, penetrating deep. Both of his hands are around my ass now, pulling my legs wide as he begins to fuck me, his fingers brushing against the edge of my clit as his cock slams into me, over and over again.

My back is pinned against the wall, and my hands are wrapped around his thick neck. The pleasure is indescribable, as though his cock was made perfectly for me.

It reaches every curve, every spot inside me that shoots ecstasy through my body.

Nestor fucks me until my legs are shaking and I'm moaning so loudly my throat has gone dry.

He pulls me from the wall and carries me into the living room, still inside me until the moment he pulls out and throws me face-first over the back of the sofa. I squeal in fright, wiggling forward, but he grabs my leg and pulls me back where he wants me.

He stands with his thick, muscular thighs locked on either side of my legs as I bend far forward over the sofa.

My pussy is exposed to him. He brushes his fingers across it, a satisfied sound rumbling through him. He pushes his cock against me again and then slams his hips forward, shoving himself into me.

I gasp, but pleasure cuts my breath off. My fingers dig into the pillows, and he wraps his hands around my hips to hold me still.

He fucks me so hard I can't think straight.

His cock reaches so deep inside me it feels like he wants to tear me apart, but I can't

seem to get enough of him.

His hands wrap around my ass and his thumbs pull my cheeks apart. He slips his hands lower and spreads my pussy as I bend forward, stretching my pussy open so that each time he thrusts into me the base of his cock rubs against my clit.

My moans get louder and louder as the pleasure builds. I can't bear it anymore.

The orgasm slams into me, blinding me to anything else. Wave after wave of pleasure steals me away as he continues to fuck me with deep, steady thrusts until he explodes as well, shoving himself deep inside me so that I can feel every throb of his cock.

Page 15

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:28 pm

She's all I've been thinking about since that night.

I can't even sleep properly unless I jerk off to the memory of her trapped beneath me on that sofa.

Fucking hell—she is perfect in every single way.

And the mischief I saw in her eyes when she challenged me. It breaks me down.

I still managed to be gentle with her, gentle enough so that she wasn't bruised the next day. And by the looks of things, she was right; she has no problem with a little rough play.

I chuckle to myself and then realize I'm in my office, and the door is open—and I have another raging hard-on as I sit at my desk.

For fuck's sake. Can I think about something else? Anything else?

I've got important things I need to deal with, and I'm obsessing over her. Every inch of her. Every little sound she makes.

The way her hair spilled over her back, the way her fingers gripped the pillow, the way she arched her back towards me as I pushed into her.

My cock throbs, getting even harder.

I groan in annoyance.

Work, Nestor. Work, or go home and fuck her again, but stop this fucking obsession.

I can't go home and take her again.

We haven't even spoken about what happened. It's been awkward between us as we skirt around that conversation. I have no idea if she regrets it or not.

I press my fingers against my temple, massaging in circles, trying to push away the frustration.

I need to focus on the shit with my stepbrother. I have more investigators looking into Miron, but the urgency of this matter is beyond the norm at this point.

I have to get that proof. Once I have it, I can take him out. It's as simple as that—yet so far, nothing about it has been simple at all.

I've been on the phone with Roan three times this morning already, going through the information we have discovered, but none of it would be enough to convince my mother.

And she is all that matters in this specific issue.

I don't want her to lose faith in me or to think I've done something wrong.

If I present the evidence to her, then she will finally see what I see, and she won't be angry when I take Miron and Sergei out of the equation.

My family will be safe again, freed from their tyranny.

Glancing at my watch, I notice that it's already three. This day flew by, and I don't think I got anywhere near as much done as I wanted. It's because of her, always in

my head.

At least the raging hard-on has subsided, and I can stand up. I need a walk. I'll grab a coffee, then come back and try to finish up the last of this work before I head home.

Walking around the side of my desk towards my office door, I'm surprised by a visitor.

"Nestor, man, it's good to see you," he says, grabbing my hand and pulling me into a hug, slapping his hand against my back.

"Benedikt, I thought you were arriving tomorrow."

"I had some free time, so figured I'd come down today and see if I could help with anything. But I stopped at the warehouse, and you have everything under control. A very impressive team."

"We are fully prepped for tomorrow's exchange. Your products arrived earlier in the week, and it's all packed and good to ship."

Benedikt smiles his usually charming grin and steps away from me, releasing me from his handshake.

I run San Francisco; Benedikt Karamazov runs Las Vegas. We hold the same power and position in the mafia, but in different cities. And because of that, we often have joint operations that run together, and some of our businesses are shared. It's just how it works.

I respect the man, but that doesn't mean I have to like him.

I don't dislike him. He's given me no reason to do that. I guess it's just a basic fact

that in my line of work, you treat everyone with suspicion. He's just one hell of an arrogant mother fucker.

I do trust Benedikt, though. We've worked together long enough.

"Listen, I heard about the attack on you last week. How are you? Is there anything I can do to help sort the situation out?" he asks, his jaw muscles feathering as he folds his arms across his chest.

"No, it's nothing for you to worry about. I have it handled."

"You sure? It's no skin off my back to throw a few guys in your direction."

I smile, nodding. "I'm sure. I've got it covered. Do you want to grab a drink later this week, after the shipments have gone off?"

"I can't. I'm already booked for an event on Thursday, so I'm leaving the same day as we finish up. Next time, though."

His offer to help is genuine. I appreciate it. But I know how Benedikt works, and he is not someone I want to owe any favors to—him or anyone else. I am perfectly capable of handling my own affairs.

There is a light knock at the office door, and we both turn towards it to find Lara standing there.

She's wearing a gorgeous tight blue dress that matches the color of her eyes. She's chosen blue high heels and her hair is braided over one shoulder. Benedikt's smile spreads wide across his face.

"Who is this magnificent creature?" he asks with confidence as he walks towards her,

holding his hand out.

I clench my jaw in annoyance.

It's obvious he is smitten with her the moment he sees her.

"I'm Lara." She smiles her sweet, perfect smile.

He takes her hand, and instead of shaking it, he holds it to his lips, and I envision ripping his eyes from his head.

"My name is Benedikt. Do you work here? Are you free tonight? Can I take you to dinner?"

Lara looks uncomfortable, but politely pulls her hand away. "I, um, I don't work here." She glances nervously towards me, her eyes almost pleading. She doesn't want to be rude; she has no idea who this man is.

I walk to her side and wrap my hand around her waist, pulling her right up against me, and Benedikt takes a step back.

"This is my wife," I say, staring right into his eyes.

He seems to find this amusing.

"Never," he chuckles. "She's far too good for you." But he takes a polite step away from us, his eyes still taking her in, but with a hint more respect than before.

But I already know what he's thinking. What he's doing to her in his mind.

"How did you get so lucky, Nestor?" he says, shoving his hands into his pockets.

“I don’t believe luck had anything to do with it,” I say harshly, realizing that I’m struggling with jealousy for the first time in my life. I’ve never experienced this before. I’ve never felt so possessive over a woman or wanted to stake a clear claim on her in front of another man.

With Lara, I can’t stop myself. She is mine. She belongs to me, and the fact that he even dared to look at her like that—never mind asking her out to dinner—has my mind exploding with rage.

Lara turns towards me, smiling, a little tense. “Sorry, I didn’t know you were busy. I just wanted to say hello and find out what time you were coming home this evening.”

I brush my hand over her cheek, another gesture to show Benedikt that she belongs to me. I still haven’t let go of her waist. “It’s completely fine, little one. You can visit me anytime. I’ll stop whatever I’m doing. I’m actually ready to leave now; if you wait a bit, we can go together.”

“It’s still early,” she smiles.

“I’m done for the day.”

Benedikt watches the exchange between us.

“You two could both join me for dinner if you’re free,” he grins, knowing he’s playing with fire.

There is no chance in hell I am going to sit at a restaurant with him all night, watching him devour my wife with his eyes, flirting and charming her while I sit there and keep my mouth shut. It won’t happen. It’s literally a risk to the diplomacy between us.

“I have other plans for my wife this evening,” I say sternly.

“Oh, I bet you do.” He chuckles. “I wouldn’t let her out either. Especially not looking as gorgeous as that.”

He is shameless, but I get the sense that he’s doing it now because he can see it’s annoying me, and I take a deep breath to calm myself.

“You’re full of shit,” I warn him.

He laughs louder, his game exposed, and the amusement in his eyes hints that he meant no disrespect by it.

“Like you didn’t already know that,” he says.

I pull Lara in front of me, her back against my chest and my hand resting on her stomach. She leans into me, and I smile.

Benedikt rolls his eyes. “Alright, love birds. Enjoy the evening’s games, don’t do anything I wouldn’t do. I’ll talk to you tomorrow, Nestor.”

“Have a good night.”

“It was lovely to meet you,” Lara smiles.

Benedikt’s grin grows wider for a second and he winks at her. “The pleasure was all mine.”

“Get the fuck out of my office,” I laugh.

“I’m going,” he says, throwing his hands in the air defensively.

With Benedikt gone, I step away from Lara. “I’ll grab my keys and things, then we can get out of here.”

“Do you work with him?” she asks.

“Yes, he runs Las Vegas. Why, are you interested in him?” I raise my brows at her, still feeling the hot sting of jealousy.

“Don’t be silly. One crime boss is enough for me to have to deal with.” She rolls her eyes, teasing me as well now.

An image flashes through my mind of Benedikt reaching his arm around her waist, and I clench my jaw tightly.

This is ridiculous.

She’s married to you.

Yes, but you know nothing about her. What if she wanted to leave with him?

I clear my throat loudly. Jealousy is a fickle, nasty thing, and not something I want to entertain. If the girl wanted to be with someone else, I would no longer be interested in her. I don’t chase anything.

But I would rip his limbs off and leave him bleeding to death.

“Do you want to go out for dinner?” I ask, walking towards her, placing my hand on the curve of her lower back, and guiding her to the door. This simple touch, and having her near me again, it’s already pushing me over the edge, my body pulsing with desire for her.

“No, I got a whiff of what the chef was making before I left the house, and I’ve been thinking about it all the way here. It smells incredible.”

“Do you know what it is?”

“Bone marrow steak. I have no idea what that is.”

“Oh, yes, we are definitely eating at home tonight. He slow roasts the bones and makes a buttery sauce from the marrow and serves it with wagyu steak and roasted vegetables. It’s better than anything a restaurant could make for us.”

Besides, I don’t want any other man looking at Lara the way Benedikt looked at her. She is mine, and I want to keep it that way.

We walk through the office, and I pull her tighter to my side as we pass my employees, men who need to get the clear message that she belongs to me. But they are more respectful than Benedikt. They don’t have his power or his egocentric boldness.

Most of them only glance at her, then quickly turn away.

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:28 pm

On Friday, Nestor leaves for work early, and I am home alone. It's strange how empty the place feels when he's not here. Even on the days when we are awkwardly avoiding each other, I still want him around. He makes this place feel like home.

Is it my home?

The question catches me off guard.

It's strange to admit it, but it's the closest thing I've had to a home before. Even with the strained, unknown relationship we have, Nestor makes sure I am welcome here. That I have everything I could ever need.

I place the book I'm reading down on the table, face down, with the pages spread open so I don't lose my place. Sighing, smiling softly, I stretch my legs out in front of me. I've been sitting with them curled beneath me for over an hour, and I'm only realizing now how cramped they are.

It's almost lunchtime, and my stomach growls to confirm it as I glance at the ornate watch Nestor bought me last week.

I shake my head and smile. He spoils me for no reason at all. I'll come out of the shower and there will be a gift on my bed, beautifully wrapped. Or a bunch of flowers on the nightstand.

It's thoughtful and sweet.

And confusing.

Am I allowed to let myself fall for him?

I push myself up and roam lazily out of the library, walking past some beautiful, lush green plants and high bookshelves.

A familiar voice calls from downstairs somewhere.

“Lara, are you home?”

I hurry towards the top of the staircase and lean over to see if I’m right.

“Ulyana?” I shout, excited to see her. “What are you doing here?”

I’m already rushing down the stairs, and she grins, opening her arms to hug me as I get to the bottom.

It’s strange how someone can be an instant friend. No weirdness, no awkward stages, just a true, relaxed, caring friend. That’s how I feel about Ulyana. And she makes me believe she feels the same about me.

“I thought I would visit while Nestor was out. I wanted to say hi, but if he sees me, I’m going to get another lecture for quitting uni.”

“You quit?” I say, horrified.

“It was so boring ,” she huffs, pouting her lip out. “I can’t imagine why in the world I thought I’d want to study business rubbish. I think I should start a new course next year—something in fashion.”

She pulls me towards the sofa and flops down into it.

“Can I get you something to drink?” I ask before I sit down, too.

“Oh, the lady of the house, yes please. Gin.”

I pour two blue gins, remembering that she likes them.

I set it down on the table next to her and then sit with my leg close to hers. She turns to face me and rolls her eyes dramatically. “Nestor is being so annoying about the uni thing.”

“He’s probably just worried about your future,” I shrug, but then realize with the amount of money in her family, she has nothing to worry about.

“He just doesn’t want me to have regrets later. But I know it’s not for me.”

“Did you tell him that?”

“I don’t think you understand just how much of a protective older brother he can be.” She laughs, sipping her drink. “How are things going between you guys?”

“It’s getting better. I’m learning things—sometimes it’s difficult for me to process everything.” I bite my lip.

“You mean—with what he does for a living?”

“Yes, that.”

“For us, it’s normal. Nestor and I were born into this life.

Our father died when we were very young, and Nestor was forced to step up way before he should have.

He was practically a kid still. But you know, he never complained.

Not once. And every time he spoke about things, he was more concerned about whether Mom and I were okay, not himself.

My brother is an incredibly special person.

He deserves the world. I don't know what we would have done without him.

” She smiles, staring off into the distance, then suddenly turns towards me with a mischievous grin.

“Have you guys, um—are you guys trying to have a baby?” she asks so bluntly, I choke on the sip I’ve just taken and spit it back into the glass.

Ulyana cracks up laughing. “That is definitely a yes.” She winks at me. “Say no more. I just want to be an aunt.”

“I’m still coming to terms with being married, it’s a whole different step to start wanting babies,” I laugh.

“I think Nestor will make an excellent father, don’t you?” She stretches her legs out, resting them on the coffee table. Ulyana is beautiful. She has this calm confidence that radiates through her. I’ve always wanted a best friend.

But my entire life was spent in the shadow of my mom’s illness.

She has been sick for years. The cancer came back twice.

The third time it took her. I spent my childhood taking care of her.

And I am grateful that I had that time with her, but it stopped me from ever being able to make any real friends.

And then on top of that, my father became absent, off gambling, or manipulating me into believing another one of his lies.

I've never had a strong sense of family.

Of safety. And I've never had a real friend, not like Ulyana.

One where I can talk about anything and not feel judged.

Where she makes me feel welcome and comfortable.

"I think he'd make a great father," I agree, considering how gentle he is with me. It doesn't mean I'm ready to be a mother, but I think he would make an amazing dad. So much better than my father. Not that it's comparable.

Ulyana chats about the new course she was looking at for fashion design, but then she flips to talking about the gorgeous dress she found at the mall a few days ago. Then she chats about her mom and her life and her brother and asks me a ton of questions about my life.

It's an incredible feeling not to be lonely anymore. And this is the first time I've really processed the fact that since meeting Nestor, by force, I have not felt alone.

I'm a bit tipsy when Ulyana leaves, wanting to sneak away before Nestor gets home. I tease her about being scared of the lecture, and she scrunches her nose and says, "He's scary when he gets bossy."

I chuckle; I've seen his bossy side. It's not scary to me. It does other things to me.

My cheeks flush with heat at the thought, but luckily, Ulyana is already waving goodbye as she hurries down the steps to where her driver is waiting.

Imagine living her life. Drivers to take you everywhere, more money than you can dream of, never having to worry about anything.

I guess it's not as simple and dreamy as it seems.

Living in the mafia is dangerous. She told me that Nestor protected her from the lifestyle, keeping her mother and her safe all this time and not exposing them to most of it.

She knows how things work, but she's never had to deal with it herself.

He's done everything for them. He's carried that burden alone, and it makes my heart melt for him even more.

I stand on the top step, watching her drive away, out of sight. And still I don't move to go back inside.

Nestor deserves someone who really cares about him, too.

Someone who's on his side. Someone who takes care of him.

I think that person is supposed to be me.

I want to be that person.

When I walk back into the house, I'm still thinking about family—my own, in comparison to his.

My father is a liar and a cheat. A manipulator who uses people every chance he gets.

I guess that's why he become involved in the lower levels of the mafia, being a criminal suited him.

But even if he was working for the mafia...

that's no excuse to be a bad person. Nestor isn't like that.

He has integrity and treats people with respect.

Even his lower-level workers. It has nothing to do with what he does for a living; Nestor is just a good man. And my father is not.

The thought should hurt me.

But it doesn't.

Maybe it's time for me to call him. I haven't had a proper conversation with him since he sold me to Nestor. I was angry, but now I might be starting to see that good can come out of bad choices.

And I might be starting to understand that being angry with my father is a waste of time and energy. He doesn't deserve that from me—because he doesn't deserve anything from me.

I want closure.

I want to accept him for who he is without letting it affect my self-worth or view of who I am. Because I spent my whole life living in the shadow of his shame—right up until the moment that Nestor freed me from it.

Upstairs in my room, I'm lying on my stomach on the bed, propped up on my elbows, staring at my phone.

Somehow, I understand that nothing good can come of speaking with my father—he hasn't changed in any way—but I need to do this.

With a heavy sigh and anxiety stirring in my stomach, I sit up, dialing his number.

It rings a few times before he answers.

"Sweetie pie," he says, gushing into the phone.

"Hi, Dad. How are you?" I ask, my throat tight.

"I've missed you." Really? Before or after you sold me to a crime lord?

"Have you been doing okay?" I ask, ignoring the comment.

"Yes, no. I've been struggling. I could really do with some help."

I roll my eyes—here it comes.

"Dad, I'm just calling to see how you are," I say coldly. He hasn't even asked me how I am. He hasn't even bothered to say sorry for selling me before he asks me for something. Can he really be that self-centered?

Yes, Lara, you knew this before you made the call.

I take a slow, quiet breath. It's okay. This call is for you, not him.

“Look, sweetie, I’m in a bit of a bind. I heard through the grapevine that things were going really well for you. Someone said you two were getting on great.”

“You mean the man you sold me to?”

He laughs nervously. “It was the universe working through me.”

He’ll say and do anything to get out of taking responsibility. I close my eyes and press my fingers against the lids. “Dad, I can’t help you with anything.”

“I just want you to ask Nestor to lend me some money, or maybe to help me get back in the game. No one wants to work with me because of him,” he says, still pushing.

“How much money did you owe him when you made the deal to sell me to him?”

There is tense silence on the other side of the line. For all he knows, Nestor might already have told me, and this could be a test of my trust in my father to be honest with me. He’ll be weighing the risk of telling me the truth or making it seem less severe.

“I cost him ten million dollars. Plus a bit that I still owed him from the past. I had to find the money—um, I didn’t have it.”

I can’t breathe for a moment. A blank wall of shock slams into me, and I sit in stunned silence. Ten million dollars.

My father owed him more than I can fathom.

How was I worth that exchange?

I shake my head. This is ridiculous.

“So, sweetie, like I was saying, if you could speak to your husband and put in a good word for me, then—”

“Dad, I know you will always be my father, by blood. But you have never shown me support or love or treated me with any kind of respect. You have given me no reason to do you any favors. I owe you nothing. Nestor owes you nothing, and my advice is to stay out of his way, and mine, respectfully, and get on with your life, being grateful that you didn’t have worse happen to you.

I am the one who is paying for your debts.

You sold me to cover them. Whatever you need to do to understand that, do it.

And never ask me for anything again. You can phone me to find out how I am.

I’m doing okay, by the way, thank you for asking,” I say sarcastically.

“But other than that—I don’t want to hear from you, Dad. Do you understand?”

“Sweetie,” he groans. “Don’t be like that. We’re family.”

“Not any kind of family like we should have been. I’ve got to go, Dad. I’m happy you’re alright, but no, I won’t help you, and neither will Nestor. Don’t push your luck with him.”

“Honey—”

“Bye, Dad.”

I hang up the phone. My heart is racing.

I've never been so firm with my boundaries before.

I've never spelled it out to my father that clearly.

It's exhilarating. I feel empowered. A smile spreads across my face, knowing that it is because of Nestor that I have the security and support to do what I just did.

He quite literally changed my life. He saved me from everything I was struggling with.

I want to find a way to help him, too.

At dinner, I can't stop staring at him. He doesn't even know the power he gave me today. A power I've been wanting all my life. The relief of setting that boundary between my father and me.

"How was your day?" I ask, dishing up a plate of lasagna for him.

"Long," he sighs, looking exhausted.

I walk around the table and set the plate down in front of him, sliding my hand over his shoulder, massaging him for a moment.

He closes his eyes and groans in pleasure, sending a spark of desire shooting through my body. I swallow hard. That was not what I was trying to achieve.

"Nestor, I wanted to say thank you, for, um, I don't know exactly—but I spent the day with Ulyana today, um..."

He takes my hand and pulls me around to face him, turning his body away from the table.

“What’s going on, little one?” he asks, looking up at me.

“Thank you for making me feel so welcome in your family. It means a lot to me,” I say quickly, feeling overwhelmed with emotion and trying not to cry and make it weird.

He chuckles and pulls me onto his lap, wrapping his arms around me. His eyes study mine as he gently brushes hair behind my ear. “I’m happy it was you,” he says.

His words are so simple, and I shouldn’t read into them, but my heart wants to.

I bite my bottom lip, realizing that I’m about to kiss him. Quickly, I stand up. I can’t do that. I want to talk to him about things.

I hurry around to my own seat, and he watches me like a hawk, a mischievous grin on his face the entire time.

Once I’m settled with food in front of me, I nod and push my shoulders back.

“I have skills, work experience, and I want to help you somehow. I can be useful in your world. There is no reason for me to just live off you without also contributing.”

He snorts. “Lara, you aren’t a drain in any way. You don’t have to contribute anything to the business,” he says, his brows furrowed with curiosity.

“I want to, though. I want to help you—to make things easier somehow.”

“Mm,” he says, picking up his fork and scooping up some lasagna. “I’ll think about

it.”

I nod. “Okay, that’s great,” I smile, perking up.

I think he’s just not sure about my skill level. I’ll need to prove that I’m capable. I can do that. If he gives me the chance.

Page 17

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:28 pm

Lara keeps asking me about how she can help in the business, and while I trust she would be perfectly capable, I don't want to involve her in anything that might put her in danger.

The more I expose her to this world, the greater the risk she will face.

It's not fair of me to do that to her, and I don't think she understands the risk she is taking by offering that.

And me not wanting to expose her to this world is also the reason I'm not taking her to the charity event this evening.

My mother and sister will be attending, but they have been trained to handle these types of things.

I have allies attending, but among them, there is always an enemy.

Someone in hiding, someone looking for information or ways to target me.

I don't want them to meet Lara yet. Her innocence is glaringly obvious. She would be an instant target.

As much as I want to show her off, it's not safe for her to be there.

When I arrive at the black-tie event, my mother is already there with Sergei. I wander over to them to say hello, giving Sergei the cold shoulder but embracing my mother with warmth.

“Where is Ulyana?” I ask, looking around and not finding her. She’s usually easy to spot as she attracts a lot of attention from the men.

“She was running late, so her driver will bring her,” Sergei answers.

“As usual,” I chuckle, not looking at him.

“Are you bidding on anything for the charity?” Mom asks.

“You decide, let me know if there’s anything that catches your eye. I had a feeling you might like the artwork, the one directly over the entrance.”

“Is that up for auction? Oh my word, yes. Let me go look at it again.”

“I’m going to do my rounds, I’ll see you later.” I smile at my mom and turn away from them both.

It’s time to mingle and show respect to my allies.

I really don’t enjoy these things. They always seem so fake.

Everyone grovels and oozes respect. It’s easy to spot someone trying to be nice for the sake of gaining your business.

It annoys me. But it’s part of the world I live in, and I’ve gotten quite good at handling it.

Roan is around here somewhere, mingling as well.

Doing his part.

I spot a good acquaintance of mine and head over to him first, starting with the easy conversations.

“Nestor, my friend, how are you? Where is your wife? I heard you got married,” he says, grabbing my hand and shaking it firmly.

“She couldn’t make it tonight, but I am looking forward to you meeting her next time.”

“What a pity. I heard she was a beautiful woman, and I was so happy you finally found someone to steal your attention.”

I laugh. Viktor is an older man with an old-school view of the world.

It’s why we get on so well. He respects good business and knows how to make money without screwing people over.

And he believes in love. He’s often told me about how his wife was the love of his life and still is, even though he lost her a few years ago.

They were together for fifty-nine years.

He will tell the story proudly over and over again.

“What was the wedding like?” he asks, his brows raised.

“It was lovely, Viktor, but we are going to have another one eventually. That one was only for our closest family.” I don’t want him to be offended that he wasn’t invited. Or to be offended to find out that I practically kidnapped the girl.

“Ah, yes, the special moments are best not spread out for the world to see. They are

more intimate that way. You be sure to keep her safe, though, young man,” he tells me sternly.

“I will.”

Someone grabs his attention, and he excuses himself.

I move on to the next person, a man with whom I have a long-term business relationship as well, but we’ve had our moments of not seeing eye to eye.

“I heard your mother was after the mosaic.”

“She has an eye for good art.”

“Well, there go my chances of getting it. I won’t even try and bid against you,” he laughs.

“I’m sorry, my friend. I can’t let my mother down.”

“Don’t worry, I understand.”

I’m going from group to group, making my rounds, saying hello, almost enjoying myself, when Miron arrives.

The instant he does, my body is tense, already prepared to deal with his bullshit that will inevitably happen.

That fucker sneers at me from across the room.

“Your brother is here,” someone says.

“Stepbrother,” I correct them as Miron walks towards us.

Fuck’s sake, can’t he just stay on the other side of the room.

“That deal you just pulled with the Red Caps—I think you could have done it totally differently,” Miron says without preamble, trying to belittle me in front of everyone standing around.

“I’m not entirely sure how you would know enough about the deal to make an informed decision or give any input at all. Unlike you, I don’t make bold statements without all of the information available to me. You might want to consider that next time.”

The crowd around us shifts awkwardly, aware of the tension.

“Some things are so obvious even a child could see it,” he huffs, provoking me further. I hate the fact that he has the power to piss me off instantaneously. I shouldn’t let it happen, but I have years of pent-up anger towards him and his father.

Miron is a constant source of contempt for me.

He lets his eyes wander slowly up and down my body, a look of disgust on his face, his mouth drawn back in annoyance.

“Where’s that wife-for-hire of yours?” he says, and my blood boils ten times hotter. My fists clench at my sides as I bite down to stop myself from punching him in the face.

“She won’t be joining us this evening.”

“She abandoned her husband? I would never allow my wife to behave that way. You

should get a handle on your woman,” Miron sneers.

“Allow?” I say, losing the battle with my willpower to keep this civil.

A murmur rustles through the crowd, and when I pull my eyes off Miron, I see everyone looking in the same direction, and I follow their gaze.

My heart leaps into my throat as I stare at Ulyana and Lara, arriving together and looking like they are about to steal the entire show.

Suddenly no one gives a shit about the petty spat between Miron and me. Even I’ve been swiped into forgetting.

Lara looks so incredible, dressed to kill, wearing a tight, body-hugging short dress embellished with glittering stones, patterned to accentuate every curve of perfection on her body.

She glimmers as she moves, smiling confidently, greeting the people I do business with, her chin raised high and her attitude in full swing.

I’ve never seen her looking so in control, and with a dark chuckle, I realize that Ulyana has coached her on how to behave at these types of events. And she’s nailing it.

Every single man in the room is staring at the two of them as though they might have a chance. My smile shifts from surprise to pride.

That’s my wife.

She turns, and her back is towards me as she greets another business partner. The dress has been designed in such a way that the back is completely open, dipping low,

elegant enough to hide what needs to be kept for my eyes only, but feisty enough to show the world what they ' re missing out on.

My mind is spinning as I watch her make her way around the room, slowly coming towards me.

I've been paying attention to people's reactions to her—not a single one of them could hide their instant attraction. Men are to her beauty, allured and enticed, and women, also to her beauty, jealous perhaps, as they cling tighter to their husbands.

She's close to me now, greeting another of my colleagues, and I hear her elegant laughter and parts of the conversation. "My husband, Nestor..." She turns towards me and lifts her hand to wave. I can't even try to hide the smile that stretches across my cheeks.

"My love, I thought you weren't coming tonight?" I say, stepping to her side, showing everyone that she belongs to me.

She immediately stands against me with her hand on my chest as she rises on her tiptoes to kiss me. "I missed you too much," she smiles.

My heart flips over, and I swallow hard, trying to control my body's instant reaction to her.

Her eyes, bright blue and full of confidence, her gestures, elegant and beautiful, and those lips, full, plump, and begging me to kiss them with more force.

I cup my hand beneath her jaw and tilt her head higher, locking my eyes with hers. People around are watching us, curious to see me with a woman, never mind one as perfect as Lara.

“You are intoxicating, Lara.”

“Do you like my dress? I bought it just for you,” she whispers.

I brush my hand over her naked spine, then across her ass.

Leaning close to her ear, I whisper my response. “It was a dangerous choice, I don’t know how you expect me to behave while you’re wearing this.”

She bites her bottom lip, mischief glittering in her eyes.

“I don’t want you to behave,” she replies, sending my thoughts spiraling.

“Nestor, is this your beautiful wife?” A business partner interrupts my thoughts and forces me to drag my eyes off Lara to reply to him.

“This is Lara. Lara, this is Yuli Parov, one of my very close friends.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Yuli,” she says, the perfect princess, shaking his hand, but staying right at my side.

“Can I get you two a drink? I’m just on my way to the bar,” he says, his eyes still roaming over Lara.

“Actually, I was just about to take a minute to sort something out before the auction starts. We will join you for a drink in a little while.”

He nods. “Of course, of course. Come find me when you have a moment.”

I take Lara’s hand and walk across the busy event hall, maneuvering past the crowds of people who all turn their heads to watch us. Lara walks behind me, and when I

glance over my shoulder at her, my heart races with excitement.

I lead her out of the main area into a storage room off the side, closing the door behind us.

The room leads to a second room, packed with ridiculously expensive art, about to be auctioned. That room has heavy security locks on the door, and technically, there should be a guard in this room, but he must be taking a break.

“What are we doing in here?” Lara asks, confused, as I turn to face her.

“Why didn’t you tell me you were coming tonight? It’s dangerous for you to just walk in here like this. I need to know your movements—your plans...” My words trail off; I’m lecturing her, and she’s just grinning at me with that darkly naughty smile I recognize.

“Am I in trouble?” she asks, pouting.

“Yes,” I reply, almost a growl. “You are in trouble, Lara.”

I step closer to her, backing her against the wall.

“Will you punish me?” she asks, sending a deliciously dangerous spike of adrenaline through me.

“I have to. I have no choice.”

Her eyes go wide, playfully scared as she bites her lips and traces her fingers over the front of my shirt.

“What if someone comes in and sees you punishing me?” she teases.

I growl, low and aggressive, my inner beast ready to tear her to pieces.

She gasps, genuinely surprised.

In a flash, I have her wrists locked in my hand and pinned above her head as I lean my weight against her, locking her between my body and the wall.

I push my cock against her body to show her what she's doing to me and she makes the most beautiful sound, like a cat purring, as she tilts her head backwards, her lips parted.

I lock my mouth over hers and push my tongue between her lips and she writhes against the wall, rubbing against my cock, driving me even crazier for her.

We both freeze as the door opens a fraction and someone stands outside, turned away from us, talking to another person.

"No, he's not there; he went to help the boss with something. He'll be ten minutes."

"Oh, thanks. I'll come back."

The door closes again, and Lara starts giggling.

"I guess we have ten minutes," I smirk.

With my free hand, I push her dress up over her hips, pulling her hands over my neck and lifting her against the wall.

I tug my pants open and free my cock and Lara gasps as I press it against her. Hooking her panties with my finger, I tug them to the side. She's soaking wet for me.

“You’re lucky we’re short on time, little one. I’ll save the punishments for home, where I can make you scream.”

As I say it, I thrust forward, and Lara almost does scream before I clasp my hand over her mouth and fuck her as hard and deep as I can.

Page 18

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:28 pm

Nestor has not accepted my offer to help, and I'm convinced it's because he doesn't realize that I am qualified and capable. I've been trying to think of a way to prove to him that I can be useful, and the only thing I'm aware of that he's struggling with is his stepbrother, Miron. And Sergei.

He needs proof to show his mother, to open her eyes to what's really going on.

It breaks my heart to think that Leticia is so in love with Sergei, and Sergei is just using her.

That isn't fair, and she doesn't deserve that.

I am as angry with Sergei and Miron as Nestor is.

I understand why it's driving him crazy and why he loses his cool around Miron.

So, in an attempt to help him, I'm sitting at his laptop in his home office—sneakily, I admit—going through his files.

The private investigators and his head of security, Roan, have been sending him footage and information as they track Miron around the city. There is also footage of the car attack.

It's all kept in one folder, and I happen to be brilliant at data analysis, so I'm excited to look through everything. I'm sure I can pick up something that the others missed.

I pull out a few blank pages from the printer tray and select a gold pen from the cup

on Nestor's desk. His work area is neat and minimalist, showing that he likes things to be in order and in the same place where he left them.

I'm the same when I work. I need a clear space because of the amount of information spinning in my head when I look at data.

I start with the first video, taking hours to watch each one and to read every single note or piece of evidence collected.

None of it is damning on its own, and Miron and Sergei have clearly been very careful not to directly implicate each other, but I have noticed a pattern of familiar faces, as well as time frames and interactions.

Something that's quite interesting is that Sergei is being more careful than Miron.

He's always somewhere public at the time of these attacks, or somewhere where a person is able to photograph him or verify his whereabouts.

Miron, on the other hand, is not as organized, perhaps doing the dirty work for both of them.

It might be why Leticia has faith in Sergei—he is often with her during the attacks.

It seems almost a waste of time to have someone tailing Sergei if Miron is the one playing out the operations.

I've seen him in a number of blurry, questionable images—talking to men who look the same as the men in footage of attacks, or men who have broken into Nestor's properties.

That alone might not be enough to convince his mother, but it's a potential link.

We need to start tailing those familiar faces as well.

If we can find a link, perhaps a payment of some kind, an exchange, between Miron or Sergei and the men carrying out the attacks—that would be all the evidence his mother could need.

I draw up several profiles on the anonymous men in the videos, searching each piece of footage for different angles to study them for tattoos, defining features, or unusual traits.

I make a note of everything, as well as times and places that they were seen.

It's thoroughly detailed, and by the time I'm done, the entire day has disappeared, and my eyes are blurry from looking at the screen for too long.

It's already five. Nestor will be home any moment.

I clean up his desk and slip my notes into a folder to present to him.

It's a big risk because he might be furious that I was using his laptop and going through some very sensitive information, but I am hoping that this new perspective and fresh look at the data will be helpful and prove to him that I am capable of being useful.

I stand up, flexing my shoulders back as I stretch and let out a long yawn.

Goodness me, I forgot how intensely I get lost in analysis. I love it. It's a puzzle, and my brain latches on to each piece, trying to fit it together. I see the bigger picture with ease as long as I have enough time to calmly look through each part of the whole story.

I'm rather pleased with what I've put together, and I'm hoping that the outcome, the value of it, will supersede any annoyance Nestor might have due to me taking the initiative.

Of course, he hires some very capable people, and it's possible this might look like a school project in comparison to the reports he would receive from someone more qualified.

I hear the front door opening downstairs, and my stomach churns with nervous excitement.

It's time.

I hurry downstairs to say hello, my body feeling tight with anxiety, which is getting worse the closer I get to showing him the information.

"Hello, little one," he says, scooping me into a hug when I walk into the kitchen and find him opening a beer.

"How was work?" I ask, nuzzling into his chest and breathing in the scent of him. I can't get enough of it. I could sleep wrapped in his clothes, and it would send me good dreams.

"It was alright, still struggling with this whole Miron mess. It's driving me crazy that we can't catch him in the act. We need a new angle. We're obviously missing something big," he huffs, then tilts his head back to take a long sip of ice-cold beer.

I step back from him, the folder feeling incredibly heavy in my hand.

"I wanted to talk to you about that," I say, my voice sounding small.

“About what?”

“Miron and Sergei.”

He tilts his head to the side, scrunching his nose in confusion and curiosity. “Okay?” he says, skeptical.

“I’m a data analyst. I’ve been doing it for years. I’m very good—I think I’m very good at it. It comes naturally to me.”

“Okay?” he repeats, leaning against the kitchen counter, one arm folded over his chest, the other holding the beer. His eyes narrow towards me.

I take a deep breath, trying to settle my racing heart.

“I put together a report that I created after looking over all of the information in the folder on your laptop,” I say it all very quickly, trying to get everything out at once before he starts shouting at me about privacy and minding my own business.

His eyes drop to the folder in my hands, his expression remaining neutral. His eyes lift to meet mine, and his stare is intense. I step forward, offering him the folder.

He sets his beer down on the counter behind him and crosses one leg over the other, still leaning back, but flipping slowly through the pages of my report.

I wait like a schoolgirl, anxious and scared, expecting to be lectured for my unimpressive work or overstepping boundaries.

Each time the tension rises in my stomach, I shove it back down and remind myself that I’m really good at what I do.

I watch Nestor's face, wanting to be patient, but unable to stop myself when I ask, "What do you think?"

My voice betrays my nervousness and causes Nestor to look up at me with an unusual smile on his face.

I bite my lip.

Is that a good smile or a bad smile?

"How long did this take you?"

"Today. Most of the day."

He closes the folder and sets it on the counter, picking up his beer again.

I hold my breath, making sure I wait without blurting out anything else.

He takes a slow sip as though he's savoring my anxiety.

"Nestor," I huff.

His laughter is mischievous. "Honestly, Lara, I'm taken by surprise."

"Because I didn't ask about looking at—"

"Because you've done a really good job of putting that together. I'll go through it all properly tonight and then pass it on to Roan. I think it's great. You clearly do have a natural talent for putting puzzles together, and it's going to give us a new direction to add to our expanding search."

“Really?” I say, almost too scared to believe him. He’s being so nice.

He steps forward and touches my cheek. “You know you’re good at what you do. Do you know how I know that?”

“How?” I ask, leaning into his touch.

“Because of the pride you took in putting that together for me. I’ve paid a lot of money for data analysis in the past, and it wasn’t even half as thorough and well presented as that. I mean it. I’m impressed.”

My cheeks skip the usual shade of blushing red and turn luminous pink as pride wells through me. “Thank you,” I mutter, looking away, smiling happily.

“Will you go to dinner with me?” he asks, catching me by surprise.

“Oh, I didn’t know we had plans.”

He laughs and shakes his head. “No, I’m asking you out, Lara. I want to take you on a date.”

A date? Like a date-date? My inner girl, the one who believes in love and happily ever afters, does a little somersault. But my logical, data analyst brain stops her mid-celebration and tells her to calm down because I can’t be reading into it.

I heard Miron whispering about me at the charity event, after Nestor and I had returned from our little adventure, and he was talking to a man about how I am a trophy wife for display purposes only.

Now I am fully aware that Miron is a snake. But the man he was talking to seemed to agree with him.

If that's all I am, I don't know. But I don't want to get hurt by making this into something it isn't.

I must remain level-headed and just enjoy my life, no longer plagued by debt collectors. I have a brand new friend, Ulyana. His family is all very sweet to me. If that's what I get out of this, I'm happy.

Even though I really want more from him.

I change quickly, choosing a long, flowing dress in pale pink. It makes me look so pretty when I twirl in front of the long mirror in my bedroom. I choose flat white sandals and a small white purse.

The dress flows around me like water as I walk down the stairs towards Nestor, waiting near the front door.

"Wow," he stammers, his mouth dropping open as he watches me.

When I arrive next to him, he takes my hand, lifts it above my head and spins me slowly around, admiring my dress from every angle.

"It's pretty, isn't it?" I grin.

"It's not the dress that's pretty, Lara. It's you that makes it look so beautiful."

"But," I say, shaking my head, disagreeing with him.

"But what?" he knots his brows.

“It has pockets,” I exclaim, pushing my hands into them and showing them off.

Laughter rolls from his lips, and he pulls me towards him, kissing my forehead.

“I admit, I never knew a dress could be so powerful. It’s got pockets. It’s incredible,” he teases.

“Ha. Ha.” I roll my eyes at him. “If I showed Ulyana, she would understand.”

“I have no doubt,” he muses, leading me out to the car.

The restaurant he’s chosen for us is a seafood place, right next to the ocean. The views from our table on the rooftop are magnificent, and because it’s still summer, we are here in time to see the best part of the sunset, when the sky starts changing colors and turning orange and pink and purple.

Our food has arrived, but Nestor is staring at me with an intense look.

“What?” I ask.

“Come with me, I need to take a photo of you in that dress with the sunset behind you. It’s too perfect.”

My heart flips in wonder at this man.

He knows the right things to say to melt my heart. I can’t believe he wants a photo of me, and that he even thought of it.

Nestor guides me through the shot, telling me to turn a little left, lift my chin, hold my hand like this—we’re laughing while he’s directing, and when he shows me the photos he’s taken, I am absolutely blown away.

I look like I'm in a fairytale world of magic. It's breathtaking. I can't believe it's me standing there in that gorgeous dress with such a beautiful backdrop.

"I really do look pretty," I murmur in shock.

"I need one more photo, go stand there again," he says, setting his phone down on a nearby empty table, pointing it toward where I am standing. He runs towards me, wraps his hand around my waist, and kisses me.

My heart flips again and starts racing as every cell in my body becomes alive beneath his touch.

He gently brushes his hand over my body, sensual but not inappropriate.

The kiss lasts much longer than a photograph would need.

When he pulls away, my lips are swollen from it, and my eyes are taking him in with a hungry need.

"How do you know the photo was taken?" I ask.

"It was a burst shot. It took about thirty shots with a little gap in between each one."

I smile and shake my head. "Very creative."

"Well, I think maybe it's time to update my profile picture, or perhaps I'll send it to my PR team and have them do a candid release." He winks, slipping his hand around my waist as we walk back to our table.

The restaurant isn't busy. It's an intimate, calm setting, and it allows us to talk freely, enjoying our dinner together.

Nestor is attentive and sweet, reaching out beneath the table to leave his hand on my leg, pulling my chair closer, and letting our legs press together.

His warmth teases me. So do his eyes. Beautiful, deep, passionate eyes. The most gorgeous hazel. Green mixed with flakes of golden brown and yellow.

I could stare at them for hours, listening to him tell me stories.

On the way home, we are still chatting and happy as the conversation flows easily.

I'm so comfortable around him, it takes me by surprise sometimes.

I don't think I've ever felt this comfortable around a man before.

My father wasn't exactly a shining example of what a relationship should be like.

I was taken on a few dates in my life, but my mom was sick, and I didn't have much time for it.

And then, after she passed away, I was drowning in debt and stress, and eventually, I just gave up looking for love or connection.

At home, Nestor leads me in through the front door.

"Would you like a nightcap or a cup of tea?"

"Hot chocolate. I've been thinking about it the whole way home," I grin, standing on my tiptoes to kiss him.

"Even after the chocolate brownie?"

“Actually, I think it is because of the chocolate brownie. It’s a downward spiral now. I’ll go on a three-day chocolate bender, and if I can’t get enough of it, I’ll turn feral.”
I wink at him.

He smirks. “I might hide the chocolate then. I would love to see you feral.”

“Sir.” Roan clears his throat loudly, stepping towards us.

“Roan, hi, what’s up?” Nestor says, still smiling from our flirtations.

“Sir, I have news for you. We just heard.”

“What is it?” Nestor asks, sounding tense in response to Roan’s tone.

“Sergei is dead.”

For a moment, neither of us moves, both staring at Roan in shock and disbelief.

“Dead?” Nestor mutters.

“Yes, sir. He was on his way home from an event outside of town, and there was what appears to have been an accident. He was killed instantly.”

“My mother—?” His throat is tight around the words; he can barely ask the question.

“She was not with him, sir. Your mother is home. Your sister is with her. I sent a few extra men to guard the house just in case there was something we missed.”

“I have to call her,” Nestor says, looking bewildered. “She’ll need me.”

“Yes, sir. Of course. I will let you know once my men bring me any more

information. But from everything we've heard and seen, it was an accident."

Page 19

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:28 pm

The sun is beating down from above us as we stand beneath the shade of the umbrellas provided by the church.

Everyone is solemn as they quietly watch his casket being lowered into the ground. My mother is crying, streams of tears flowing freely over her cheeks, turning her face red, her eyes swollen and painful to look at. She is grieving openly. She lost a man she truly loved and believes loved her, too.

My chest is tight, pulling my heart in different directions.

Today is about respecting someone who died. I might not like the man, but I do have great respect for my mother's pain, and her loss is what I have come to honor and provide support for.

Miron, on the other hand, isn't bothering to show his own father any respect at all. He isn't even watching the casket as it disappears into the rich, dark hole, to be buried beneath freshly-dug earth.

I glance at him, and his eyes are tight on me.

He's already made several comments to let me know that he has no doubt I am the reason his father died. That I was behind this 'accident.' He's already vowed revenge.

I glare back at him, but when Lara shifts a little closer to me and wraps her arm around my waist, it pulls my attention back to where it is supposed to be. Honoring the passing of a life.

My mother's sobs are breaking my heart, and I can't engage with Miron now. It will hurt her even more if we fight at her husband's funeral.

Ulyana's gaze catches mine, and she pulls her mouth tight. I can see what she's thinking in that one, quick look. She's hurting for our mother, but not sorry to see the man gone. She has her arm around our mother's shoulders, holding her close, letting her grieve.

I am the one who identified the body, partially because I needed to see for myself that he really was dead and that this wasn't some ploy or trick or part of a bigger plan they might have.

It was him.

His face was sliced open, grated over the road as he was launched through the front window of his car during the crash. One side of his face looked like him; the other side looked like it had been in a meat grinder.

I've seen what flesh looks like once it's been in a meat grinder.

Swallowing hard, I push the image of his dead eyes out of my mind. The funeral director suggested a closed casket, and I insisted that my mother understood there wasn't another option.

After he is lowered into the ground, Lara takes my hand and leads me away from the graveside, into the church where our family is hosting a memorial with food and drinks and photographs of Sergei propped against easels around the room.

It's morbid.

Lara walks ahead of me, her hand locked in mine, leading me to the bar so that she

can order me a vodka.

Her long black dress has a high slit in it. Every now and then, I see a glimpse of her creamy thigh before it disappears beneath a layer of soft, flowing black fabric.

She is becoming more confident with each passing day. She is growing into the role of being my wife, not missing a step, standing at my side, and saying all the right things.

She turns towards me, and my eyes trace over the black diamond choker I chose for her to wear today. It accentuates her collarbones and complements the long lace sleeves.

“Nestor?”

“Mm?” I say, distracted.

“Vodka, my love.”

She’s holding a glass towards me.

“Thank you.” I sigh in relief, letting the sharp liquid pour down my throat, and the burn eases some of my tension.

Lara leads me away from the bar to stand near the wall of white and black flowers.

“Are you okay?” she whispers, snuggling close against me.

“I’ll be much better when we get out of here.”

“Nestor Rostov, would you mind if I asked you a few questions?” a reporter asks

politely. It's a necessity to allow the vultures into the memorial. A select few, but still, vultures nonetheless.

They were not part of the ceremony or the burial, but they were there, lurking, taking photos, whispering rumors.

"Go ahead, but keep it short," I say roughly.

Lara remains right against my side, her arm protectively around me.

The reporter smiles at her before starting her line of questions.

"It is no secret that you and Sergei did not get along. His son has been rather vocal about the conflict between you two. People are worried that his death was not an accident." She tilts a recorder towards me.

"I did not hear a question," I huff.

"Oh, um, sorry. What was your relationship like with Sergei? Is there any merit to what his son, Miron, is claiming?"

"Sergei was my mother's husband. He made her happy, and I am sorry to lose him. He was a part of our family."

"But you two were fighting?"

"All families argue."

"Did you kill him?" she asks, boldly—and stupidly, because if I had killed him, why the fuck would I confess it to her in some pathetic interview at the man's memorial?

I'm biting my tongue, wanting to rip her throat out for the ridiculous question, but Lara speaks before I can think of anything to say.

"My husband, like the rest of the family, is distraught over the loss of his stepfather, Sergei. People in the media will, of course, want a juicier story than a simple, heartbreaking accident, because to whisper rumors of foul play is far more exciting than allowing a family to mourn in peace. Your line of questioning is incredibly disrespectful, and I suggest you move on before I have you removed from the venue. And do not even try to talk to Sergei's wife.

You have already made it clear that you have no intention of being empathetic to the pain she is in after losing someone so close to her heart. "

It takes every ounce of self-control not to stare at Lara with my mouth open, wanting to keep my composure in front of everyone.

"Nestor..." The reporter looks shaken by Lara's stern reprimand and decides to try with me again instead.

"I believe my wife made it very clear that you should shift to a more respectful line of questioning if you want to remain an invited member at this memorial. Save your gossip for the tabloids. We have nothing further to say to you."

And when the reporter walks away from us, muttering an embarrassed apology, it takes every ounce of my self-control not to lift Lara in my arms and spin her around in celebration.

Instead, I pull her very close and lean down, whispering against her ear, "You are incredible, Lara. My mind is blown by how well you handled that."

She looks up at me and smiles.

“I’m just looking out for you, Nestor.”

If not for my mother’s pain, I would have paid my respects and left hours ago. The memorial is dragging on, and I’ve spoken to so many different people, shielding against the rumors that Miron is spreading, doing my best to protect my family from them, and I’m exhausted.

Another reason I haven’t walked out of here is that Lara is right by my side, supporting me, defending me, and helping me stay calm in this heavy chaos. Her gentle touch, her arm around me, and her confidence as she stands at my side—it’s giving me more than she knows.

And more than I thought possible.

She’s giving me strength.

Miron is currently talking to a reporter a little way from us, and I can hear every third or fourth word.

He is not being subtle in his accusations.

I can’t believe that he thinks the media is the best way to deal with internal family issues; even though I didn’t kill Sergei, I know Miron has made many attempts on my life, and I never once took it to the media.

It’s not how things are handled in the bratva world.

It’s another glaring example of why he should never be trusted to lead San Francisco, even in the event of my death—he would be voted out of power before a few months had passed.

But by the laws of the mafia, he is next in line. The next closest relative who should take my place.

If I had a son, that would be different. My son would be the automatic heir, and I could appoint someone to teach him and hold my position until he comes of age.

That person would be Roan.

It would shock a number of people, but he is the only man I've ever felt enough confidence in.

What I would prefer, though, is to have a son and raise him myself. And for him not to inherit the position in the event of my death, but rather for me to hand it over to him when I retire.

It's late when we get home.

And I'm exhausted down to my bones. It takes effort to walk upstairs to my bedroom.

Lara follows me into my room.

"That was horrible," she sighs, dropping her purse onto the chair in the corner.

"It was. I thought it was never going to end." I kick off my shoes and strip out of the dark layers of clothing I wore today.

Lara tilts her head to the side, watching me, then smiles softly.

"I am going to get changed and then come and sit with you for a while, if that's okay.

I don't feel like being alone right now."

"I would really like that," I nod.

By the time she returns to my room, wearing cute pink shorts and a cropped T-shirt, I am already in bed, tired, but with my head too busy to even think about sleep.

When she walks in, I smile right away, feeling some of the tension lift.

"Thank you for today, it meant a lot to me to have you there," I say quietly as she lifts the blankets and slides beneath them.

I reach out under the blankets and pull her closer, and she nuzzles against me, letting out a soft breath of air as she gets comfortable.

I can smell her body lotion. She uses a rose one. I know because I chose it for her, and it smells incredible on her skin.

I lift her wrist to my face and take a long, slow breath of her.

"I love it. It's creamy and delicate, it makes you smell like wildflowers."

She has her head resting on my chest, and she slowly starts to trace her finger around the edges of my tattoo. The sensation is surprisingly relaxing, and I close my eyes.

Her touch is alluring, enticing, but I'm so tired, and she brings me such deep comfort that I drift off to sleep.

In the morning, I wake up with Lara in my bed, and I smile broadly. She feels me

moving, and in her half-asleep state, she snuggles up closer to me and wraps her arm around my chest.

I can't remember the last time I slept that well. We were close all night; I was holding her and enjoying every moment of it, even in my sleep.

I am more rested than I ever remember being, and it feels incredible.

I'm lying on my back, and her body pressed against mine has my cock throbbing with desire.

I slip my arm beneath her back and pull her even closer, and she moans sweetly in her dreams.

I'm about to lift her onto my chest when I realize this isn't just lust.

This is so much more.

I don't just want her.

I want her.

My body is begging for her.

Shock bolts through me. Panic, perhaps, is a better word.

I never had any intention of falling for Lara.

From the moment we met, she has been a wild attraction for me, and I didn't even notice the day it changed into something more. I race through my memories, trying to pinpoint the moment it happened, but each memory with her is filled with fondness

that overwhelms me even more.

What's happened to me?

This wasn't supposed to happen.

I slip my arm out from around her and shift across the bed, trying not to wake her anymore.

I'm in too deep.

It's a risk to care about people, and I already have my family to think about.

I didn't want this.

I just wanted— I don't know what I wanted.

This is too much.

I climb out of bed and hurry from the room, heading downstairs to make coffee.

As I walk away, I hear her softly calling my name, but I ignore it.

I can't think straight, and all I want now is to create space between us.

How did I let her get to me?

It's a weakness.

To become emotionally involved with someone is a form of weakness. And I can't afford weakness in my position.

Page 20

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:28 pm

I'm certain he heard me.

I wasn't speaking loudly, but he was still in the room when I called his name, so it would have been impossible for him not to hear me.

Nestor hurries through the door and turns down the passage, out of sight. Why would he ignore me?

I must be mistaken.

Maybe I was softer than I thought.

Stretching my body out, I wiggle my toes under the blanket and smile, turning to bury my face against his pillow.

Things between Nestor and me have been amazing lately.

He's sweet and caring and incredibly special to me.

More than special.

An intense craving for coffee drives me to climb out of bed, despite being so warm and comfortable. If I had my way, I'd snuggle up to Nestor all day and forget about the rest of the world until tomorrow.

But he probably wants to check in on his mom.

I hope she's doing okay. It was heartbreaking to watch her yesterday.

Her pain was so raw, so scrutinized by those disgusting reporters.

I have no idea why they allowed them in there.

I bet Miron had a lot to do with that. It was his father's funeral, and Nestor mentioned that he was the one who made the arrangements.

So that means he was the one who invited the media inside such a delicate and intimate affair.

And, of course, all evening he was loud-mouthing answers to their questions, being horribly blunt in his accusations towards Nestor.

It makes me furious to think about it.

That man is evil. You can see it in his eyes. He's miserable, and he wants the world to be miserable with him.

Entitled, too.

He has no right to Nestor's position. And why in the world does he, for even a moment, think he could possibly be a better man than Nestor?

It makes me snort in mocking laughter when I picture Miron in charge. He'd crumble, his ego broken, throwing tantrums like a child when things didn't go his way.

I slip Nestor's oversized robe onto my shoulders to ward off the unusually cold bite in the air.

It can't be autumn already. I was just starting to get used to the summer.

Lifting the soft material to my face, I take a long breath in, smiling because it's like a hug from him, being surrounded by his scent.

I pad barefoot into the kitchen, finding Nestor making coffee, shirtless and looking sexy as hell in his gray sweatpants. I slip my arms around him, laying my cheek against his back.

"Good morning, gorgeous," I say.

He clears his throat, his body a bit stiff. "Morning. Did you sleep okay?" he asks. His voice is rough, though, off.

"I slept better than I've slept in ages. Aren't you cold?" I ask, brushing my hands up and down his torso.

He steps to the left, out of my grasp. "Sorry," he mutters, reaching for something.

I move away and lift myself onto the counter, sitting with my legs hanging over the edge. "How did you sleep?"

He looks worried.

"Mm. It was good," he answers, short and clipped.

I want to ask him if he's okay, but I think it's a stupid question. Of course, he's not okay. All of the drama and tension with Miron, and the pain that his mother is going through—he must be worried.

I want to ease his burden somehow, but this is a difficult situation to fix.

I bite my lip, not saying anything.

Nestor lifts his coffee mug and turns away from the machine, walking towards the door. He pauses, then turns back and kisses me lightly on the cheek. “I’ll be in my office,” he says, then disappears.

It feels like rejection.

And it leaves a hollow pit in my chest.

Sighing, I tell myself not to take it personally because he needs space to deal with his own loss and the changes happening. I can’t make it all about me; that’s selfish.

With my own coffee hot and steaming in the mug in my hand, I decide to go and read for a while in the library. To give Nestor his space.

As I’m walking past his office, I hear voices, and recognize Roan talking to him.

“Miron’s schedule got busier than usual,” Roan says.

“I imagine it would after his father’s death.”

“You’re right, it could be that. But the places he’s going don’t add up.”

“How so?”

“Here’s what the guy managed to photograph from his notepad on his desk. He scribbled down a couple of places he wanted to go tomorrow, and my guy thought it might be important.”

“Tomorrow we have the operation scheduled with Benedikt.”

“I’m aware,” Roan says. “Do you want to leave the Miron thing until that’s over?”

Nestor sighs loudly.

“Yes, let’s leave it. We can pick it up again on Wednesday.”

“Yes, sir.” Roan’s footsteps come towards the door, and I run quietly away, ducking into the library.

I want to see the photograph.

I want to see where he’s going.

What if it’s a pattern? My head is still fixated on that puzzle, and I won’t be able to let go until I solve it. And I really, really want to do something good for Nestor. I want to show him how much I care by fixing something for him.

That afternoon, I make a stop at the mall, purchasing a baseball cap and a cheap disposable hoodie. I want to be incognito. It has to be something I can toss in a moment’s notice but wear to hide my face.

The giant pair of glasses at the checkout counter is also perfect, so I add them to my purchase.

Tomorrow, while Nestor is busy with whatever business he has with Benedikt, I am going to see what Miron is up to.

I’ll wait till Nestor is asleep tonight before I sneak into his office to snap a photograph of that photograph.

Miron knows very little about me.

I doubt he would recognize me if I walked past him wearing giant glasses and a cap.

Not that I plan to walk past him. I don't have any intention of getting that close.

It's unfortunately easy to avoid Nestor, because he already appears to be avoiding me. It hurts, but I'm trying so hard to remind myself that it's because he's going through a difficult time and not because of something I've done.

Nestor retreats to his bedroom early, and instead of going through and asking him if I can stay with him tonight, I retreat to my own room, respectful of his needs, but also wanting to sneak into his office without him noticing.

It's past eleven when I am comfortable enough to make the move.

It only takes a few minutes. The printed image Roan gave him of Miron's notes is on his desk, next to his laptop. I take a quick photo of it and rush back to my room, closing the door behind me to study it in the quiet darkness of my bed.

I zoom in on his messy handwriting, scrawled in blue ink across a lined page.

A delivery company at 9 am

A coffee house. 11 am

Dropping off a document. 12:15 pm

Picking up dry cleaning. 1:30 pm

The longer I study the list, the more my suspicion grows about the types of places he

is going. And the times are so specific.

“What are you up to, Miron?” I whisper quietly, studying the phone, trying to see past the words.

Everything on that list is so normal. Too normal. Every day, run-of-the-mill errands. Why would Miron be doing such bland things when he has people taking care of his every need?

My interest is piqued, and I can't let it go now.

Nestor is only leaving the house around nine tomorrow morning, so I won't make the one at the delivery company, but I can get to the coffee house before Miron and tail him from there to the next place.

Maybe he's meeting people, trying to cover up the meeting to make them look like something else.

Why would he want to hide a meeting? It can't be for any good reason.

I struggle to fall asleep, my mind looping and the anxiety in my stomach knotting tighter the more I watch the time.

I've never done anything like this before, so I'm really nervous.

But it's okay.

All I have to do is stay out of sight. How hard can it be?

I pretend to sleep late to avoid Nestor because I don't want to have to lie to him if he happens to ask me what I'm doing today.

So I wait in my room until he's gone, my stomach aching from nerves.

I watch out of the window until his car is out of sight before I head down and climb into my car—well, the one that Nestor gave me to drive, because apparently my car was a death trap and wheels and had to be sent straight to the scrap yard.

It's a black Audi, a beautiful car, and I might learn to appreciate cars more simply because I get to drive it.

It doesn't take me long to get to the place Miron listed. I'm early, but that was my plan. It seems better to already be established and hidden by the time he arrives.

I sit in the car, ducked low for thirty minutes before I spot him walking towards the building with two men following close behind him like security guards.

Shit. I didn't think this part through. Do I follow him in? How else will I know who he's meeting?

I pull my cap down low and climb out of the car, walking casually into the coffee shop and hovering near the wall while I suss out where he's going to sit. He goes to the back of the shop and through a door with a sign that says employees only.

Dammit.

But it does become quickly obvious that no one is really paying any attention to me, and in a bold, terrifying move, I walk straight to that door, push it open and slip through.

I hear Miron's voice not too far away, coming from a room to the side. Move closer, but a man steps out.

“Hey, girl, what are you doing here? You don’t work here,” he shouts. I freeze in horror, but then snap out of it and turn to run before Miron sees me.

I run straight back out of the door and through the coffee shop, into the parking lot.

Instead of going straight to the car, because if they see me, they’ll associate it with me and trace the details of the car to Nestor, I run to the left, down the road—and I just keep going until I have a chance to duck into an alleyway, out of sight.

Pressed against a wall, crouching low to the ground in the back of the alley, I wait with my eyes glued to the entrance facing the road.

One of the security guards runs past the alleyway, not turning in.

My head is spinning. My heart is beating so fast it’s hurting.

But relief washes over me when he keeps going.

I stand up, ready to rip off the disguise and walk calmly back to the car as though I know nothing of what just happened, but as I do, a dizzy spell slams into me and I have to lean on the wall to avoid falling on my face. Nausea tightens my stomach.

“It’s just stress, take a breath,” I whisper to myself, closing my eyes and trying desperately to pull myself together.

But it’s not working, and the dizziness won’t subside.

I can’t drive home like this. It’s too risky. I don’t understand what’s wrong with me. I didn’t even run that far.

With no other choice, I pull my phone from my pocket and dial Ulyana.

“Hi,” I say sheepishly when she answers.

“Hey, you, what are you up to?”

“I need your help, actually. Are you free?” My words are strained.

“Of course, I’ll drop anything for you. What do you need? Why do you sound so weird?”

“If I send you my location, will you please come fetch me?”

“Girl, what’s going on?”

“Just come fetch me,” I say tightly, my head spinning.

“I’m on my way right now,” she replies, sounding worried.

My hands are shaking as I slide my phone back into my pocket and close my eyes as I lean against the wall. What is wrong with me? This is so strange.

Ulyana reaches me in twenty minutes, and she arrives with two bodyguards.

“You brought backup?” I smile weakly.

“I was really worried. What are you doing out here?” she says angrily.

“I got really dizzy and I panicked, but my car is just down the road. I don’t think it’s safe for me to drive, though.”

“Get in, we’ll drive there and one of the guards can drive it back for you.”

I'm so grateful for her help, and on the way home, the dizziness fades and my heartbeat slows. It must have been from panic. I don't know what I was thinking, going into the back of that coffee shop alone.

Ulyana stops outside the entrance and narrows her eyes at me. "Come on, I'll walk you to the door."

"No, don't be silly, I'm really fine now."

"Shut up and get out," she laughs.

We're on the top step when Ulyana pulls me into a hug. "I'm so glad you called me. Don't hesitate to call again if you need me, okay?"

"You needed help?" Nestor's voice is low and full of concern. It makes me jump and spin towards him.

"It's okay. She called me," Ulyana smiles.

"But why didn't you call me, Lara?" Nestor sounds upset.

"Oh-kay. I think that's my cue. I'll see you later, guys," Ulyana says quickly, and practically runs back to her car.

"What happened?" Nestor demands.

I bite my lower lip and take a deep breath. "Can we talk inside?"

Nestor is furious. I mean, scary angry.

“What the hell were you thinking, following Miron? Do you have any idea what that man is capable of?” he shouts, the tendons in his neck taut and his eyes narrowed towards me with singular focus.

I’m sitting on the edge of the sofa, listening to his lecture, shaking my head.

“I was trying to help,” I say defensively.

“By getting yourself killed? How would that have helped anything?”

I’m watching him pace up and down, his fists clenched, his shoulders squared. I don’t recognize him.

And all I can think about is how he’s been avoiding me lately, and now I’ve made it worse by making him so angry that he looks like he hates me.

Page 21

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:28 pm

“Nestor, I had a plan. He was up to something, and I wanted to prove it. I wanted to get information.”

She won't stop defending her ridiculous choice to tail Miron. Does she really have no clue how much danger she was in?

I'm so angry with her that I can barely see straight.

The thought of Miron getting his hands on her, of hurting her—I can't begin to describe what it's doing to me.

I'm sick with rage, stressed, and worried about all of the things that could have happened to her. Can't she see it? Can't she see what she's doing to me?

“What do you think would have happened if he caught you?” I snarl, spinning to face her, standing over her with every muscle in my body so tense it might snap.

She bows her head lower, her lips curled in anger.

“Stop shouting at me,” she shouts back, standing up from the sofa, and pushing me away from her, trying to create space.

I take a step away, but not far.

“Nestor, I was careful. He didn't see me. I made sure of it, and I even wore a disguise,” she sighs, rubbing her hands over her face in exasperation.

“A disguise? Are you joking right now? Do you think a hat and a pair of glasses is going to hide who you are? This isn’t a movie, Lara. This is real life, and Miron wouldn’t hold back or be gentle just because you’re my wife—in fact, he’d probably be more brutal because you are my wife.”

“I was trying to be useful,” she yells, throwing her hands in the air.

She’s still not getting it; she’s not understanding how crazy she’s making me. I grab her arm and pull her close, forcing her to look up at me.

“And I am trying not to lose you,” I shout angrily.

There is a tense moment of silence as we glare at each other, both holding our ground, determined not to back down—two fierce, strong personalities, each thinking that they are in the right.

Her eyes pierce into me, her brows knitted, her lips pout. I’m still gripping her arm, perhaps too tightly, but I don’t want to let go.

My gaze drifts from her eyes to her lips.

The shift in my body is instant. The flare of desire, the heat of lust that bolts through me—and she sees it, because the shift in her body is instant, too.

I tug her even closer, and my lips crash against hers.

Fireworks explode between us as our defenses drop, and the heated emotions turn to need.

She wraps her arms around my waist and tilts her head back to deepen the kiss. I push my tongue into her mouth, and she moans against me, her fingers knotting in my

shirt.

She's tugging at my clothes, pulling them off me in a desperate rush.

I tug her hoodie and her T-shirt over her head and toss them aside. She squeals when I push her onto the sofa, and she lands with a huff. I'm on top of her before she can blink, grabbing her pants and pulling them off her beautiful, slender legs. Perfectly shaped, toned and smooth.

Grabbing her delicate lace panties, I impatiently rip them from her body. Lara gasps and threads her fingers through my hair, pulling, causing pain that mixes with desire and pushes my need. My cock is throbbing, aching to be inside her.

I wrap my hands around her thighs and pull her legs apart, moving so that I'm kneeling in front of her. I push my face between her legs, and wrap my mouth over her clit.

The sound she makes causes my cock to go so hard it feels suffocated in my pants. With my mouth moving over her pussy, my tongue playing with her, I tug my belt off and rip my pants open to free my cock.

I grab it in my hand and begin to stroke back and forth in smooth, steady motions while my tongue dips in and out of her sweetness.

Lara lifts her feet onto the sofa, spreading her legs wide with her knees bent against her chest.

I push my tongue deeper, and she is the most beautiful thing I've ever tasted, but I want more than this. I need it. I'm desperate to have her in a way that claims her as my own.

I stand over her, lifting her and turning so that I can sit on the sofa. I pull her onto my lap, her legs straddling me. She's so petite, weighing nothing as I grab her hips and hover her, legs spread wide, over my cock.

She shudders when my cock presses against her pussy.

"You're mine, Lara. And your pussy belongs to me. I'll do whatever I want with it," I growl, pulling her down onto me.

Her fingers dig into my shoulders as my cock forces her pussy wide open, spreading her and filling her.

Our bodies fit together perfectly.

I hold her hips, lifting and dropping her onto myself, spreading my thighs and arching my hips upwards to meet her. I use her body like a toy, savoring the way her face distorts with pleasure, her lips parted, and those beautiful, angelic sounds spilling from her.

Each time I push into her, the need grows.

It's impossible, but I want more. I want more of her.

I tug her pussy over my cock and push her onto me, penetrating as deep as I can. Then I rock her hips back and forth instead of up and down, grinding her over me, her clit rubbing against the base of my cock, causing her pussy to tighten around my shaft and her legs to start shaking.

I have never felt such pleasure before in my life.

How is it possible for her to be this perfect?

Lara tilts her head back, exposing her long, slender neck to me, her hair loose down her back.

Her breasts, round and full, bounce with each movement, her nipples erect, dark, round peaks.

I run my hand up her spine and take a handful of her hair, pulling with a steady, even force, locking her in place as I grind her even harder against me.

It's her undoing.

She can't escape me. She is at my mercy, and I am giving her exactly what she desires.

And it breaks her apart.

She arches towards me, gasping, her legs shaking.

Her stomach muscles tighten and her pussy clamps down on me.

I groan with pleasure as her orgasm spasms through her, wave after wave convulsing over my cock.

I explode as well, deep inside her, connected to her, and never wanting to let go.

Lara lies against my chest with her head on my shoulder, her breathing heavy.

I am still inside her as we sit quietly, slowing our racing hearts.

My fingers stroke lazily through her soft hair, down her back and over her ass, I lift my hand and do it again.

My body is shaken, but it's not because of the intensity of our pleasure together; it's because of how much she matters to me. The thought of losing her, the fear—it shook me to my core. And being with her now, after the fight, only strengthened the realization.

She means the world to me.

I need to tell her. She needs to know how I feel.

Lara lets out a groan of discomfort, and I lift her to see her face.

“What’s wrong?” I ask with concern.

“I don’t feel well,” she says, barely a whisper. “It happened earlier today as well, that’s why I had to call for help.”

“You should have called me, Lara,” I complain, but then, seeing the look on her face, I realize how bad she is. I carefully lift her off me and set her on the sofa.

“What do you need?” I ask, brushing my hand over her forehead. She doesn’t feel hot, but that only means she doesn’t have a fever. It could be anything.

“A glass of water, please. And maybe I need to take a cool shower.”

I lift her immediately into my arms to carry her to the bathroom.

While I turn the shower on, she ties her hair up into a messy bun on top of her head. I love it when she does that. She looks disheveled and cute as hell.

After the shower, she is still feeling horrible, so I put her straight to bed. My bed. I want to keep her close to me.

“Stay here, little one. I’ll make you something to eat. Maybe the dizziness is because you haven’t eaten yet.”

“Mm,” she says, closing her eyes and leaning back against the pillow. I watch her for a second, worried.

I go downstairs to make her a cup of tea and some toast. When I come back up, there is a bit more color in her cheeks, and she’s sitting up.

“What if I have the flu? It seems that the wave of weakness comes right after exerting myself,” she says.

I chuckle, remembering how good it felt to move inside her.

“Then we need to keep your heart from racing.” I touch her face again as I sit down on the bed. “But try and eat something. It will be good for you.”

Lara sits quietly while I watch her take small bites of her toast.

She glances at me, and I get the feeling she wants to say something.

Except I’m the one who should say something. The fight we had earlier—I was harsh because I was so worried.

“Little one, I didn’t mean to be cruel earlier. I was angry because of what might’ve happened to you. It scared me,” I say.

Her brows furrow as she looks at me.

“I wanted to help, Nestor. You’ve been so stressed the last few days, and you’ve hardly even spoken to me. I know you’re going through a lot, and I only wanted to help.”

I tuck a stray curl behind her ear.

“I realize that. But please don’t do something like that again. I could have put one of my men on it if you thought it was important.”

She nods.

Then her bright, beautiful blue eyes lift to watch my face. “Nestor, we can’t—um—sex doesn’t just fix everything. We can’t just have sex and expect all of our problems to go away.”

Her words sting me and take me by surprise. I didn’t realize that she thought that was all it was. I thought she felt what I felt. It was so intense for me. So deep and meaningful, whether that terrifies me or not is irrelevant. It is what it is, and I felt it.

But apparently, she didn’t.

She sees it as a quick fix for an argument.

I clench my jaw, straightening my back.

“I understand. Don’t worry, sex is just an outlet. A way to blow off steam. You’re right. It’s better if we keep this as a professional partnership for the time being. We can work together to solve the issue with Miron.” I say what I think she wants to hear.

She nods.

Shit. It is what she wanted to hear.

I was ready to pour my heart out to her just a second before she said she wasn't feeling well. How embarrassing would it have been if I put that pressure on her when she didn't want the same thing?

I clear my throat loudly and nod.

“Well, I can leave you to rest if you like.”

Her eyes narrow, and there is sadness in them. Or worry. It's hard to tell—and clearly, I am not as good at reading her as I thought. I thought she wanted more, too.

Should I tell her how I feel?

No.

You can't.

She's not feeling well. There is a lot going on.

Don't add this awkward pressure. It will make things more tense between the two of you if she knows you want more from her and she doesn't want the same thing.

I stand up, smiling, but it doesn't reach my eyes. “I better get dressed,” I chuckle dryly. “When you're feeling better, you can go over the Miron info with me and tell me what puzzle pieces you've fitted together. We can work on a plan,” I say, thinking it's what she wants.

She nods and smiles too, tense, uncomfortable. “Okay.”

I should leave her in peace.

I grab a pair of pants and slip them on, then hurry from the room.

As much as I want to sit next to her and pull her into my arms, let her sleep on my chest while I watch her beautiful face, I've clearly overstepped her bounds. I need to pull back and be respectful of what she wants.

Page 22

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:28 pm

It's been two days, and I'm not feeling any better. I'm still under the weather, but it's not something I can pinpoint. It comes and goes, and sometimes it's nausea, and sometimes it's dizziness.

Nestor, even though he was reluctant, had to go into the office today. I reassured him I was feeling better, but I'm not.

I've been on the internet for the past fifteen minutes searching for my symptoms. And one option keeps popping up even though it's probably the last thing I need to find out right now.

I might be pregnant.

After another website leads me to a link for buying a pregnancy test, I huff loudly and put my phone down.

Chewing the inside of my cheek, I come to the conclusion that since the seed of an idea has been planted, I am not going to stop worrying about it until I take a pregnancy test. At least it will ease my concern.

I can pop in at the pharmacy and even ask the pharmacist what else it might be.

With my mind made up, I climb out of bed and get dressed—might as well do it now.

It's a twenty-minute drive, which I actually enjoy. I roll the windows down and listen to the sounds of the city, people moving about, on their way to work, grabbing coffee, smiling, scowling, laughing, and talking.

I've been cooped up in bed trying to get 'better,' but I might not be sick.

I get lucky and find a parking spot right outside the pharmacy.

It's not too busy inside, and once I've found two different types of pregnancy tests, I head to the counter to talk to the lady standing behind it.

She spots what I'm buying and smiles.

"Will that be all for you today?"

"I've been feeling a bit weird lately. I looked online and this was the suggested reason, so I'm getting these, but what else could it be?"

She asks me my symptoms and gives me a knowing grin. "That is the best place to start. And I don't want to suggest anything else until you've done that test, because you don't want to take the wrong meds while being pregnant."

When she says 'pregnant', I glance nervously behind me.

She notices, and her face softens. "Sweetheart, whatever the outcome is, it'll be okay.

There is a staff bathroom in the back if you want to do the test now, quickly.

It's not for the public, but I'll unlock it for you.

Then, if it's not that, I can see what else I can give you?

Also, you don't need to do two tests. This one is very realizable. "

"Thank you, yes, I'd like to do the test now if you don't mind."

She shows me where to go and hands me a key from under the counter. I push the swinging door open and walk down a narrow passage to a locked door. My heart is racing with anxiety. My stomach is churning like a washing machine.

Inside is a clean, white-tiled, simple bathroom.

My hands are shaking as I open the packaging and read the instructions. Pee on the stick. Wait three minutes.

I sit on the toilet and hold the end of the little test wand in the stream, then snap the lid on and set it on top of the sink.

Now I wait.

It's the longest three minutes of my life.

The double lines appear quickly, after only one minute. But my mind still insists on waiting the full three minutes, just in case they are going to disappear. Of course, they don't. They only become more solid. More glaringly obvious. A definite, unquestionable confirmation.

I am pregnant with Nestor's child.

Tears spike at the back of my eyes, and I squeeze them closed.

I clean up in the bathroom, throwing everything in the little bin beneath the sink. Okay. Well, at least now I know.

And now I have to decide what to do about what I know.

The pharmacist is very sweet to me and already has a few items prepared for when I

come out. “Yes?” she asks, sounding happy for me.

I nod. “Yes.”

“Oh, that’s wonderful news,” she says, making me smile. I want it to be wonderful news, but I’m nervous.

“Just in case it was a yes, I got this ready for you. This will help with the dizziness. It’s extra minerals that your body needs right now.

And this will help with the nausea. Unfortunately, it’s a natural part of everything to have some sickness, and some women get it worse than others.

Don’t stop eating. Just have small amounts throughout the day.

And definitely get to a doctor as soon as you can, to make sure everything is good. ”

I listen, and I thank her, then I carry my purchases out in a small brown paper packet clutched in my hand.

My mind is oddly blank, and I realize I’m in shock as I climb back into the car.

I have a million questions racing through my mind.

Nestor will be happy, but not in the way I want him to be happy.

I would love for him to be excited to have a baby with me, but I think for him, it’s more about creating an heir, all because of Miron. I don’t want Miron to be the reason I have a child.

Nestor is so hell-bent on fighting him, on getting revenge against him. It’s like his

entire world revolves around his stepbrother at the moment. He doesn't even have space for me.

After he told me that our relationship should be strictly professional, working on the project together, it broke me.

Especially seeing as I am falling for him. And falling hard.

I tried to tell him I don't just want sex. I want the sex to mean something. And his solution for that was to say we shouldn't have sex, then.

I wish I could be happy about carrying his baby, but how can I be?

I want things that don't seem possible.

For a while, I sit in the parked car, not ready to go home, not knowing where to go.

Until, eventually, I realize I want to speak to my mom. Even when she was sick, she had the best advice. She was a strong woman, even in her pain, and she was gentle and beautiful.

So, I drive to her grave.

She was buried in a little garden area away from the noise of the city. A place where I thought she could find some peace.

The parking area is a walk away from the gravesite, but I take it slowly, enjoying the sun on my face and the cool, fresh air of autumn as it brushes over my cheeks. I push my hands into my pockets and think about everything that's been happening.

It's like some unbelievable movie. A made-up story.

One minute I'm working, struggling to get by each day, focused and stressed. Next, I'm kidnapped, married, and living like a princess in a castle.

I grin as I arrive at the garden and push open an ornate iron gate.

There is a smooth rock at the foot of Mom's grave, and I sit down on it, leaning forward to brush my hand over her headstone. A small, neatly carved stone with her name, years of life, and a quote I chose carved into it.

The light of a loved one's smile will forever burn in the hearts of those left behind, even long after their death.

"Hi, Mom," I whisper. "I really miss you." My words are tight, and a tear rolls down my cheek. I brush it away with the back of my hand, smiling. "I've got a lot to tell you. So much has happened lately, that's why I haven't visited."

In the afternoon sunshine, I talk to my mom about everything.

I tell her about what happened with my dad, and how I've forgiven him and set boundaries—and I'm really proud of that.

I tell her all about Nestor. How I hated him at first, but now I've fallen for him.

And about his mom and his sister. I tell her about how amazing his family is.

And finally, I tell her that I'm pregnant.

Wind whistles gently through the nearby trees in the long moment of silence that follows. I look up at the branches, swaying slowly.

"I wish you could tell me what to do," I sigh.

More silence.

But in this silence, my lips curl into a smile and my heart warms.

I laugh, and the sound comes out joyful and relaxed.

“I knew you’d help me see things clearly,” I say.

Because suddenly I understand.

I have never been happier in my entire life.

I have never felt more welcome than I do now.

His family has embraced me, made me feel at home, as though I am one of them.

Nestor has been kind and more than generous, and he’s been respectful and caring.

For the first time ever, I feel like I matter. Like I’m special to someone.

My poor mother wanted to give me that, but she was too weak. My father—he was too selfish.

But I have it now.

I have a family.

A family I will fight for and do anything to keep.

“Thank you, Mom,” I say excitedly as I stand up and pull my phone from my pocket.

As I walk back through the garden, enjoying nature and everything around me, I dial Nestor.

It rings once before he answers.

“Hello, little one, how are you feeling? Do you need me to come home?” he asks quickly.

“No, I’m doing a lot better. I, um, I am looking forward to you coming home, though,” I say hesitantly.

There is a slight pause.

“You are?” he asks. I wonder what he thinks when I say that. I want to tell him I’ve come to understand that I’m crazy in love with him, but it will be so silly if he doesn’t feel the same.

“I am. How is your day going?”

“Mm. Well, I’ve got a bit to sort out here before I can get away, some things went south.”

“Oh, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to interrupt your work,” I say nervously.

He chuckles, a beautiful sound that rumbles through the phone. “No, little one. I love your interruptions. Are you out somewhere?”

What does that mean? I can’t help the massive smile that spreads over my face.

“I am walking in a very pretty garden. I came to visit my mom’s grave. But I’m headed home now.”

“That’s sweet. I’m glad you’re feeling better, then. It’s a gorgeous day to be outside in nature.”

My heart somersaults.

“I have something to tell you,” I say, excitement shooting through me.

“Oh really, what is it?” I can hear the smile in his words.

“No, not over the phone. We can talk when you get home.”

“Should I bring takeout?”

“Yes, I’m craving chow mein.”

“Excellent choice. I don’t know how you expect me to be patient waiting to hear what you want to say.”

“You’ll just have to be,” I giggle.

We talk a little while longer before I hear a lot of noise in the background, and I know he has to go, even though he sounds reluctant to end the call.

My heart is singing, walking the rest of the way back to the car.

What I’m sensing from him, and what I now understand about how I feel, it’s real. Maybe we were both just scared to be the first to say something. But he wouldn’t treat me like that if he didn’t care about me.

And maybe once we talk about things and explore the possibilities, he will even grow to love me.

It's strange how earlier I didn't want to go home, because I felt lost and unsure. And now all I want is to be there, with him, wrapped in his arms.

I climb into the driver's side and drop my phone into the passenger seat, humming a song my mother used to hum to me when I was little. I start the car, and it growls to life as I pull out of the parking area, turning onto the road that leads back home.

I can't wait to tell Nestor. It's a conversation I want to have face-to-face, though. He's going to be so excited about being a father.

And then I'll tell him how I feel.

I'm certain, but nervous. A happy kind of nervous.

A car skids out onto the road in front of me, and I slam on the brakes as I smash into it, the seatbelt cutting into my shoulder when I'm thrown forward.

A scream of fright shoots from my lips as my face hits the airbag that explodes from the steering wheel.

The wind is knocked forcefully from my lungs, and I gasp for breath, grasping blindly to unclip the safety belt constricting me.

It snaps free, and I push the door open, spilling from the car, wondering if the other driver is okay. My feet are unsteady, and I clutch onto the side of the car, my eyes wide in disbelief, staring at the damage.

My heart is racing, my head is spinning. I squint into the driver's side of the other car. Suddenly, everything goes dark, and I realize someone has thrown a bag over my head.

A new form of panic hits me as I'm lifted off the ground, kicking and screaming, fighting for my life.

I lash out, clawing at anything I can reach.

A man swears at me.

"Fuck's sake, bitch, do you want me to fucking punch your lights out?" he snarls in anger.

Another man laughs. "Throw her in the trunk, let's get out of here."

"Tell the boss we have her."

"Let's go."

I'm thrown into a hot, small space, and the trunk is slammed shut. I pull the hood off my head, gasping for air, my eyes watering, my lungs still burning from the accident.

The car starts, and I'm trapped, with no idea where I'm going or what is going to happen to me. And all I can think about is him.

I need him.

I need Nestor.

Page 23

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:28 pm

I tap my fingers in agitation against the keyboard, waiting for the program to refresh. It's been a long day, filled with frustration.

After the sweet phone call from Lara earlier this afternoon, all I want to do is rush home to see her.

I don't know what it was about the call, but it gave me so much hope.

She wants to tell me something. And it's important enough to be a face-to-face conversation.

My heart is telling me that she might say she loves me.

Or at least that she wants more from our relationship. It's what I want to hear.

She sounded so happy on the phone.

I'm daring to hope, daring to allow myself that excitement.

I would have left ages ago, but stupid things keep happening at work. Annoying mess-ups that don't make sense. And when I look into it, nothing is actually wrong—it's just the hint of things going wrong.

"What the fuck," I grumble, leaning back in my office chair and huffing loudly when I realize the truck we thought was stolen just had a weird glitch with the tracking device.

“What is going on today?” Roan sighs, as agitated as I am. “Things keep happening, but we haven’t actually lost anything. It’s annoying.”

“I have no idea....”

Suddenly, my mind fits the pieces together and I understand. “ It’s a fucking distraction ,” I snap, standing up and knocking my coffee over.

“Fuck,” Roan snarls, immediately knowing I’m right. He stands up too and grabs his jacket as we bolt towards the door, running out of my office to the car.

“We have to check on Ulyana,” I say tensely, my heart hammering like a wild bird in my chest.

She would be the first target. She has always been a target, and if people are looking to distract me, it’s because they have something bigger planned and it’s happening right now.

Roan has the phone out, on speaker, so I can hear, already dialing her number.

Each ring makes me more tense.

I start the car, Roan in the passenger seat next to me.

His jaw is clenched as tightly as mine. The phone is still ringing, over and over again, until finally it goes to voicemail.

“Fuck,” I growl in anger. “Try her again.”

“We should go straight there,” he says, pressing to dial again.

My tires grind against the gravel when I spin out of the parking area and turn, skidding again, into the road.

Ulyana doesn't answer the second time either, and my heart has sunk into the pit of my stomach.

Roan says nothing, setting his phone down, he pulls his gun out of the holster and places it on his lap.

After a tense moment of silence, he mutters, "We'll find her, sir."

When his phone rings, we both jump, and he grabs it.

"Ulyana?" he says, sounding angry.

"Hi, Roan. I have two missed calls from you. Did you dial me by accident?"

"Where are you?"

"I'm at home with Mom. Why? What's going on? Where is Nestor?"

"I'm here. Has anything happened? Are you two safe?" I say, tilting my head towards the phone in Roan's hand.

"Yes, what is going on? You're scaring me."

"Sorry, I—I don't know. Just—stay in the house, okay? I want to make sure everything is okay. Just be safe."

We end the call, and Roan dials the head of security at my mother's place. He informs him of what we suspect, and the guy confirms he will get another team on the

property.

“Call Lara,” I say, suddenly realizing my family has grown. And while our marriage is still new, she would be as much of a target as Ulyana.

Roan dials Lara.

He dials her again.

And again.

He dials the security team on my property at home, and they confirm she hasn’t been back since she left early this morning.

“Track her car. And her phone,” I yell in terrified frustration.

Turning the steering wheel, I change direction, heading home instead of to my mother’s place.

Roan sends instructions out to our team to prepare. We don’t know what for yet, but we need to be ready.

“It has to be Miron,” I say, nausea churning in my stomach.

“I agree,” Roan says darkly. “But, Nestor, we need more men. Half of them are guarding your mother’s place. If Miron has decided he’s bold enough to take your wife, then he’s lost his mind, and we need to go in there prepared for the worst—over-prepared. We need more men.”

“You better track Miron’s phone as well. And I need to contact Benedikt. I never wanted to owe that man anything, but it seems there are some things worth being in

debt for.”

At my mansion, men are rushing back and forth, fitting Kevlar and unpacking crates of weapons.

I’m pacing, waiting for them to find out where Miron is, and I’m about to make a call to Benedikt, asking him a favor.

Roan stops in front of me. “Her phone and her car were parked outside Angel Memorial Park. She was driven off the road. There wasn’t any blood on the scene, but there was a struggle.”

My jaw clenches tightly as the muscles twitch over my face.

“Thank you. And Miron?”

“We’re still looking for him.”

I nod, waving Roan away so that I can make this call.

I clear my throat, holding the phone against my ear. I’m standing next to a wide window, looking out into my garden.

This place won’t be a home without her.

The thought makes me angry. It’s intrusive, suggesting she isn’t coming back. But she is. I’ll fucking tear the world apart to get her back.

“Nestor, hey man, how are you?” Benedikt answers calm and relaxed.

“My wife has been taken, we suspect it was my stepbrother. We are busy planning a

full-scale attack, but I need more men. Are you still in San Francisco?”

“Fuck,” Benedikt mutters. “Yes, I’m here. I’ll pull my team together. Where are we going?”

“Come to my place. We’re looking for his location now. As soon as we have it, we’ll attack.”

I push my hand through my hair, closing my eyes to try and calm my thoughts.

“I’ll get my tech guys on it as well. See if we can find him. I’ll be at your place as soon as possible. Hey, Nestor. We’ll get her back, man. And we’ll tear that weasel to pieces afterwards.”

“Thank you, Benedikt,” I say quietly.

It’s a horrible sensation to be trapped in limbo like this. I know she needs me, and I’m ready to go in the blink of an eye, but I have no idea where to point my anger. I have no idea which direction to run in.

The team behind me, prepping for war, is an excellent force of power. Men I trust with my own life.

I want to sit in the car, waiting for the signal. But instead, I just stand here, staring out the window, terrified that my intrusive thought might be real.

I want her back.

I love her.

What?

I love her.

I love her.

The thought is so deeply true that it slams into my heart like a tidal wave.

My throat tightens, my fear deepens. I've never been in love before. Not like this. I cannot lose her. It simply isn't an option.

Thirty minutes later, Benedikt arrives with two SUVs full of men.

Everyone is ready.

Everyone is on edge.

It's another twenty-five minutes after that before Roan comes bursting into the living room and shouts, "We've got a lock on him."

Everyone stands up at the same time and grabs their gun, all hyped up and eager to get moving.

Benedikt shouts, "Everyone in the car." His men immediately obey. I don't even have to tell my team, they know what to do. We've been prepped and waiting for hours.

I climb into the front seat of my own SUV. The windows are heavily tinted, thick with bulletproofing, and the car is more truck than SUV. It's solid enough to drive straight through a building, and I'll do that if it's what it takes to get inside.

"I want to be the one to kill him, but if it comes down to it, and you have the shot, you take it," I say to Roan.

He nods, staring at the car and pulling onto the road behind Benedikt's SUV ahead of us.

I'm coming, Lara. It's going to be okay, little one.

Page 24

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:28 pm

We don't drive for long. I do my best to count the turns and note each direction, but it's not as easy as it seems in the movies, and once I miscount one turn, the rest becomes useless.

It feels like the trunk is getting smaller by the minute. I've never struggled with claustrophobia, but in this moment, I can see why people have it.

I can hear the muffled sound of men talking from the front of the car. Occasionally, I hear hooting or a shout.

Sometimes I kick the back of the car, but it's not easy, and I'm worried I'm wasting my energy instead of saving it to fight when I'm out of here.

Because it's not a long drive, I know we're still in the San Francisco area when the car comes to a stop and the engine goes quiet.

My heart pumps faster, adrenaline making me dizzy as I wait for the trunk to open.

When it does, the light that floods in blinds me for a moment, and I blink hurriedly, trying to get my vision back.

Rough hands lift me from the car, and I'm thrown over a man's shoulder. I don't recognize him, or the place he's carrying me into.

Three men are walking with him, talking about nothing in particular, casual and calm.

We enter an industrial building. It smells like we're close to the docks.

The place is filthy; it stinks as though people have been squatting in here. I gag and fight the urge to vomit all the way down this man's back. I can't imagine he'd treat me kindly after that.

Stay calm, Lara. Wait for the right moment. Watch everything. Learn. Be patient.

I have to keep reminding myself that kicking and fighting until I have a real chance of escape is going to be useless.

He carries me past an elevator that clearly isn't working. The heavy metal door is hanging lopsided, full of dents, and the floor looks rotten. There are so many guards standing around on the ground floor.

We take the stairs, which don't exactly look safe, either.

Third floor.

Third door on the left. Along the passage are more guards.

We go into a room, no bigger than a bedroom, perhaps once an office of some kind. There are old, rotten books in the corner and a broken desk, leaning precariously against the far wall. The windows are coated in dust and grime, the light struggling to pierce through it.

The air smells cleaner in here, but not by much.

I'm slung forward, off his shoulder, and dropped to my feet, but my legs buckle beneath me, and I fall to the ground.

"For fuck's sake," the man groans, grabbing my arm and yanking me back to my feet.

“Where is the boss?” he asks his comrade.

“Not sure, he said he was on the way. Let’s get her tied and ready. The last thing we need is more drama or her getting away.”

“This little bird isn’t going anywhere,” the man holding me smirks, a dark, terrifying smile. He reaches out and touches me, and I pull away from him, making him laugh in amusement.

“Feisty,” he says.

The other man loses his patience.

“Tie her to the chair,” he snaps, pointing at a wooden chair that isn’t part of the building. It’s too new. Too clean.

The man holding me drags me to the chair and pulls a roll of duct tape from somewhere, then starts to wrap it around my wrists and ankles, locking me tightly in place.

The other man watches me with cold eyes. His expression is one of boredom, and all I can do is glare back at him, trying to make him think I’m not afraid, even though I’m dying inside.

Nestor will come.

As soon as he realizes I’m gone, he will come find me.

I keep repeating this reassurance over and over again.

I sit in that chair for an eternity. Hours that feel like a lifetime.

Every part of my body is aching because I can't move. The tape is cutting into my skin, and the wood of the chair is hard against my body.

I'm exhausted from the constant sense of alertness. Too scared to rest my eyes. Too scared to drop my guard.

I hear movement outside, and the men in the room stand straighter, alert.

"What did you do to her?" a familiar voice snaps, footsteps echoing along the dusty, old wooden floor.

"Nothing, boss, you said not to hurt her till you got here."

Miron.

Of course, it's Miron.

Nestor's anger over me chasing Miron is fresh in my mind. This is exactly what he didn't want.

This is what he was afraid of.

Miron walks around the room and stops in front of me, staring down at me with his arms folded across his chest. He says nothing, the corners of his mouth turned down as though he finds me disgusting.

"I can see why he chose you," he mutters, contradicting the expression on his face. "Beautiful."

I swallow, tilt my chin up, and glare at him in defiance.

“What do you want from me, Miron?” I say with as much confidence as I can muster.

He ignores my question, turning to his men. “Were you followed?”

“If we were followed, they would’ve come in and saved her by now. We’ve been waiting for you for hours.”

“Do I look like a give a fuck how long you had to wait for me?” Miron growls angrily.

The men look unhappy about being spoken to like that.

My job, the only thing I can do, is to buy time. Nestor will suspect Miron right away. He hates the man. He will find me.

Miron’s phone rings. He huffs, answering it.

“What?” he snaps.

There is a moment of silence. “Deal with it. I’m busy now.”

He slides it back into his pocket and turns to face me again.

“I am sorry about your father’s death, Miron. You were wrong, though. It wasn’t Nestor,” I speak as calmly as possible.

He snorts, laughing, and waves his hand through the air. “No, it was an accident. I know what. I knew it from the beginning.”

“Oh. Then why did you get so angry with Nestor?”

He shakes his head. “I don’t expect you to understand, girl.”

“Do you miss your dad? Even losing someone in an accident is still painful. He was your father, after all.”

He rolls his eyes as though he’s talking to an annoying child. That’s fine. He can see me as an annoyance, as long as he’s still talking.

“My father was not the type of man I’d ever miss.

All he ever did in my life was hold me back.

He is the reason I haven’t been able to take over from Nestor yet.

Fucking patience. He kept telling me to have fucking patience.

Can you believe that? He seemed to believe that the power Nestor had would somehow just fall into my lap without me having to take it.

” He laughs loudly, a bursting sound that erupts from him as he throws his head back and holds his belly.

“You didn’t need to take Nestor’s position to have power. You already have power.”

“I want more,” he screams, his smile gone.

“My father was weak. He fell in love and forgot about our plan. He was pathetic. He kept pushing for peace and telling me to go with the flow, to work at my stepbrother’s side.

He wanted me to grovel like a fucking pathetic little gutter rat until Nestor promoted

me.

” He clenches his fists and moves as though he wants to punch the wall, but stops short of it.

I have an urge to tell him his father was right, that people do work for the things they have in life, but instead I bite my tongue and say, “Sometimes our parents don’t see things the way we do. Sometimes we might even be wrong.”

Miron’s face goes dark with anger.

“Ha,” he says coldly. “Are you saying my dad was right? That I don’t deserve the same power Nestor has?”

Are you saying Nestor is a better man than I?

That I’m not worthy?” He’s practically screaming at me, spit flying from his mouth as anger pulses in his veins over his temples.

The sudden uncontrolled rage tells me he’s had this fight many times before—maybe with his father, maybe with himself.

“I didn’t say that,” I interject quickly, trying to defuse him, but it’s too late. His rage is boiling. He thinks I told him he’s unworthy, and there’s apparently no going back from that.

“Miron,” I say desperately. “I didn’t say that.”

He runs at me and grabs my throat in his broad hands. Locking his fingers tightly around my neck, he squeezes until the air cuts off and my eyes begin to water. “Do you think I give a fuck about what you think of me, bitch?” he hisses in my face, his

breath hot against my cheek.

“Boss, we need her alive, for leverage,” someone says cautiously.

“He only has to think she’s alive, you fucking idiot,” he growls, squeezing even tighter. I want to gag and choke, but I can’t. I can’t draw air in. I can barely see through my tear-soaked eyes.

I’m going to die.

This is how I die.

“Fuck,” one of his men screams and a bullet snaps through the window into the ceiling.

Downstairs, three stories below us, gunfire breaks out in every direction. Miron lets go and staggers away from me, his eyes wide.

“Tell your men to kill everyone,” he screams. “Don’t fucking let anyone come through that door.”

But already the gunfire is sounding up the stairs, and the scream of men as they fall from the third to the first floor, slipping over the railing of the curved staircase, is making Miron nervous.

Miron shakes his head.

“Fuck this,” he snarls and runs to the window, climbing out of it and onto the fire escape.

I scream Nestor’s name.

Again and again.

Miron's men are confused, their boss having abandoned them.

Nestor, Roan, and Benedikt burst into the room, and Miron's men drop their weapons and lie flat on the floor.

Nestor runs straight to me. He wraps his arms around me and holds me. "I'm here, I'm so sorry. I was so worried. We got here as fast as we could."

He leans back, pulling a knife from his pocket. "Are you hurt? What happened?"

I try to answer him, but instead I burst into tears. He cuts my hands and ankles free and lifts me into his arms.

"Miron is gone," Benedikt says, his voice tight with disappointment.

"We'll find him," Nestor growls. "He'll pay for this with his life."

Nestor keeps my face pressed against his chest so that I can't look around as he carries me out of the building.

I'm grateful, because I'm already starting to feel the shock of what's happened, and I don't think I could handle the sight of what I assume is Miron's team of dead guards.

The air smells metallic with their blood and gun powder, mixed together in a scent I don't think I'll ever be able to forget.

"Have the doctor waiting at home," Nestor tells Roan as he climbs into the back of one of the cars outside and holds me on his lap.

Roan nods and dials, letting the phone ring as he pulls away from that horrible building to take us home.

My body is shaking in his arms.

He came for me. I'm safe now.

At home, I ' m lying in Nestor's bed. The doctor has taken blood, checked my heart rate and blood pressure, and is currently doing some basic tests to make sure I'm okay.

I'm tense and anxious, wanting a moment alone to talk to Nestor. From the second he got me home, it's been chaos, and I've been overwhelmed.

"Alright," the doctor says, sounding pleased as he walks back into the room.

Nestor stands up from the foot of the bed and moves aside so that the doctor can talk to both of us.

"The good news is that the baby is fine," he nods, smiling.

"Baby?" Nestor mutters, his brows knitted tightly.

"Yes, there is nothing to worry about and—oh." He glances from me to Nestor. "You didn't know?" he asks me, worried.

"I knew," I say weakly, feeling the weight of the moment press me into the bed.

"I didn't," Nestor says, his voice tight. He folds his arms over his chest. "Was there

anything else, doctor?"

"No, she is going to be okay. Her stress levels are very high, which is to be expected, and I want her to have a calm and restful environment for a while. Nothing that will upset her. Good food and lots of sleep."

"Understood," Nestor says, his eyes locked onto me.

"Thank you, doctor," I say.

Nestor leaves to walk the doctor out, and I sit alone in the bedroom in a full-blown panic. That is not how I wanted him to find out. What will he think of me? This is horrible. This is so bad.

I need to explain to him that I wasn't hiding it. He has to know that I only just found out a short while before I was taken.

My heart is racing, and I'm struggling to breathe when Nestor comes back into the room.

"Hey, hey, calm down, take a deep breath," he says, worried.

"I—I—"

"Stop, Lara. Nothing matters right now except that you need to relax. We don't have to talk about anything. Okay? Stop, take a deep breath."

I do as he says.

He waits for my breathing to even out.

“I’m going to make you some tea. Just—close your eyes and rest, okay?”

He stands up and walks out, clearly not wanting to talk to me.

It hurts. It breaks my heart.

He didn’t even comment on the news.

He didn’t say he was happy or sad.

He didn’t want to talk.

Give him time, Lara. He just needs time.

Page 25

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:28 pm

Walking out of the room and leaving her lying in bed is so difficult for me. I want to ask her a thousand questions.

I want to know why she hid this from me.

She knew I wanted a child, we'd spoken about it before, so why wouldn't she tell me that she's pregnant?

I sigh heavily as I take the stairs, headed to the kitchen to make her tea.

There could be a simple explanation. Just one I don't want to accept.

She doesn't want the baby and was planning to end the pregnancy before I found out about it. Does she not want to be with me?

The idea stirs anger and resentment in me.

No, stop, you can't jump to conclusions.

There must be some way for me to get my mind to stop racing in looping circles. I can't drown her with my questions and worries now. The doctor made it clear. She needs rest. The last thing she needs so drama.

I have to wait until she's ready to talk, and I have to give her space to heal from what she's been through.

Over the next few days, Lara is on bed rest, but she moves to her own room, which

hurts even more. I haven't spoken to her at all about the pregnancy. In fact, I haven't spoken to her about anything. My questions are limited to asking her how she's feeling, and then leaving her in peace.

I'm going crazy.

I can't take much more of this.

I need to know what's going on with her.

Or you need to accept that she doesn't want it and be a fucking man and get over it.

I ' ve spent the day pacing again. Another day locked in this state of rejection and confusion.

I love her. It means nothing if she doesn't love you too, Nestor.

My mother is coming to visit me today. She was horrified when she found out what happened with Miron, and she wanted to come over right away, but I asked her to give me a little time.

She insisted on coming today.

I guess she is as restless as I am; this news must be shocking to her, finding out I was right the entire time, even though she didn't want to believe it.

I have the chef set up a table of snacks and drinks outside on the patio. My mother is fond of her tea spreads, and it takes my mind off everything else to arrange them for her.

When she arrives, she doesn't even say hello—she just wraps her arms around me

and hugs me tight.

“I’m so sorry, Nestor. I honestly didn’t believe it.”

I hold her close, sighing. “I know, Mom. I’m just glad it’s all out in the open now.”

She doesn’t let go for a long time, and I know there is a sense of guilt from her for not listening to me. I don’t feel that way towards her, though; I don’t have anger or blame. The only person at fault here is Miron.

“Come on, I’ve made your favorite,” I say, leading my mom out to the patio to sit in the afternoon sun.

“Where is Lara? I was hoping to see her,” my mom says, sitting down.

“She’s resting, Mom. She went through a lot. And—she’s pregnant,” I say tightly, not sure if I should be celebrating or not.

“Are you serious?” Mom says excitedly.

“I am, but she didn’t tell me about it. I found out from the doctor. I don’t know if she ever planned to tell me.” I pick up a small cupcake and toy with it, not interested in eating it, but needing something to do with my hands.

“I see,” my mother says, understanding my concerns. She reaches out and takes the cupcake from me, setting it aside. “Nestor, I want you to listen to me.”

I turn my body towards her and nod.

“Firstly, I want to tell you how sorry I am—”

“Mom, I don’t—”

“Shush. I said I need you to listen. I need to say this. Okay?”

I nod again. “Sorry.”

“I’m so sorry for not believing you. Miron and I were never close. I hardly spent any time with him. He was close with his father, and I was close with Sergei. Sergei meant the world to me, and because he was a good man, I thought his son was, too.

“So, I wasn’t close to him, but I certainly didn’t think he was after my family or that he would do anything like this. However, I should have trusted you.”

She pauses, swallowing, chewing the inside of her cheek.

“Mom,” I say, taking her hand. “I don’t blame you in any way. Miron is the monster. He’s the one I hate. You have nothing to be sorry for.”

She nods. “Now, tell me, what is going on with Lara?”

“I don’t know,” I shrug, huffing.

“Nestor, I’ve never seen you so happy before. The way you smile when you’re around her, your entire face lights up. Maybe you aren’t even aware yet, but I can see the love in you. And I am certain I can see it in her, too.”

“I don’t think so, Mom. If she loved me, why would she hide the pregnancy? And even now, over the past few days, she’s moved back into her own room, she’s not talking to me...”

As I sit explaining to my mother that Lara is avoiding me, I realize that she’s been in

one room the entire time. I'm the one who's avoiding her.

“What is it?” Mom asks, noticing my pause.

I sigh again, frustrated, not knowing what to do.

“Nestor, my boy, you are a powerful man. You have a great deal of responsibilities, and I understand you need to present a certain face to the world. However, even bratva leaders fall in love. Even bratva leaders fight for love.”

“Do you think she wants me to fight for her?” I ask, tilting my head to the side.

“I think she is unsure of how you feel about her. Have you told her? Have you shown her?”

I let my mother's question turn over in my mind. I haven't shown her, no. And I've never told her how I feel.

Mom waits patiently, picking up a cupcake and enjoying it with a sly smile on her face as though she knows secret things.

I laugh at her. “Don't look so smug.”

“Mothers know everything, my boy,” she laughs. “You still need my advice even at your age. Let me enjoy the moment.”

The conversation with my mother made things glaringly obvious to me. I was the one pushing her away. The doctor said to let her rest, not to abandon her to be alone and feel unwanted. Honestly, it was a stupid mistake.

The night after talking to my mother, I leave a note on Lara's pillow while she's sleeping in the afternoon. It's an invitation to join me for dinner that same evening.

At eight o'clock, when she comes downstairs. I'm waiting for her.

"Hi, I thought you might want to get out of the room for a bit," I smile, holding my hand out to guide her, not to the dining room, but towards the front door.

"Oh, Nestor, I'm not dressed to go out-out," she says in a panic, glancing down at her sweatpants.

"No, but you can come and see something quickly."

I push the door open, and parked at the bottom of the steps is a brand-new Audi.

"Because yours was ruined," I smile, happy to be spoiling her.

"Oh, thank you, that's very kind of you."

"I also know how much you enjoy working on those data puzzles, so I got you this." I hand her a new laptop, the latest MacBook Air.

"Nestor, thank you, this will definitely help." She smiles, but her smile is tight.

"Um, and dinner is waiting for us in the dining room. I ordered Chinese, because you never got your chow mein." As I say, I remember the day she phoned me. I can't believe I forgot. She wanted to tell me something at dinner that night. Something important that she didn't want to say over the phone.

She was going to tell me about the pregnancy. How could I have forgotten such an important thing ? I can't believe I'm only realizing this now.

We're standing on the front step, staring at the car. I turn to face her and smile. "I realized something," I say quietly, watching her.

"Mm?" She says, her shoulders tense, her arms wrapped around herself.

"I need to apologize." I sigh.

"For what?" She knots her brows.

"I've been so caught up in my own head, thinking and overthinking about why you were hiding the pregnancy from me, but you weren't. You were going to tell me that night, weren't you? That's what you were talking about on the phone."

She nods. "I was. I wanted to tell you in person."

"I'm such an idiot," I chuckle. I can't believe I've been worried about all the reasons she was hiding it from me when she wasn't.

I wrap my arm around her waist and Lara lets me lead her to the dining room, where she sits, too tense, too rigid, poking at her bowl of chow mein.

"Lara, what's wrong? Please talk to me," I say gently.

"It's not that I don't appreciate the gifts, Nestor. It's wonderful that you are providing me with the tools I need to work with you to solve all the stuff with Miron. It's just that—"

"That's not what this was about," I say in surprise.

"What do you mean?" she looks up at me, her brows knitted.

“I didn’t want to give you tools —I just wanted to spoil you. I’ve also ordered perfume and a beautiful new dress for you for a date I want to take you on when you feel ready. It’s got nothing to do with work or Miron.”

“Oh. I thought you wanted to strengthen our professional relationship,” she says, setting her chopsticks down and watching me.

“ Professional —” I laugh. “No, Lara. I want to see you smile. I want to spoil you by giving you everything your heart has ever wanted. I want to give you the world because— because I love you. ”

Her mouth drops open, and her eyes shoot wide.

“You love me?” she stammers, her eyes glittering with the threat of tears.

“I do,” I chuckle.

“What about—you only kept me here because I owed you the debt of clearing my debts. I sold myself to you. How can you love me? I thought you only wanted an heir from me.”

I stand up and walk around the table to her side.

I pull her from her seat into my arms. “Lara, I never saw it that way. I never thought you owed me anything; when I made that ‘deal’, it was only because I didn’t want you to leave.

Even back then, my heart was falling for you.

I might not have understood it, but I was already fighting to keep you close.

You never sold yourself to me, Lara. I wanted to help you, and I wanted to have you near me. ”

Lara looks bewildered as she stares up at me, and I start to worry that her expression is one of concern.

I step away from her, not dropping my arms from around her, but giving her a tiny bit of space.

“Lara?” I say tensely, and the questions I want to ask won’t come to my lips.

She seems to understand my fears, and a wide smile breaks across her face.

“I love you too, Nestor. I am so madly in love with you, and I was too scared to tell you. I was scared you didn’t feel the same way.”

Her words slam into me, and happiness washes over my entire soul.

“You love me, too?” I laugh, pulling her tight against me again.

She giggles, crushed against me. “I can’t breathe,” she complains, still laughing.

I pull her away again and wrap my hand around her cheek. Tilting her head up towards me, I lean down and kiss her.

All this time, we were both too scared to tell the other, and all this time, we felt the same way.

The kiss sends fire flooding through me, an intense, deeply emotional yearning for her. Something so beautiful, so real, that it causes me to choke back tears that I have never cried before.

Lara leans away from me and gently touches my face.

“We’re both idiots, aren’t we?” she smiles.

“Yes, we really are. We could have been enjoying this ages ago,” I laugh.

“Well, if you don’t mind, I’m going to be sharing your bed from now on.”

“Are you kidding? The housekeeper is already moving your stuff across to the open closets in my room,” I tease.

“Let’s never keep secrets from each other, Nestor. I want to tell you everything, forever.”

“Let’s get married again,” I say, watching her eyes light up. “A real wedding, with a beautiful dress and my family there.”

She squeals in excitement and jumps into my arms.

The dinner is forgotten as I carry her upstairs to our room.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:28 pm

“Do you think he’s going to grow any bigger?” I ask, standing sideways in the mirror and admiring how much my belly has expanded over the last six months.

The dress Nestor bought me for tonight’s family dinner only just fits, even though it’s designed for my pregnancy.

“He’s going to be a giant. Are you ready to go? You know how Mom gets when we’re late,” Nestor says, standing behind me and wrapping his hands beneath my belly, lifting it slightly to hold the weight for me.

I groan in relief and lean into him. “Stay there. Don’t you dare move.”

He chuckles, leaning down to kiss my neck.

“I couldn’t imagine you looking more beautiful than you did before, but throughout this whole pregnancy, you’re glowing more and more each day.”

“I’m just happy I’m one of the lucky girls.” I grin at my reflection in the mirror. He’s right. I am glowing. And despite the size of our son growing in my belly, this pregnancy has been magical for me.

“Lucky?” he asks, letting the weight of our baby return to me as he steps away to grab his jacket and slip it over his crisp white shirt.

I turn to adjust the collar, letting my hand drift over his chest.

“Yes, some girls hate being pregnant, and some girls love it,” I shrug.

“I see. Does it help that you have the most amazing husband in the entire world who would do anything for you?” he asks.

“Mm. Let me think,” I say, holding my finger to my chin, scrunching my nose.

“Lara, you better be very careful about your answer,” he warns me, an edge of mischief in his voice.

“I’m not sure. My husband has been neglecting me lately.”

“Excuse me?” he snarls, looking horrified.

“Oh, look at the time, we really have to go,” I grin, quickly grabbing my own jacket and making for the door.

“Lara Rostov, you are going to be in a great deal of trouble when you get home tonight and your husband decides to do anything but neglect you.”

“Mm. Promises, promises,” I say, glancing over my shoulder at him.

He growls, that divine sound that he makes when he thrusts into me from behind.

I’ve been drowning in need of him during the pregnancy. My hormones are all over the place, but one thing that has been steady is that I want him. All the time. Every morning, every night.

I’m surprised that he’s keeping up—and still offering more.

If we weren’t going to be late, I would have pounced on him already, but we just had fun in the shower, and we have a dinner to get to.

Nestor catches up with me and wraps his arm around my waist as we walk out to the

car. “You are a cheeky little fox, aren’t you?” he grins, leaning down to kiss me as he pulls the car door open.

“Your cheeky little fox.”

“Don’t ever forget that.” He slaps my ass and closes the door once I’m inside.

On the way to his mother’s place, he gets a call from Benedikt. “Sorry, my love, I need to take this,” he says, pressing to answer the call on his Bluetooth.

“Benedikt. How are you, man?”

“Good, good. I’m arriving next Tuesday. We can go through the plans for the operation then. I have a few ideas I want to run past you.”

“Good, that’s perfect. Listen, I’m just on my way out so—”

“Wait, before you go. I didn’t call about that update. I just wanted to let you know that Miron was spotted by one of my informants.”

“Where?” Nestor asks, immediately tense.

“On the streets of Las Vegas. I sent my men to the location, but he was long gone. He’s a slippery little snake, but I have my eyes peeled. Now that I know he’s in my city, I will be on high alert. I’ll let you know if I hear anything more.”

“Thanks, man. We’ll get that asshole eventually. “

“We will. Enjoy your thing,” Benedikt says, then hangs up the call.

Benedikt and Nestor are getting on a lot better since he helped him rescue me. Nestor told me that he thought Benedikt would get bigheaded about it and hold it over him as a debt, but he didn't. They became closer.

He's like part of our family now. I'll forever be grateful that he was willing to help, and Nestor is seeing their business and partnership in a different way. They're friends now. Genuine friends.

Leticia is waiting at the front door when we arrive. She glances at her watch with a stern look on her face.

I grin and pull her into my arms. "Sorry, we're late, Mom. It was all Nestor's fault." I wink at Nestor, and he shakes his head.

"It's always Nestor's fault," Leticia huffs, shooting daggers at her son. "The roast is almost ruined because you can't be here on time."

"Mom, we're three minutes late," Nestor laughs, following her into the house.

Ulyana jumps up from the sofa and shouts, "Finally." Except she's taunting Nestor, rolling her eyes at her mother's dramatics.

"I'm practically wasting away here, I'm so starving from the wait," Ulyana says, clutching her stomach in agony and staggering across the living room.

She stops in front of me and grabs me in a big hug, then wraps her hands around my belly. "How is my favorite little boy in the whole entire world?" she asks, talking to my belly, not me.

"I'm also okay," I grin.

"Pish posh," she dismisses me with a wave. "I'm having a conversation with my

nephew. Don't interrupt. This is serious."

I giggle and my tummy bounces. The baby kicks against Ulyana's hand, and she screams in excitement. "I felt it," she shouts.

These family dinners are some of my favorite moments. I had no idea how much I needed these people. Once strangers, now they are the glue that holds my heart together.

They are everything to me.

Nestor slips his hand over my leg beneath the table as I set my knife and fork down on my empty plate.

"You ate more than I did," he teases. "Was he hungry?"

I hold my belly and groan. "I think he's still hungry," I laugh.

Leticia grabs my plate, ready to dish up some more. "Our growing boy already likes his grandmother's cooking the best," she says proudly.

"Oh, please, Leticia, I can't possibly eat any more," I laugh, stopping her.

"Fine, I'll pack you a takeaway. It will be the perfect midnight snack."

"That would be wonderful. I'll kick Nestor out of bed and make him bring it to me at three in the morning."

Ulyana giggles.

"Don't laugh, she's done it before, more than once." He grins at me, wrapping his arm around my shoulder and pulling me close. "It's practically abuse."

“Punishment,” I agree, winking at him.

“Oh, get a room,” Ulyana complains.

“On that note, thank you for dinner, we are going to head home.” Nestor stands, pulling me to my feet.

“We can’t eat and run,” I say in horror, not wanting to offend Leticia.

“Oh, please, I’ve had enough of you two. Come back when my grandchild is born,” she teases. “Go home and rest, Lara, you need it.”

We say goodbye with lots of hugs and head back to our car.

All the way home, Nestor’s hand is brushing over me. It’s driving me crazy with need, and in a naughty moment, I wiggle my dress higher and slip his hand between my legs.

He almost slams on the brakes, he’s so surprised, but then slides his fingers inside me and groans.

“I can’t drive like this,” he stammers, pushing his fingers deeper inside me.

“Don’t stop,” I whisper, rocking my hips forward and spreading my legs wider.

Nestor turns to the right and takes the car off the main road into a parking lot overlooking the beach.

“What are you doing?” I ask in horror as he turns the car off and pulls me onto his lap.

“This is your fault,” he growls, tugging his pants open and freeing his throbbing cock.

“Nestor, we’ll get caught.”

“It’ll be worth it,” he grins, pushing my dress higher and positioning me over his cock.

I glance out of the window. It’s tinted, and it’s dark outside, but we are right out in the open on the beach.

I’m about to complain again when he pushes his cock into my pussy and forces it to stretch wide open for him.

The pleasure is indescribable as he thrusts deep into me.

I moan, gasping for breath, clinging to him in the small space in the front seat of his car.

“Do you want me to stop, little one?” he whispers darkly against my ear. He knows I can’t stop. He knows I will claw him to pieces if he tries to stop now.

I whimper in his arms as he thrusts into me again.

He chuckles and says, “That’s what I thought. You love this cock. You can’t get enough of it.”

I sit up on his lap and tilt my head back as he runs his hands over my breasts. My nipples are hard against the fabric of my dress, and he pinches one between his fingers, shooting a spike of sensation through my body. I shiver in delight and he groans as my pussy tightens around him.

He starts to move faster, lifting me, holding my hips, letting me hover above him as he slams into me, over and over again, causing the entire car to shake and move.

I'm not even trying to be quiet anymore.

I'm crying out, each thrust sending me on a wild ride of desire and lust, pushing me closer to the edge.

He grabs a handful of my hair and pulls my ear against his mouth. "I love you, Lara," he whispers, penetrating my body.

He pulls me harder onto his lap, grinding his cock against me, knowing that this breaks me every single time.

He smiles when I start to shudder against him, my legs locking around him. His cock is pulsing inside me, and suddenly my pussy tightens, every muscle alive, twitching, throbbing, exploding as the orgasm slams into me.

Nestor holds me hard against his cock, not letting me move until every drop of pleasure has run through me and exploded out of him.

The car is misted by our body heat.

He grabs a handful of my hair and pushes his lips against mine, kissing me fiercely, with passion and love.

"Fuck, you are incredible, little fox," he sighs. I can feel his heart racing against my chest as he holds me.

"Will they arrest us if they catch us?" I ask with a naughty giggle.

"Mm. You know I own this city, right?" he muses.

"Do you know what else you own?" I ask, leaning back to look at my gorgeous husband.

He narrows his eyes, confused. “What?” he asks, still rocking me back and forth gently on his cock even though we’ve both finished.

“You own me,” I say.

His cock throbs.

I bite my lip.

“I do own you,” he says, rocking me with more force, pushing himself deep into me.

“Seriously?” I say as his cock starts getting harder.

“It’s your fault, my love, again,” he whispers, pulling my lips back to his.

I let out a sweet moan as he starts to fuck me again.

I will never get enough of this man.

THE END

Dear reader, thanks so much for reading Nestor and Lara’s story. I hope you enjoyed it.