

NIKOLAI II

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Sneak Peek #2

"Vivi, turn your webcam. I can't see the full piece." The staccato accent of Niels Mikkelsen's voice echoed in the sunroom Nikolai had converted to a home studio for me. "The easel with your new work is blocking my view."

"Hang on." I wiped the palette knife I had been using on the nearest rag, cleaning away the ridge of cerulean blue oil paint clinging to the metal, and dropped it on my worktable. I moved a few steps to the left and turned the stack of art books supporting my laptop and webcam so Niels could see the painting I had finished earlier that week. Sliding to the side, I asked, "Can you see it now?"

"Yes!" Excitement filled his deep, masculine voice. "My goodness, you've really grown since the last show." Rustling sounds filtered across the speakers as he moved aside the papers and files on his desk and leaned in for a better look. "But you're also returning to your roots, I see. Mixed media?"

"Layers," I said. "It's about the layers."

"Yes," he hummed his agreement. "You're maturing. I can see that you have found something very interesting to say."

The compliment from the Danish billionaire and world-renowned collector of modern art brought a smile to my face. Although he had enjoyed my show earlier in the year, Niels hadn't wasted the chance to deconstruct my paintings and encourage me with criticism that he delivered with an academic air. "I'm glad you like it."

"I do." He slid back into his seat, the leather creaking and the springs of the chair groaning. "I suppose I don't have to look very far for your muse."

"And who would that be?" I glanced at the screen to see him watching me rather intently. The handsome face filling my laptop screen could have easily been printed on the glossy front of a men's magazine or in a couture editorial. He had the strangest eyes, the hazel color an enthralling mix of whiskey brown with jade flecks, and sharp cheekbones. The intensity of his gaze made me glance away. If he had been an alpha

wolf, I would have been a pack member who happily bared her neck in submission rather than risk being torn to pieces.

"That Russian of yours, of course." Leaning back in his chair, he interlaced his fingers behind his head. "Where is Nikolai? Usually when we have our chats, he's hovering in the background." He clicked his teeth. "Such jealousy."

I rolled my eyes at the way he tried get a rise out of me. Nikolai didn't hover, but there was no love lost between the man I loved and the Danish tycoon who was sponsoring my debut on the international art scene. "He's probably on his way home." I peeked at the clock in the lower right-hand corner of my screen. "We're headed to a barbecue with friends in a little while."

"How very domestic," Niels replied rather dryly.

"I rather enjoy domesticity."

"I'm sure that you do." There was no mistaking the slight tone of censure to his voice. "Playing house is all very well and good, but remember that you have other talents beyond flower arrangements, cooking dinner and keeping house."

I shot him an annoyed look. "You are so abrasive sometimes."

He shrugged. "What you call abrasive, I call truth. You have an amazing talent as an artist, Vivian. If you continue nurturing your gift and maturing in your art, you have a truly bright future ahead of you. Husbands and children have a bad reputation for ruining the promising careers of young women."

His words stung in a way he couldn't have imagined. I fought the urge to touch the gentle curve to my belly that I easily hid with my painter's smock and loose dresses. Just days before walking the stage to accept my bachelor's degree, I had discovered that I was pregnant. It had taken only the simplest calculation to realize that we had likely conceived our first child the night we had marked our bodies with matching tattoos, the night Nikolai claimed me as his queen.

The discovery had filled me with elation and terror. Elation because I couldn't imagine anything sweeter or more wondrous than creating a beautiful new life with Nikolai. Terror because I secretly feared that the madness that had driven my mother to suicide lurked within me. Pregnancy had been the trigger that sent her down that long spiraling road of mental deterioration that included an attempt at drowning me before finally hanging herself in a motel room.

My stomach lurched violently—and not with morning sickness—at the thought that even a single seed of her illness had begun to sprout within me. Nikolai had been so overjoyed by the discovery that we were expecting a child, and I couldn't bear to burden him with my admittedly overblown worries. My mother had shown symptoms of her mental illness earlier in life. So far, I had operated on an even keel.

Once again, I convinced and reminded myself that I was simply overreacting. It was just first-time pregnancy nerves and the unknown ways adding a child to the life I shared with Nikolai would change things. *You're fine. You're being a drama queen. Let it go.*

"Vivian?" Niels called to me. "Have we lost the connection?"

"No." I turned toward the screen and smiled at him. "I spaced out for a second thinking of some last minute things I need to take care of before we leave for London on Sunday."

"You're staying with Yuri?"

"We are."

"I'm going to leave Amsterdam in the morning. My first stop will be the gallery to make sure everything is exactly the way it needs to be." He tapped his fingertips on the gleaming burl wood of his desk. "Has Lena been prepping you for the press?"

"She has. I'm sure we'll discuss it during the flight."

"Did she mention Tatiana Melnikova?"

The name didn't ring a bell. "No. Why?"

He waved his hand. "One of the journalists I was speaking with earlier in the week at a gallery showing in Berlin mentioned that he was coming to London to see your new collection. He asked whether this Tatiana woman had sponsored your show, and I thought she might run in your circle of friends there in Houston."

I took a moment to think about the many acquaintances we had but came up empty-handed. "No. Sorry."

"She's probably some rich Russian who wants to shove her way onto the art scene. It's little matter." He leaned forward. "We need to discuss your plans for next year. We should consider another show in the spring in Houston and then perhaps something in New York. You'll need to give some serious thought to the agents I've recommended and—"

"Niels," I gently interrupted, "let's get through this show first." I didn't want to tell him that early next year I would be waiting to go into labor. I had just started the eleventh week of my pregnancy and was due in mid-January. Though I had no plans to give up painting, I also had to be realistic about juggling studio time and travel with a breastfeeding infant.

"Fine," he agreed with a slight frown. "We'll table this discussion until I see you in London."

I had no intention of taking up this discussion that soon but didn't feel like pushing the issue. "Sure."

He nodded. "I'm very sorry that we didn't get to have our dinner last week, but my business over here couldn't be rescheduled. I'm very much looking forward to seeing you next week. And your husband," he added as if it were an afterthought.

"Niels."

Startled by Nikolai's greeting, I glanced over my shoulder and spotted my husband sauntering into our sunroom-slash-studio. He carried one of the ripe, juicy peaches from the trees in our backyard. I had been craving them so much lately, and he never failed to pick the perfect one each time he came home.

Crossing the studio, he set aside the peach when he reached my side and placed a hand on my shoulder. His fingertips grazed my neck, and I leaned into his touch, seeking the comforting, familiar warmth of him.

"See?" Niels said with a laugh. "Always hovering in the background."

Ignoring the barb, Nikolai asked, "How's business, Niels? Everything floating along nicely?"

I didn't miss the slight narrowing of the Danish businessmen's eyes. The two men had just shared some secret communication. Judging by that brief and almost imperceptible micro-expression, Niels wasn't pleased. What did Nikolai know?

"Business is fine. Better than ever," Niels replied. "And you? How are the new partnerships working out? Because I always find that mergers can be a bit...messy."

That reference I did understand. Though Nikolai tried to shield me from all the dirty details of the underworld, not even he could keep the whispers about my father and his father going into business south of the border from me. Judging by the newspaper articles I read online every morning, the cartel my father had once served so

faithfully seemed to be preparing to go to war with him and the men who had chosen to follow him.

"After some corporate restructuring, things will settle down."

In any other setting, the words would have been innocuous. In this instance, they were ominous and threatening. Corporate restructuring could only mean one thing—hits. They were probably going to happen from the top down. Did he mean my father? Or his? Or the cartel?

"Let's hope." Niels leaned forward and folded his arms on the desk. "Your wife is looking exceptionally beautiful today. One might even say she's positively blooming."

Did he know? How? I had gained less than five pounds and dressed so carefully. Was it that easy to see now? I schooled my features and refused to let him have the satisfaction of knowing he had rattled me.

Nikolai took it in stride. "Yes, I'm a very lucky man."

"You truly are." Niels held his gaze. "See that you remember that. Pamper her. Spoil her. Remind her that she's precious. There is no end to the long line of men who would happily take your place." He pushed up the cuff of his shirt and glanced at his watch. "I have to get to a meeting. I wish you both safe travels. I'm looking forward to seeing you next week."

"Same here," I assured him, though I doubted Nikolai shared my sentiment.

"Until then," Niels replied with a smile.

"Bye."

The second the video-call ended, Nikolai reached out and shut my laptop. He muttered under his breath, but I heard every word. "Insufferable fucking prick."

I swatted his arm. "Be nice."

"I am extremely nice. He is extremely annoying."

I stroked the silky fabric of the tie I had chosen for him that morning. "You shouldn't let him get to you. He enjoys pushing your buttons."

"Because he's perverse," Nikolai grumbled.

"Yes," I agreed, thinking of the stories Lena had told me about the man's rather dark sexual desires. "He's incredibly helpful when it comes to my career, but there's no rule that says I have to rely on him as my shepherd through this new world." Not

wanting Nikolai to have something else to stress about when he already had so many burdens to bear, I said, "After the show, I'll put some distance between us."

"No." Nikolai combed his fingers through my hair. "He's the best contact to have in your network. I can't stand the way he openly flirts with you, but I won't ask you to cut ties with him." He pressed a tender kiss to my forehead. "You're right. I shouldn't let him get to me. He only enjoys it more when he gets a reaction from me."

Not wanting to talk about Niels anymore, I gestured toward the peach. "You brought me a snack."

"Of course," he said in between light kisses that he dotted along my cheek. He nibbled my neck before sucking on a sensitive patch of skin. "But first I think I'll have mine."

"Kolya," I whispered, my toes curling against the floor. "Now?"

"I've been thinking about you all day. I couldn't get out of Samovar fast enough." He tugged on the strings tied at the small of my back and peeled my smock away from my dress. Tossing it aside, he spun me around and pressed me back against my worktable.

"Are we alone?" I nervously glanced at the closed door. Ever since Erin and Ivan's wedding, Nikolai had beefed up our home security. Danny, Boy, and Arty were all familiar faces around the house these days. Sergei had officially left my husband's employ a week earlier and had been freed from the family after the underground bare-knuckle tournament. I didn't know the full score there, but I sensed Nikolai, Sergei and Bianca were keeping a big, fat secret from me.

A week earlier, I had overheard Arty talking to Kostya about *nochniye volki*, the Night Wolves gang, but both men had clammed up the second they noticed me coming out of the library. I wanted to know everything—but I *didn't* want to know everything. I tried to remind myself what Nikolai had said to me in April. I had to trust that he would tell me what I needed to know.

"No one will bother us." He placed his hands on either side of me and lowered his head, capturing my mouth. His passionate kiss made me dizzy with desire.

I clutched at his arms and whimpered, "Kolya."

"God, Vee," he said, tearing his lips away from mine. "That sound does crazy fucking things to me."

I gulped and tried to catch my breath. He grasped my hand and dragged it down between our bodies. "Feel what you do to me."

My heart beat wildly in my chest, thumping against my ribcage like a hummingbird on a sugar high. Though I had come into our marriage a virgin, I had quickly gained confidence in my sexuality under Nikolai's loving, encouraging hands. Even so, I still blushed madly when my fingertips found the hard outline of his cock. He pressed my hand against it, and I grasped him through the fabric of his perfectly tailored trousers.

Groaning my name, he leaned into my hand and kissed me again. His fingers tangled in my hair and tightened into a fist as he tugged my head back, exposing my vulnerable throat to his lips and teeth. I shivered with arousal and whimpered even louder as he laved and nipped at my neck. Stroking him through his pants, I tried to slow down my racing breaths. A rush of wet heat pooled between my thighs, and my breasts ached with anticipation.

Not that I had to wait very long. He crouched slightly and slid his hands to the backs of my thighs. In one swift movement, he hoisted me right up onto my worktable. He shoved aside clean brushes and tubes of paint to make more room for me. His tongue stabbed against mine while his dexterous hands made quick work of whisking away my paisley print skater dress and panties. I hadn't worn a bra that morning because pregnancy had made me so sensitive and uncomfortable.

Taking a step back, Nikolai shrugged out of his jacket and loosened his tie. His hungry gaze roamed my naked body as he unbuttoned and rolled up the sleeves of his shirt. "I wish you could see yourself right now. You remind me of a wood nymph perched on the edge of that table. All you need are wings."

I smiled at the description. "There's a costume shop on the way to Bianca's house."

He laughed. "Don't tempt me."

"I'm your wife. I'm supposed to tempt you."

"Mission accomplished," he murmured and moved closer to me. His gaze slid to the art supplies lining the center of the table. He ran his fingers over the bristles of the many brushes standing upright in the mason jars I preferred for their storage. "These are clean?"

"Yes." I watched him carefully. What did he have in mind?

Nikolai plucked a big, fat hake brush from the jar where I kept miscellaneous tools. Though I had never been very good at the sumi-e style of painting, I liked the effect the brush made on canvas. After watching my fellow artsy friend Hadley Rivera teaching the ink wash technique to her students at the arts center she owned, I had gone right out to my favorite supply store to buy four of them.

But Nikolai had no intention of using that brush to paint...

"Oh!" I sucked in a surprised breath when he trailed the brush along my neck, down my chest and across my breast. He swirled the super soft bristles around my nipple. It felt incredible, and my body responded instantly. The puckered peaks tightened, and I broke out into goose bumps.

My gaze darted to Nikolai's face. His lust-darkened eyes were focused on my breasts as he teased them with the brush. Raw need flared in his irises. When he lowered his head and suckled me, I nearly slid off the table. My delighted moan echoed in the room. He gripped my waist, holding me in place, and continued to torment me with the brush and his mouth.

"Lean back," he ordered.

In a haze of lust, I did as instructed and leaned back on my palms. He pushed my thighs apart and bared me to his heated gaze. I held my breath as he dragged the fat brush down my belly, swirling it around my navel before guiding it even lower. The feathery bristles glided over my bare lips, and I shuddered. "Oh."

He smiled wickedly and swept the brush up and down the seam of my sex. My fingers curled behind me, my nails scratching at the surface of the table, and I fought the urge to shut my legs and stop the sensual torture. He tossed aside the fat, soft calligraphy brush and selected a bright brush from the jar where I stored my oil brushes.

I bit my lower lip when he parted the most delicate part of me with his fingers. He slipped his fingers down to my opening and encountered the slick wetness seeping from me. Holding my gaze, he slowly penetrated me with one and then two fingers, burying them to the knuckle in my sheath. Stomach trembling, I felt those first curls of desire blossom in my core. I shuddered when the sable bristles of the paintbrush grazed my clitoris.

"You aren't the only artist in this house." Nikolai whispered against my lips before flicking his tongue against mine. "Let's see if I can paint a brilliant masterpiece."

I surrendered to his erotic kisses while his nimble fingers did crazy, dirty things to me. The firm strokes of the paintbrush drove me wild. My aching nub throbbed almost painfully as I moved closer and closer to the edge. The coil of bliss in my belly tightened. In and out, his fingers plunged into my soaking core. Round and round and side to side, the paintbrush flicked at my pulsing clitoris.

My breaths were shuddery now, almost panicked. A flutter invaded my belly—and I exploded with sheer ecstasy. I rocked my hips and lifted my bottom right off of the table, riding Nikolai's hand while his mouth skimmed my throat and my breasts. He had learned all the secrets to my body and knew when I had had enough. His fingers went still and his kisses turned gentler and sweeter.

The paintbrush dropped to the table with a clatter. He cupped the back of my head and ravished my mouth. I clung to his chest, fisting his shirt in my trembling hands. When he broke our kiss, he pulled back just enough to gaze into my eyes. "Look at you. Lips swollen, pupils dilated..." He teased his tongue against mine. "You're practically begging for my cock."

I gripped his belt and jerked him toward me. "Do you want me to beg? I'll happily slide down to my knees right now."

He chuckled darkly and touched his lips to my forehead. "The tile floor in here is too hard. I won't have you bruising your knees for me."

Amused by his reply, I smiled at him. He picked up the peach he had brought me and held it up to my mouth. I could smell the citrus scent of the all-natural cleaner he used on the produce from his garden and small orchard. Though he preferred to garden organically, he was taking no chances with me or the baby.

I took a small bite of the peach. The yellow flesh yielded easily and spilled sweet juice on my tongue. Nikolai stunned me by dragging the exposed fruit around my right nipple, spreading the sugary nectar all over my skin. I inhaled a sharp breath when his tongue followed the same path. "Nikolai!"

He just laughed mischievously and continued painting my breasts with the peach juice and lapping it up with his tongue. I marveled at the sight of him. He had been so tense lately. Seeing him grinning and hearing his laugh filled me with such happiness. I

loved knowing that I was the one he came to for comfort and relaxation. I was the only one who could put a smile like that on his handsome face.

The peach left a wet trail down my belly to the vee between my thighs. I held my breath and waited to see if he would take it any farther, but he stopped just short of where I wanted his touch most. His tongue traveled the same wet line but kept on going until it hit the jackpot. I threw back my head and spread my thighs as he went down on me. He zeroed in on the rhythm I loved most, flicking and fluttering his tongue over that swollen kernel until my thighs were tensing.

But the moment I started to get close, he stopped. "No!" I thrust my hips toward him, but he was already standing.

Grinning devilishly, he swept me up into his arms and playfully swatted my bare bottom. "Patience, Vee."

"Please," I pleaded and wrapped my arms around his shoulders. Nuzzling into his neck, I nipped at him and sucked hard on his skin. "I want you."

He carried me to the wide, low chair in the corner and deposited me on the plush upholstered cushion. "I'm yours, Vee."

Reaching for his belt, I ordered, "Show me."