

NIKOLAI II
By Roxie Rivera

NIKOLAI II (Her Russian Protector #6)

Claimed and cherished by Houston's most ruthless mob boss, artist Vivian Kalasnikov embraces her new position as Nikolai's wife and the lonely, dangerous role as queen of Houston's underworld. But Nikolai is keeping secrets from her, and the whispers of a coming street war leave her terrified for the man she so passionately loves—and the tiny life growing inside her.

Nikolai finally has everything he's ever wanted—power, wealth and a family with Vivian, the beautiful sun who lights up his dark life. But as his young wife prepares for her debut on the international art stage, he finds himself drawn into a bloody conflict that threatens the quiet life he's painstakingly built. He can feel the promise of his future happiness slipping through his fingers like grains of sand.

One wrong move, and he'll lose Vivian and his child forever. One wrong move, and he won't see another sunrise.

The sins of their fathers have come back to haunt Vivian and Nikolai. To protect his beloved wife and his heir, he'll do absolutely anything. The brutal gangster who violently conquered the streets of Moscow and Houston is about to be unleashed—and Houston's underworld will never be the same again.

Ivan (Her Russian Protector #1)

Dimitri (Her Russian Protector #2)

Yuri (Her Russian Protector #3)

A Very Russian Christmas (Her Russian Protector #3.5)

Nikolai (Her Russian Protector #4)

Sergei (Her Russian Protector #5)

Sergei II (Her Russian Protector #5.5)

Nikolai II (Her Russian Protector #6)

Kostya (Her Russian Protector #7) Coming July 2014

Alexei (Her Russian Protector #8) Coming Fall 2014

Newsletter Link

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Prologue

April

"Where are we going?" My gaze darted from the windshield to the strong, proud profile of my husband's handsome face. The pale blue glow from the dashboard lights highlighted all the features I loved so much. Unable to help myself, I reached across the short distance between us and trailed my finger along the scar on Nikolai's jaw. My fingertip traced the curving line of his chin and dipped into the shallow cleft there.

"It's a surprise, *zolota*." He cast a sinfully sexy smile my way, and my core trembled wildly. The realization that this smile was mine and mine alone did crazy things to my heart. With everyone else, he maintained that impenetrable wall. Others were met with a coldness that chilled to the bone with a single, sharp glance.

But not me. Never me. With me, Nikolai was warm and loving because I was his *solnyshka* and his *zolota*—his sun and his gold.

"You said you don't like surprises." I tapped his lower lip, and he responded by playfully nipping at my finger and making me giggle.

"I don't, but it's different when it's a surprise for you."

"Why?"

"Because it simply is." He turned his head and kissed my palm before turning his attention to the wet highway that he deftly navigated. Rarely did Nikolai drive us anywhere. For security reasons, he usually preferred to let Kostya, Sergei or Danny handle that rather mundane duty. Tonight was special for some reason. He had even chosen to drive the Continental coupe that he babied so much.

"Did you enjoy the opera?" He grasped my hand and interlaced our fingers.

"I did." That morning he had surprised me with tickets to a performance and instructions that I was to be ready to leave the house by six. After a quick shopping trip with Erin and Bianca, I had popped in to see Holly Phillips at her salon so she could work her magic.

"I'm glad." He lifted my hand and kissed the back of it. "What did you think of dinner? If you didn't enjoy the private dining at the theater, we can visit one of the restaurants in the Theater District the next time. We won't have a problem getting a table."

No, we definitely wouldn't. That was one of the perks to Nikolai owning one of Houston's finest and most popular restaurants. He had contacts at all the hottest places in town. "I enjoyed the dinner and dessert at the theater, but I enjoy trying new places."

"Then I will make different arrangements for our next night out." He rubbed his thumb in a slow circle along the back of my hand.

The idea of having a regular date night with Nikolai filled me with such happiness. Before our rather rushed wedding, we hadn't had a chance to date like a normal couple. A crazed psychopath, an angry drug lord and my fugitive father had complicated things and pushed us into a hastily arranged wedding without a real courtship.

The city was quieter now and the underworld seemed to be in a calm period, but I knew better than to think it would last. Sooner or later, all hell would break loose—and Nikolai would be right in the center of it.

Not wanting to entertain those terrifying thoughts, I jokingly replied, "If I had known you were a patron of the opera and had a box, I might have studied German or Italian instead of Russian and Spanish."

He laughed. "Every year, I hope they'll announce one of Tchaikovsky's operas on the schedule, maybe *Iolanta* or *Eugene Onegin*, but every year, it's Wagner or Puccini. Not that I don't enjoy their operas but..."

"I understand."

As he exited the loop and merged into one lane traffic with heavy construction, his hawk-like gaze skipped to the rear view mirror. Instinctively, I glanced at the passenger side mirror. Though the rain drops made it difficult to see, I spotted the black SUV following us and stiffened. The memories of the blitz attack that had nearly killed him were too fresh.

"Easy," he said and squeezed my hand. "It's Artyom and Danny."

Looking more carefully, I relaxed. It was one of the black Escalades from Nikolai's fleet. "Have they been trailing us all night?"

He glanced at me with amusement twitching his sinful mouth. "What do you think, *rybka*?"

The pet name brought a smile to my face. "I think you probably had some of your men in the audience."

He nodded. "Kostya enjoys the opera. He brought Boy with him and stuck him in an aisle seat near the rear. Artyom and Danny stayed in the SUV, just in case."

Just in case we needed to make a hasty exit amid a hail of gunfire or worse, I silently finished.

He must have known what I was thinking. "You're safe with me, Vee. No one will ever hurt you again."

I wanted to believe him. I wanted to believe that no one would ever harm us again, but I knew better. If my life had taught me anything, it was that there were no guarantees. "You can't promise me that."

"*Solnyshka.*" He unlaced our fingers and slid his hand to the back of my neck, cupping me gently but firmly. "You are my wife. You belong to me. I protect what's mine."

It was an outrageously alpha statement, but I understood that was simply Nikolai's way. From him, that was the strongest declaration of love possible. "Do you belong to me?"

"Always," he answered without hesitation. "Forever."

"So how do I protect you?"

He shot me a strange look. "That's not your concern."

"It is," I insisted. "If you take care of me, I'm supposed to take care of you."

"You do take care of me, Vee." He caressed my neck. "In your own way," he added. "In the way that means the most to me."

"I worry about you." We didn't speak of his role as the Russian mob boss of Houston very often. It was a fact that was acknowledged and accepted between us, but it wasn't a topic that we discussed. Even now, I felt uncomfortable bringing it up. "I read the newspapers, and I see what's happening with the cartels in Mexico and I—"

"Vee," he murmured softly. "Don't."

"But—"

"Do you trust me?"

There was no question about that. "Yes."

"Then trust that I will tell you what you need to know," he said. "If I say nothing about my work, that's a good thing."

"I know."

His jaw visibly clenched at my whispered reply. It wasn't a sign of irritation with me. No, he was angry with himself. "I'm sorry."

"For what?"

"Dragging you into this life of mine," he said. "You deserve so much better. If I was less selfish, I would have made sure you ended up with a man like Misha or Viktor or Leonid."

I blinked at the mention of Yuri Novakovsky's fellow billionaire oligarchs who visited Samovar every time their business trips brought them to Houston. "You being selfish and wanting me all for yourself has nothing to do with it. I never would have been happy with those men."

"You don't know that. You never tried."

"I didn't need to try dating men like that. It was you, Kolya. It was always you." Narrowing my eyes at him, I reached over and pinched his leg through the crisp fabric of his trousers. "And why are you trying to convince me I should have run away with one of Yuri's friends? Do you regret marrying me?"

"Never." He hurriedly and firmly reassured me. "You are the best thing that ever happened to me. Marrying you was the proudest moment of my life and the smartest decision I have ever made." He caressed my neck and traced the shell of my ear with his thumb. "Because I love you, I want the best for you. It would have been better for you to marry an obscenely rich businessman who could give you everything you deserve."

I reached up and clasped his hand between both of mine. "You've given me everything I want and more. I don't need *things*, Nikolai. I only need you."

He eased on the brake as we approached an intersection. The yellow light switched to red and he made a full stop. With his foot on the brake, he surprised me by leaning over, cupping my face between both hands and capturing my mouth in a deeply sensual and possessive kiss. I gripped his arms as he flicked his tongue against the seam of my mouth and silently asked for entrance. A little whimper escaped my throat when the kiss took an erotic turn that left me trembling inside.

Always aware of his surroundings, Nikolai gently ended our kiss seconds before the light turned green. His hand returned to the back of my neck where he tenderly caressed my skin. We drove in silence for a few moments before he finally spoke again.

"I only need you," he echoed my words. "*Only* you. Everyone else—*no one else*—matters to me like you do." A happy smile curved his mouth, and his thumb glided along the curve of my neck. "You look so beautiful tonight."

I actually blushed. "Thank you."

Nikolai turned down a street that ran parallel to a rather rundown shopping center. All of the storefronts were closed except for one—a tattoo parlor I recognized as the one his preferred artist owned. He didn't pull into the parking lot but instead navigated down the side street and into the employee lot out back. It was a shadowy space that would have made me nervous had I been alone, but I feared nothing with my husband at my side.

As he parked, I twisted in my seat to face him. "What are we doing here?"

He switched off the engine and unlatched his seatbelt. Leaning across the center console, he flicked off my belt and pushed it away from my shoulder. His fingertips grazed my cheek and jaw before gliding over my lips. Holding my gaze, he asked, "Do you know what today is?"

"Friday." I noticed Danny hurrying from the SUV to take up a position at Nikolai's door. He quickly unfurled an umbrella and waited for his boss to exit the car.

Nikolai chuckled softly. "Yes, but more specifically."

"Um...it's Friday. It's April the..." My voice trailed off as the significance of the date struck me. "Oh."

"*Da.*" He nodded solemnly. "Eleven years tonight." His hand slid down my neck, over the curve of my breast to the flat expanse of my belly. He rubbed a slow, warm circle there, his palm moving over the gunshot scars hidden by the diaphanous amethyst chiffon of my evening gown. "Eleven years since the night I nearly killed you."

The awful, ugly truth hung in the air between us. Flashes of memories I had tried to suppress came roaring back to life right before my eyes. The shame of my involvement in the attempted hit on Nikolai's life made my stomach lurch. I had been an easily tricked child, a little girl so desperate for her father's love that she had agreed to burglarize a house, but that didn't make me any less guilty for what had almost happened that night. Nikolai had fought off my father and escaped with his life before very nearly taking mine.

"We were bound together forever that night. You and me," he said, his hand going still on my abdomen. "I never imagined it would lead us to this life we share, but it has. It was fate that you would become my queen."

My eyes widened at his description. "Your queen?"

"You would prefer *koroleva*?" he teased.

"Kolya! Be serious!"

"I am being serious." He played with the loose waves of my hair that cascaded around my shoulders. "That's what they're all calling you. The Night Queen," he clarified. "Because you rule the underworld with me."

"Hardly," I argued. "I'm just your wife. I'm just—"

"You aren't *just* anything, Vee. Not to me and not to them." He captured my mouth in a lingering kiss. Pulling back, he held my gaze. "Come. It's time for your coronation."

I blinked, and the pieces fell into place. "You've brought me here to see *Igla*."

He laughed at the nickname the men of his family had given to the Hungarian expat tattoo artist who had spent most of his adult life in Moscow. *Iglochkoy* was a Russian embroidery style where the threads were punched through the fabric using a sharp needle. "You've been eavesdropping again."

"Your men should be more discreet."

He shot me a look before sliding out of the front seat. Danny handed over the umbrella that shielded Nikolai's tuxedo from the warm drizzle and stepped back to give him some space. My husband walked around the car to open my door. Reaching in, he grasped my hand and guided me out into the night. His palm settled against the small of my back and he gently pressed me toward the rear entrance of the tattoo shop that Arty now manned. The street captain with the shaved head and grass green eyes winked at me as I passed.

Inside the shop, we were greeted by the infamous tattoo artist. The older man sported a thick, long white beard and heavy ink from the top of his neck to the tips of his fingers. No doubt his torso, back and legs were equally as decorated. Nikolai called him by his real name—Tomi—but the artist only nodded before taking us to his private studio at the rear of the shop. It was so quiet in the space that I wondered if he had shut down the business to see us tonight.

With Arty and Danny guarding the door, Nikolai shut it behind us. Clearly at ease in these surroundings, he slipped out of his tuxedo jacket and bowtie, dropping them on Tomi's desk. He accepted the sketch the artist thrust his way and studied it with a smile. Handing it to me, he asked, "What do you think, Vee?"

I examined the surprisingly feminine and delicate crown Tomi had drawn. The design wasn't very big, but it was incredibly detailed. It was done in the style of a Russian tiara, the type one of the Feodorovna empresses might have worn. Tomi had incorporated Nikolai's pet name for me by using beautiful little sunbursts. There was a pretty crest in the center but it seemed unfinished.

As if reading my mind, the artist handed me a pencil. Addressing me in Russian, he said, "You're the only one I've ever allowed to alter my designs."

Understanding that this was something I should consider an honor, I reverently took the pencil and the drawing to the nearest flat surface. I didn't have to think twice about what would go in the center of the crest. I sketched in my husband's Cyrillic initials. Soon they would mark my skin, forever branding me as his.

When I handed it to Tomi, he actually cracked a small smile. "Good," he said before taking the pencil and cleaning up my addition with harder, cleaner lines.

Nikolai's hands settled on my shoulders. The heat of his chest seeped into my back. His lips brushed my ear. "You don't have to do this. I thought you might like to have one done. You've always been fascinated by them, by what they mean and how they're earned."

Glancing back at him, I asked, "Have I earned this one?"

He pressed a tender kiss to my throat. "You've earned so much more than this. It's the least I can give you. The very least," he whispered before turning my face and claiming my mouth.

"Where will it go?" I tried to ignore the nervous wobbling in the pit of my stomach and focused on the beautiful piece of art that would soon adorn my body.

"Where would you like it to go?"

"You choose. It's your gift to me."

His eyes sparked with a primal flare that made my insides tremble for a reason that had nothing to do with nervousness. I pressed my thighs together as Nikolai walked to Tomi's small desk and grabbed a rubber band from the container on the corner.

When he came back to me, Nikolai gathered my hair in his hands and twisted the strands into a high bun that he secured with the rubber band. His lips skimmed the back of my neck. I sucked in a shocked breath when his tongue flicked against my skin.

"Here," he decided. "You'll wear my crown here."

I gulped and nodded. It would be easy to hide by wearing my hair down—and to show off whenever I wanted by choosing to wear my hair up. The idea of Nikolai seeing his mark on me when we were alone thrilled me. "Yes."

With a satisfied hum, Nikolai took my hand and tugged me toward the chair in the center of the room. The red leather was worn in spots but it seemed sturdy and comfortable. I was taken aback when he sat first and leaned back. When he patted his lap, my lips parted to protest, but he squelched the words with one heated look.

Ignoring Tomi's amused stare, I straddled Nikolai's lap as daintily as possible. The flowing skirts of my evening gown came in handy. They were loose enough and so full that I didn't have to worry about the fabric bunching along my thighs or hips.

"Look at me." Nikolai commanded my gaze. "This is going to hurt. Not as bad as the other pain I've caused you." He shot a pointed look at my stomach. "But it won't be pleasant."

I interlaced our fingers and gave his hand a squeeze. "I'm not afraid."

"No," he agreed and kissed me lovingly. "You never are."

Behind us, Tomi readied the necessary supplies. I leaned against my husband, accepting his strength and finding comfort in his soothing warmth, as Tomi prepared my skin and applied the stencil. Nikolai's powerful arms kept me from flinching when the first bite of the needles registered. I stared into his handsome face, enthralled by his pale eyes, and found myself wondering, not for the first time, how he managed to look at me with such love and kindness one moment and offered others that cold, icy glare the next.

The pain of the needles stabbing into my skin blossomed from one small spot to the entire back of my neck. After some time, the heated burn morphed into a strange numbness that I didn't mind so much. My fingers began to tremble, and Nikolai simply held my hands tighter. The all-black design didn't take as long as I had expected, and before I knew it, Tomi was wiping away the blood and ink and handing us a pair of mirrors.

My skin throbbed, and I felt a bit lightheaded. I used the mirror I had been given to catch sight of the reflection from the one Nikolai held behind my head. The delicate and darkly beautiful mark on my skin seemed as if it had always been meant to fit right there. Maybe it had. Maybe Nikolai was right. Fate had thrown us together eleven years earlier, and now here we were, married and in love, the king and queen of Houston's underworld.

"Do you like it?"

I caught the slightest hint of uncertainty in my husband's voice. Smiling at him, I nodded. "I love it."

He leaned forward and kissed me then, the scorching heat of his lips against mine promising a night I wouldn't soon forget. Tomi bandaged my neck, and Nikolai carefully shifted me off his lap. He steered me toward a chair in the corner and slipped his jacket around my shoulders.

"Drink this," he said, taking a can of my favorite soda from Tomi and pressing it into my hands. "The sugar rush will help."

"Thank you." I sipped at the ice cold drink and glanced up at him when he started to remove his cummerbund and shirt.

As if reading my mind, he nodded. "It's my turn."

Consciously ignoring the painful pulse along my nape, I watched as he took his place in the chair and bared the back of his neck for Tomi. He was tall enough that he rested his chin on the top of the headrest while the ink master tattooed a matching but more masculine crown on his skin. I wondered how many other pieces the artist had done for my husband. The more elaborate art, the iconography on his forearms, the onion domed churches topped with steeples and crosses that took up his entire back, those were definitely Tomi's work. There was also the pair of interlocking Orthodox wedding crowns and our names that Nikolai had hired the man to ink over his heart on Valentine's Day.

Some of the tattoos, the faded ones with blue and green tints, had been done during his stints in some of Russia's worst prisons, back when Nikolai was younger and restless and prone to risky decisions. They were simpler pieces—numbers and letters, shields and crosses, spiders and daggers—that held secret meanings. Each tattoo told part of Nikolai's history with Maksim Prokhorov's criminal family.

With his father's crime family, I silently added. That was a secret we hadn't told anyone. Only Yuri, our priest, the parish deacon and my father knew the truth about Nikolai's father's identity. We intended to keep it that way. There was nothing but danger that would come from letting that fact become more widely known. It was best for everyone to think that Nikolai was simply Maksim's chosen man in Houston.

My thoughts turned to the massive cross in the center of his chest and the stars just under his shoulder blades. He had two matching stars on his knees. They were tattoos that very few men in the life earned. I didn't know whether he had gotten them before or after he had earned his position as the *pakhan*, the boss, of Houston. It wasn't a question I dared ask or one he would likely answer. There were lines I didn't cross in our marriage and that was one of them.

I didn't like it, but that was the bargain I had made when I had agreed to marry him. We weren't like our friends. He wasn't going to tell me everything, and I had to find a way to be okay with that. I hadn't yet discovered how I was supposed to do that, but I prayed that someday I would figure it out. I hated not knowing what was happening. I hated the nights when I stared at the ceiling waiting for him to come home, all the while knowing that I couldn't ask him where he had been or what he had been doing.

I worried that someday all that secrecy was going to tear us apart. Marriages were supposed to be built on truth, but our foundation had some serious holes in it. One good gust of wind—and the walls of our house might crumble in on us.

"*Solnyshka?*" Nikolai's concerned voice interrupted my thoughts. He didn't even seem to feel the needles buzzing along his skin as Tomi worked the vibrating tattoo gun back and forth. Brow furrowed, he gazed at me with worry. "Do I need to call in Artyom?"

I shook my head and offered a sweet smile. "I'm fine. It's been a long day."

He didn't seem totally convinced but let it go. Feeling steadier, I gripped the can of soda and stood. I pulled his tuxedo jacket tighter around my shoulders and enjoyed the familiar, comforting scent of him that curled around me. While the crown tattoo took shape on Nikolai's skin, I perused the framed art decorating Tomi's walls. His tattoo style leaned more toward the traditional end of the spectrum, but the ink and pencil drawings with vivid swaths of color that he had proudly hung on his walls convinced me he had been classically trained in the fine arts.

Lost in my silent critique of his art, I didn't even realize he had finished Nikolai's tattoo until Tomi appeared next to me. He issued a little huff of laughter. "They aren't as good as yours, but I like them."

I glanced at him with surprise. "I think they're better than mine. Much better," I added softly and with a touch of envy in my voice. Gesturing to the street scene that had held my interest, I said, "Your style reminds me of Goncharova."

His light blue eyes widened noticeably. He glanced at his drawing and then back at my face. "You're serious."

"Of course." I tilted my head as I studied the scene again. "It's the way you've drawn the motorcycle that makes me think of her work."

"Would you like to take it?" Tomi gestured to the drawing.

As an artist, I understood what it meant for him to offer the framed canvas to me. "Yes, thank you. I'd love to hang it in my studio."

A smile brightened his face. He reached for the drawing and carefully took it down from the wall. With a surprisingly bashful tone of voice, the hard-looking man handed the framed piece to me and offered three words in Russian, "For the queen."

"Thank you." I hugged the drawing to my chest.

Shrugging into his shirt behind Tomi, Nikolai watched us with a pleased expression. When he joined us, he slipped his hand under the jacket draped around my shoulders and retrieved a thick envelope from the cleverly concealed pocket there. He exchanged the envelope and a handshake with Tomi and walked me out of the room.

I didn't miss Arty's curious glance as he tried to locate the new ink we both sported. My lips twitched with amusement when he gestured for Danny to take the lead. I glanced back at the captain as we walked down the hall and caught his surprised gape at the bandage covering the back of my neck. I had to bite back a laugh when he winked at me and made an approving thumbs-up gesture with the hand that still had all its fingers.

Outside, the rain had finally stopped. I slid into the passenger seat, and Nikolai reached down to gather up the hem of my skirt, clearing it from the door. He leaned in and captured my mouth with a playful kiss. I grasped his shirt, holding him hostage, and boldly flicked my tongue against his. He growled, the sound low and rumbling in his chest, and gently pried my hand from his shirt. His forehead touched mine. "Soon."

I practically vibrated in my seat as we made the drive back to our home. The dull ache along the back of my neck spurred thoughts of my friends and their reactions. Bianca would be aghast by the placement of the tattoo. She wouldn't come right out and call it tacky, but she would give me *that* look. Lena would probably frown and mutter something about gang tats. Erin would be her usual sweet-as-pie self and would probably gush over the romantic gesture. Benny would simply smile and call it beautiful.

The longer I thought about it, the less I wanted to share my new secret. Deciding to keep it discreetly covered by my wearing my hair down, I stared out the window and wondered what other surprises this night would bring.

We reached the house without any problems and parked in the converted carriage house in the rear of the property. Nikolai waved at Arty and Danny, sending the pair off for the evening, before escorting me across our backyard. He paused every now and then to inspect the newly blooming plants in the garden and flower beds he tended with such care.

Holding my hand, he led me through the side entrance and into the mudroom. He pressed a tender kiss to my temple. "I'll meet you upstairs."

Nodding, I rose on tiptoes and pecked his cheek. "Don't be long."

"I won't."

Trailing my fingers down his arm, I reluctantly parted from his side and made my way upstairs while my husband went through his usual nightly routine of making sure the house was secured. I paused at one of the upstairs windows overlooking the front yard and noticed two men talking on the sidewalk. One I immediately recognized as Kostya, but the other was unfamiliar. I assumed he was some new recruit, a young street soldier happy to stand guard on our home for the chance at gaining Nikolai's favor.

Some of the magic and excitement of our night faded as the reality of our life together hit me. Suddenly the tattoo no longer felt so romantic. It felt more like a public symbol of ownership and a sigil of protection. I could practically hear the thoughts of the underworld denizens who might see the mark still burning and throbbing on the back of my neck. *Don't touch that one. She belongs to Nikolai.*

"Vee?" He appeared behind me on the stairs. When I glanced back at him, his brow knitted and his mouth quirked to the side with worry. "Do you regret it?"

My stomach clenched. "What?"

"The tattoo," he said, coming to join me and taking the jacket from my shoulders. He dropped it onto one of the nearby slipper chairs before sliding his hands around my waist and embracing me from behind.

I relaxed when I understood what he meant. "No."

He nuzzled into the side of my neck and breathed in deeply. "I should have talked to you about it first. It was wrong of me to spring it on you like that. You're not one of my men champing at the bit to be branded as one of my soldiers. I should have given you time to consider it."

I laughed at that. "You do remember your proposal to me, right?"

He growled against my throat. "Not my best or most romantic moment," he conceded.

"No, but it definitely set the tone for us." I reached back and caressed his jaw. "We seem to make our best decisions relying on gut instinct."

His wide palm rested against my abdomen. He splayed his fingers against the front of my evening gown and playfully nipped at the fleshy spot where my neck curved into my shoulder. I let loose a mewling sigh and pressed back against his hard, powerful body. "Kolya..."

He tugged on the zipper running along my left side and pushed the empire-waist gown off my body. It pooled around my feet in a billow of purple chiffon. With one hand, he unsnapped my strapless bra. The other was busy drawing ticklish circles on my bare stomach. Standing in only a seamless nude-colored thong and high-heeled sandals, I felt acutely undressed. My nervous gaze flitted to the window. "Nikolai, they'll see us."

The possibility of one of his men getting a peek at me momentarily cooled his ardor. He hoisted me up in his arms, kicked aside the outrageously expensive dress and carried me to our master suite at the end of the hall. Placing me down on the bed with surprising reverence, he tapped the tip of my nose. "Stay."

Leaning back on my hands, I watched him slowly strip. My greedy gaze roamed his naked and heavily tattooed body. He had the natural physique of a swimmer. Where I had to run every morning to keep fit, he needed only a few mornings a week at Ivan's gym to look that damned good.

My gaze drifted along the myriad scars, some of them puckered and pink and others thin and white, marring his skin. The reminders of the pain and violence he had

known in his life always saddened me. He had escaped the horrors of a sickeningly abusive orphanage and survived as a homeless child on the streets of Moscow with Ivan at his side. Later, the two men had brutally conquered those same streets before coming to Houston to make inroads for the Prokhorov family.

Sitting up all the way, I lingered on the fresh scars from the December attack that had nearly killed him. The stab wounds he had sustained hadn't healed correctly, not after he had slipped out of the hospital in the middle of the night with my cousin Eric, a Houston detective, as his accomplice. Instead of resting and recuperating, Nikolai had gone to great lengths to save me that night and in the weeks that followed.

He brushed his hand over the black eight-pointed star sitting just beneath his left collarbone. "Do you know what these mean? What I did to earn these?"

My gaze flicked to his somber eyes before settling on the frightening star he touched. They were the tattoos only a man who had reached the highest and most secretive echelon of the Russian mafia earned. Voice soft, I nodded and whispered, "Yes."

He stalked toward the bed with that predatory grace I found so thrilling. Standing so close I could feel the heat waves radiating from his skin, he asked, "What else do these stars on my chest and my knees mean?"

Focused on his pale eyes, I didn't miss the dangerous flash in his icy irises. "That you will kneel before no man."

"*Da.*" Then, deliberately and with glacial slowness, he slid to the floor and knelt in front of me. He removed my shoes and slipped my underwear off my body. I held my breath as he peppered light yet stunningly erotic kisses along my thighs. He lifted his head and pinned me in place with a scorching look that made my heart swell and my stomach wobble violently. "Only you, Vivian. You are the only one in the entire world who can bring me to my knees."

His bold confession struck me as both an incredible compliment and a reverent warning. I wielded an immense power over him, the sort of power other men dreamed of having, and I had to be careful in the way that I used it.

With a silent but meaningful look, he dropped his head and resumed the sensual trail of kisses along my thighs. Overwhelmed by arousal and love for this beautifully

complicated man, I fell back to the bed and closed my eyes. My hand traveled down my own belly and didn't stop until I felt his thick sandy-colored hair beneath my fingertips.

A pleased sigh escaped my lips when he parted my legs and began to torment me with that wicked, wicked tongue of his. "Nikolai..."

Chapter One

June

"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 or to 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."

Chapter Two

Nikolai's heart hammered in his chest. Vivian gazed up at him with that sultry smile and her brilliantly blue eyes, and he was fucking lost. Sometimes he was taken aback by how confident she had become as his lover. He held still as she unbuckled his belt and unbuttoned his trousers. She lowered his zipper and freed his cock from his boxers.

His eyes closed briefly at the feel of her soft, warm hand gliding along his throbbing shaft. It was the wet, hot glide of her tongue around the head that made them pop open again. Nostrils flaring, he breathed in deeply and stared down at the raven-haired nymphet bobbing up and down on his cock. He loved watching his erection disappearing between her lips. The swirl of her tongue was even better.

"*Solnyshka*." He threaded his fingers through her hair and tried to maintain control over the raging urge to pump his hips. Deeper and deeper, she swallowed his length on every down stroke. His balls ached, and he wanted nothing more than to be buried in her tight, slick pussy. "Enough."

She dragged her mouth all the way back to the tip and held him in her mouth for a long moment before finally allowing him to slip free. He wiped her lower lip and smiled when she bit down on his thumb. Brushing his knuckles along her cheek, he said, "Turn around. On your knees."

She hastily complied with his instruction and gripped the arms of the chair. Her perfect little ass wiggled side to side as she presented herself to him. He caressed her back and bottom before gently, carefully, probing her with his fingers. She was so fucking wet he could hear his digits sliding in the slickness between her thighs. His cock pulsed, and his groin tightened. He had to get inside her. *Now*.

Cock in hand, he guided the blunt crown into her and thrust forward. He held onto her hips and withdrew from the wet heat enveloping him. She moaned with pleasure and pushed back to meet his next forward motion. He picked up the pace but tried to be mindful of the force he used. Since discovering her pregnancy, he had been eaten up with worry. He would do anything to keep her and the baby safe. *Anything*.

"Kolya." She breathed his name on a sigh and reached back to grab his hand. "So good." Her fingers gripped his wrist now. "Oh, God. More. *More*."

Hearing her beg for his dick shattered his control. He had never been able to deny her anything and wasn't about to start now. He gave her exactly what she wanted and fucked her harder and faster. She gripped the top of the chair now and cried out again and again. The keening sounds echoed in the room.

When she lowered her head, her black hair fell away from her neck and revealed the tattoo. *My tattoo*. Unable to help himself, he ran his fingers over the dark mark. It was a primitive thing, but he couldn't stop the grip of possession and ownership that clutched at his heart. *Mine*.

Wanting to feel her come and to remind her who lived to give her pleasure, he leaned forward and slipped his hand between her thighs. His arm brushed her belly, and he felt the slight curve there. As petite as she was, she was already showing. Soon their secret would be difficult to keep. The fear that kept him awake at night stabbed his chest. He muscled it down and focused on beautiful Vivian who writhed with need beneath him.

With the practice that came from learning his sweet wife's body, he found her clit and expertly strummed it. His name poured of her mouth in an unending litany as she chased her orgasm. He felt that first flutter of her cunt and smiled triumphantly. "Let go, Vee. Give it to me. Come. *Come*."

She did. With a white-knuckled grip on the chair, she trembled violently and climaxed. Bending down, he licked the tattoo on the back of her neck and then bit down before riding her hard and fast. She cried out his name, and her pussy clutched his cock, setting off his own explosion. Buried deep inside her, he jerked roughly and filled her with his seed.

He fell against her back and panted against her neck. "Vee." He whispered to her in Russian. "*Ya obozhayu tebya*."

She clasped his forearm. "I love you."

Reluctantly, he pulled away from her and found some paper towels on her worktable to clean them up. When she tried to stand, he noticed her unsteadiness and instantly leapt to her side. He caught her before she fell. "Vee! Are you all right?"

"Sorry," she said a bit breathless. "I'm just dizzy."

He silently cursed himself for being so careless with her. She was pregnant and carrying his child. He needed to be more careful with her.

"Come here, baby." Not bothering to get her dressed, he sat in the chair and tugged her down on top of him. He hooked his foot along the side of the ottoman and dragged it closer. Stretched out together on the comfortable chair and stool, they enjoyed a quiet moment. He brushed his fingers through her hair and caressed her bare back.

The new painting she was working on caught his attention. She had been using palette knives for this one and only palette knives. The layers of oil paint created a depth and richness that made the colors seem so incredibly vibrant. There was something about this painting that unsettled him though. The longer he stared at it, the more convinced he was that she was trying to tell him something important. He could almost feel the waves of conflict and uncertainty flowing from the piece.

His hand traveled to her belly, and he placed a protective hand over the spot where his child was growing. Not for the first time, he wondered if he should have taken measures to delay their family. Vivian had been through so very much since Christmas. She had nearly been killed and trafficked. He had rushed her into marrying him so he could keep her safe. Now, she was pregnant with what he, selfishly, hoped was the first of many children.

But she was young and had her entire life ahead of her. Her career as an artist was just beginning to blossom. Soon she would have a child, and while he was prepared to do everything he could to support her dreams and aspirations, he feared motherhood might impede her journey. The guilt gnawed at him. He should have been more responsible and put her future first.

"You're terribly pensive today." She stroked his jaw. "Is everything all right?"

He kissed her palm and turned the question around on her. "Is everything all right with you?"

Vivian glanced at him. "Yes. Why?"

"The last six months of your life have been filled with changes."

"They were good changes." She cuddled in closer to him and pressed her cheek to his chest.

He bit his tongue rather than reminding her that she had married a mob boss. Good wasn't the adjective he would have used to describe that change. Embracing her

and kissing the top of her head, he murmured, "I'll do anything to make you happy, Vee. Whatever you want. Whatever you need. It's yours if you ask me."

"I am happy." She kissed his jaw. "With you." Trailing her fingers down his chest, she asked, "How was work?"

He understood that she was asking about the restaurant and not his other work. Grunting at the memory of the spat between waitresses, he said, "Lidia and Jessica got into it again. I could hear them squawking at one another from my office."

"What was it this time?"

"I have no idea. I didn't ask. I sent them both home and took them off the schedule for two days." Wrapping her hair around his finger, he admitted, "You were right about Lidia. I probably should have let her go after the night she purposely dumped that glass of wine on Bianca."

"Bianca told me that Lidia apologized to her. She accepted the apology and wiped the slate clean."

He made an irritated noise at that. "Bianca is too sweet for her own good. Sergei will have his hands full with her."

Vivian snorted indelicately. "In more ways than one."

He laughed. "Listen to you! I should be ashamed at how badly I've corrupted you." Her soft giggle inspired a smile. "Do you need to do any last minute shopping before we leave for London next week?"

"I don't think so. I'm going to see Holly on Friday for a quick trim and to have Maria do a manicure. I'd like for us to have everything packed by Thursday."

"That won't be a problem." He mentally arranged his schedule for the upcoming week. It was going to be a busy one for him. One of his most loyal soldiers was being released from prison, and he needed to finalize the arrangements for his crew while he was out of town with Vee. Kostya would be in charge, and Arty would be his second. He had no doubts when it came to his two most trusted men, but he worried about his fugitive father-in-law Romero and Julio Jimenez, the cartel's main man in Houston, coming to blows.

There were already rumblings on the street that Romero was going to challenge the cartel and do it using backup from Maksim. The two old bastards were already running guns south of the border and causing serious headaches for him. Nikolai feared

Vee's father would try to make his move against his old cartel while he was away in London and the city was vulnerable. He had to shore up his alliances before leaving so that Kostya was in the strongest position possible.

But he didn't want to think of any of that right now. Lush and naked, Vivian was curled against him. He didn't want any of the ugliness of the underworld to touch her.

"We have our first doctor's appointment on Tuesday. Don't forget that you're supposed to meet me there at two."

"I won't." The prospect of the first glimpse of their baby on ultrasound excited him. It still seemed a bit unreal, but he was certain that seeing their baby would make it all more final. "I wouldn't miss it for anything."

"How much longer are we going to keep this quiet?"

"I don't know. As long as possible." Hating the position they were in, he interlaced their fingers and smiled at the paint smudges staining her skin. Because she deserved to know the truth, he confessed, "Our fathers are stirring up trouble with Lorenzo Guzman. Until I can get that mess sorted, I don't feel comfortable announcing your pregnancy. You read the Mexican newspapers, Vee. You know what the cartel is capable of doing."

He swallowed hard and placed his hand against her stomach. Fingers splayed, he silently vowed that nothing would stop him from keeping them both safe. *Nothing*. "We have to be careful until things go quiet down there."

She sighed loudly. "Our dads really suck."

He chortled at her remark. He would have used a stronger word to describe the situation. "They do seem to enjoy making things difficult and dangerous for everyone."

"Is it worth it? All this trouble they're causing?" she clarified. "I mean, what are they going to get out of going to war with the cartel?"

He planned to use all the favors he could call in to avoid a war. He had a reputation for negotiating his way out of stalemates like these and hoped he could prevail upon Maksim and Romero to see the light. A war would be bad for everyone in the underworld.

"Money," he said finally. "It's always about money, *solnyshka*."

"Greedy bastards," she grumbled.

He laughed softly and kissed the top of her head again. "Do you think you can stand up now? We need to shower and change soon or else we'll be late for dinner with Bianca and Sergei."

"I just need to remember to move more slowly when I'm changing positions." She let him help her stand and humored him with a smile when he tugged her dress down over her head. He slipped her panties into his pocket and earned a frown. "Remember to put those in the hamper. I'm pretty sure Boy will die of embarrassment if my undies tumble out of your suits when he takes them to the cleaners on Monday morning."

He tried to imagine the look on the kid's face if he got a peek at the sexy little panties Vivian preferred. Of course, he hadn't missed the way the kid stared at her when he thought no one was paying attention. He couldn't blame Boychenko for wanting to look, but he trusted the kid knew better than to even think about crossing that line.

Upstairs, he joined Vivian in the shower. She had piled her hair high on top of her head to keep it from getting wet. She still hadn't shown off the tattoo in public yet, and the one on the back of his neck wasn't visible because of his shirt collars. He rather liked that it was something just for them and didn't mind that others hadn't seen them.

"Will you be all right in here alone?" He eyed her carefully. "Are you still dizzy?"

She poked his stomach. "You worry too much. I'm fine."

"I'm your husband." He kissed her temple and smoothed his hand along her belly. "It's my job to worry about you and the baby. When I married you, I swore vows to protect you and care for you. That means making sure you don't pass out in the shower."

Her expression softened. "I really am fine."

Taking her at her word, he exited the shower and grabbed towel. He rubbed his skin dry and wrapped the towel around his waist before heading for their large walk-in closet. He paused as he passed Vivian's racks of clothing and ran his fingers along the soft fabrics. It was a simple thing—a silly thing, really—but the sight of her things mixed in with his filled him with the most incredible sense of contentment.

She was here with him—in his house and in his bed—and shared his name. She was exactly where she was always meant to be. By bravely choosing to love him, with all his flaws and his sordid past, Vivian had given him something so precious. She filled his home with love and happiness and gave him a reason to be a better man.

He wasn't stupid enough to believe that he would ever be good. No, that fucking ship had sailed and sunk a long time ago. He wasn't like Sergei. He couldn't be redeemed in that way, but he could be better. He would do anything to make Vee proud of him. Even now, he was using leverage and leaning on Romero to avoid bloodshed. A few cleanly executed hits would be quicker than negotiating, but he couldn't bear the thought of Vivian looking at him with mistrust and disappointment.

"Kolya?" The shower had shut off and he could hear Vivian opening vanity drawers.

"Yes?" He called out to her as he selected a pair of jeans and a lightweight shirt. Around the house, he was comfortable wearing a polo, but he didn't want to bare his arms at Bianca's home because he wasn't sure about the guest list.

"I got distracted earlier when you came home, and I forgot to ask you something."

He picked out a pair of Italian leather wingtip boots. "Oh?"

"Niels said that a journalist he met a few days ago asked him about a Russian woman who was coming to the show in London. He didn't recognize her name, and he wondered if she was someone from our social circle. Her name wasn't familiar to me."

"What was it?"

"Tatiana Melnikova."

The boots dropped from his hands and hit the hardwood floor with a thump.

"Are you okay?"

"Yes." He quickly recovered and snatched up his shoes. "I dropped my boots."

"Oh. So Tatiana? Do you know her?"

"No." Guilt squeezed his chest in a vise-like grip. Fuck. *Fuck*. Even though it would be easier, he couldn't lie to her. Swallowing roughly, he confessed more loudly, "Yes."

Boots in hand, he left the closet and found her standing in the doorway of the bathroom. Wrapped in her robe, she clutched at the labels and peered at him with confusion. "Why did you change your answer?"

Tossing his boots onto the closest chair, he expelled a noisy breath and rubbed the back of his neck. There was no easy way to say it. "Tatiana Melnikova isn't her real name. It's a fake. It's a name and an identity I bought for her. Her real name was Tatiana Filipova—and she was my fiancée."

Vivian's face slackened, and her delicate hand moved to her throat. "You... But..."

"It was before you, Vee." The look of betrayal etched into her beautiful face slashed at his heart. "Years before you ever came to Samovar," he hurriedly explained. "You were still in high school, and your grandparents were alive."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

I didn't think you would ever find out. But he couldn't say that. He couldn't admit that he had been hoping to never have this conversation with her. "She had to disappear. There was no reason to tell anyone about it. Besides it was a long time ago, Vee. She doesn't matter."

"You don't get to decide something like that unilaterally." Her sharp tone surprised him. "How would you feel if you found out I had been engaged to another man before you? That I had been planning to become his wife and have his children and build a life with him?"

Jealousy burned through him. Slashing his hand through the air, he insisted, "It's not the same, Vee."

Incredulous, she threw out both hands. "How?"

"Because I didn't love her! She was handpicked by Maksim to form an alliance with a rival family. It was a way for Maksim and her father to align their interests. That's it. It was a practical decision."

"People might think you're describing our marriage."

"How?"

"My father and your father found a way to align their interests." She looked like she might start crying at any second, and it fucking killed him. "The night you proposed to me, you had been in meetings with the cartel and taking phone calls from Moscow. Did Maksim tell you to propose to me?"

"No! It wasn't like that for us."

"Are you sure?" She arched one dark eyebrow. "You asked me to marry you because you were catching heat from all sides. You gave me your name to protect me."

"I asked you to marry me because I fucking love you, Vivian." Irritated that she would even compare their marriage to the sham that he would have had with Tatiana, he snarled, "You are the only one—the only fucking one—I have ever loved. *Ever.*" He

gripped his teeth and tried to maintain his cool. "Don't ever question my love for you. It's the one thing I won't abide."

"Then why did you lie to me just now? I asked you if you knew Tatiana and you said no."

"I panicked." He wasn't proud to admit it. "I haven't heard her name in years. That's a complicated and very messy chapter of my life that was supposed to be closed forever. Everyone thinks she's dead or that I had her killed. No one would dare to say her name in front of me."

"Why?" Her eyes narrowed with suspicion. "For a man who says he didn't love her, you've gone to extremes to save her life and to avoid talking about her."

Just tell her. Tell her the whole ugly, sordid truth about Tatiana and be done with it.

But he couldn't. He had given his promise, and he never broke his word. Surrounded by a minefield, he had to tread carefully. "Tatiana was caught with another man. She humiliated me in front of my crew and in front of *krestnii otets*. In front of Maksim," he clarified, in case she had any question as to the godfather he meant. "She is fucking dead to me and to everyone in this family and her own."

The anger faded from her face. Vivian held his gaze "I don't ask you questions about your other business, but when I ask you a question about something that impacts our marriage and our relationship, I expect you to tell me the truth."

His gut clenched. Though the urge to tell her everything about Tatiana and the reason she had run and how she had escaped her father's control was strong, he refused to pull Vivian into it. There were too many innocent people who could be badly hurt by the truth, including one person that Vivian loved dearly. He wouldn't put her in the position of knowing too much and having to choose whether to keep that painful secret.

"In the future, if you ask me about a woman from my past, I will tell you the truth." He couched his answer in carefully chosen words and silently prayed she would leave the topic of Tatiana alone. There was no good that would come from dredging up that ancient history and putting so many lives at risk.

She seemed mollified by his answer. "I'll tell Niels that she's an old friend of yours."

He shook his head. "Don't tell him anything about her. She won't be coming to the show."

"But the journalist—"

"She won't be coming to the show. I'll make sure of that." He intended to put Kostya on the task of tracking her down and giving her a warning. After he helped her escape, Tatiana had sworn that she would never contact him again. He intended to hold to her to that promise.

Vivian didn't seem happy about his instruction. "Fine. If that's the way you want to handle this."

"It is." Crossing the distance between them, he clasped her sweet face between his hands and grazed his thumbs along her cheeks. "Vee, in my entire life, you are the only woman who has ever managed to melt the ice around my heart." He touched his forehead to hers. "Whatever I had in the past doesn't matter. It's us, our marriage and our family that matters to me. I love you."

"I love you," she murmured, "but don't lie to me. I can't—I *won't* stand for it."

"Nor should you," he agreed. Knowing that he asked so much of her, he pulled back and gazed down into her eyes. "You've given me your trust, and you've accepted all the bullshit that comes with the bad choices I made before I met you. I don't take that for granted. I know what you've sacrificed to be with me."

There was so much more he wanted to say, but he couldn't find the words. Vivian caressed his jaw, and he saw understanding reflected in her sapphire eyes. He whispered his love for her before tenderly capturing her mouth. She surrendered to his seeking mouth and wordlessly forgave him. He didn't deserve her forgiveness, but he selfishly accepted it all the same.

Eventually they separated and dressed. He finished before her and went downstairs to choose a bottle of wine to take as a gift to their hosts. He had chosen his favorite Australian Shiraz from the collection in the butler's pantry when he heard heavy footsteps approaching from the adjacent dining room.

Glancing toward the doorway, he caught sight of Boychenko. By the looks of it, the blond kid had finally gotten the message from Arty about the expectations for the street soldiers. Instead of the T-shirt and jeans the kid had been wearing the last time

Nikolai had seen him, Boychenko had paired a dark polo with khaki chinos and nice shoes. It was an improvement and a step in the right direction.

"Boss?"

"Yes?"

"One of your neighbors was at the back gate. The judge," Boychenko explained. "He says he needs to see you. I wasn't sure if you wanted me to let him inside so I left him in the garden with his dog."

Boy had only been on the house security detail for a short time, but he had quickly learned that Nikolai didn't like anyone who wasn't part of the family in his home. "I'll go speak with him." Gesturing toward the back of the house, he said, "Grab the keys to my Land Rover and pull it out of the garage for us."

"Yes, sir."

"And Boy?" The kid paused and looked back at him. "Artyom tells me that you're doing well on the street. You've done a good job here at the house and with Vivian." He leveled a stare at the younger man. "It's important to me that she's surrounded by people I can trust."

"I understand, boss."

He was sure the kid did. If Boy wanted to climb higher in the organization, he would earn his place much more quickly by proving himself trustworthy and willing to do whatever Nikolai asked of him. "Good."

Boy left to finish the errand he had been given, and Nikolai carried the bottle of wine across the house with him as he trailed in Boychenko's footsteps. He opened the back door and found Judge Fitz Walker crouched down under a tree and scratching between his Mastiff's ears. The dog slobbered happily while the judge, dressed in workout clothes, smiled at him. A widower who had lost his wife to a heart attack the prior winter, the man had had a rough run of luck lately including a small house fire and that dog seemed to be the only thing made him happy.

"Judge, my apologies for the wait." He approached the man but didn't hold out his hand. Though he was cordial with the man, they weren't friendly. More importantly, he didn't want dog hair and saliva all over his hands.

"It's fine." The older man stood, his knees creaking with the movement. "Roscoe and I were walking by, and I thought I would see if you were available to chat."

"I have a few minutes." He glanced back at the house. "My wife and I are heading out for the evening." Always mindful of the balance of favors owed to him, Nikolai was only too happy to help a federal judge in any way he could. "What can I do for you?"

The judge glanced toward the grass and fidgeted with the leash attached to his patiently waiting dog. "It's my daughter. She's in trouble."

Nikolai's lips settled into a thin line. If a man with so many connections was coming to him, trouble was probably an understatement. "What sort of trouble *exactly*?"

"Drugs," the judge said somberly. "She's been an addict for years. We tried everything to get her clean, but nothing worked. Helen, my wife..." His voice broke and he cleared his throat. "It killed her. All the stress and the worry," he said. "It killed her."

The raw emotion in the other man's voice made him uncomfortable, but he didn't try to interrupt the judge.

"Julie's attached herself to a drug dealer. She won't come home. I think...I'm worried that they're *using* her."

Nikolai's jaw clenched. It wasn't unheard of for dealers to surround themselves with young women that they pimped out to their friends and business associates.

"She won't let us—me—talk to her. I've tried, but the last time I went to see her, those goons put a gun in my face."

"You should go to the police."

"I can't." The judge looked stricken. "I don't want them to see her like that. I have to work with these people."

Nikolai ran his tongue around his inner lip. "Which crew is she with?"

"I don't know."

"What's the boyfriend's name?" He expected to hear the name of one of Lalo Contreras' men but that wasn't what came out of the judge's mouth.

"Bobby Pham. He runs with a Vietnamese gang."

"Pham?" Nikolai repeated. "You're sure?"

"Yes."

The name wasn't familiar to him, and he made sure to know every dealer on the streets, from the high level kingpin wannabes like Lalo to the lowest slinger who bought dope on credit and tried to carve out a piece of action.

"What's he selling?"

"Cocaine."

Nikolai tried to make sense of that. Only the cartel and their associates were allowed to move weight around the city. The Vietnamese weren't in that circle so how the hell were they getting their hands on product?

"I'll look into it." He was going to do more than that. "Give me a few days."

The judge's face relaxed with relief. "Thank you." He hesitated. "Whatever you need—"

"I won't hesitate to ask," Nikolai assured him.

The judge nodded. His gaze skipped behind Nikolai and he smiled. "Vivian!"

"Your honor," she replied with a smile as she joined them.

"You're looking lovely this evening," Judge Walker complimented.

"Yes, you do," Nikolai agreed as he wound his arm around her waist. She wore a striking rust-colored dress with flowing sleeves that ended right above her elbows and a hem that flirted with her knees. The silhouette was deliberately loose and hid the early stage of her pregnancy flawlessly. But that line of buttons down the front of her bodice had his fingers itching to pluck at them.

The gold bracelets adorning her wrist jingled as she reached down to ruffle Roscoe's ears. Seeing her with the dog set his mind into motion. Maybe it was time to add a dog or two to their growing family. He thought of Yuri's great beast of a guard dog but tossed aside the idea. No, Vivian would want something gentler for their children. Gentle but fierce enough to protect his family, he amended.

"Well, I won't keep you two," the judge said and gave Roscoe's leash a tug. "Thank you for the advice on my honeysuckle. I'll let you know if it works."

"Please do." Nikolai watched the judge leave the backyard before guiding Vivian toward the idling Land Rover. Boychenko waited nearby while he got his wife situated in her seat. After closing the door, he flicked his fingers and gestured for the kid to walk around the back of the SUV with him. He stopped near the rear cargo door. "Bobby Pham?"

"Sure," Boychenko said with a nod. "He's one of Mr. Lu's nephews. He runs counterfeits for the old man. DVDs, purses, shoes. It's all good shit though. Top notch."

"Just counterfeits?"

"The last I heard," Boy confirmed.

"When you get off tonight, I want you to find out where he operates. Do it quietly."

"Sure thing, boss."

"And be careful, huh? Everyone is tense right now. Lots of trigger happy fingers, yes?"

"Right." Boychenko nodded dutifully. "I'll be careful and quiet."

Satisfied the kid could handle the task, he slid into the front seat of the SUV and handed the bottle of wine to Vivian. She studied him as he buckled up. "Everything okay?"

He glanced at her and smiled. "It will be."

But a nagging voice warned him that it was going to get a hell of a lot worse before that happened.

Chapter Three

Three mornings later, a soft buzzing sound roused me from a dead sleep. Bleary eyed, I turned onto my side and slapped at my bedside table to grab my iPhone. I squinted at the screen and groaned. It wasn't even four a.m. yet.

I didn't recognize the number and considered letting it go to voicemail. But what if it was important? The thought that one of our friends might be in trouble spurred me to answer. "Hello?"

"Vivian."

I stiffened at the sound of my father's raspy voice. "Dad?"

"I know it's early, but I need to speak with Nikolai."

I glanced at my husband. Face down on the bed, he had one arm draped across my waist and his leg hooked across both of mine. I could feel his warm, deep breaths skittering across my skin. The sheet had fallen down around his taut backside. Last night he had come home in a rather amorous mood. By the time we were finished writhing together in bed, we had been too tired to even contemplate slipping into pajamas. We had passed out in a tangle of limbs.

"It's four in the morning, Dad."

"I know what fucking time it is," he snapped. "Put him on the goddamn phone."

Irritated, I hissed, "I don't know who you think you're talking to, but I'm not one of your grubby MC brothers. You do not call my house at four in the morning and speak to me like that. *Me entiendes?*"

A tense silence stretched between us. The rough, gravelly tones of his laughter filtered across the speaker. "Yeah, kiddo, I understand you. Sounds like you've finally found that backbone. They're right. You are becoming the queen."

I ignored the remark. "What do you want?"

"I need to speak with Nikolai. Now. It's important." He paused. "Please."

"Hang on." I lowered my phone and reached out to stroke the back of Nikolai's neck. "Kolya? Wake up."

He bolted upright and instantly covered my body with his own. Pressing me down onto the mattress, he protectively shielded me and the baby. "What is it? Did you hear something?"

"No." I gently caressed his face. Even in his sleep, he never truly relaxed. I worried so much about the stress he endured day after day. "Relax."

He expelled a slow breath but didn't move away from me. Dropping his head down, he nuzzled his nose against mine. "What time is it?"

"A little before four," I answered quietly. Holding up the phone, I gave it a shake. The screen lit up his face with a bluish glow. "You have a call. It's my dad."

Nikolai grunted with annoyance but took the phone from me. He rolled onto his back and tugged the sheet up around my shoulders. "Yes?"

I heard my father's voice but couldn't make out the words. The conversation was short and mostly one-sided.

"I'll call you back in a few minutes." Nikolai ended the call and placed my phone on the bedside table. He leaned over and kissed my cheek. "I have to go downstairs. Go back to sleep."

Downstairs. To his office that Kostya swept for bugs. To the burner phones that couldn't be traced. I grasped his hand and stopped him from leaving. "What's going on?"

He squeezed my fingers in a reassuring grip. "Nothing that you need to worry about, Vee." He planted his mouth against mine and lingered. "Get some rest. I kept you awake too late last night."

"I'm not complaining."

"Good." His hand followed the outline of my growing curves. "I intend to keep you awake again tonight."

I giggled as he tickled my sides. "Kolya! Stop!"

He placed a noisy kiss on my cheek. "Go to sleep. I'll wake you for breakfast."

I didn't have the energy to argue with him. First trimester exhaustion was still kicking my butt. I had been lucky to avoid the worst morning sickness, but I couldn't seem to get enough sleep.

From my spot in bed, I watched him disappear into the bathroom and emerge in only his pajama bottoms. He left the room quietly and closed the door behind him. Hugging my husband's pillow, I closed my eyes and tried to sleep. My mind reeled with troubling thoughts. My father hadn't contacted me since January. For him to call this early in the morning? It was very serious.

Though it would be so easy to sneak downstairs and eavesdrop, I stayed in bed. My heavy eyelids drifted together, and I surrendered to the siren call of sleep. Sometime later, I woke to the sound of a knock at the bedroom door. Sitting up, I clutched the sheet to my bare chest and glanced at the clock on Nikolai's side of the bed. It was after nine!

"Vivian Ivanovna?" Artyom's rough voice penetrated the door.

I smiled at the way he called my name in that ultra-respectful way. He used my grandfather's name instead of my father's for obvious reasons. Clearing my throat, I asked, "Yes?"

"I have your breakfast."

"Oh. Um...just a second." I carefully slipped out of bed, making sure to take my time to avoid dizziness, and found my nightgown and robe neatly draped across the foot of the bed. *Nikolai*.

I dressed and pulled my hair into a low ponytail. When I opened the door, I found Arty waiting patiently in the hallway. He smiled down at me. "*Dobroye utro.*"

"Good morning."

"May I?"

"Yes." I stepped aside and let him into our bedroom. He carried the tray to the sitting area by the window that overlooked the backyard and placed it on the leather ottoman there. I sat in my favorite chair and gestured to the empty seat. "Would you like to stay?"

He glanced around the bedroom and shook his head. "I don't think the boss would like that."

"It's only breakfast."

"It's your bedroom." He grabbed the neatly folded napkin, unsnapped it and draped it across my lap. Artyom wasn't about to put either of us in a situation where wagging tongues might start rumors. With a playful smile, he took one of the pears from the tray and walked to the open doorway. Leaning against the frame, he took a bite.

"There. Now we can talk."

Amused by his compromise, I perused the offerings on the tray and decided to have the yogurt sweetened with a drizzle of honey and raspberries first. "Thank you for breakfast."

"I only made the tea. The boss put this together before he left. He told me to let you sleep in and wake you at nine."

Not at all surprised that Nikolai had arranged all of this, I ran my fingertips across the soft, lush petals of the three Madame Berkeley roses he had clipped and placed in a small vase for me. The apricot petals had a tinge of pink on the tips. "Where is Nikolai?"

"He had to leave unexpectedly."

I picked up the mug of tea and took a sip. The ginger and orange blossom flavor soothed my nausea. "Business?"

"*Da*."

"My father?" I noticed the slight tic in his cheek and sighed. "What's he done now?"

"It wasn't your father. It was one of his men." The tight-lipped captain warily admitted that much but I sensed he wasn't going to tell me much more.

"It's bad?"

Arty crunched another bite of the sweet pear and nodded. My gaze was drawn to the tattoos on his hand. He lacked the five dots that Nikolai, Ivan and a handful of others had. It meant that he had never been to prison. The grinning devil on the back of his hand always freaked me out. He had the year of his birth inked onto his fingers, on the spaces between the joints and the nails. There was a typical thief's talisman on his thumb, and a scarab on his pointer finger. The asterisk on his middle finger wasn't a symbol I recognized.

Glancing away from his hand, I asked, "So I guess you're going to be my shadow today?"

"Yep." He turned the pear in his big hand and sank his teeth into the soft flesh. "You're getting a new one tomorrow. A full-timer to replace Sergei," he explained.

"Oh? Is Danny going to take over?"

"No. Danny is moving up the ladder." He made a walking motion. "The boss has decided that Ten will be responsible for you."

I blinked with shock. "Wait. Ten? As in Anton Vasiliev?"

"Yes."

"But he's in prison," I sputtered. Why in the world wasn't I told this? Irritated that Nikolai had kept this decision from me, I stabbed my spoon into my yogurt.

Arty shook his head. "He got out this morning."

A thousand arguments against being placed in the care of man with Ten's reputation raced through my mind but I clamped my mouth closed. That was a conversation I would have with Nikolai. Speaking of my husband... "Do you think Nikolai will be back by this afternoon?"

He shrugged. "Maybe. Why?"

"I have an appointment." We were supposed to have our first look at the baby today, and I really, *really* didn't want to drag a mob captain to my first prenatal visit.

"If the boss isn't back in time, I'll make sure you get there." He finished off his pear. "Is it at the salon?"

"Not exactly," I murmured and tucked into my breakfast.

"You let me know when you're ready to leave. I'll take you." He pushed off the door frame. "Do you want to paint here at the house or do you want to go to the studio?"

"I'll stay here today."

"Okay." He gestured over his shoulder. "I'll be downstairs. Boy and Ilya, one of my other guys, is here. If you need anything, you call for us. Yes?"

"Sure." He started to leave but I stopped him. "Artyom?"

"Yes?"

"I'm going to be totally nosy for a second. You can tell me to mind my own business if you'd like."

He actually laughed and held up the hand that was missing two fingers. "You want to know the story behind this?"

"No!"

"It's all right. Everyone wants to know."

"No, really. I—"

"Luka Beciraj."

I didn't know that name. "Who?"

"You know Besian?"

"A little." I dipped my spoon into the yogurt and stirred it around. "He was at our wedding."

"Luka is his cousin, and he's the big boss over in Tirana. He runs that family with an iron fist."

I didn't know a lot about the Albanian crews, but I did know they were all about their family ties, loyalty and honor.

"I made the mistake of taking something from Luka." Artyom held up his hand. "So he took something from me—with a chisel and a hammer."

My eyes widened at the brutality of it. "Jesus."

His shoulders rolled nonchalantly. "I got off lucky. Two fingers? It's a small price to pay."

"A small price?" I shook my head. "You guys are crazy sometimes. You know that?"

He laughed sadly. "Yes."

I scooped up a spoonful of the yogurt and raspberries. "I was going to ask about the tattoo here." I tapped my finger to indicate which one I meant. "I've never seen a ring tattoo like that one."

He glanced at the asterisk on his hand. "It means I have no father."

I frowned. "That's not what Nikolai or Ivan's orphan tattoos look like."

"They were abandoned. I disowned my father. It's different."

"I see." I suddenly had a sneaking suspicion that the green-eyed captain had a life story similar to mine. More than once, I had dreamed of disowning my own father.

Artyom tapped his knuckles against the door frame. "We'll be downstairs."

Certain the men all had money on the World Cup matches, I waved my hand. "I don't mind if you watch the games."

He grinned. "I was going to ask, but I thought I'd wait until after your breakfast."

Feeling lucky, I asked, "Are the books still open?"

He seemed surprised by the question. I couldn't blame him. The fact that I sometimes indulged in gambling was one I kept very quiet. He glanced at his watch.

"Yes. Why? You want to drop a buck on the chalk? It's Portugal."

I tried to remember all the sports talk from Bianca and Sergei's barbecue. "Make it two."

"You got it."

After Artyom left, I pushed aside thoughts of chisels, hammers and Albanian blood feuds and enjoyed my breakfast. I stopped halfway through to grab my phone. I went straight to the Mexican newspapers I scanned every morning and looked for clues as to why my father would have called and why Nikolai would have left without a word. There were the usual reports of cartel violence, but I didn't see anything that tied back to Houston.

Uneasy and prickling with dread, I finished my breakfast, showered and dressed for the day. I dropped off my tray in the kitchen and handled a bit of housework. We had a housekeeper who came by twice a week, but I rather enjoyed the mundane, quiet tasks. They gave me time to think or unwind.

But today I couldn't shake the feeling that something bad was happening.

Alone in my home studio, I perched on a stool and stared at the two finished canvases and the blank one that sat on my center easel. I wasn't sure where the hell I was going with this new collection. *Find something to say.*

God, there was so much I wanted to say. I just didn't know how to do it. Layers, mixed media, vibrant colors—there were so many choices. I needed a cohesive vision. My other collections had all come together so easily, but this one? No, this one evaded me.

Rather than attempting a new painting, I opened one of my favorite art books and studied the pages of oil paintings completed only with palette knives. The technique had long fascinated me, and I had been incorporating it in my work for some time now. I selected a trio of colors and squeezed small dollops on a palette so I could practice different strokes and layers.

I kept glancing at my phone, checking the time and expecting a message or phone call from Nikolai. Biting my lip, I decided to send him a text instead of calling. My finger hovered over the screen for a few seconds before typing in a message.

V: Doctor's office in one hour. Call me!

When I didn't hear from him after fifteen minutes, I debated whether to cancel the appointment or go on my own. We needed to keep our pregnancy quiet, but I also needed to start my prenatal care. My hand drifted to my stomach, and I bit my lip. I had to make a decision—and I was choosing the health of the baby. We were leaving for London in a few days, and I needed to know everything was all right.

I cleaned up my mess and looked for Arty. He sat forward on the edge of a couch in the media room and watched a soccer match. Boychenko leaned against the opposite wall and split his attention between the front yard and the television. He seemed tense, and it occurred to me that Arty had years of practice playing cool and dealing with the blowback of this life. Whatever problem had dragged Nikolai out of bed so early clearly had Boy rattled.

"Artyom?"

He instantly muted the television and rose to his feet. "What can I do for you?"

"That appointment? I need to leave soon."

"Sure." He glanced at Boy. "Get Ilya. You'll follow us."

Boy nodded and left to find the guard who was probably hanging around the backyard. Arty switched off the TV. "Which vehicle would like to take?"

"Parking is going to be a nightmare unless we valet."

"Valet? Where are we going? A hotel?"

I swallowed anxiously. "No, you're taking me to the hospital. The new women's hospital downtown," I clarified.

"Hospital?" Concern darkened his face. "Are you all right?"

I touched his arm. "I'm fine." I lowered my voice. "I'm pregnant."

"Pregnant? But that's fantastic! Congratulations!" He looked as if wanted to hug me but held back. His expression quickly turned more serious. "Oh, but this is a very bad time for—" He stopped suddenly. "I mean—*shit*. What I mean is—"

"I know what you meant," I interjected. "We've had the same thought."

He rubbed the back of his neck. "Boy and Ilya? I trust them, but two mouths means two more chances for the news to get out. I assume that you and the boss want this quiet until things settle down."

"That's the idea."

"I'll tell them to stay here. You and I will leave in the Land Rover, but we'll switch to one of the fleet cars we keep in the parking lots around town. No one will be able to follow us that way. I'll make sure that your trip today is as secret as possible."

I clasped his hand and smiled warmly. "Thank you."

"It's my job." He touched my shoulder. "Let's go."

Half an hour and a vehicle switch later, we were riding an elevator up to my obstetrician's office. I gripped the handle of my purse and wondered where Nikolai was. I had texted him four more times during the drive and still there was no response. My emotions were all over the place. Anger, annoyance, frustration.

"He'll be here," Arty assured me as we reached the office door. "He's probably running a few minutes late. As soon as I see him, I'll send him inside to find you."

"You don't have to wait out here." He seemed hesitant to follow me inside the office. I didn't blame him. It was a strange situation. "It might be a while."

"I'll wait. It's no problem."

"All right."

Inside the office, I checked in and took the stack of paperwork to an open chair. Balancing the clipboard on my lap, I filled out the pages of medical history and insurance information. I couldn't fill in all of Nikolai's medical history so I had to leave spots blank. They still hadn't called me back by the time I had finished the paperwork so I fished my phone from my purse and texted him again.

V: Doctor's appointment in five minutes. Please call!

But he didn't answer.

A nurse popped her head out of the door that led back to the exam area and called my name. I glanced back at the entrance, expecting to see Nikolai rushing through the door like some scene from a movie, but he wasn't there. With a sad sigh, I followed the nurse to the triage station to be weighed and have my blood pressure and temperature taken. When that was done, I was led to a room and given a gown and a sheet.

Alone in the room, I sat on the edge of the exam table and nervously fidgeted. I tugged the gown tightly closed and used the sheet to cover my legs. My gaze flitted around the room. There were posters about breastfeeding, birth control and the anatomy of pregnancy on the walls. The poster about post-partum depression caught my attention. All those worries and fears bubbled to the surface.

The door opened, and hope flared within me. It was him. It just had to be him, rushing into the room, breathless and apologetic.

But it wasn't Nikolai. It was my doctor.

Plastering a smile on my face, I shook her hand and shoved down the feelings of disappointment and bitterness that threatened to overwhelm me. *Where are you?*

Chapter Four

Rubbing a hand down his tired face, Nikolai blew out a noisy, frustrated breath before sliding out of the backseat of the SUV. He buttoned his jacket and adjusted his aviator sunglasses, all the while scanning his surroundings like a hawk in search of prey. Flanked by Danny and two others, he grimaced at the muggy heat that greeted him. Even at nine in the morning, the humidity and warmth were oppressive.

Kostya waited for him at the entrance to the climate controlled storage locker. The hard line to the other man's mouth didn't bode well. "They're all inside. I've swept the area and the men for bugs. I've confiscated all the cell phones." He held out his hand and wiggled his fingers. "I need yours."

Nikolai retrieved his phone and handed it over. Kostya switched off the power, peeled a red sticker off his shirt and pressed it onto the phone before dropping it into a bag he carried. "The new guy is here. He came light. No heavies."

New guy? *Shit*. The lack of sleep over the last few weeks was getting to him. He had completely forgotten that there was a new player in town. His decision to wipe out the Night Wolves after they been caught gathering intel on Vee and had attempted to kill Bianca in her own store had left a power vacuum in the hierarchy of the white supremacist groups.

He didn't like working with them, but it was a necessary evil. Their hatred for others sickened him. Though he was no saint, he had his lines and codes. He didn't touch innocent people—children, wives, girlfriends, parents. That had always been his rule. He didn't cross that line. Ever. But these men who were so twisted up by skin color and religion? They didn't follow those rules. It made them reckless and dangerous and difficult to predict.

But he needed to fill that power slot. It was better to invite in someone with a power structure behind him than to let the smaller gangs around town fight it out on the streets. In some ways, he felt like a bit like the CIA installing and propping up a dictator who would follow the party line.

So overtures had been made and a new man from the main Aryan group out of Dallas had been sent down to Houston. Nikolai couldn't remember his name. *I need more coffee.*

As if reading his mind, Kostya said, "His name is James Mueller. They call him the Red Baron." He actually flashed a smile that revealed how stupid he found that nickname. "He's not your typical skinhead loser. I think you might actually like him. You know, except for all that white power bullshit."

"We'll see. Where did you put him?"

Kostya laughed mischievously. "Between Nickel Jackson and Mr. Lu. It's our own little version of the U.N. Security Council in there."

Nikolai chortled at the mental image of a racist sandwiched between a Vietnamese importer and the burly black gangster who ran all the action in the area of the city known as the Bloody Nickel.

"By the way, boss, Julio wants a private meet after the council finishes."

Nikolai groaned. "He's not going to like what he hears."

Kostya shrugged. "I'm just the messenger."

"Where did you seat him?"

"Between Besian and Mr. Lu and across the table from Spider."

Nikolai knew and respected the Calaveras MC vice president. He suspected Spider didn't like this mess any more than he did. That fucking phone call this morning threatened to push the cartel and the MC into a war.

Back in April, the big story around town had been the hit-and-run death of a high school kid leaving a concert up in the The Woodlands. The poor kid had been clipped and dragged by a motorcycle. The rider had jerked the kid free and sped off, leaving him in the middle of the road where he was hit again by a truck.

The cruelty and coldness of that death had bothered Nikolai. Within a day of the story hitting the news, Kostya had quietly informed him that the kid was actually the godson of Julio Jimenez, the Guzman cartel's top guy in the city. Kostya had believed the kid was really his biological son so Nikolai had put out feelers to find the asshole who had killed the boy. It would have been a nice gift to the cartel and a good deed that would buy him some goodwill down the line.

Because of the motorcycle connection, he had specifically asked Romero to get the Calaveras on it. The bastard had sworn up and down that none of the MCs in town had anything to do with it. The rider that night hadn't been wearing a kutte or colors. He was just some random guy on a Harley.

Except that he wasn't.

Romero had been lying through his fucking teeth and had been forced to admit to that this morning. It had been his closest friend Mando Fernandez, the damned sergeant-at-arms for the Calaveras MC, who had killed the kid. He had been doing a bit of freelance work that night so he hadn't been wearing his vest or riding his usual bike. Mando had called Romero the next morning, after the kid's identity was revealed, and Romero had given him orders to keep his trap shut. They had planned to take that secret to the grave.

But someone had found out and told Julio. Now Julio wanted blood. Nikolai didn't blame him. The thought of someone hurting his child was like a spear to the chest. The person who made the mistake of even trying to touch his son or daughter would know a grisly and violent end. He would make sure of it with his bare hands.

As Nikolai entered the storage container for the quarterly council get-together, he still didn't know what the hell he was going to do about this situation. The fact that Romero had known the whole time rankled him. This was something he had needed to know but his father-in-law had kept him in the dark.

Romero had let this fucking wound fester and rot—and now Nikolai had to decide how far up the limb would be amputated.

He glanced at the guards lining one wall. Each boss brought one man inside to watch his back. The rest of them remained outside. Even before he opened the door that sealed off the secret chamber portion of the container, he could hear the raised voices from inside. This council had been started to keep the peace and negotiate easements when it came to territories disputes. Usually the meetings were peaceful and short but the summer heat had a way of inflaming tempers. There was a lot of business on the table today, and Nikolai had a bad feeling it was going to be like trying to wrangle cranky toddlers in a daycare center.

He stepped inside the room and swept his gaze around the sparse interior. A round table, some chairs, no windows. He glanced at the familiar faces seated at the table and mentally catalogued their allegiances, strengths and weaknesses. If he didn't get what he wanted through negotiation, he would apply pressure to those weaknesses.

When he dropped down into his chair, Nikolai spotted the cup of coffee waiting for him. Kostya, of course. He took a sip while the room quieted down. The new guy, blond and green-eyed and dressed impeccably in a grey single-breasted suit, looked

uncomfortable as Nicky and Mr. Lu leaned across him and hissed at each other. He let his gaze linger on Julio Jimenez who looked unnaturally calm. Spider drummed his fingers on the table and assiduously avoided looking in Julio's direction. Beside him, Besian unwrapped a jawbreaker and popped it into his mouth. They exchanged a look before the Albanian mob boss dropped back into his chair and rolled the hard candy around his mouth.

"All right. Let's get this shit over with," Nikolai stated. He gestured toward the Red Baron. "This is James Mueller. He's with the brotherhood out of Dallas." There were murmurs of introductions around the table. Just in case Mueller had any funny ideas about his position on the totem pole, Nikolai made sure to end them. "He won't have much to say today. He's here to listen."

Mueller simply nodded.

Nikolai tapped his fingers on the plastic lid of his coffee cup. "Who is up first?"

"Me." Julio waved his hand, and Nikolai's stomach clenched as he expected shit to get real and loud fast. "We have an issue that needs to be addressed. It's between me and him."

The knot in his stomach eased when Julio pointed toward Mr. Lu. The elderly man held up both hands and immediately started to protest. Julio began to talk over him, and Nikolai stepped in like a father separating arguing children. "Come on. One at a time. Julio?"

"Our market share is dropping around the city, and it's not because the red ribbon campaigns are working. Our dealers—Lalo and his men—are reporting that someone is undercutting their prices and flooding the market with product. It's coming from his territory."

"No, no, no." Lu waved both hands. "We don't deal in drugs." He stated his position firmly, and Nikolai didn't detect a hint of untruth. Apparently the old man was in the dark about his nephew's activities. Boychenko had reported back with an address and half a night's worth of observation that confirmed Bobby Pham was dealing.

"Bullshit," Julio spat back. "I had two guys do buys from a dishwasher at a pho shop and a massage parlor."

"I can't control every single lowlife in my territory." Mr. Lu turned his attention to Nikolai. "If there are side deals going on in my backyard, I'll take care of it." He glanced

at Julio. "You should have come to me first. This didn't have to be escalated as a council matter."

"I wanted it out in the open, in front of everyone," Julio said and cast a look at Spider. "But if Lu says that he'll take care of it, I take him at his word."

Nikolai sipped his coffee. This was far from settled, but he wasn't going to get involved. Not publicly, at least. "Next item?"

"That's me." Nicky raised a dark hand glittering with gold jewelry. "And Lu."

The old man made an irritated noise. "I told you that all purchases are final."

"No, no, no, no, no." Nicky pounded his finger against the tabletop like a nail going into wood. "You guarantee the shipments."

"Yes, I guarantee the shipments. I guarantee that they arrive and are transferred to you. That's my guarantee. I don't guarantee what's in the boxes!"

Nicky leaned across the table, forcing Mueller back into his seat. "How in the hell are my boys supposed to push lean when the syrup is bad? Huh?"

Ah, now Nikolai understood the issue. Nicky bought huge quantities of promethazine and codeine from Chinese suppliers to sell to users who mixed it with lemon-lime soda to get high. They called it lean because the kids who drank that shit started to tilt and lean after a cup or two. It used to be easy enough for Nicky's guys to doctor shop to get their ingredients. With the DEA cracking down, Nicky had turned to Mr. Lu who imported and delivered the cough syrup without incident.

"What the fuck do you want us to do about it?" Besian rolled the jaw breaker around his mouth. The sound of it knockings against his teeth irritated Nikolai but he tried to ignore it. "Lu is right. We pay him for shipping and customs. That's it."

"He gave me the supplier contact. That's on him," Nicky insisted. "He's on both sides of this deal. He's taken a cut from the supplier for making the contract, and he's getting my shipping and handling fees. Now he's telling me that he can get me the good stuff from a different factory—at twice the price and only if I clear the debt on that last shipment that I can't even give away." Nicky shook his head. "This shit ain't right, y'all."

Mr. Lu started to argue about his policies, but Nikolai had had enough of it. Besian caught his eye, and they shared a look of understanding. It was time for the gangster version of good cop, bad cop.

"You know, Lu, it sounds like you're losing your touch, old man." Besian crunched what was left of the jaw breaker between his back teeth. "You've got kids selling some of that sweet Colombian *llelo* right in your backyard, and now you're making the Bloody Nick sick with your bad syrup."

Mr. Lu sputtered. "That is not—"

"Nicky, maybe I should put you in contact with my man. He can get you anything you want from anywhere in the world." Besian made the offer with a smile, but it was a threat as dangerous as a knife to the throat for Lu. Without the confidence of the men at this table, he couldn't do business. If they started using Zec for their shipments, they would cut the old man off at the knees.

"Look," Lu interjected hastily, "we don't have to be so drastic." With a resigned sigh, he turned toward Nicky. "I'll take back the shipment, and I'll get you a clean shipment on my dime to replace it."

"I want the same price for the new shipments," Nicky countered.

"I can't get it for that price," Lu insisted.

"Bullshit. You and your—"

"Enough," Nikolai interrupted. "Nicky, the market is the market. When prices rise, we all have to adjust." He looked to Mr. Lu. "At the same time, it's better to ease these types of price changes onto our customers. So let's talk about a six month discount." Knowing that Nicky wanted a good deal and Lu had to think about thin margins, he started off at a number that left room for negotiations. "Thirty percent?"

"Impossible!" Mr. Lu vehemently refused. He waited two heartbeats before countering, "Ten."

Cheap old bastard. "Twenty-five."

"Fifteen."

"Twenty," Nikolai said, his voice lower and sharper.

Lu sighed. "Yeah. Okay."

Nikolai glanced at the man who ran the Fifth Ward. "Do we have a deal?"

Nicky gave a slight nod. "Yes."

"Good." Nikolai placed both hands around his coffee cup. Fully expecting Julio to bring up his issues with Mando, he asked, "Anything else?"

"Pussy," Besian said, fishing a new jaw breaker from his pocket.

Nikolai's mouth settled into a grim line. His family didn't touch the skin trade, but several of the men at the table had lucrative business lines dedicated to it. "What about it?"

"In the last two months, I've had to send my guys out to chase away the corner girls who have been hanging around the strip clubs." He popped a green candy into his mouth. "They come in vans from Nicky's district and hang around the parking lots. Instead of spending money to get into a VIP room in my clubs, the customers are taking their dollars outside to visit these cut-rate streetwalkers. It's cutting into my bottom line and draws police attention. Lights and sirens are bad for business."

"Look, man," Nicky sat forward, "Sugar's sits on the edge of the buffer zone. Do you expect me to hook GPS tags on my girls? They walk the streets. I can't help it if they cross an invisible line."

"Invisible line my ass," Besian growled. "I'm pretty fucking sure they can see the huge hot pink lips blinking on top of Sugar's. This is you making plays and edging into my territory." He swept his hand along the table. "We've talked about this. We agreed—"

"We agreed that you get the high-end action," Nicky cut in with a wag of his finger. "You get the security business for the high-end escorts Alina runs out of her brothel and the strip clubs. I have all the street action. *That* was the deal. But you've been pinching my girls and running your escorts around my territory."

"That's not the way it happened," Besian argued. "I can't help it if your girls are tired of giving fat fucks handjobs in back alleys and getting their knees dirty over at the Flying J parking lot. Employee retention isn't my problem. You should take that up with Alina." He crunched another jaw breaker. "We're just her hired muscle."

Nickel Jackson rapped one of his golden rings on the table. "Don't give me that line. You and Alina have been running your games for years."

Wading into the fray, Nikolai said, "Maybe we need a bigger buffer between your two territories."

Julio agreed with a slow nod. "I'm with the Russian on this one. Every time we meet, you two squabble about territory issues. Your business interests intersect too much. We could partition off a strip between the two of you and give it the Hermanos."

Now that didn't surprise Nikolai one bit. The Hermanos street gang was closely allied with the cartel and helped maintain their presence here in the city.

"We have businesses in that area around Sugar's," Mr. Lu mentioned. "We could take it."

Nikolai noticed that Spider didn't make an offer to take the piece they were discussing. He was smart and practical and likely anticipated it would be more trouble than it was worth to his MC. Nikolai considered the new man at the table. "Mueller."

"Yes?" By the look on his face, he already knew what was about to be asked of him.

"How would you like to be the new owner of ten Houston blocks?"

Mueller rubbed his thumb over his watch face. "Real estate is my legit business. I'll buy anything if I can get a good price."

"Then today is your lucky day because I'm giving it away free," Nikolai remarked.

After the expected grumbling from Besian and Nicky over the new arrangement, they settled some of the smaller issues and ended their meeting. Nikolai tensed when he noticed Julio passing Spider, but the two men didn't exchange a word.

"Trouble in paradise?" Besian asked in that maddening way of his. The man could ferret out a secret faster than Kostya. "What's that saying around here?" He dug around in his pocket and produced another jaw breaker. "Oh. Right. Too many chiefs and not enough Indians."

Nikolai snatched the candy away from Besian, the plastic wrapper crinkling loudly as he closed his fingers around it. "I can't listen to you crunching another one of these." He stuffed it into his own pocket. "You're going to ruin your teeth."

Besian issued an amused chuff. "Yes, Papa."

Nikolai shot him a warning look. "What is with the candy?"

"I'm trying to cut back on the smokes," Besian explained. "Apparently they kill people. The candy helps me fight the urge to light up."

"You're going to need a dentist and a gym if you keep this up," Nikolai warned. "All that sugar? You'll be trading lung cancer for diabetes."

Besian shot him the finger. "What about you? How did you stop?"

A memory flashed before his eyes. Suddenly he was rifling through his desk drawers and coat pockets at Samovar in search of a pack of cigarettes. He couldn't understand why they kept disappearing. Certain one of the employees with cash flow problems was pinching them, he had gone into the locker room to check the cubicles.

Desperate to feed his habit, he had opened the first locker—and froze at the sight that greeted him. Two stacks of cigarette packs, some brand new and sealed and others half empty, sat on a shelf in the locker. It wasn't the discovery of his stolen cigarettes that had stunned him. No, it was the realization that he was staring into Vivian's locker. His gaze had settled on the photos taped to the door and interior walls. All but one were Vivian with Lena, Erin and Bianca at various social gatherings—college football games, concerts, night clubs and the beach.

But that one photo taped to the left wall, down low where it was almost easy to overlook, had ensnared him. It had been snapped a few months earlier when the staff at Samovar had blindsided him with a birthday cake before the doors opened for lunch. More than anything, he had been startled someone had discovered his birthday. Until, of course, he had spotted Vivian standing near the rear of the small crowd, her fingers interlaced and her expression a mixture of excitement and fear. Somehow she had wheedled that bit of information out of one of his friends. Vanya, he was sure. The former street fighter had a soft spot for Vivian.

But soft spot didn't even begin to describe what he felt toward the blue-eyed beauty who had completely upended his carefully arranged world. So when she had bitten her lip and silently pleaded with him to just sit the hell down and pretend that he enjoyed the off-key notes of his staff singing *Happy Birthday* that's exactly what he did.

For her. Because, if he was being truly honest with himself, everything he did had been for her and only her since the moment he had discovered her bleeding, broken body in the front yard of that house.

When it was time to cut the cake and partition out small squares to the staff, Vivian had been the one who came forward with a knife to handle the task. Someone had snapped a photograph of her by his side, a sweet smile on her face and the hint of one ghosting across his. It was a totally innocent photograph and rather unremarkable to anyone who didn't know what to look for—but he knew and he saw it.

He had taken that photo and tucked it into his wallet. Later, with a couple of drinks in him, he had discovered the decency to be embarrassed and a little bit ashamed for stealing from Vivian. The photo had meant something to her, but he suspected it meant more to him. Looking at that photo, he could almost imagine that it had been just the two of them. Together. Happy.

Even now, more than two years later, he still tugged that photo out of his wallet on occasion and ran his finger along her face. Their home was decorated with dozens of photos of the two of them, but that one meant the most to him. It was the first. It had been so important to him that he had secretly scanned and saved it, just in case he ever needed another copy.

Realizing he had drifted into his thoughts, Nikolai stood up and glanced at Besian who wore a slightly bemused expression. "Vee asked me to quit so I did."

Besian seemed surprised by his honesty. "Just like that?"

"No. I tripped up quite a few times but I kept trying." *For her.*

"Well," Besian said on a low breath and rose from his chair, "then I'm fucked. I'll never meet a woman like your little artist. God knows I've looked."

"Because there are no other women like Vee," he answered matter-of-factly. Thinking of the women Besian paraded around town, he made a simple suggestion. "Stop looking in the wrong places."

"Oh, there's a list then? Of right and wrong places?"

It was one thing to discuss women with his closest friends, but giving relationship advice to a rival boss? Not really his thing. Deciding to cut this discussion short, he pointed out the obvious. "Stop dating your employees."

"You married your employee."

Affronted that Besian would even think to compare Vivian to the naked, glitter-dusted girls dancing on his stages, he glared at the man. "That's my wife you're talking about, Besian. We are friends, but don't think for one fucking second that distinction means anything when it comes to her."

The Albanian boss held up his hands. "Hey, come on. I didn't mean it like that."

Irritated with Besian, he asked, "Are we done?"

"We will be as soon as you tell me what the hell is going on between the cartel and the Calaveras. I have side deals with the MC for bikes and bike parts. Do I need to cut back on those shipments and add more security?"

"It's business as usual. The issue is personal. It has nothing to do with the cartel or the club."

"You sure?" Besian glanced at the closed door and stepped closer. "I'm hearing shit, Nikolai. Worrisome shit," he added seriously.

He had been hearing the same worrisome shit, but he shrugged it off. "There are always rumors. That's the nature of our world."

"It's not only rumors. I saw something the other day. Something very strange."

Nikolai narrowed his eyes. "And what was that?"

"I took 59 to Laredo last week to check up on our operation there. Do you know what I saw?"

"Drug mules. Drug dealers. Corrupt deputies." He listed the usual things one might find on that stretch of highway. US 59 was notorious for drug traffic and heavily favored by the cartel.

"Hector Salas, Lalo Contreras and two of Mr. Lu's nephews all left the same hotel. I was sitting in the lobby reading the paper when I spotted Lalo first. I didn't think much of it because, hell, he's the cartel's street man. When I spotted the two Pham boys and Hector?" Besian shook his head. "That's not a coincidence."

Hector Salas had a reputation as the cartel's fixer and top enforcer. His father had been drug lord Lorenzo Guzman's best friend, but it was his mother that was really interesting. She had been the sister of Eddie Rivera, one of the richest men in the country. A cartel squabble twenty years earlier had killed her. She had been violently and brutally murdered.

According to the stories around town, Hector's father had sent him to Houston to live with Eddie and his family. By all accounts, Marco Salas had promised his wife their son wouldn't follow in his footsteps. Clearly he had failed. From what Nikolai knew of the story, Hector had served ten years in the military before being dishonorably discharged and tossed to the wolves. The cartel had come calling, and the rest was history.

The puzzle pieces started to fit together now. Lorenzo Guzman was feeling the squeeze south of the border. Rival cartels were gaining strength and market share. He had Romero, once a friend and now his enemy, making plays in his backyard with the support of Maksim. Were Lorenzo's captains and street soldiers thinking of staging a coup? How did these Vietnamese kids fit into this? There were so many Latino street gangs in Houston. Lalo and Hector could have picked any or all of them to start running product and setting up new supply lines so why the Pham boys?

"I'll look into it." Nikolai headed for the door. "I hate these shady, backroom deals."

"Whatever happens? My crew stands with you."

Nikolai glanced at Besian and nodded. The Albanians had some lucrative businesses and sidelines in the city but they didn't have strength. They limited their growth by only allowing those who were connected by blood or marriage to join the ranks. It cut down on the sort of backstabbing bullshit that was probably happening right now inside the cartel—but it meant they needed the protection of a bigger organization.

"We're with you," Nikolai confirmed.

"And the others?" Besian gestured toward the closed door with a lift of his chin. "If the cartel implodes, we're going to have the barbarians at the gate. We'll need every man we can get."

"Yes, we will." Already doing the math and thinking of the dozens of ways this could end, Nikolai left the storage locker with Besian at his side.

"Oh. I forgot." Besian snapped his fingers. "Everything is ready for Ten's party. You get him to the warehouse, and I'll handle the rest."

Nikolai wasn't thrilled by the welcome home party that had been arranged by the captains, but he wasn't about to stop them. Ten had given six years of his life to protect the family so he was willing to turn a blind eye to whatever was going to happen tonight at Besian's warehouse.

"No alcohol, Besian." He fixed the slightly shorter man with a pointed look. "They'll force him to piss at his first meeting with his parole officer tomorrow morning. They're going to be watching him closely. He has to do everything by the book or else he'll have to go back inside and finish up his ten years."

"Hey, I'll take care of him. He's in good hands."

"He better be." Nikolai thought of Artyom and his mangled hand. "Because Luka isn't the only one with chisels and hammers in his garage."

Besian issued a dark laugh at that one. "I almost believe you."

Standing alone, Nikolai noticed Mueller and Julio lingering nearby, both wanting to speak with him. The others were long gone. He had wanted to speak with Spider but that would have to wait until he could track him down and corner him. Because he was certain the discussion with Julio was going to be a long one, he flicked his fingers at Mueller.

"Take a walk with me, Red Baron."

Chapter Five

Nikolai didn't even try to hide his smirk at the irritation that flashed across James Mueller's face upon hearing his nickname. Side by side, they slowly walked away from the container. Mueller spoke first. "I fucking hate that name."

"Should I even ask why it was given to you?"

"No."

He decided not to poke. "This new territory you've been given? I wouldn't try to set up shop there. You and your kind won't last a week in that neighborhood. Put some men there to keep the peace and leave it at that. Don't try to grow or put down roots. Nickel's men will try to push back and agitate so keep that in mind when you choose your men. "

"Not quite the welcome wagon I had expected," he replied, hands buried in his pockets.

Nikolai stopped and pivoted to face him. "Do I need to remind you what happened to the last lightning bolts and swastika crew that tried to gain a foothold here? Because I'm sure Kostya would love to take you for a ride so he can give you all the details."

"Look," Mueller whipped off his sunglasses, "I get it. Those Night Wolf assholes didn't play nicely in the sandbox. They were young and reckless. We aren't. When it comes right down to it, the only color I care about is green. So if we can find a way to work together and make some money doing it? Great. If we can't, we'll close up shop and move on to more hospitable territory."

"Sounds like a reasonable plan," Nikolai agreed, glad to see the man understood the score here.

"That strip of territory you've given me is a shit sandwich, Kalasnikov, but I'm going to grab it right off that silver platter, take a big ole bite and smile. You run the show here, and we are not looking to upset that balance."

While Nikolai didn't appreciate the imagery of that rather colorful metaphor, he studied Mueller's face and saw no signs of lying. "What is it that your crew wants?"

"We want the ice trade in town. That's it."

"I'm not the man to ask for that. That action is city-wide, but Nickel holds the biggest share of the market. I doubt he'll be very accommodating if you get anywhere near his territory." And that was putting it nicely. Knowing what he did of the way Nicky

Jackson had gained control of the Fifth Ward, he believed Mueller was in for a long, painful ride.

"You'll find I can be very persuasive." Mueller slipped his sunglasses back into place.

Nikolai didn't comment on that.

"This is a bit awkward, but my wife wanted to know if yours would be interested in exchanging contact info. Mindy is trying to get settled here. She's looking for a hair stylist, a spa, a personal shopper. Shit like that," Mueller said with a wave of his hand.

He had to bite back a guffaw at the idea of Vivian interacting with Mueller's wife. In case the man wasn't aware, he enlightened him. "My wife's father is Romero Valero."

"I'm aware of that."

"Then you're aware of the fact that Vivian is half-Mexican, yes?"

Mueller shrugged. "Like I said, when it comes to color, I'm only interested in the green printed on hundred dollar bills."

"Vivian's inner circle is full." Because it wouldn't kill him to extend a little kindness and earn some favor, he said, "She enjoys the salon and spa Holly Phillips owns. It's called Allure. I'm sure your wife can find the details online."

"Thanks." Mueller seemed to get the hint. "I'm sure I'll see you around town. Mindy likes to run with the philanthropist set. She's begging me to get a box at the opera. I hear you have one."

Nikolai nodded. The idea of running into Mueller at the one place he enjoyed when he needed a well-earned dose of relaxation and culture pissed him off. From now on, he would have to remind Vee to vet the guest lists for the society and charity invites that landed on their doorstep every month.

Mueller patted his chest and retrieved his cell phone. His mouth slanted with a smile. "It's my wife. We're closing on our new house this afternoon. River Oaks," he said. "The country club area. You're near there, right?"

Nikolai saw right through the innocent façade. The man was one of the most successful real estate agents in Dallas. Mueller would have no trouble finding out exactly where Nikolai lived, when he had bought his house, how much he had paid for it or the recent tax bill. "Yes. In one of the historic homes."

"Home? Estate more like," Mueller said with a laugh. "I have to take this." He extended his hand. "I hope this is the beginning of a prosperous relationship."

Nikolai shook his hand and fought the urge to wipe his palm on his jacket. Leaving Mueller, he moved toward Julio who gestured to his SUV. Nikolai hated getting into other people's cars. Kostya stood next to the vehicle and made the smallest gesture with his fingers to let Nikolai know he had checked the SUV during the meeting. It was safe and free of tracking and listening devices.

Inside the middle seat with Julio, he waited for the other man to speak. He didn't dare reveal his hand until he was certain of what the other man knew. Julio sat stiffly, his hands clenched into fists. Nikolai eyed him warily. This guy was hanging on by a thread.

"I'd like to think that you and I have a good working relationship," Julio said. "We've done business for years. There has been friction, yes, but we've always managed to find a way to negotiate our way around it. The two of us—you and me—we've always kept the big bosses happy and away from each other's throats."

"We have." Nikolai wondered where he was going with this speech.

"I don't expect loyalty from you. We don't play for the same team. But some common fucking courtesy would have been nice," he growled. "How could you stand there at my boy's funeral and watch me put my son in the ground all while protecting that scum piece of shit who killed him?"

The pretense of the boy being the godson was gone. Nikolai didn't have to think too hard to understand why a man would deny a child his name and raise him outside his home. Life as Julio's son would have been exceedingly dangerous. By all accounts, the boy had enjoyed a normal, happy life before that awful night.

"I didn't know." Nikolai turned in his seat so Julio could clearly see his face. "I didn't know until this morning. Had I known that one of those MC bastards had killed that boy—*your* boy—I would have trussed him up myself and delivered him to you wrapped in a fucking bow."

Julio studied him for an intense and unnerving moment. His eye twitched, but his hands relaxed. "I want him. Now."

"I'm working on it, Julio, but Romero didn't call me until after he sent Mando on the run. The guy is in the wind."

"So put your spy on it!"

"He is. Kostya will find him, but it won't be easy. It might take some time." He hesitated. "Have you talked with Romero?"

"This morning."

"Good." Nikolai had all but ordered his father-in-law to open a channel of communication with Julio. He wanted them to work this out but had feared he would be the one forced to step in and make it right.

"Not good," Julio retorted. The man's fists tightened again. "He offered me money. Can you believe that shit? He asked me what my son's life was worth."

Nikolai's stomach revolted at the sheer audacity of it. He shouldn't have been surprised. Romero had abandoned Vivian in a home with an armed man to save himself. If he wouldn't go back to save his own flesh and blood, he sure as hell wasn't going to be motivated by fatherly love to do the right thing for Julio.

"Do you know what I asked him?"

"No."

"How much is Vivian's life worth to him?"

The words registered slowly, and Nikolai turned his head to stare at Julio. An icy cold spilled through his veins and settled in the pit of his stomach. In that moment, his ability to think and reason like a human being vanished. He was reduced to his most primal state. He felt like a lion preparing to defend his mate and their cubs. *Protect. Kill. Protect.*

Very calmly and with a voice that sounded unnaturally relaxed, Nikolai stated the facts. "You're under a great deal of stress, and you're still grieving for your son. I'm going to let this go today."

In a flash of movement that startled Julio, Nikolai clamped his hand around the man's throat and shoved his temple against the window. His head whacked the glass with a loud thump and his skin squeaked as he tried to fight free. Nikolai grasped the man's hand, drawing back his thumb into a stress position, and held him there, weak and trapped.

Hissing like a viper, he warned, "But if you ever make the slightest hint of a threat against my Vivian, I'll kill you." He squeezed his fingers around Julio's throat. "I'll fucking kill you, and I'll take my time doing it. Kostya will be mopping up the scene for weeks after I'm finished."

His warning given, Nikolai held his hand on Julio's throat a moment longer, pressing his fingertips into the other man's flesh to be sure there would be bruises. He wanted Julio to look in the mirror every morning for the next week and remember what had happened here. This wasn't an empty threat. Nikolai would end any man who tried to hurt his wife and his baby.

Letting go, he reached for the door handle and exited the SUV. Julio coughed and cleared his throat. Before he shut the door, Julio said, "One hundred thousand, Nikolai. That's all she's worth to him."

Gritting his teeth, Nikolai slammed the door and strode to his vehicle. Kostya hurried to catch up, and Danny's brow furrowed with concern as he quickly opened the rear door so Nikolai could get into his vehicle. Kostya dropped into the driver's seat and eyed him in the rearview mirror. Smartly, he said nothing while Nikolai tried to regain control of his raging temper.

He didn't know who he wanted to hit first—Julio or Romero. Julio had crossed the line by threatening Vivian. It wasn't her father who had killed his boy. It was Mando Fernandez. Julio had no business whatsoever dragging her into this mess. She was innocent in this.

And mine. She's mine, and he's fucking crazy if he thinks he can even joke about putting a hit on her. The disrespect was outrageous. Fucking outrageous.

"One hundred thousand dollars," he grumbled while reaching for his seat belt.

"Boss?" Kostya twisted in his seat. "Do we need to hit up the bank?"

Kostya didn't mean a normal bank branch. He meant one of the locations where they stowed hard currency.

"No." He sat back and wiped his face with his hands. "Julio threatened Romero over this bullshit by asking him how much Vivian's life was worth to him."

Kostya sucked in a shocked breath. "And?"

"And what do you think happened?"

"Well I heard him talking so at least you left him alive," Kostya dryly replied. "I didn't bring my black bag of tricks."

The dark humor did little to ease Nikolai's anger. "Romero put a price of one hundred thousand on Vivian. On his daughter. On *my wife*."

Kostya wisely didn't speak.

"She took the fall for him. She believed in him. She *loved* him like all little girls love their fathers—and he abandoned her. He left her there to die. He left her there for me to kill. He left her behind to fend for herself while he went inside and did his ten year stretch. And what's she worth to him? A handful of stacks." His jaw clenched so tightly it started to hurt. He thought of sweet Vivian, always optimistic and kind, always believing the best in everyone, and wondered how the hell she had been saddled with such a shit for a father.

"But she's precious to you, boss." Kostya spoke the words in a tone that was meant to calm him. "She's precious to you, and she knows that. She knows that you value her above all things. She knows that you would do anything for her."

The reminder eased the fury inside him. "We need to get out in front of this. Julio is a ticking time bomb. He's going to blow. Romero will yank and yank on that chain, and Julio is going to lose it. He can't touch Mando because the man has no wife or family so he'll go after Romero."

"He's got a stripper."

"What?"

"A stripper from Sugar's," Kostya explained. "Her name is Tawny. She didn't come in to work the last few nights. She's gone on the run with Mando, but she has family in the area. I'll shake them down and see if she's made contact with them."

"Do it—but keep it quiet, yes? And put out some feelers on hitmen. Julio won't use one of the squads on the cartel payroll. He'll hire this out. He'll go freelance with a *sicario* or maybe even one of the Professionals."

Kostya inhaled a long breath as he considered the possibilities. "There's the Ghost or the Liquidator. Either way, it's not good."

"We can contact the Liquidator. He's got standards and a code. You know his rules."

"Yes." Kostya had a professional relationship with the man everyone knew as the Liquidator. He had three younger brothers who also worked in that rather peculiar line of business—the Collector, the Fence and the Cleaner. They were ungodly expensive but they did quality work. "If someone tries to buy a contract on Vivian, they'll know about it. They'll turn it down, but they'll know."

"No, I want them to buy it. I want them to buy it and come to me. I'll triple the fee and pay them for the identity. Fuck it. Offer them whatever they want. Let them name the price. Triple, quadruple, quintuple—it makes no difference to me. I'll pay it."

"All right, boss. I'll get on it." Kostya put the car in drive and eased on the gas. "So much for a quiet year, huh?"

Nikolai exhaled roughly. "It was too good to last."

"Yes." They drove in silence for a few minutes. "Where to next, boss?"

"The meetup with Romero," he said, glancing at his watch. They were running late. Although Nikolai valued punctuality, he didn't even blink an eye at the thought of making Romero wait. For a moment, he considered filling the three hour drive with a phone call to Vivian, but he didn't want to wake her if she was still sleeping.

And what would he tell her? Your father's best friend killed a cartel kid and now he's on the run so the cartel and the MC are probably going to slaughter each other in the streets?

Jesus. Nikolai scrubbed his face again and wished he hadn't left his coffee on the table. Gazing out the darkly tinted window, he tried to play the various angles. He couldn't find a single way to end this without bloodshed.

For a moment, he actually toyed with the idea of calling Detective Eric Santos. He and Vivian's cousin had never seen eye to eye but the detective was a stand-up guy who would do the right thing. His contacts were almost as good as Kostya's. He could find Mando, snatch him up on an outstanding warrant and sweat him in a gen pop holding cell to force him to talk.

Once he was on the inside, Mando would have to fold to protect his club. The district attorneys and Feds would be tripping over themselves to cut a deal and get any information they could. Mando was too loyal to the MC—a real ride or die man—to flip on his boys, but he might spill the secrets he knew about the cartel. If that happened, the cartel would find a way to shut him up on the inside. Either way, he would be off the streets and no longer one of Nikolai's problems.

It was the cleanest way to fix the situation—but Nikolai's men would see it as the ultimate betrayal. There was still some grumbling over the way a Fed informant Besian basically owned had been used to clear out the Night Wolves once and for all. If Nikolai went to Eric, it would cast a long fucking shadow. Every step he made would be

questioned. Suspicion would dog him. He needed his men to believe in and trust him implicitly and without question. He couldn't have dissension in the ranks.

So what to do? For once, he honestly didn't know. He couldn't see the answer. *I'm losing my edge.*

Still plagued by questions, he barely registered the minutes and miles ticking by. Too soon, their vehicle was pulling into the agreed meeting spot. The SUV sat still for less than a minute before the passenger side door opened and Romero slid inside. Kostya exited slowly and quietly to take up a guard position outside.

Romero had come incognito—jeans, Mexican football jersey, sneakers and a baseball cap pulled low. He had started to grow out a beard. Somehow it made him look even harder and rougher. There were streaks of silver in the dark, coarse hair. His age was finally catching up to him.

Whipping off the hat, Romero scrubbed his fingers through his hair. "Fuck, what a mess."

Nikolai twisted in his seat to face his father-in-law. "You offered him money?"

Romero arched an eyebrow. "Yes. And?"

Taken aback by the familiar facial movement, Nikolai accepted that no matter how much he wished he could pretend that Vivian had nothing in common with her old man she was still his daughter. "And? Are you seriously going to fucking sit there and act as if you didn't just insult Julio? A man who lost his only son?"

"It was an accident."

"Bullshit." Nikolai slashed his hand through the air. "I read the police report. His light was red. He ran it and clipped that kid. Instead of staying behind to help the kid, Mando left him in the street to die. A little boy!"

"He was sixteen."

"And Vee was eleven when you left her behind," Nikolai angrily retorted.

"Yes, she was eleven when you shot and nearly killed her." Romero dared him to find a comeback. "How is my baby girl? I hear she's settling in quite nicely as your queen. Apparently she made quite an impression at the fight."

A vision of Vivian in black and gold at the warehouse where he hosted the bare-knuckle tournaments taunted him. God, she had been breathtakingly beautiful. He had been torn between wanting to scold her for doing something so risky and wanting to

sweep her into his arms and kiss her until she was breathless with arousal and blushing in submission.

"She's strong, brilliant and nurturing. She's found her place." *Right next to me.*

Romero made a throaty noise. "You're still going to London this weekend?"

"Yes. We leave on Sunday."

Romero glanced out the window, but not before Nikolai caught an expression that resembled regret. "That's good. I'm glad she's getting this chance."

Nikolai wasn't about to invite him to tag along or tell him that Vivian wanted him there. She didn't. "What are we going to do about Julio and Mando? We can't let this keep spinning out of control. Julio just threatened Vivian to my face. I can't allow this to play out in my city."

Romero stared at the windshield. He seemed to be carefully weighing his options. "I'll talk to Julio again." He held up his hand before Nikolai could interrupt him about the money. "I'll find a way to make it right."

"He wants Mando. Unless you tell him where to find your friend, he's going to start crossing names off lists—and he'll try to start with Vivian."

Romero's dark eyes flashed with a warning. "He won't touch my daughter."

"Your daughter *and* your grandchild." Nikolai hadn't been planning to reveal her pregnancy to her father yet, but it might be the only way to make Romero do the right thing. "We're pregnant. Eleven weeks."

Romero didn't say a word. He seemed completely stunned. "Vivian," he said finally. "A baby?"

"Yes."

Romero's throat moved up and down and he swallowed audibly. He seemed to be searching for the right words. Finally, he found them. "I don't particularly like you, Nikolai. I've learned to tolerate you."

High fucking praise indeed.

"When I heard you were going to marry Vivian, I didn't like it, but I honestly couldn't think of a better man for her."

The statement rocked Nikolai to the core.

"I don't mean that in the traditional way." Romero kept his gaze fixed forward on the windshield. "I mean that in the sense that by simply being my daughter Vivian is in a

great deal of danger every day. My list of enemies is a mile long and growing every day. There aren't very men in this world who could keep her safe *and* love her." He paused. "But you do."

"I do," Nikolai agreed. "I will."

"You have to watch her carefully," Romero instructed. "After the baby comes," he clarified. "Katya was always wild and unpredictable. Those were things I loved about her—until I didn't. Until I realized that she wasn't *right*. That she was broken up here." He tapped his temple. "It was having Vivian that flipped some switch. She was never the same again."

"Vivian isn't her mother." Nikolai growled the words.

"No, she isn't, but she's a woman and things happen to women after they have babies. You have to watch her. Keep her safe. Keep the baby safe."

Was Romero thinking about the day Katya had tried to drown Vivian as a child? The day a neighbor had broken down the door to save her? Was he thinking about all the times that Katya had abused Vivian while he was off running errands for the cartel or riding with the club?

"You don't have to worry. I'll keep them safe."

Romero finally looked at him and nodded. With a rough sigh, he reached for the door. "I'll get this thing with Julio taken care of while you're in London. It'll be safer for Vivian that way." He opened the door and climbed out of the SUV but didn't immediately close the door. "When you get back, we need to have a long discussion."

"About?"

"Our next moves," Romero said, as if strategizing together was the most natural thing in the world.

"*Our* moves?"

"It's time the two of us stop barking for our masters. It's time to cut the leashes."

Nikolai stared at the door that Romero quickly closed. Was his father-in-law proposing what he thought he was?

"How did it go?" Kostya asked as he fastened his seatbelt.

Nikolai replayed his father-in-law's parting shot. "I honestly don't know."

Kostya swiveled in seat, bracing his hand on the console. "What the hell does that mean?"

"It means things are going to change. Whether we're ready for it or not," he added ominously.

Kostya let that sink in for a moment. No doubt, he was already running the various scenarios and making lists of all the dirty deeds that would need to be done to protect the family. With a disturbingly cool shrug, Kostya said, "Fuck it. We'll make it work. We always do."

That was just like Kostya to put it all in perspective. "True."

Turning back toward the windshield, the cleaner announced, "I'm starving. Let's have a steak and a beer and forget this shit morning ever happened. Then we'll head back to Houston and track down Ivan and Ten."

Happy to let someone else make a decision, even if it was something as simple as lunch, Nikolai dropped his head back against the seat, closed his eyes and nodded. "*Da*."

Chapter Six

Nikolai grinned warmly as Ten strode into the coziest private dining room at Samovar with Ivan and Kostya right on his heels. Only a few inches shorter than Sergei, Ten sported similarly broad shoulders and the physique of a fighter. He had obviously burned a lot of prison time exercising in the yard. No longer did he wear his hair long. It was clipped short, but he had a scruffy beard now. There were a couple of new tattoos on Ten's neck and arms, all of them marks Nikolai had sanctioned from the outside.

"Boss." Ten extended his hand, but Nikolai surprised him by embracing the other man tightly. Ten stiffened, but Nikolai didn't hold it against him. He had spent enough time on the inside to understand how difficult it was to allow other people to invade his personal space.

Stepping back, Nikolai let his arms drop to his sides. "You look good."

"I feel good." Ten glanced around the dining room, his eyes darting toward the corners almost as if he expected to find men lurking in the shadows.

"It takes time, Ten." Nikolai cast a look at Ivan who studied his friend with a mixture of sadness and understanding. "You'll adjust." He gestured toward the table where the best the restaurant had to offer awaited them. "Come. Eat."

Though Nikolai preferred the seat with the best view of the room, namely the entrance and exit points, he let Ten have it tonight. Ivan dropped down into the other chair and reached for his silverware. Always so easy in social settings, Ivan took control of the conversation and kept it light and fun. The stories he told were intended to draw Ten back into the life he had left behind and familiarize him with the changes that had occurred during his time inside.

Sitting back and pushing away his dessert plate, Ten shook his head. "I still can't believe you're married. I never thought I'd see the day that you let yourself be chained to one girl."

Ivan toyed with his wedding band. A faint smile played upon his mouth. "When you meet Erin, you'll understand. Most days I can't believe she agreed to marry me."

Nikolai chuckled at that. He understood what that was like. There were mornings he woke up and simply gazed upon Vee's sleeping face because he couldn't quite believe that she was his wife.

Ten stared at Nikolai's wedding band. Unlike Ivan who had chosen to wear his according to the American custom, Nikolai wore his on the right hand because it was the Orthodox way and Vivian's preference. "You wouldn't believe the kites that were flying between cells when the news hit that you were going to marry the machete's daughter."

"I can imagine." Nikolai folded the edge of his napkin as he pictured the small folded notes attached to long strings of floss soaring through the air. Deciding this was as good a time as any to bring it up, he said, "I wanted to speak with you about Vivian."

"Should I leave?" Ivan asked, already rising from his chair.

Nikolai swept his hand through the air. "Stay."

Ivan sat down and reached for his fork again. It was a move that didn't surprise Nikolai in the least. Far from it, actually. The sight of Ivan cleaning his plate, refusing to leave even one tiny scrap of food behind, took Nikolai back to their shared childhood. Cold, hungry nights hadn't bothered Nikolai that much. He had turned that hunger into anger and used it to fuel his survival and his rise through the ranks.

But Ivan? Ivan hated being hungry. Whenever he ate, he made sure to finish every morsel available to him because as a child meals had been meager and few and far between. Despite finding success and wealth with his investments and business, Ivan was still that scared, hungry kid deep down inside. Erin's love for him had gone a long way toward easing some of those deep-seated fears but some habits would never change.

Turning his attention toward Ten, Nikolai began a conversation he expected the other man was not going to like. "I realize that you had hoped to be slotted into a job at Alexei's dealership or with the gym," he motioned toward Ivan, "until your probation was finished but I need your skills somewhere else."

Looking slightly uneasy, Ten said, "The conditions of my parole—"

"Will not be impacted by what I'm about to ask of you," Nikolai assured him. "You will follow them to the letter. Your new duties will never take you anywhere near those types of activities or people."

Ten's eyes narrowed. "What sort of job is this?"

"I need you to guard my wife."

Ten's lips parted with shock. He clamped them shut and worked his jaw back and forth. His prized enforcer had the worst fucking temper so Nikolai steeled himself for a blowup.

But it never came.

Nostrils flaring slightly, Ten inhaled a steady breath. The muscles in his neck were flexed, and his hands were curled into fists atop the table, but he maintained control. Finally, he said, "If this is what the family needs me to do, I'm happy to take the job."

"Ten." Nikolai sat forward and tapped the table. "This isn't a punishment or a demotion. Even if you were legally free and clear, I would still ask you to do this for me. I need the very best men I know watching Vivian. Sergei is gone, and if I thought Ivan would come out of retirement for me, I'd ask him."

Ten's shoulders dropped and the insulted look on his face faded. He asked the most obvious question. "Are we going to war?"

Now it was Ivan who tensed. Apprehension darkened his face.

"Not yet," Nikolai answered. "Not if I can help it."

"Then why me?" Ten seemed honestly confused by the request. "I was your best enforcer. I was the man you called to do the jobs no one else could. I trained Sergei for you and made sure there was someone to keep this city in line while I was away. To ask me to babysit your wife?" He touched his chest. "I'm sorry, boss, but it seems like a waste of my skills."

"Vivian is absolutely precious to me. She's my one weakness—and my enemies know it." Nikolai didn't like admitting that aloud but Ten deserved to know the truth. "She was already a target because of her father, but now that she's my wife, she's the biggest target in the city. Something is coming." He rubbed his thumb along the spot where his pulse beat on the underside of his wrist. "I can feel it."

"The cartel?" Ivan asked the question everyone plugged into the underworld wondered.

"Lorenzo Guzman is losing control. Romero will make a play, but he's not the only one. It could get messy." He held Ten's gaze. "I need to know Vivian is safe, especially now."

"Especially now?" Ten repeated.

"Now that she's pregnant." Nikolai dropped that bombshell without warning. "It won't be easy to hide much longer." He was talking to Ten man to man now and not as his boss. "Will you watch over them for me? I need to know they're safe."

"Yes." He answered without hesitation. "Of course."

Nikolai glanced at Ivan who drew a finger across his lips. He wouldn't breathe a word about the pregnancy, not even to Erin.

Leaning back in his chair, Nikolai said, "Sergei has agreed to talk to you about guarding her. He was with her the longest so he knows her the best. They bonded like brother and sister." He hesitated as he considered the hard, violent man in front of him. "I don't expect that sort of friendship between the two of you, but I need to know that you'll treat her...gently."

Ten shot him a look of consternation. "Boss, I'm not going to sit here and defend my reputation. I'll treat your wife with the same respect I give you—but I don't need a friend or a sister."

Nikolai lifted both hands. "Fine. That's fine."

"When do I start?"

"Tomorrow." Nikolai gestured toward Ten's messy beard. "You can keep that but clean it up." He eyed the other man's jeans and polo shirt. "We need to get you some new clothes."

Ivan took the lead on that one. "I'll take care of it. We can go see my guy in the morning after we visit his P.O. and the DPS office for his license. Then I'll drop him off at your house?"

Nikolai nodded. "We have a new kid at the house who can do all the driving until you have everything arranged. He's young and has a clean record."

"Boychenko?" Ivan grabbed his glass of water and finished it. "He's a scrappy little bastard. Sergei might actually be able to turn him into a fighter. He'll always be a featherweight but he's got potential."

"Wait." Ten seemed confused. "Roman?" He held up his hand to measure five feet or so from the floor. "The kid who bags groceries at his grandmother's little market?"

"The market is gone," Nikolai said, "and Roman is nineteen. He's working for Artyom now." Recognizing that lost look in Ten's eyes, he shrugged. "A lot happens in six years."

Ten nodded slowly. "Yeah."

Fully aware that the shock of being released from prison made it easy for a man to slide into depression, Nikolai decided it was time to send Ten on his way. A

celebration would be good for him. It would remind him of all the friends who cared about and had missed him. He needed to feel surrounded and supported. He needed to be made whole again.

He walked them out the side entrance while they waited for one of the valets to bring Ivan's Escalade. He shared a look with Ivan as the other man slid behind the wheel of his vehicle. Like brothers, they could communicate without saying a word. *Keep him out of trouble.*

"They'll be fine."

Nikolai searched the nearby shadows for Kostya. He hated the way the former covert operative skulked in the darkness. There weren't many men who could get the drop on him, but Kostya was one of them. Thankfully they were on the same side.

"Ivan will take care of him. He won't let Ten fuck up his parole." Kostya finally emerged from the shadows. "You want me to drive you home?"

Nikolai shook his head. "No. Are you heading to the party?"

Kostya shot him a look that said *of course*. "I'm catching a ride with some of your line cooks. If you need me—"

"I know how to find you," Nikolai replied.

Kostya took exactly four steps down the street before turning suddenly. "Shit." He reached into the back pocket of his jeans and retrieved a cell phone. "I forgot I had this."

Nikolai accepted it from him and tucked it into his own pocket without a glance. Vivian wasn't in the habit of texting or calling him unless it was important. If it had been something that needed his immediate attention, Artyom would have found a way to get a message to him through Kostya or Danny.

He spent more than an hour in his office going over paperwork. Samovar and the legitimate and very successful businesses he owned wholly or partly around the city were the major sources of his personal income. Early on, he had recognized that building a legitimate portfolio was the only way to stay out of prison. So he had kept his eyes open for business opportunities and had availed himself of Yuri's head for finance.

His first forays into legitimate earning hadn't been smooth or above-board exactly. Truthfully, the first few car washes and bars that he had acquired had been on defaulted loans he had extended. The construction company that he intended Sergei to run in the near future had been purchased when the previous owner needed fast cash.

Any time a man left the family—men like Ivan or Alexei—he made sure to fund their startups. Twenty or twenty-five percent ownership here or there added up quickly.

While his crew earned tidy sums off of their illegal activities, he made sure they were receiving the bulk of their income through the side businesses. That way they weren't tempted to get stupid and surrender to the temptation of easy but dangerous money. Their hands were dirty, but they weren't *that* dirty. He stayed on their asses about paying taxes and keeping out of trouble.

Thoughts of avoiding the trouble brewing around the city plagued him as he drove home. There were so many pieces to this puzzle, and he could no longer tell where each one fit. He finally had the one thing he had wanted most—a family with Vivian. His stomach in knots, Nikolai accepted that one wrong move could cost him everything.

As he drove by Judge Walker's house, he thought of his promise to help the man extricate his daughter from a bad situation. The morning after giving the order, Boychenko had given him the address and a quick rundown of the situation after a few hours of watching the house where the woman was living. It wasn't going to be easy to get her out of there, not if her habit was as bad as Boychenko's investigation had uncovered. She was hooked on that sweet Colombian candy *and* her dealer.

After he parked in the garage, Nikolai ambled toward the side gate that granted him access to the alley. He walked the shadows like a man used to living in them, completely at ease and not the least bit afraid of what might lurk in them. Frankly, the types of people who hid in the shadows were probably more likely to be afraid of him. Well—all of them who weren't Kostya.

The judge left his back gate unlocked. Nikolai frowned at that. Anyone could get in here. Bad people even. *Like me*. He entered the backyard and used the flagstone walkway. He had traveled twenty feet before he heard the unmistakable *click* of a revolver cylinder slamming into place. With a quirk of his mouth, Nikolai stood perfectly still and lifted his hands. The porch light suddenly illuminated the backyard and blinded him from seeing anything on the screened-in porch.

Playing along with the judge's game, he slowly lifted his jacket and turned in a circle. Seemingly satisfied that he was unarmed and had no ill intentions, the judge flipped the light off. The *thunk* of the gun landing on a table echoed in the night.

"Awfully late for a social call, Nikolai."

"I work odd hours." Hands on his hips, he waited for the judge to invite him onto the porch or send him away. Realizing he hadn't heard a peep from the judge's dog, he glanced around the backyard. "Your gate is unlocked. Did Roscoe escape?"

"He's at the vet. Someone poisoned him. With cocaine," the judge growled. "Those bastards took my daughter, and now they're trying to kill my dog."

"So the gate is unlocked and you're sitting in the dark with a revolver—"

"And a shotgun."

"And a shotgun," Nikolai repeated, "because you think they'll come back and you're hoping to unleash some of that Texas justice?"

"My castle. My guns."

Nikolai didn't doubt the judge would blow a hole in the first unfriendly face that peeked over the hedge. "When did the poisoning happen?"

"This morning," the judge answered. "I let him loose to do his morning business but he didn't come back to the house. I found him out near the garden shed. He had eaten half a pound of bologna laced with drugs."

Nikolai scratched his fingers through his hair. He wasn't sure what pissed him off more. Was it the fact that some lowlife thug had gotten *this* close to his own home, to his wife? Or was it the fact that some dumbass drug dealer thought it would be a good idea to threaten a federal fucking judge in a boss's backyard?

This was bad. There would be cops crawling all over this poisoning and digging into it. Though he didn't want to get dragged any deeper into this argument between the judge and Bobby Pham, he nevertheless extended his help to the man. "I've located your daughter, but it won't be easy to get her out of there."

The judge finally emerged from the darkness of his screened-in porch to the door he had propped open with a heavy planter holding a wildly overgrown aloe plant. "Is this where you shake me down for money?"

"No. This is where I tell you that these types of things tend to be noisy if they're rushed. It's easier on everyone if we do this quietly."

"What does quietly mean?"

"It means we do it my way. It means that it takes some time."

"Time?" The judge raised his voice, clearly exasperated. "I don't have time. She's been there too long. If I don't get her out soon—"

"You asked for my help, and I'm telling you this is the best way. If you don't want my help, by all means, do it yourself. But I warn you it won't go well for either of you."

"Is that a threat?"

"It's free advice. I suggest you take it." Biting back his frustration, he sighed. "I want to help you, Judge, but you have to work with me. You rattled their cages. Poisoning your dog was a warning. I suggest you heed that warning. Leave this ugly business to men like me."

Not wanting to argue with an armed man who was probably teetering on the edge of a breakdown, Nikolai pivoted on his heel and left the judge's backyard without another word. He stepped onto his property and instantly spotted the silhouette of a man leaning against a corner of the pergola. The flare of a lighter illuminated Ilya's face—and the flowers smashed between his arm and the wood.

"Get off the roses," Nikolai chided. Vivian loved sitting under the pergola in the morning. She often sketched the beautiful blooms. He had one of the delicately shaded drawings in his office at Samovar.

"Sorry, boss." Ilya spoke around the cigarette clamped between his lips and straightened. "It won't happen again."

"See that it doesn't." He glanced around the yard. "Where is Boychenko?"

"The kitchen."

"Arty?"

"Inside." Ilya took a long drag and held the smoke in his lungs before slowly, almost decadently, exhaling it in a curling plume. "There was some trouble four houses down, boss."

"I heard."

"When I saw the cops in the alley, I called a guy I've got in my pocket, up at the police station. He told me his girlfriend who works in a vet's office had seen the judge's dog. He was poisoned."

Not for the first time, Nikolai was impressed by Ilya's network of gossips and informants. "Do we know who did it?"

"You're not going to like this answer." Ilya blew out another lungful of smoke.

Subtly shifting away from the breeze that carried the smoke, Nikolai tried not to inhale the familiar scent of it. With the stress piling up on his shoulders, he had a raging craving for a Marlboro red. "Just tell me."

"It was the judge's daughter."

Nikolai narrowed his eyes. "You're sure."

"I took one of the baskets you keep on the porch, picked some peaches and tomatoes and visited your neighbors. I told them you were going out of town and your wife wanted to share the extra produce out of the garden before you left. Your peaches will open any door on this street." Ilya chuckled darkly at his off-color remark. "The old lady who lives next to the judge? In the brick house?"

"Mrs. Laramie."

"Right. That one." The bright tip of his cigarette bounced as he gestured with it. "I asked her about the judge's dog. I said that Vivian was really worried because she wanted to get a puppy and if there's some psycho running around poisoning dogs... It was a complete bullshit tale, but I figured it would soften her up, get her talking." Ilya waved his hand. "So the old lady tells me not to worry because it's just family trouble."

"Family trouble," he repeated dubiously.

"She says that the daughter and the parents argued like crazy before she moved out. Apparently the fireworks were like the Fourth of July over there. She told me that she saw the daughter drop something over the fence this morning. The old lady gets up early to fish in the summer so she knows everything that goes on in this neighborhood." Ilya took a final drag on the cigarette before stubbing it out between his shoe and a brick paver. "Did you know the people across the street, the ones with the white front porch, have swinger parties? She says that she can see everything with her binoculars."

Nikolai did, actually, know that the Jamesons were rather peculiar when it came to their bedroom games. Kostya routinely ran surveillance on the neighborhood and had uncovered some truly bizarre goings-on down at that house.

Not wanting to discuss his neighbors' sex lives, he asked, "Did she mention it to the police?"

"The swinger parties?"

Nikolai clicked his teeth. "No. Julie poisoning her father's dog."

"Oh. No."

"Why not?" Nikolai's gaze drifted to the cigarette butt that had been crushed on his sidewalk, and Ilya bent down to pick it up without having to be asked.

Pocketing his trash, Ilya shook his head. "She says that she isn't going to get involved. She did once before, when the girl was in high school and she caught some older guy sneaking into the girl's bedroom. It didn't end well. Apparently the daughter went crazy, smashed the old lady's windshield and slit her tires. She's dangerous, boss." He pointed to the back gate. "Do you want us to put more men out here until you leave for London?"

"Ten will be here tomorrow." That was all he needed to say. More men in the house would unnerve Vivian and make her feel unsafe. That was the very last thing he wanted.

Leaving Ilya outside, Nikolai took the sidewalk to the backdoor and entered through the mud room. He was surprised to find Boychenko sweeping the kitchen. Eyebrows raised, he watched the kid dump the dustpan into the trashcan tucked into a lower cabinet. By the looks of the counters and sinks, he had been busy.

If any of the men on his crew ever saw the kid doing chores like these, they would rag on him until the day he died, but Boychenko didn't seem the least bit fazed to be discovered this way by his boss. The kid offered a self-deprecating smile as he twisted the red plastic ties on the garbage bag. "Miss Vivian got sick after dinner. Arty has forbidden me to cook ever again."

The Miss Vivian thing always amused him. Born and raised in Houston, Boychenko was the strangest mix of Texan and Russian when it came to his manners. Nikolai offered the kid an encouraging look and lied right through his teeth. "I'm sure it wasn't your cooking. Vee has a nervous stomach. She's been very stressed about the upcoming show."

"Just in case, I've tossed everything and cleaned the kitchen for her."

"You didn't need to do that. We have a housekeeper who comes tomorrow morning."

"It was no big deal, boss." He hefted up the bag. "Do you need any other chores handled before I head home?"

"No, but there is something else I need you to do."

"Anything."

"Get the names of the men who run with Bobby Pham. I want to know where they live, what they drive, where they eat, who they fuck—everything. Understand?"

"Yes. I'll get it done."

"I know you will." Of that, Nikolai had no doubt. This kid was hungry and ready to prove himself. "Oh." He snapped his fingers, remembering something he had forgotten that morning. "Your uncle. The one who lives near Conroe?"

"Valery?"

Nikolai nodded. "Does he still breed dogs?"

"Sure. Mastiffs and Great Danes." Boychenko got a funny look on his face. "I heard Ilya making up that story about Miss Vivian wanting a puppy. Was that real?"

"It might be. Tell your uncle I'd like to speak with him when I get back from London."

"Okay. Night, boss."

He locked the side door behind Boychenko and started loosening his tie as he crossed the kitchen. When he stepped into the entryway, Nikolai noticed Arty sitting on the second floor in the seating area there. Normally Artyom kept downstairs after Vee turned in for the night. Thinking of the way she had been sick after dinner, he assumed the captain had simply wanted to be close to her in case she needed help.

Nikolai shrugged out of his jacket and tugged free his tie as Artyom came downstairs. The somber expression the other man wore unsettled him. "What's wrong?"

"Your phone is off?"

He touched the hard lump outlined in the jacket tossed over his arm. "Kostya had it because of the meeting. He didn't give it back. Why?"

"Boss, did you forget something?"

"Forget something?" He rolled through his mental datebook but couldn't think of anything that he'd forgotten to do. "No."

Standing in front of him, Artyom suddenly looked disappointed. "Vivian."

A quiver of panic struck his chest. "What about her?"

"She had an appointment today. An important one," he emphasized.

And then it hit him.

Chapter Seven

"Shit. *Fuck.*" Sick to his stomach, Nikolai suddenly remembered Vivian's appointment with her doctor. Shame gutted him. How the hell had he forgotten that? Nothing that had happened today was more important than Vee and the baby, but their appointment hadn't registered even once.

"After she told me about the appointment, I left Boy and Ilya here. We took the Land Rover but ditched it at one of the parking garages in case we were followed. I switched to one of our cars and took her to the doctor. I stayed in the hallway and didn't see anyone come on or off the elevator who looked out of place. After the appointment, we got the Land Rover and I took her out for a late lunch at Hugo's before bringing her home. We weren't followed. You can keep this a secret for a few more weeks."

The street captain Nikolai trusted the most proved yet again why he was always the one man who could be counted on in a tight situation. He had taken good care of Vivian.

Better than me. The thought caused a pang of guilt in his chest that threatened to stop his heart. He had promised Vee that he would do anything to make her happy. He had promised to protect her and love her and provide for her and their children, but he couldn't even remember one single doctor's appointment. He dreaded seeing her disappointed face. It would fucking kill him to see that he had let her down.

Artyom's gaze darted to the second floor. "No one even suspected that something was off with her. She's gotten very good at hiding what she thinks and feels. She's learning to build a better mask than yours. That was one part of you I was hoping wouldn't rub off on her."

There weren't many men who out there with balls big enough to censure him so the fact that his three-fingered captain had done it made Nikolai take notice. Was Vivian changing? Had he missed that?

"Did Ilya tell you about the judge's dog?"

Momentarily thrown by the question, Nikolai took a second to answer. "Yes."

"Do you want me to take some guys over to Pham's place?" Artyom didn't have to say the words. Nikolai understood what he was really asking. *Do you want me to bust down their front door and beat the shit out of them until they get back into line?*

"Not yet." There was something about the situation that unsettled him. If he had to send the boys over to knock some sense into Pham and his crew, it would be better to know which team was propping up the fledgling dealer.

"Do you need me to stay?"

"No. Go home."

Artyom headed for the front door. He wrenched it open but paused on the threshold. Turning back, he met Nikolai's gaze but hesitated to speak his mind.

Too tired to fight with an old friend, Nikolai sighed. "Just say it."

"You dragged her into this life." He held up a hand to stall the coming protest. "Sure. Okay. You warned her what it would be like, but she loves you. All of you. Even the ugly parts. I'm sure she thought she understood what this life is like—but—*Jesus*." Artyom blew out a noisy breath and lashed out with frustration. "This is your first child. Maybe your only child. Don't fuck this up." Anguish twisted up his face, and he swallowed hard. "You'll never forgive yourself."

Nikolai watched Artyom spin on his heel and leave the house. For a long moment, he stared at the closed door. Artyom was right, of course. About everything.

The pain on his friend's face forced Nikolai to think of a tragedy that none of them ever mentioned. It was the sort of thing no one wanted to remember. How long had it been? Fourteen years? Fifteen? Another lump of guilt piled onto his shoulders upon realizing he couldn't even remember the date Artyom had buried his baby and his girlfriend Rozalina.

He scrubbed a hand down his face as those ugly memories assaulted him. God, they had all been so young then, barely out of their twenties and certain they had the whole fucking world figured out. They couldn't have been more wrong.

Everyone had warned Artyom about getting involved with a prostitute hooked on heroin but he couldn't be swayed. He had loved that woman and had stolen her away from the pimp who had owned her. Though Nikolai had thought it impossible, Artyom had gotten Rozalina clean a few months into the pregnancy. Their son had been a tiny little thing when he was born, but he was healthy.

For a few months, it had seemed like Artyom would get his happily ever after—but then the past came knocking at the front door with a fully-loaded Makarov. Rozalina

had survived without taking a single hit, but Artyom had taken two gut shots. The baby...

With Artyom fighting for his life in the hospital and her baby dead, Rozalina had gone off the deep end. She had found her old dealer, traded her body for a bag of dope and had overdosed in some shit hole apartment, alone and afraid and drowning in her grief. Ivan had been the one who finally found her, half naked with a dirty sheet around her waist, a syringe dangling from her arm and the baby's photo clutched in her hand.

Nikolai's stomach lurched at those memories and of the bloody violence that had followed after the burials. They weren't memories he wanted to revisit, especially not before he went upstairs to make things right with Vivian. After locking the front door and setting the alarm, he shut off the lights and glanced out the closest window. He spotted Ilya talking to Danny as they handed off duties for the night.

A lumbering silhouette trudged across the yard to take up a spot out back. It was the first night Kir Petrov had guard duty. Ivan wasn't going to be pleased when he learned his best pro fighter was moonlighting as a guard to earn some extra cash. That was a conversation Nikolai didn't look forward to having. He had already made it abundantly clear to Kir that he was only allowed to watch the house at night and nothing more. That was it. If he put even a toe across the line, he would be bounced.

Already imagining the ringing ears that would result from talking to Ivan about Kir, Nikolai climbed the stairs and slowly made his way to the bedroom he shared with Vivian. He rested his hand on the door for a moment and tried to decide what he would say.

But what could he say? There was absolutely no excuse for what he had done. None. Zero.

Nikolai entered the bedroom. He swept the room with a quick gaze. The lamp on his bedside table illuminated the room. His gaze moved along the Vivian-sized lump on the far right side of the bed. The covers were up around her ears. There was no mistaking that signal. She didn't move, and he wasn't sure if she was asleep or pretending. Should he wake her? Was it better to let her have a good night's rest before they argued in the morning?

"Where were you?" Her voice was thick with sadness and disappointment.

Sighing, he quietly shut the door and leaned back against it. "Corpus Christi."

"What was in Corpus?"

"Your father. There's a problem brewing between the cartel and Romero's outfit. It's not going to end well." He rubbed at his tired eyes. He had spent the entire day trying to keep her safe but what Vee had really needed was for him to be present. "But none of that shit matters. I should have been here."

She didn't argue with him. Her silence cut him worse than any blade ever had. Toeing off his shoes, he shoved them against the wall with his foot and bent down to rip off his socks. He balled them up and shot them toward his shoes. Tossing his jacket and tie onto the bench at the end of their bed, he unhooked his cufflinks, dropped them onto his jacket and rolled up his sleeves.

As he came around her side of the bed, Nikolai got his first look at Vee. The flush to her cheeks and the tip of her nose betrayed the fact that she had been crying. The usual luster to her blue eyes had dulled. She warily watched him, almost as if she were seeing him for the first time, really seeing him, and it terrified Nikolai. Because if she ever saw that darkness deep down inside him...

Crouching down next to the bed, Nikolai started to touch her face but withdrew his hand. He studied his palm for a moment and thought of all the filth he had touched today. The same hand that he yearned to stroke her face with had shaken the hands of a white supremacist and drug dealers. The same fingers that he wanted to trail along her cheekbones and her pouty lower lip had gripped Julio's throat. These were the same fingers that had pulled the trigger and nearly killed her all those years ago.

An invisible band squeezed his chest so hard, Nikolai couldn't breathe. Feeling so fucking dirty, he abruptly stood and took a step away from the bed. Vivian stared up at him with confusion. God, but she looked so impossibly young and innocent in his bed. A feeling he didn't want to name invaded his stomach.

Struck by the stark differences between them, by all the ways he could never be good enough for her and their child, he staggered away from their bedroom and into the bathroom. He ripped at his clothing, jerking it off his body and throwing it on the ground. Still struggling to breathe, he stepped into the shower and twisted the knob. The showerheads and jets mounted flush along the travertine ceiling and walls blasted him with cold water that shocked his system. Seconds later, the water burned hot. Resting

his forehead against the tile, he didn't care if it scalded his tattooed skin. Nothing would ever wash away the stain of the terrible things he had done.

A small, soft hand touched his back and startled him. He instantly reached for the knob, adjusting the water temperature so Vivian wouldn't be hurt. Unable to look at her, he continued to press his forehead against the tile. He shut his eyes when she wrapped her arms around his waist and began dotting sweet little kisses across his back.

He had broken her trust. He had hurt her. He had made her cry. He had left her feeling forgotten and abandoned yet here she was comforting him. In some ways, her kindness and love made him feel even worse.

"I needed you today." Her cheek rested against his back now, and her arms embraced him tighter. "We needed you today."

He swallowed around the heavy lump in his throat. "I'm sorry, Vee."

It wasn't enough. It would never be enough. But it was all he could offer.

"Maybe we aren't ready to be parents."

The words stabbed through his heart like an ice pick. Was she having second thoughts about having his baby? "Don't say that."

"Why not? It's true. Look at us! I don't have the first clue about being a mother and you?"

He gritted his teeth at the unspoken implication. Those old bitter feelings of abandonment and worthlessness crept into his head and soured his stomach. "What? Say it, Vivian."

Her arms dropped from his waist. "I don't want to fight with you."

"It's too late for that." He couldn't bear to look at her so he kept his gaze fixed forward on the tile "Say it, Vivian. Say what you're really thinking about me. I'm sure it's nothing worse than I've thought about myself. I'm a violent criminal. I'm an ex-con who was such a bad seed that his real father left him to die on the streets rather than taking him in. I'm broken inside and all twisted up because I was pimped out to pedophiles and—"

"Stop." Vivian gripped his shoulder and tried to turn him around. "Stop it, Nikolai." She shoved hard on his shoulder, and he relented. Looking over her head, he tried to fight her as she cupped his face and tugged his head down but it was futile. She peered into his face, her eyes searching his, and whispered "Enough."

For a long, heady moment, they simply stared at one another. She found the courage to speak first. Always his brave, beautiful Vee...

"I meant that your job isn't exactly the most stable. We never know when you're going to be here or when you're going to have to slip out of the house in the middle of the night." She trailed her fingertips down his cheek. "Today scared me. I started thinking about what it would be like to do this," her hand drifted to the gentle curve of her belly, "all alone."

"God, Vee." Shamed and feeling lower than dirt, he wrapped his arms around his wife and lovingly embraced her. "I fucked up today, but you aren't alone. You'll never be alone in this." He started to make promises but bit his tongue. He didn't want to break them. "I will try, Vee."

"I know you will." She brushed her fingers along his jaw. "You are broken and twisted inside, Nikolai, but so am I. The things we survived as kids?" She shook her head. "We're both lucky we're even alive today. It doesn't do us any good to dwell on all the mistakes we've made or the bad things that happened to us. It won't change anything. This is where we are in life—*our* shared life."

She grasped his hand and dragged it down to her stomach. She rested her palm atop his, their hands covering the small space where their child was growing. "We are all this baby has. It's you and me against a big, scary world. *Us. Together.* That's the only way this works."

With her words hanging in the air between them, she grabbed the bar of soap he preferred from the tile alcove where he kept it and lathered her hands. Gentle and thorough, Vivian spread her soapy palms all over his body. He suspected she had figured out the reason he had bolted from their bedroom to the shower. She took her time washing his skin and even scrubbed shampoo onto his hair, her short and neatly trimmed nails scratching at his scalp as he bent forward to make it easier for her to reach him.

The water rinsed away the soap and shampoo clinging to his skin, but one lone sudsy bubble rode the curve of Vivian's breast. He reached out to follow the path it had taken with his finger. Even after the bubble popped, Nikolai's finger continued its trek. Since Ivan's wedding, he had noticed the subtle changes to Vivian's body. Her breasts filled his hand now and felt firmer and heavier. He traced one of the more prominent

veins that led to her nipple. The little peak was darker now, a deeper, duskier pink that enthralled him.

She exhaled a pleased sigh when he dipped his head and tongued her nipple. He suckled her lightly, moving his mouth between breasts until she rose up on her toes and threaded her fingers through his hair. Concerned about the wet tile, he broke away from her just long enough to switch off the water. He didn't care about drying off or grabbing towels. He stepped out of the shower and onto the rug before swinging her up into his arms and carrying her into their bedroom.

After placing her on their bed, he crawled on top of her and ravished her mouth. He loved the feel of her hands roaming his body, gliding along his sides and gripping his shoulders. Their tongues danced, and she whimpered into his mouth. He turned his attention to the curve of her neck and nipped and licked at the spot that made her shiver and giggle.

Shoving her thighs apart, he clasped her ass in one hand and canted her hips up higher. His other hand snaked between her legs. Her eyes flashed when he dipped his fingers into her wet heat. She bucked her hips and boldly reached for him. Wrapping those elegant fingers around his cock, she stroked him a few times and bit her lower lip.

He kissed her hard, stabbing his tongue against hers before nibbling her lip. Lining up their bodies, he pressed forward and sought the slick slide of her pussy with the blunt head of his erection. He thrust inside her and groaned at the sensation of tight heat enveloping his cock.

Writhing and clutching, they moved together on the bed. Even after months as her husband, he still marveled in the intimacy they shared. He had never told Vee that she was the first—the only—woman he had ever made love to like this. With everyone else, face-to-face lovemaking had been too intimate and had made him feel too vulnerable. It was always rough and fast, from behind or facing away from him. The goal had always been simple—to get off and go home.

But not with Vee. He wanted to see her gorgeous face, and he wanted her to see him. He wanted her to see him vulnerable and unmasked. He wanted her to see a side of him that he showed no one else. He indulged his need for comfort with lingering touches and tenderness.

He loved watching the way her eyes widened and the way her pupils dilated. He had learned to read the twitch of her mouth and the flutter of her thick eyelashes. Judging by the way she clawed at his shoulders and gripped him between her thighs, she had learned to read him just as easily. She could see that he was close.

But first...

He changed the angle of his penetration and framed her clitoris between his fingers. He circled the little bud with quick flicks of his wrist all while driving into her cunt with deep, faster strokes that made her head fall back. Unable to help himself, he buried his face in her neck and nipped at the exposed line of her soft skin. Her pussy clenched him just before the fluttering waves of her climax gripped his cock.

"Kolya."

And there it was. His favorite sound. His name falling from her sweet mouth on a sigh of ecstasy.

Nikolai let go. He let those waves of pleasure crash over him and drag him down until he inhaled a shuddering, rough breath to refill his lungs. Not ready to be parted from her yet, he captured her mouth in a series of lazy, sensual kisses. He caressed her lush curves and smiled at the way she melted into his touch. Boneless beneath him, Vivian smiled sleepily.

Sliding his arms around her, he dragged her into a normal sleeping position on the bed. With their wet hair and bodies, they had made a mess of the comforter. He dragged it down the bed and tossed it in the corner of the room. It would have to go to dry cleaning with his suits. He could just imagine the tsking Anna would do in the morning when she collected the laundry—and the way Vivian would blush when the older woman made a ribald remark.

Turning off the lamp, he slid into bed beside her and tugged the sheet over their quickly cooling bodies. She burrowed into him, and he happily welcomed her into his arms and against his chest. Rubbing his face into her hair, he inhaled the sweet scent of her and felt the stress and the guilt of the day fade.

Vivian drifted off within seconds, but his mind wasn't so fast to settle. The words she had spoken to him in the shower rattled around in his head. Though he intended to do everything in his power to make sure that Vivian and the baby were safe, he accepted the odds of his personal safety weren't very good. He had a lot of enemies, and he

blocked the path of many hungry, ambitious younger men. He wasn't as stupid as Lorenzo Guzman. The cartel boss thought himself untouchable but Nikolai didn't share that delusion. Someday, somewhere, someone would make a move against him.

Julio had seen that day coming. It was the reason why he had denied his son his name and sent the child's mother to Houston. It was the reason he had stood aside and allowed her to marry another man who would raise his son. None of that could have been easy for Julio to swallow, but he had done it with his son's best interests at heart.

It hadn't worked. He had lost his child to a senseless act of recklessness.

There had been a time when Nikolai had believed it might be possible to get out of the life. After the holiday attack on Vivian and the hell she broke loose in January, he had accepted the painful truth. He was never getting out of the mob. That door was closed, locked and barricaded. He was in this life until death.

He hoped—prayed, really—that he would a long life with Vivian. He wanted it all with her, kids and grandkids. He intended to do everything in his power to make that possible, but he had to be realistic. If something happened to him, he needed to ensure that Vivian and the baby were safe.

Safe houses, stashed money, new identities—he had a lot of work to do.