

PAPER

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Paper
By Roxie Rivera

“Listen, it has to be *perfect*, Sergei.” Nikolai paced his home office with determined strides. “I don’t want to see a speck of dust or smell even a hint of paint fumes when I walk through that door.”

“It’s perfect, boss. I went through the space personally,” Sergei assured him. “When I leave, I’ll wrap the front doors with the red bow Bianca made. It will be exactly what you wanted.”

Certain Sergei wouldn’t let him down, Nikolai relaxed. “I’m sure it will be.”

“Boychenko is waiting for your text. I gave him the key to the back door. He’ll come in, set everything up and get out before Vivian sees him.”

“Thank you, Sergei.” Knowing full well he had asked more of Sergei than he would have any other contractor renovating a space, he added, “I appreciate all the hard work you’ve put into this for me.”

“No problem, boss. I’ll see you around.”

Ending the call, Nikolai picked up the clean suit jacket he had draped over the back of his chair and slipped into it. He tucked his phone into the interior pocket and picked up the jewelry box sitting on his desk. Although he planned to give her the gift

after Lev was born, he refused to call the bracelet a push present. The term made his skin crawl.

He never wanted Vee to think that he was rewarding her with trinkets and a pat on the head for all the hard and frankly, dangerous, work of birthing his child. He hoped that when he gave it to her, Vee would understand the reason for it. He wanted her to have something that she could wear every single day to remind her of the family they were building together and how very much he loved her for giving him the chance to have a life he had never dared to dream might one day be his.

After running his fingers across the delicate gold braid and the little lion, starburst and king's crown charms that Zoya had designed especially for Vivian, he locked it away in the safe. The day for presenting Vee with that gift would come soon enough.

Catching sight of the latest parenting book he had been reading in his free time, he snatched it off his desk and hid it away in the drawer with the rest of the books Dimitri had given him. Considering the totally shit childhood they'd had, these types of books were their best chance at *not* fucking up as fathers, but he didn't want Ten or Boychenko to see them when they did their security rounds. Boychenko wouldn't dare say a word, but Ten? Ten would relish the chance to needle him with jokes about Oprah or Dr. Phil.

Speaking of that devil...

Ten knocked on the door frame and poked his head inside the office. "Boss, the boys are ready to ride escort." The enforcer turned bodyguard glanced at his watch and grimaced. "I have to hit the road if I'm going to get back before curfew. My P.O. has been up my ass lately. I think he still suspects something about all that shit that went down in October. Now he's got a fucking hard-on for catching me breaking the rules."

"So don't break them," Nikolai warned. "You're too important to Vee. She counts on you, and she trusts you." He squeezed Ten's shoulder. "I know this is hard, but you only have a year and a few months left. We've done everything we can to keep you out of trouble. You work here with our guys that have the cleanest records. You don't carry a weapon. You don't drink. You're playing by their rules, and you're doing well."

Ten scrubbed his face between his hands. “This is *worse* than prison, boss. At least when I was inside, I didn’t have any of this temptation staring me right in the fucking face. But here? It’s *everywhere*.”

“I know.” Nikolai hated that Ten was still suffering for a crime he hadn’t committed. “I’ve already asked so much of you. First, the six years you went inside for us, to protect the family, and now two more? It’s wrong, and I wish there was some other way—”

Ten exhaled roughly and waved his hand. “It’s fine, boss. We’re good.”

“We’re not even close to good, Ten. I owe you so much. When the time is right? You’ll be repaid.” He gripped Ten’s callused, scarred hand. “I swear that to you.”

“I know you’re good for it.” Ten smiled and whacked him on the back before retreating from the office. “Have fun tonight.”

Nikolai watched Ten head for the door and waited for Boychenko to secure it behind him before climbing the stairs in search of his wife. He ran through his mental checklist for the baby’s impending arrival. The hospital bags were already packed and waiting downstairs. He’d checked and rechecked the car seats in both vehicles. They had already chosen and met with their future pediatrician. He had the routes to the hospital mapped out and contingency plans in place for keeping the city calm and quiet.

Vee’s doctor had said that first babies often went beyond their due dates, and she expected this one to do the same. Although Vivian’s due date was still nine days out, Nikolai had an unshakeable feeling that their son would be here soon.

When he neared the closed door to the nursery, he couldn’t help himself. He opened it, stepped inside, turned on the light and immediately smiled. Vee had outdone herself. He hadn’t been quite sure what to expect when she had mentioned the fairytale theme, but he had known she would create something wonderfully sweet for their son.

The mural featuring on the main wall had taken her nearly three weeks to complete. The little fairytale scenes she had painted on the creamy white dresser and changing table were absolutely perfect. She had chosen soft, lush bedding to complement the soothing colors and had filled the shelves and bins with toys and books.

He had been given the task of choosing the baby furniture. Picking out a crib and comfortable glider had been the easiest part. Dimitri had warned him that baby furniture was infuriatingly difficult to put together—and he hadn’t been wrong.

Eventually, he had conceded defeat and called in Ten for backup. Together and with plenty of swearing, they had finally managed to put together the entire room.

Because he was paranoid about accidents, Nikolai had insisted on anchoring every single piece. That had drawn looks of disbelief from Ten who warned him about coddling the boy. He had dismissed those concerns with a wave of his hand. After everything he and Vee had survived as children? *Blyad*. He would wrap Lev in a plastic bubble if it would spare him from experiencing even one second of the pain or trauma his parents had known.

As he turned to leave the room, his gaze landed on the photographs artfully arranged on the wall closest to the door. Vee had been talking about putting up some family photographs this week. It seemed as if she had finally found some time to tackle her final nursery project.

Vee had attached little chalkboard strips to the top and bottom of each frame. In the top strip, she had written the English word for each relation. In the bottom, she had neatly printed the Russian word. Moving along the gallery wall of photographs, he noticed she had labeled their closest friends as aunts and uncles, but she had also put a snapshot from the Samovar Christmas party featuring Boychenko, Ilya, Ten and Danny on the wall and labeled the men as *family*.

What would it be like for Lev to grow up surrounded by so many people who cared about and wanted to protect him? He contrasted that experience with his own bleak and often terrifying childhood and wanted to drop to his knees to thank God for giving his son the chance he had never had.

He lingered in front of Eric Santos's photograph and frowned. He wasn't sure he liked the idea of the detective eyeballing him every time he walked into his son's room. But, he silently reminded himself, Eric was blood family and that meant something.

When his gaze landed on the photos of Vivian's grandparents and mother, he was taken back to his earliest days in Houston. For the Western Christmas they had celebrated in December, he had given Vivian a box of photographs and letters and other bits of her family history that Maksim had cobbled together for him. She had put some of the photographs downstairs on the main wall in the entry, but she had handpicked these for Lev's room.

Asking the boss—his father—for that favor hadn't been easy, but Maksim had jumped at the chance to do something nice for Vivian. Maksim's reaction had unsettled Nikolai. He feared the old man wanted more involvement in Lev's life than he was willing to grant, but only time would tell.

The picture of Romero took him by surprise. His father-in-law straddled his beloved Dyna street bobber and leaned back on the worn leather seat. Wearing his club colors, he looked every bit as intimidating and dangerous as he had ever been, but he was smiling at the camera. The effect of the smile combined with the black and white tones of the photograph made Romero look almost grandfatherly. *Almost.*

To teach Lev the words *mommy, daddy, parents* and *love*, Vee had chosen photos from their maternity session that had taken place just after Thanksgiving. He had been less than enthusiastic about doing the session, but he couldn't deny Vee anything she wanted. His only stipulation had been that the session had to take place in their home. Looking at the photos now, he couldn't believe he had been so stubborn and difficult about sitting down for them. They were stunning and had captured moments that he wanted to remember for the rest of his life.

As he moved back toward the door, he noticed the grandfather position on his side of the family tree had been left empty. Maksim hadn't made any public moves about recognizing him as his son, and he wasn't going to push. For now, it was safer to keep that secret. With the added stress of the new baby and the new vulnerability it posed to him, he didn't need the complications of the world knowing he was Maksim's son. When the time was right, they could make that move with plenty of advance planning.

Noticing the photo in the paternal grandmother spot, he leaned in for a better look—and froze with shock.

My mother.

Mama.

Flashes of broken memories, of a childhood so long ago it seemed almost dreamlike, invaded his mind. Suddenly, he was four-years-old and jumping in puddles while his mother playfully scolded him for splashing her dress. He was a little boy curled up next to his mother as they tried to stay warm in their tiny flat during a cold Moscow night. He was a scared little boy watching a nurse drag a blood-stained sheet over his mother's lifeless body...

Shaking himself from those unwanted memories, he reached out to touch the glazed and slightly distressed frame that held a picture of his mother. *Marina*. She had been so young when he was born, still just a teenager, and so incredibly beautiful with her blonde hair. In the photo, she smiled brightly, her youthful innocence a stark contrast to the haggard, frail woman he barely remembered.

But where the hell had Vee gotten this photograph?

No. Surely not...

But there was no other explanation for her having it, was there? Maksim must have put it in the box he had sent from Russia. For some reason, Maksim had held onto this photo for all these years. He'd held onto it, and he'd wanted them to have it now.

But why?

Not wanting to go there, Nikolai backed away from the wall of photos, switched off the light and left the nursery. He breathed in deeply and tried to clear his mind. Delving into the twisted history his teenaged mother had shared with a man at least twice her age was the very last thing he wanted to do before taking his wife out to celebrate their first anniversary. The last thing Vee deserved tonight was his brooding asshole routine. She had suffered through enough of that during the summer.

"*Solnyshka?*" he called out to her as he walked into their bedroom. When he spotted the massive dog lounging on their bed, he scowled and snapped his fingers twice. "Stasi! Down!"

The Great Dane yawned dramatically and pushed off the comfy mattress and duvet. He arched his back high, and the overhead lights reflected off the black spots on his sleek gray coat. The dog had been handpicked by Boychenko's uncle from the small pack that he had bred and raised specifically for security. Barely a year old, the tall, broad dog possessed a bark that rattled the walls.

So far the beast had proven to be a good fit for the family. Vee utterly adored Stasi, and the dog seemed completely infatuated with her and intensely curious about her pregnant belly. Nikolai had watched the dog interact with children at the dog park where Vee liked to take him for socialization. He was gentle and sweet, but he had the instincts of a protector. Watching him chase Ilya off the front porch the first morning he had been in their home had been worth every penny Nikolai had paid for the dog.

Stasi nudged his hip in search of a pat, and Nikolai granted it but only after sternly eyeing the dog who promptly sat like the well-trained dog he was. “No bed. No furniture. Yes?”

The dog snorted and padded out of the room, probably to hop up onto one of the couches in the living room. Boychenko would have a hell of a time getting Stasi off the sofa if the dog decided to plant himself on it.

Shaking his head at Stasi’s antics, he asked, “Vee? Are you ready?”

“No.”

He grew concerned when he heard the sad, tearful sound of her answer. He followed her voice to the master closet where he found her wearing only a bathrobe and hot rollers as she stood in front of a pile of her favorite shoes. Tears glistened in her beautiful blue eyes when she lifted her head to glance at him. His chest tightened painfully. “Baby, what’s wrong?”

Lower lip wobbling, she cried, “My shoes don’t fit!”

“What do you mean they don’t fit?” He stared at the pile of haphazardly tossed heels and flats and wondered how in the world a year’s worth of purchases could no longer fit her.

“My feet are fat and gross.” She burst into tears that stunned him. “My hands are fat. My wedding ring hardly fits anymore. And I broke out this morning!” Covering her face with her hands, she sobbed loudly and damn near broke his heart. “I’m a hot freaking mess!”

“*Sladest!*” He crossed the space between them in quick strides and gathered her in his arms. Even at nine months pregnant, she was still light enough that he could easily lift her up and carry her if he wanted. “You are *not* fat. You’re *pregnant*.”

He knew she didn’t mean any of that. She had never been the type of woman who cared about weight or who thought a woman’s worth was based on the size printed in her jeans. But the hormones were making her so overly emotional lately!

The hot rollers in her hair made kissing her forehead awkward so he noisily kissed her cheek instead and rubbed her lower back. He let his hand slide along the curve of her spine and the plump lushness of her bottom. Giving her a playful pat, he said, “Even if you gained two hundred pounds, I would still love you.”

Wondering just what she had on under that robe, he kissed her neck and slipped his hands under the fabric. When he encountered only warm, naked skin, he smiled lasciviously and nipped at her throat. He enjoyed the way she shivered in his arms and grabbed two very greedy handfuls of her lush bottom. “And I’d still want to fuck you every night and every morning.”

“Kolya!”

“You know it’s true.” He claimed her pouty mouth in a long, tender kiss. After everything she had endured and overcome in her life, Vee possessed a well of inner strength that rivaled his own. She was brilliantly talented, so unbelievably beautiful and held him right in the palm of her small hand. Her love had healed him and given him the courage to dream of a life that had always seemed impossible. Everything that was good in his life existed because of her.

But, over the summer, that bullshit with Tatiana had rattled her confidence. Hypersensitive to her bruised feelings, he had been overly attentive to her. He never wanted her to doubt his devotion and loyalty to her—and *only* her. Vee was the absolute and uncontested love of his life.

Even though he was blind to other women, that didn’t stop them from trying to gain his attention. For a man in his position, mistresses weren’t at all uncommon. Most of the married men who ran in his underworld circles had wives and mistresses and girlfriends and one-night stands. It was almost expected that he would find a woman to keep on the side now that his wife had given him a son.

He ignored the flirtatious glances and come-ons when he was at the restaurant or conducting business around town, but it wasn’t so easy for Vivian. She pretended not to see them. She pretended not to care—but he knew she did. He could only imagine how hard it was for her not to demand that he fire certain waitresses or to hold her tongue and not make a scene. She always presented herself as the perfect wife in public, always classy, serene, kind and in control. She didn’t complain about the female attention when they were alone either.

She trusts me to be faithful to her. I’ll gnaw off my own fucking hands before I touch another woman and break her trust or her heart.

And now here she was, heavy with his child, uncomfortable and hot with a constantly aching back and heartburn that kept her up all night, and all she wanted was to look pretty for their first anniversary and none of her damn shoes would fit.

“We don’t need fancy shoes for where we’re going,” he assured her. “In fact, we don’t need fancy clothes either.”

“But you’re in a suit,” she protested.

Cupping her face, he smiled down at her. “Vee, I’m *always* in a suit.”

“Sometimes I like you better in jeans,” she admitted.

“Then I’ll change into jeans.”

“Those?” She pointed to a pair hanging on his side of the oversized walk-in closet. Sheepishly, she added, “They make your ass look fantastic.”

He laughed. “Lady’s choice it is.” Gesturing to the small upholstered chair in the corner of the dressing area, he ordered, “Sit and wait for me to change. I’ll help you dress when I’m done.”

She didn’t argue with him. In the early days of her pregnancy, she had protested every single time he had pulled the overprotective husband card, but these days she happily complied. It took a little maneuvering for her to get situated in the chair. She shifted twice before finally finding a comfortable position.

Stretching out her legs, she curled one arm low around the swell of her belly and patted the top of her round stomach with the other. She smiled suddenly and reached for his hand. “Here. Feel.”

Nikolai stepped away from the rack of jeans and let her drag his hand into place on her firm belly. Even after all these weeks of being able to feel Lev kicking, he still reacted with wonder when he felt those powerful taps against his palm and fingertips. When she grinned up at him, her eyes sparkling and her cheeks flushed with excitement and happiness, Nikolai thought his heart might burst in his chest.

Marshaling his self-control, he bent down and kissed the spot their son had been kicking. “Be nice to your mother. Stop kicking her in the ribs.”

She laughed and leaned back against the chair. Wincing, she shifted again. “Dr. Vargas wasn’t joking when she said this kid is locked and loaded. I know this is going to sound horrible, and please don’t think I’m a terrible person or that I’m not excited about the baby—because I am—but I am so *over* being pregnant.”

Sweeping his fingers down her cheek, he said, “I don’t think you’re terrible for wanting to be done with this part of it. Nine months is a long time to wait to meet our son.” Thinking of what awaited her, he asked, “Are you still sure you want to do this without drugs?”

“I want to try. We’ll be in the hospital, and if I change my mind, it will be easy enough to have an epidural started.” As if reading his mind, she grasped his hand, turned her face and kissed his palm. “Stop worrying. I’ve got this.”

It was impossible for him to stop worrying, but he wasn’t going to burden her with that. Keeping on his shirt but tossing aside his jacket and tie, he quickly switched into jeans and his favorite leather boots. He crossed over to Vee’s side of the closet and picked out the comfortable black leggings he knew she liked the most and a simple snowy white sweater with pale pink hearts. Remembering the way she had complained about fabric rubbing on her sensitive stomach, he grabbed one of the white camisoles she liked to wear under her clothes.

When he opened her top drawer to find undergarments, she gestured to the island. “I bought something special for tonight. I might be dressing down for our first anniversary, but I’m still going to rock sexy panties.”

“I’m not going to argue with that.” He happily picked up the lacy panties and matching bra and carried them back to her. With her clothes draped over both shoulders, he held out his hands and helped her stand. When he was sure she wouldn’t faint from the change in blood pressure, he tugged on the sash holding her robe closed and shoved it off her shoulders.

For a long moment, he simply stared at her luscious body, taking in her curves and softness. Not content to only look at her, he put his hands on her skin and glided them down the line of her neck to cup her breast and hip. Suddenly his plans for their night no longer held the same appeal. Leaning down, he skimmed his lips over her collarbone and the swell of her breast. “I think I might prefer to stay in and have you for dinner.”

“As tempting as that is, I’m starving.” She ran her fingers through his hair and scratched at his scalp in the way he enjoyed. “Take me out and feed me. Then you can bring me home and do whatever you want to me.”

He groaned at the very idea of having her surrender completely. With the baby due any day, he was painfully aware that each sexual encounter they shared might be their last for weeks. Capturing her mouth in a hard, passionate kiss, he gave her bottom a playful swat before breaking away and dropping to his knees. He peppered ticklish kisses across her belly and at each hip before stroking her calf and silently coaxing her to lift her leg. He slowly helped her into her panties and bra and then into the rest of her clothing.

Having watched her put in and remove hot rollers for months, he had a pretty good idea of how they worked. He carefully removed each clip and pulled the each roller from her dark, shiny locks. By the time he was finished, the small island in the closet was littered with clips and curlers.

“Holly better watch out,” Vivian said, “because I might start seeing you for my blowouts and trims.”

Taking her teasing in stride, he joked, “Maybe this gift for hairstyling is genetic.”

“I’d like to see you say that to Maksim’s face.”

He chortled. “Not in this lifetime.” Then, thinking of the picture in the nursery, he asked, “Did he send the photo of my mother?”

She pouted. “You went into the nursery without me.”

“I’m sorry. Was it a surprise?”

“Well....sort of.”

“Tell you what. I’ll let you take me back in there, and I’ll pretend to be shocked.”

She rolled those pretty blue eyes. “No. But—did you like it? The gallery wall of photos, I mean?”

“They’re perfect.” Wondering why she was hesitating, he prompted her with a simple utterance of her name. “Vee.”

“Yes,” she said finally. “Maksim did send that photo.”

“And?”

“It was in the bottom of the box in an envelope with my name on it. He wrote me a note.”

“Maksim? Wrote *you* a note?” He couldn’t believe it. The boss *never* put anything in writing. Ever. It was one of his rules.

“It was short. Just a single line.” She hesitated. “You’ll know when he’s ready.” She hesitated again. “He signed it *Dedushka*.”

“He did not!”

She nodded. “He did.”

What game was Maksim playing? Signing a note like that? *Grandpa*? The idea of the old man embracing his new grandfatherly role troubled him. *What does he want with my son? What does he want with me?*

“The rest of the photos are in my studio downstairs. I have them locked in a drawer. I wanted to talk to you before I had them framed for your office and the wall in the foyer.” She toyed with a button on the front of his shirt. “There are some really cute snapshots of you as a baby with your mom.”

“What? Really?” A painful tightness squeezed his heart. He wasn’t sure if it was longing or sadness that gripped him.

“Yes. You were so adorable, Kolya. You had the chubbiest little face.” She combed her fingers through his hair. “You were so blond. Like platinum blond.” Her eyes glimmered with excitement. “Do you think Lev will be blond like you or dark-haired like me?”

“He’ll have dark hair and blue eyes.” How he knew that Nikolai couldn’t say, but he was certain of it.

“The photos are all labeled on the back. It’s a woman’s handwriting.” Reluctantly, she said, “I think your mother sent them to Maksim, and I think he held onto them even after...” She seemed unable to mention his mother’s death. “When you look at them, you’ll understand what I mean.”

“I’ll look at them tomorrow.” He didn’t think he could handle it tonight.

“I should have told you.” She tilted her head and tried to read his face. “I should have showed you when I found them.”

“It’s fine, Vee. I’ve had so much going on the last week that I’m actually glad you didn’t mention them. I would have been too distracted.”

Placing her hand against his neck, she caressed him lovingly. “How is work?”

He didn’t like it when she asked about *that* side of his life, but he never lied to her anymore. After nearly losing her over the summer, he would never be that stupid again.

“Things are tense between certain factions. It will work itself out, but it couldn’t be

happening at a worse time.” He touched her belly. “I wish I could take paternity leave like a normal man, but if I step away for too long…”

“Kolya, I understand. I knew what I was getting into when I married you. After everything we’ve been through? We’ll figure out a way to make parenthood work. But when you’re here with us? When you’re home? Be *here*. Give us your full focus. That’s all we need. The amount of time doesn’t matter.” She burrowed into him and rose on tiptoes to kiss his cheek. “We love you, Kolya.”

Closing his eyes, he allowed himself to rejoice in her love. *I don’t deserve this. I don’t deserve this at all—but I’ll fight to the death before I give this up.*

She stepped out of his embrace. Standing back, he watched with an amused smile as she tipped her head over and shook out the loose curls. He loved the sexy, carefree look and couldn’t wait to grab onto a handful later while she rode him hard and fast.

After checking her reflection in the bathroom mirror and dabbing on a little lipstick, she turned toward him and put her hands on her hips. “This still doesn’t solve the issue of shoes.”

“What did you wear today while you were out running errands with Ten and Boychenko?”

“My gardening clogs.”

“The orange ones?”

She nodded. “Hot, right?”

He laughed. “So sexy.”

“Well it’s gardening clogs or I can see if Ten left some of his giant shoes in the mud room.”

“The clogs are fine.”

She suspiciously narrowed her eyes. “Where exactly are you taking me?”

Snatching her hand, he planted a quick kiss on her mouth and tugged her after him. “It’s a surprise.”

“Hmm,” she murmured skeptically as he pulled her through their bedroom and into the hall. “The last time you took me out for a surprise I ended up pregnant and with a tattoo on the back of my neck.”

He paused at the top of the stairs and turned around to smile at her. “I really set the bar high for surprises, huh?”

She giggled and then made a measuring gesture with her thumb and forefinger. “Maybe we could set the bar a smidge lower tonight?”

“Done.” He gave her hand another tug. “Come on.”

After grabbing her coat and shoes, they left the house. The drive to their secret destination took a little longer than he had expected because of the weather and an accident. He didn’t mind. Sitting in traffic gave him a chance to text Boychenko and to simply enjoy holding her hand while they idled and waited for the cars in front of them to inch forward.

“It’s good to see Artyom behind the wheel again,” she said as she traced her thumb over one of the tattoos on his hand. The street captain and his crew were in the SUV in front of them. “I’m glad he’s back with us.”

“He seems recovered physically, but I worry about him. Getting shot like that? Seeing Erin kidnapped and his crew killed? Bleeding out on the floor? That changes a man.”

Nikolai still carried the guilt of what had happened that awful night in October. Artyom had nearly been killed trying to protect Erin. His failure to keep his family and friends safe that night still haunted him. It had been a painful lesson to learn, but it wasn’t a mistake he would make again.

That night, during his long drive to Mexico to deal with Lorenzo, he had realized that the people around him were safer when he was the brutal, ruthless gangster who cut first and asked questions later. Vee had softened him in so many good ways, but sometimes a man had to be hard. She could never know of the things he would do to keep her and their family safe. Those were secrets and burdens he would carry to his death.

“We should do something nice for him,” she said, completely and wonderfully oblivious to the dark turn his thoughts had taken. “We should send him on a vacation some place warm.”

It was a sweet thought but...

“He hates the beach.”

“Oh.”

Not wanting her to feel as if she had been shot down, he suggested, “We could send him to San Francisco or Seattle. He’s always talking about visiting the West Coast. He likes big cities.”

“I’ll talk to him about it after the baby comes,” she decided. “If you talk to him, he’ll say no, but if I tell him I want to send him away on vacation, he won’t be able to turn me down.”

Nikolai’s lips twitched with amusement. She had learned very quickly that the men who were part of her personal guard were simply incapable of hurting her feelings. Boychenko would walk barefoot across broken glass for her, and Artyom would do anything to keep her from crying or being upset. “Yes, I think it’s best if you bring it up.”

Still holding her hand, he navigated the dark streets to the Galleria district and found a parking space in the empty lot across from the building Alexei owned. The area was under development still, but it would be open soon enough. For now, the parking lot was a ghost town.

Clearly confused, Vivian glanced around the upscale retail center. “Is there a new restaurant you want to try?”

“We’re having something delivered.” He leaned across the center console of the Continental and opened the glove box. When he withdrew the black sleeping mask, she looked at him in surprise. “Trust me.”

“I do.” She unlatched her seatbelt and moved her head closer to him so he could put on the mask. “Always.”

Very gently, he slipped the mask into place and kissed her cheek. Of all the people who had trusted him, he cherished her the most. “Wait here, *solnyshka*.”

“Okay.”

He got out of the car and took the umbrella from Artyom who stood ready to guard them. The city had been quiet the last few weeks, but it would never truly be safe for Vivian or their son to walk alone on the streets, especially not at night. There were too many power hungry men and too many low-level street thugs with grudges to ever let their collective guard down in public.

“Boy set everything up,” Artyom informed him. “I called him right before we got here. He’ll wait for you two to enter and then hit the lights before he sneaks out the back. He’ll be watching the rear exit with Danny.”

“Good.” Walking around to Vivian’s door, he opened the umbrella to shield her from the hazy drizzle and reached in to help her out of the car. With a hand on the small of her back, he guided her across the parking lot and onto the wide sidewalk. He stopped in front of the double doors adorned with Bianca’s red bow. Safe under the awning, he handed the umbrella to Artyom who smiled with anticipation of Vee’s reaction.

Stepping behind his wife, he put his hands on her shoulders. He lowered his face and whispered against the shell of her ear, “I had a hard time wrapping this one, but I hope you like it.”

“Kolya...” Slight censure filled her voice. “You’ve already given me so much this year. You gave me presents on the 25th and on the 6th! I didn’t need anything else for our anniversary.”

“I’m your husband. It’s my prerogative to spoil you.” He kissed her cheek. “And this is different.”

Very carefully, he tugged free the mask and pocketed it. He heard her sharp intake of breath when she spotted the bow on the front doors. “I don’t understand...”

Stepping beside her, he withdrew a key from his pocket and pressed it into her hand. “Open the doors.”

She glanced nervously in his direction before stepping up to the tall, wide mahogany doors he had commissioned. She touched the iron filigree on the front before pulling on the bright red ribbon and handing it to him. When she unlocked and pushed them open, he trailed her into the dark space. On cue, Boychenko flipped the lights—and Vivian gasped.

“Oh my—! What did you do?” She whirled on him in shock and disbelief. “Is this...? Is it *mine*?”

Loving her reaction to his biggest surprise yet, he cupped her face, the ribbon still dangling from his fingers, and nodded. “This gallery is yours.”

She hopped up and kissed him hard, wrapping her arms around his neck and damn near squeezing the air right out of him. Grinning like a little girl on Christmas morning, she spun away from him and walked in slow circles as she took in the renovated gallery space with its gleaming hardwood floors, smoky gray walls and professional lighting. “What in the world possessed you to do this for me?”

“When we were in London at your show, I realized that you needed your own space to show your paintings. You need a place that you control and that only showcases your works or other artists you handpick.”

“Kolya, this is too much.” Seemingly in awe of her new gallery, she shook her head. “This is so high-end.”

“You’re high-end.” He grasped her hand and interlaced their fingers. “You are an amazing painter. You’re going to be famous. You need a gallery that supports you and your growing career.”

Before she could protest the expense or the challenges of staffing the place, he said, “Let me show you the rest of it.”

Her eyes widened. “The rest of it? How big is this place?”

“Big enough,” he answered cryptically and led her off the main show floor. He pointed out the reception and cashier desk before taking her into the three offices in the rear. “I figured you would need a manager and probably an assistant. You’ll also need someone to work up front and maybe someone to handle the online side of the business.” He waved dismissively. “But we can work out the details later.”

“What’s back there?” She pointed to a set of double doors at the end of the short hallway.

“Back here,” he guided her into the wide open space, “is a place for you to paint and work. I thought there might be days when you need to be here instead of at the house studio. I had them bring over all of your furniture and shelves and supplies from the warehouse.”

He didn’t bring up the fact that they had closed down her old warehouse studio after the attack on her life in October. She couldn’t face going back there, and he didn’t blame her. “I thought you would be able to do a backdrop over here for photographing your paintings. You can frame over there and package and ship things here.” He gestured to the different stations. “And that’s for Lev.”

She smiled sweetly at the corner space he had outfitted for their son to play and sleep while his mother worked. There was a small playpen and a padded and very colorful floor covering plus toy bins and a comfortable chair for her to nurse. She had tears in her eyes when she hugged him again. “It’s perfect, Kolya.”

Burying his face in the curve of her neck, he inhaled the wonderful scent of her hair. “I’m glad you like it.”

“I feel a bit silly now. I made you something with paper. You know, like all the books say?”

“I know,” he said, pulling back to gaze down at her. “The first anniversary is paper—and that’s exactly what I got you.” Saving the best for last, he slowly disentangled himself and backed away from her toward the worktable. He picked up the stack of papers there and handed them to her. “Happy Anniversary, Vivian.”

Guardedly, she took the papers from him and started to read through them. Her eyes widened a few times, and she glanced up at him with shock. “Is this...? Are you serious? It’s *all* mine?”

“This is all yours. This is something that is *clean* and outside the family. I want you to build a business for yourself. I want you to have something that is yours and only yours. You deserve this.”

“Kolya...”

Gesturing around them, he explained, “This whole street belongs to Alexei. He snatched up all of the retail space on these three blocks when the developer lost everything in the recession. Kazimir is going to relocate to the shop space right next door, and the other shop on the corner? That’s going to be a luxury boutique for handbags and dresses.”

“You certainly chose a high traffic area.”

He nodded. “Sergei’s construction crews did all the work here. He’s given you a fair price, and Alexei’s agreed to make you a very good deal on the rent for the first five years.” Not wanting her to worry about the cost of running the gallery until it became profitable, he said, “Turn to the back two pages.”

Shooting him a strange look, she did as told and scanned the contract. Looking completely taken aback, she asked, “Are you serious? No.” She shook her head. “You *can’t* be serious.”

“You’ve earned it. Samovar isn’t Samovar without you there. You became the soul of that place, and everyone loves you. It’s only right that you own half of it with me.”

“But you built that restaurant! You made it what it is, Nikolai.”

“And I want to share it with you.” He dropped the ribbon onto the worktable and placed his hand against her soft cheek. “You’re my wife. We’re already partners in life. I see no reason why we shouldn’t also be partners in business.”

“But you already share everything you have with me!”

“Yes, but this makes it legal. This gives you the right to take your partner draw and spend it however you like. It will give you some breathing room until your gallery is established and profitable.”

Her beautiful face scrunched up as big, fat tears dripped down her cheeks. The pregnancy hormones and the romantic gesture he’d made seemed to be almost too much for her to handle. Hauling her into his arms, he whispered, “Baby, come here.” He hugged her tight and kisses the top of her head. “*Ya tebya lyublyu.*”

“I love you, too.” She rose on tiptoes again to brush her mouth to his. “I love you so much.” Her insistent kisses sent a shock of heat rolling through his chest. “So much.”

Just then, her stomach growled loudly, interrupting their romantic moment and making them both laugh. He dragged her toward the candlelight dinner Boychenko had arranged at a worktable at the rear of the studio. The street soldier had gone above and beyond by bringing a tablecloth and silverware and even setting out flowers and lit votive candles.

As Vivian settled into her chair, she asked knowingly, “Roman?”

He nodded. “Roman.”

“I can’t understand why he doesn’t have a girlfriend! He’s so sweet and handsome. You would think girls would be lining up around the block to date him.”

Nikolai shot his wife a look. “Do I need to worry about you elbowing the other girls out of the way to make it to the front of that line?”

She rolled her eyes and tapped the back of his hand with her spoon. “You know Roman isn’t my type.”

No, but you’re definitely his. More than once, he had caught young Boychenko watching Vivian a bit too closely. He had considered rotating the kid out of guard duty, but he trusted Boychenko not to do anything stupid. Lots of men looked at Vivian in a yearning, needful way, but no man was stupid enough to try and make a move. Not even that infuriating Danish bastard was ballsy enough to try to lure her away from their marriage.

“He doesn’t date because he spends all of his time working, training with Vanya or taking care of his grandmother.” Nikolai opened Vee’s napkin and draped it across her lap. “He doesn’t have time for a social life.”

“That’s sad.”

Incredulous, he dropped into his seat. “Says the woman who worked her way through college waitressing and who was either in class or in a studio every other minute of the day and night!”

“The person I wanted a social life with wasn’t very interested in me at the time.” She slipped in that barb with the arch of an eyebrow, almost as if actively daring him to explain his behavior back then, and dipped her spoon into the creamy butternut squash soup.

“I wanted you, Vivian. I wanted you so badly it *hurt*. But I wasn’t ready to be the man you needed or deserved.” He bypassed his soup and went right for his entrée. “I would have hurt you back then—and you were too young.”

She rolled her eyes at him again. “I’m still young.”

“Yes, your old man is quite aware of the age difference, *solnyshka*.”

“Lord,” she said with a laugh. “Can we agree right now never to call each other that? My old man? My old lady?” She gave an exaggerated shiver. “You’re giving me flashbacks to my childhood and the club Daddy rode with!”

They had a nice laugh about that and then enjoyed their candlelit dinner. The evening was quiet, simple and sweet, and exactly what they needed. With the baby coming any day, this might be one of their last chances to have a special night. Nikolai liked to think it would be as easy as hiring a nanny to look after Lev so they could have a social life or travel for business, but his paranoia about his son’s safety would make that a difficult position to fill.

“What are you thinking about?” Vee asked as she polished off the last of her dessert. “You looked so serious all of a sudden.”

“I was thinking about how hard it will be to find a nanny we can trust to watch Lev.”

“Maybe we can see if Ten is interested in a slight change to his job description.” She leaned back in her chair and placed both hands on her belly. “I think he would be a fantastic manny.”

Nikolai choked on the wine he had been trying to swallow. Vivian tossed back her head and laughed gaily as he mopped at his mouth with a napkin. “Jesus, Vee! Warn me before you say something like that!”

“And ruin the surprise? I don’t think so.”

“Ten? A manny?” He shook his head. “We’ll see if you’re brave enough to repeat that tomorrow at breakfast when he’s at the house.”

She shrugged with total nonchalance. “You watch, Kolya. He’s going to be a big, soft teddy bear when it comes to Lev.”

“I don’t pay him to be big and soft. I pay him to be mean and hard and willing to do whatever it takes to protect you and the baby.”

“He can be all those things *and* a caregiver.” She leveled a stare that made him shift uncomfortably. “You’re all those things. You are ruthless and hard when it’s necessary, but you’re also wonderfully patient and loving and tender when I need it.” A wistful smile crossed her face as she glanced around the studio. “Do you remember the first time we made love?”

“Of course.” His answer came out deep and husky. Memories of their torrid lovemaking on that canvas drop cloth made his blood run hot. “It wasn’t my best work.”

“It was good enough.”

Now he was the one arching an eyebrow. “Good enough? That sounds like a dare, Vee.”

“Maybe it is.” She had kicked off her shoes and now ran her bare foot along his calf and up his inner thigh. Holding his gaze, she kneaded his quickly hardening cock with her toes. Her eyes had gone all smoky with desire. “This could be our last night without a baby.”

Grasping her ankle, he warned, “If you keep that up, I’m going to fuck you right here on this table.”

She pulled free from his grasp and rubbed her foot along the full length of his erection. “Promise?”

“Woman...” He growled low and captured her foot again. “I’m warning you.”

“Take me home, Kolya.”

He made a big production of saying yes. “You know I can’t deny you anything.”

She smiled impishly. “I’m counting on it.”

“Solnyshka.” Laughing softly, he pushed out of his chair and walked around to her side of the table. Gazing down at her, he trailed his fingers down her cheek and thought of all the ways he could make her blush once he had her naked in their bed. “What am I going to do with you?”

Taking his hand, she kissed each tattooed finger before turning those sea blue eyes toward him. “If I’m a very lucky girl? Wicked, wicked things.”

Leaning down, he held her mischievous gaze. “I have it on good authority that tonight you’re going to be the luckiest girl in Houston...”

The End.