

## 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, *zlotse*." 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 *solnyshko* and his *zlotse*—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."

"*Solnyshko*." 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 *tsaritsa*?" 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 *Igolochkoy*."

He laughed at the nickname the men of his family had given to the tattoo artist who decorated their bodies. *Igolochkoy* 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 the man called *Igolochkoy* 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.

With my skin throbbing and feeling 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.

"*Solnyshko?*" 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 his mother tongue, "For the *tsaritsa*."

"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. 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..."