



The Monster (Steamy Shorts #13)

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Description: in Lenas best-selling and acclaimed short story series is:

THE MONSTER by Lena Little

In Slavic mythology, there are creatures called Bies.

Horrifying demons whose name literally means “one who causes fear and terror.” They torment humans by possessing them and driving them to insanity.

As a child, my sisters would tell me the cat I adopted or the stray dog I fed were Bies.

That they would transform in my bedroom and slip inside my body to control my movements. That they would take me deep into the woods to hold me prisoner. That they would feed on my soul bit by bit until I was nothing but an empty husk of my former self.

At twenty-one years old, I still fear the dark, the shadows, and any demon lurking within. I sleep with the lights on, waking up with every creak of the floorboard or every scrape against my window.

All my life, I’ve been afraid of monsters.

And now I’m about to marry one.

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NINA

“D o you, Nina Scranton, take Nikolai Petrov as your husband, to live together in holy matrimony, to love him, honor him, comfort him, and to keep him in sickness and in health, forsaking all others, for as long as you both shall live?”

“I ... I ...”

The soft murmurs buzz around me, but the sounds seem distant, muffled by the pounding in my ears. My breath comes in shallow gasps, each harder to draw than the last.

The walls of the church close in on me, and my mind races, conjuring up all the horror stories about the man standing before me. Terror clamps down on my chest, and I clench and unclench my fists, even though it does little to shake my growing panic.

My eyes are zeroed in on the hard wall of his wide chest. Even through the layers of clothing, it's easy to see that this man is built like a tank, at least twice bigger than me. His hands, massive and veiny, can crush my throat with a small pressure.

“Nina!”

I snap out of it at the sound of my father's voice. Cold terror seeps through my veins. After years of living under his roof, my body instinctively reacts to his command.

I raise my gaze, expecting the worst, expecting someone fully ready to eat me alive, only to find the softest, warmest bright-blue eyes I've ever seen. He's the cause of my fear, and yet, at this moment, he's like an anchor, pulling me back from hysteria.

"Y-yes. Yes, I do," I finally stammer.

Did I imagine that look of relief on his face?

Oh, God. His face.

I knew about Nikolai Petrov long before my father called me to his study and told me I was marrying the man everyone called The Monster.

In this part of the globe, legends are still alive. And while I scoff at the mention of Baba Yaga and Bauk, the one about The Monster sent a chill down the base of my spine.

It wasn't because he was rumored to be massive or had the strength of a dozen men. Or had eyes so cold it could freeze you on the spot.

No. It was because his face alone could make you pee in your pants. Scarred. Demonic. Looked like the devil himself. Striking fear in the hearts of his enemies even as he stood and only watched.

And yet.

It's not ... as bad as I thought. Well, except for the two-inch scar on the left side of his mouth. It makes him look like he's perpetually smirking. It's jarring, yes, but it takes me all of two seconds to get over it.

And the rest of him?

Dark blonde hair slicked back, a razor-sharp jaw that could cut glass, high cheekbones, and long lashes I would kill for.

Is this it? The Monster? The one I had nightmares about?

Is something wrong with me? Am I missing something? Or are the rumors exaggerated?

Part of me is relieved, and the other part is—I want to chalk it up to temporary madness or stress getting the best of me—oddly attracted to him. What does it say about me when the one everyone fears is the first man I’ve ever felt drawn to?

The man who’s about to become my husband.

“Do you, Nikolai Petrov, take Nina Scranton as your wife, to live together in holy matrimony, to love her, honor her, comfort her, and to keep her in sickness and in health, forsaking all others, for as long as you both shall live?”

Nikolai doesn’t take his eyes off me as he answers, “I do.”

I must be going mad because his deep voice tugs something in me. My skin flushes hot under his scrutiny, and I curb the impulse to shift on my feet. I have never been comfortable being the subject of anyone’s attention, and this time is no exception.

His gaze catalogs everything about me, taking a long, careful scan of my face, then the rest of my body.

The priest continues speaking, and I tune him out as I stand there, tilting my head back to stare at Nikolai.

Danger comes off him in waves, but strangely, for reasons unknown to me, I feel safe

around him. God knows I can't remember the last time I felt this way.

At home, I was always on guard—from my father, my sisters, my stepmother. I didn't know what I would wake up to or come home to. Would they “accidentally” spill water on me or steal my books or tear my clothes? I wish I could say these things stopped when my three sisters left the house and got married, but my stepmother took it upon herself to continue the tradition of making me suffer.

“I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may now kiss!”

In a normal wedding with a normal couple, that will be met with cheers and applause. But no one claps, no one whistles. The weight of hundreds of eyes press down on me.

The priest's words hang in the air, echoing in the massive church. The silence is suffocating and oppressive, as if the cavernous space has drawn a collective breath and held it.

Nikolai moves closer to me, and I make a mental scan of my feelings. Fear is nowhere to be found. Instead, there's curiosity.

He has full lips, and I wonder if it's going to feel soft on my own. Is he about to give me a quick kiss, or will he force his tongue inside my mouth?

I shouldn't feel excitement and anticipation thrumming in my veins, but I do. Jesus, I do. What is wrong with me? A few minutes ago, I was about to pass out from terror. And now, I'm ... turned on?

Nikolai leans forward, head dropping to my level. Even at 5'6 and with four-inch heels on, he towers above me.

He brushes his lips along my cheeks, and something tugs low in my belly, but he

doesn't kiss me on the lips. Disappointment tastes bitter on my tongue, and I can't believe I'm briefly entertaining the idea of making the first move instead.

His breath tickles my ear as he whispers, "Do not ever fear me, wife. I am your husband, and I will lay down my life for you."

I'm still trying to process what he said when he plants a chaste kiss on my cheek and straightens back to his full height, his face devoid of expression, his eyes betraying nothing.

What have I gotten myself into?

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NIKOLAI

My brothers called her the “plainest, dullest, most uninteresting Scranton” and the one who didn’t look like her sisters. They meant it as condescending, but I’m glad.

I’m glad she doesn’t look like anyone but herself.

Nina Scranton’s beauty hits me as solid as a punch. Her eyes are like pools of honey, the same color as her hair. She has a dimple on her chin and a smattering of freckles across her nose and cheeks that even her makeup could not cover.

The soft cheekbones, the soft, plump lips.

My God, she’s perfect. Whoever called her plain was either blind or a fool or both.

And I’m about to sully her with my filth.

Two months ago, when my eldest brother, Ivan, casually commanded me to marry a Scranton, I didn’t think too much of it. I was used to receiving orders and carrying them out without question. It was just one of them.

Two powerful families from different parts of the world and leaders in their respective industries. Unifying through marriage. It’s a tale as old as time.

But as I hold her close after the farce of a wedding ceremony, the soft strains of

music filling the air around us, I can't fathom that she's my wife. Barring the fact that we just met on our wedding day and we were both forced to marry, she feels unreal. The world falls away, and it's just the two of us—my hands on her waist and her arms around my neck.

My blood tingles under my skin, and I fear that I can't make myself release her once the song ends.

When she refused to look at me as she walked down the aisle and stood beside me, my heart sank. I couldn't blame her. I look hideous. People, especially kids, run the other way when they see me. That's not unwarranted, though. I am a monster inside and out—something I have to live with for the rest of my godforsaken life.

I'm so wrapped up in my head that it takes me a few seconds to realize she's trembling slightly. Her eyes are on the buttons of my shirt, as if those are the most interesting things she's ever seen.

The realization that she doesn't want anything to do with me cracks me open. Obviously, I don't expect her to fall in love with me or even be excited at the prospect of having me as a husband.

It still stings, however. The best I can do is put her mind at ease. That despite everything she heard about me—and I know she heard plenty—I'm the last person she should be afraid of.

“What are you scared of, little wife? Or should I call you Nina?”

Nina gives me the full force of her gaze, and sparks go off in my brain. “Do whatever you want. I don't care.”

The resignation in her tone tears me apart. “No. You are my wife” —the word feels

so damn good on my tongue— “not my prisoner or slave. You tell me what you want or don’t want, and I will respect it.”

Surprise widens her eyes, and she studies my face. I suppress the natural urge to look to the left so she wouldn’t need to stare at the ugly scar on my mouth. I can’t do that, though, lest she think it’s me being dismissive or arrogant. Funnily enough, I never cared what others thought of me. Now, I do. I care what Nina thinks.

Her voice is soft and quiet as she says, “I never get a say in anything.”

White-hot anger pierces through me. Her father, Edmund, is a scum. If I find out he’s treated her less than she deserves, he’s going to regret ever making me part of his family. “Not in my house. From this day forward, you will tell me what upsets you, what displeases you, and what scares you. And I will make them right.”

“W-why would you do that?”

I shrug. “You are my wife.”

Fear crosses her features, and my blood boils at the realization that something in her feels broken. “Y-you’re doing this, so I will lower my guard and give in to you.”

“There’s nothing to give in to. I will not force myself on you, nor will I do things you don’t agree to.”

“So you will not fuck me?”

That single word coming from her surprises the hell out of me. “No. I will not visit your bed unless you want me there.” I cast her a fierce gaze, hoping against hope she would see the truth in my eyes. “The moment you become my wife, no one will ever impose on you again. Not even me. You are under my protection. Anyone who

crosses you crosses me.”

Her eyes search mine, and she must see something she likes because her face softens.
“Thank you, Nikolai.”

Desire hits me in full force. I have never heard my name said like that. People often say my name with fear, anger, amusement, or pity. On her tongue, it’s like a caress, and it sets off a chain reaction within me.

My heart slams against my ribcage, my muscles tense, and my vision narrows. All the chatter, music, and cutleries tinkling against the plates—they all fade into white noise.

Nina. This woman. My wife.

I will kill for her, but I will also end my own life if she asks.

Goddammit, I am so fucked.

NINA

Eleanor, Jade, and Mia huddle by one of the tables, their cheeks pink, eyes glassy. Each of them has a wine goblet, and Mia doubles over, spilling her drink to the floor. That only makes her laugh harder.

My eyes dart between them and Nikolai, who stands by the doorway with one of his brothers. He must sense me staring because he turns to me and gives me a tip of his head.

“Look at the blushing bride, girls. She looks like someone on her way to the slaughterhouse,” Eleanor teases, her voice dripping with mock sympathy. “I can’t blame the poor girl. She did marry a monster.”

Jade snorts. “Serves you right, Nina. You always thought you were better than us just because you were smarter. Now look where you are. At the mercy of a Petrov.”

Mia fills her glass again and gives me a sly grin. “I’ll call you in the morning, sis. You know, just to check if you’re still alive or if he’s already made a new coat from your skin.”

They exchange amused glances, not even bothering to hide their delight in the whole situation. Ever since Father told me about my wedding, they never stopped sending me messages about Nikolai—what he did to the poor barista who stole from his bar, what he took from the family who didn’t pay their monthly dues, what he sliced off

from the guard who slept while on duty.

Taunting is like a sport to them. They feed off my misery. Over time, I learned not to rise to their baits. They like it when I fight back because it gives them another reason to be extra vicious.

“You know, now that I think about it, they’re quite a match.” Eleanor nods conspiratorially to the others. “He’s a monster; she’s a doormat. What a pair they would be.”

Mia rolls her eyes and tips the glass to her lips. “Oh, poor Nina. Smart, soft-spoken Nina. Soon-to-be-doctor Nina.”

Every single word they say is a needle pricking at me. The fear I felt when I first glimpsed Nikolai comes roaring back. When we leave this party, it’s going to be just him and me.

I know he promised he wouldn’t ever force himself on me, but I’ve learned not to give too much stock to what people say. I’ve learned to judge them by their actions, and Nikolai is still, for all intents and purposes, a total stranger.

In a few years, if all goes according to plan, I see myself as an emergency medicine doctor. It’s one of those professions that requires absolute mental composure—staying calm, rational, and focused in stressful circumstances.

Yet, here I am, on the verge of panicking AGAIN.

I only need to go home with Nikolai. That’s it. But like what Eleanor said, I might as well be on my way to the slaughterhouse.

My mind shuffles through different scenarios, and I become so preoccupied with

them that I fail to notice Nikolai until he's standing beside me, touching my arm. "Let's go, Nina."

Why is it that when he's not beside me, I think too much to the point where I'm triggering my own panic attack, but when he's near, my thoughts go quiet?

To think he's the main cause of my distress.

Behind me, I hear my sisters snicker, but I pay them no mind. I loop my arm through Nikolai's and leave with as much dignity as I can muster, even though every single guest knows this is nothing more than a business transaction for both parties.

A weird sensation settles in my gut. In this room full of predators and opportunists, the one I will gravitate to if shit goes sideways is Nikolai. I met him just over two hours ago, but I will choose him over my own family. I know, deep down, the safest place is with him.

Yes, he's a monster, and yes, he probably did most of those things I heard him do. Then again, it's not like Father doesn't have blood on his hands either. In our world, it's kill or be killed.

Nikolai just happens to be the alpha predator.

We head to his vehicle, and while I expect him to let me figure out how to climb the truck in my heels, he surprises me yet again when he lifts me in his arms and deposits me on the seat as though I weigh nothing. He doesn't do so much as grunt.

As my seatbelt clicks into place, I cast a sidelong glance at Nikolai. He's looking straight ahead, and in this view, I can see his nose was once broken. A few days of stubble darkens his jaw, and a muscle ticks as he clenches it.

The truck's interior is quiet, except for the low hum of the engine and the soft rustle of the air conditioning, as he drives away. The space between us feels dense and charged, and the tension is palpable—a thick fog of something I can't identify.

“I meant what I said back there, Nina.” Nikolai's voice almost makes me jump in my seat, but he keeps his gaze fixed firmly on the road ahead. “The last person you need to fear is me. That assurance isn't enough, I know, especially given all the stories everyone probably fed you, but in the next few days, you'll realize I'm a man of my word.”

Before she died five years ago, Mom said I had a good pulse on people, and I needed to listen to it. My gut instinct will tell me who to avoid, what to believe, and when to run away. So far, my gut hasn't failed me yet. Hopefully, now won't be the first time.

It's just words, but I'm already half-convinced Nikolai is telling the truth. “I know.”

“No, you don't. Not yet, but you will.”

We're on the outskirts of the city, and the darkness is broken only by the occasional street light flickering past. My gaze drifts to the window, and I watch his faint reflection. He's ruggedly handsome in an unconventional way. He cuts a sharp profile, for sure.

Feeling a sudden urge to talk, I shift in my seat, leaning my back against the window so I'm half-facing him. “Tell me something you've never told anyone.”

His huge hands are clenched tightly around the steering wheel. I expect him to say no, say something to put me in my place, and continue driving. Instead, the corners of his lips lift slightly. “Are you going to use that against me one day?”

This is a side of him I did not imagine, and it eases the knot in my stomach. “Maybe.”

His eyebrows lift. “Honesty. That’s good. There’s not enough of that to go around.”

“No deflecting my question.”

The fleeting, almost imperceptible expression of amusement is there again, and he uses one hand to scrub across his jaw—a gesture I find ... sexy. “You know how I got my scar?”

I shift in my seat again, a bit uncomfortable with his chosen topic, as I rack my brain. “Kidnappers, I think. They wanted to send a message to your father.”

“Not really. They wanted me to cry. Since I refused, they said they’d help me smile instead.” He heaves a sigh. “It hurt like a motherfucker. I was sure they slashed my whole mouth.”

My stomach churns, and a cold sweat breaks across my forehead despite the air conditioner. “Oh God.”

He looks apologetic as he says, “You wanted to know something no one else did.”

“No one else knows that?”

“My family did. The thing no one knew was that the night I came back home, I spent five hours curled on my bed, crying like a baby. I was seventeen at the time, and I wanted to die.”

“God, I’m sorry, Nikolai.”

He waves a hand as if he didn’t just reveal the most gut-wrenching story I’ve heard. “Believe the stories, Nina. I am a monster, but I protect what’s mine ... even if it’s from myself.”

By the time we arrive in his mansion, I'm too distraught to notice the interiors, walking like a zombie to the hallway until Nikolai touches my elbow and points to the door in front of me. "This is your bedroom, Nina. The one across is mine. Sleep easy. No one will enter your room except for your personal maid, Elsa, whom you'll meet in the morning."

I stare at this massive hulk of a man and picture the scared boy. He's forever reminded of that moment. Each time he runs a hand across the scarred skin, each time he watches himself in the mirror.

I cannot compare what I've been through to his, but that doesn't mean I don't understand what it's like to mourn the person you'll never become.

Without thinking, I close the distance between us and rest a palm on his left cheek, right over the scar. He flinches but continues to stand still. "May all those who hurt you burn in hell, Nikolai."

That earns me another small smile. "They already did, little wife." He rests his hand over mine and leans against it, his stubble prickly against my skin.

Something ripples over his expression, his gaze holding mine, the air crackling between us. The ticking of the grandfather clock behind me seems to amplify the silence between us.

The muscles in his neck visibly tighten, and both our breathing grows faster, my heart racing, my core clenching. We're waiting for the other to do something.

But...

The clock lets out a deep, resonant chime, cutting through the mounting tension between us. I start at the sound, and it breaks whatever spell we are under.

Nikolai snaps his eyes shut, dropping my hand and taking a deep breath. “Goodnight, little wife.”

Without another word, he spins on his heel, walks to his bedroom, and closes the door behind him, leaving me standing in the hallway, my hand still tingling. The longing is like a physical blow, throwing me for a loop.

All my plans of distancing from him evaporate. The relief I felt when he said he wouldn’t fuck me tonight is replaced by disappointment.

God, it’s driving me crazy. Maybe I just need to sleep this off. Maybe in the morning, I wouldn’t be as needy.

I can hope.

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4

NIKOLAI

What the fuck?

Nina wanted to comfort me, and yet my caveman brain seemed to take it as an invitation to pounce on her.

The mattress dips as I sit on it and prop my elbows on my knees, clutching my head. Frustration and disappointment gnaw at me.

What if I scared her? What if I just undid all the ways I managed to put her mind at ease? What if she thinks I'm going to force myself on her now?

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

I have no idea how to navigate this situation I'm in. Why did I have to go fucking ruin everything by being unable to control myself? It took everything in me not to kiss her right there and then. Her mouth is so inviting, so soft, so plump.

My body lit up at her touch, stirring to life for the first time in thirty-two years. It's a little unsettling but not entirely unpleasant.

Tomorrow. I will know tomorrow if all my efforts at easing her worries have gone down the drain. If she begins walking on eggshells around me. If she looks at me with fear.

Stripping off my clothes, I stand under the shower and brace both hands on the tiled wall, toying with the idea of finding my release.

I've been walking around with a boner all night, and I can't take it anymore. With a growl, I wrap a hand around my cock and conjure Nina's beautiful face and her fucking delectable body—all those soft, glorious curves.

It's pathetic, jerking off to thoughts of my wife on our wedding night. But I'll take it. As long as she's across the room from me, I will keep my distance.

Even if that means fucking my hand day in and day out.

5

NINA

The first rays of early morning sunlight slip through the sheer curtains, and my eyes flutter open. For a moment, I linger in that calm, hazy space between dreams and reality, but when the disorientation clears, I sit up in bed and groan.

Father sent three suitcases of my clothes before we came home last night, and everything else—shower, skincare, and hours of tossing and turning before succumbing to sleep—was a blur.

I shower and brush my teeth, still in the process of taking in how grand this bedroom is. It's at least three times the size of my old bedroom, with high ceilings, floor-to-ceiling windows lining one wall, two deep armchairs around a wooden coffee table to one side, and the walls painted a warm ivory color.

I sit on the oversized bed in a silk robe, sweeping my gaze and smiling. I won't miss my old bedroom. This is infinitely better.

A soft knock on the door momentarily startles me. Is it him? Is it Nikolai? If so, what would he think of me in broad daylight? Last night, I had makeup on. Right now, I'm bare-faced and deeply flawed.

The thick carpet muffles my steps as I walk toward the door. Should I change into decent clothing first? But maybe he's just here to ask me to join him for breakfast? Oh God. Why am I overthinking everything?

I grasp the ornate brass handle and turn it, peeking at the small figure on the other side.

“Good morning, Miss Nina.” Standing in the doorway is a young woman about my age, her black hair neatly pinned up in a bun. She smiles brightly at me, her warm, friendly face making me smile back at her. “I heard you moving about, and I brought you breakfast.”

I step aside to let her in, and she gives me a nod of gratitude as she balances a tray in her hands, setting it down on the coffee table. It has a cup of steaming coffee, a glass of orange juice, and a beautifully arranged spread of bread, fruits, egg, and jam.

“Oh, gosh. Thank you so much for this...?”

“Elsa, Miss.” Her eyes sparkle with kindness. “Nikolai said to bring you breakfast in case you didn’t feel comfortable eating with him.”

“You call him Nikolai?” Her smile disappears, and she blinks slowly. Realization dawns on me at what I just said, and I smack a palm to my forehead. “God, that’s not what I meant. I’m sorry, Elsa. I should just shut up.”

Elsa gives me a sheepish smile. “I see how you’re surprised. House staff aren’t usually allowed to call their employers by their first names.”

I want to deny it, but that is true. My sisters would get a conniption if their assistants dared to call them by their names. “I’m sorry again. I must seem like a snob to you. I didn’t mean anything by it, I swear. I’m just curious.”

She shakes her head, her smile widening again. “Nikolai insisted we call him that. He said he had enough people calling him boss or sir.” Elsa pulls her earlobe. “He’s not like other employers, Miss. He treats us like family.”

Yet another surprising thing about Nikolai. “Well, then. Stop calling me Miss. Call me Nina. Nice to meet you, Elsa.”

I extend a hand to her, and she takes it. “Nikolai was right. You are very beautiful.”

Heat rises to my cheeks. Nikolai gossips with his people? How so unlike him. Then again, I don’t really know him that much, do I? “W-what? He talked about me?”

Elsa nods enthusiastically. “Oh, he couldn’t stop. When he instructed me to bring you breakfast, he said, ‘You’ll be the first to lay eyes on her, Elsa. Make sure you don’t stare, even if her beauty knocks you off your feet.’”

Nikolai said that? “Oh, uhm, okay.”

She purses her lips and covers them with her hand. “My mouth is running again. I’m so sorry, Miss Ni ... Nina. I’ll leave you to your breakfast now. If you need me, there’s a button by your bed. If I can’t come, Wilma will be here. If she’s not around, there’s Beth. Rest assured, there will be someone on the other line.”

“How many are in this house?”

Elsa thinks it over before she says, “Two dozen, probably? We go on shifts, depending on our classes.”

“Classes?”

“Nikolai requires everyone under thirty to attend college. He pays for it, says we need to fulfill our dreams.” Elsa looks like she’s about to burst, and she lowers her voice. “I’m graduating in two years. I’m going to be an accountant!”

She leaves me with my jaw hanging open. I’m trying to reconcile this version of

Nikolai with everything I've heard about him. The stories paint him as this cold, calculating monster who will stop at nothing to get what he wants. Who will take the lives of innocent people just because. Who will bathe in the blood of his enemies.

I'm utterly confused. The conflicting images swirl in my mind, leaving me uncertain and unsettled.

Who is my husband? What is the real version of him?

For the next three days, Nikolai stays true to his word. He leaves for work before I've woken up and arrives after I've had my dinner. We don't even see each other unless I take a peek in the window when he gets home.

Did I imagine that steamy moment between us on our wedding night? Have I mistaken his kindness for attraction?

But Elsa said...

God, I'm losing it. Overthinking has always been a problem, and now my brain won't shut up.

I'm still on break, and classes won't start until next month. With nothing else to do except study, I spend hours exploring this mansion. There are at least a dozen bedrooms, and I'm surprised to find mine bigger than his. Yes, I checked out his bedroom and even his study. Both rooms weren't locked, which was a dangerous thing to do given the nature of his 'business'.

On the night before my wedding, Father told me to spy on Nikolai. Get whatever useful information from him, take photos of his documents. I had several chances to do just that, and Father didn't let a day pass without texting me a reminder.

I can't do it. I won't.

This man trusts me enough that he lets me wander in his home. Father never did.

I'm not going to betray Nikolai when he hasn't done anything except welcome me to his home and give me the best sleep I've had in years. I'm beginning to think the air here is cleaner because I can breathe more freely. Sure, the overthinking is there, and so is the anxiety, but at least I don't dread leaving my bedroom every single day.

I'm so lost between my random thoughts and the pages of my Anatomy and Physiology book when I hear the unmistakable, familiar sound of tires on gravel.

A smile spreads across my face, my excitement bubbling over.

This is crazy, and he's probably tired from work, only looking forward to a peaceful night ahead.

But I crave his company, and I want to see him.

I practically fly out of my chair, running barefoot toward the front door. I'm wearing nothing but an oversized T-shirt and boxer shorts, but I don't care. We can't avoid each other forever. I don't want to.

The wide door swings open just as I come to a halt in front of it. A rush of cold air sweeps in, but it's quickly forgotten as I see my husband. He steps inside, his suit jacket draped over his forearm, his sleeves rolled up to his elbow.

He hasn't noticed me yet as his eyes are glued to his phone.

Clearing my throat, I beam at him. "You're home early."

Nikolai freezes mid-step and snaps his head up, his eyebrows scrunching as though I just sprouted wings and two horns. “Nina? Is everything okay?”

I twine my fingers behind me and nod. “I just want to have dinner with my husband.”

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6

NIKOLAI

Nina wants to eat dinner with me, and I don't even have to force her to.

The day was long, and I came home mentally preparing for the next, barely aware of my surroundings. Her voice cut through my thoughts, and I was sure I was either imagining her or hallucinating from hunger.

When she took a step toward me, the world tilted on its axis.

God, I missed my wife, but after nearly scaring her the other night, I did what I could to make her comfortable, even if that meant sneaking into my own house.

Now, she wants my company, and the exhaustion of the day melts away.

Elsa and Wilma, her personal maids, stand to the side, not bothering to hide how they're enjoying this exchange, especially my reaction.

"You've not eaten yet?" I ask Nina, checking the time on my watch and frowning when I see it is almost eight in the evening.

"No. I've been waiting for you."

Warmth spreads through my chest, tripling my heart rate, making my palms sweat.

"Oh, are you bored here?"

She ignores the question. “Nikolai, do you want me to join you for dinner, or do you prefer to eat alone?”

What is even that question? How can she ask that when she dominates my thoughts 24/7? She’s always in the perimeters of my mind even while I’m neck-deep in meetings. Why does she?—

“Yes, Nina. He would love it if you joined him for dinner,” Elsa says, grinning from ear to ear.

Have I been too lenient with them? Is it high time to start acting like an asshole boss?

“Well?” Nina smiles again, stopping my heart, the yearning making blood roar in my ears. “Let’s go. We don’t want the food getting cold.”

We make our way to the dining room, Nina walking beside me. I pull out a chair for her, catching a whiff of her clean scent as she sits. I settle into the chair at the head of the long mahogany table, and this cold room suddenly feels cozy and intimate.

The cook, Dario, carries a tray laden with steaming dishes. He moves with practiced grace, setting down platters of roasted vegetables, beef stroganoff, beetroot soup, and dumplings. It’s too much for both of us, but Dario cooks meals for all the staff members, not just me and Nina.

“What’s your favorite food?” Nina asks.

I fork a piece of ground meat dumpling and think. “Chicken pot pie.”

“Dessert?”

“I’m not really a dessert person.”

“Not even ice cream?”

“Ice cream is disgusting.”

Nina slowly puts her cutlery down and scowls at me. “You did not just say that.”

I lift one shoulder. “It’s just milk with flavor. That’s disgusting.”

Nina crosses her arms over her chest, and I don’t miss the fact that she’s not wearing a bra. Sure, she has a big shirt on, but I can pinpoint where her nipples are, especially with the way she unknowingly squishes her tits together. “Wow. Only a monster would say that.”

Instead of feeling offended, the humor in her tone makes me chuckle.

Nina rests both palms on the table and leans forward, and I try to ignore the way her soft tits press against it. What a lucky, lucky table. “How do you like your foods, then, if you find ice cream disgusting? Cooked with blood from your enemies?”

I raise an eyebrow at her and wipe my mouth. “Do you think I’m a savage?” I fork another dumpling. “No. I sprinkle shaved liver on the side.”

Her mouth forms an ‘O’. “And what about the kidney? The heart? Surely, a non-savage man like yourself wouldn’t waste anything.”

“Dario, what can you do with the kidney and heart?”

Dario perks up, eyes flicking from me to Nina. He tries to keep a straight face, but the side of his mouth twitches. “We can saute them and add onions and mushrooms.”

“Oh my God. What is this household?” Nina buries her face in her hands, but her

shoulders shake. “Please tell me this is actually beef stroganoff.”

Dario shrugs. “It’s for me to know and for you to find out.”

He leaves with a flourish, and Nina bursts out laughing. “Dario jokes! He always looks so serious with me.”

“Maybe you were serious with him too. He takes a feel with people, and he will only lighten up if you lighten up.”

Nina smiles and goes back to eating, and I don’t have an appetite anymore. All I want to do is watch her, trace her with my eyes, and be grateful for her presence. I don’t remember enjoying a meal like this.

She swallows her food and picks a grilled carrot. “You have an amazing household.”

“Really? Are you sure? Because you can tell the truth about Elsa and Wilma, and I’ll have them pack tonight.”

“We heard that, Nikolai. Did you know cyanide is colorless, and you won’t suspect anything if I pour some on your coffee?” Elsa calls out from the kitchen.

“Carbon monoxide is also a thing. Remember, you have a fireplace in your bedroom,” Wilma chimes in.

I shake my head while Nina grins and gives the two women behind her a thumbs-up. What is going on here? Did I step inside a different house? How the hell are they ganging up on me?

“Can you please pass me the dumpling?” Nina asks.

I hand her the small bowl, and as she takes it, her fingers brush my hand. It's innocent, yet it's not. It ignites the pulse of excitement in my veins, my skin burning hot through my shirt. But it's not just me.

Nina's pupils widen, flush crawling up her neck, eyes going a little hazy. It happens in a few seconds, but the front of my dress pants becomes uncomfortably tight, forcing me to adjust my position in my seat.

If I stand, Nina will know. The entire household will know. Even the fucking chandelier will know.

I can't have that, so I steer our conversation in a different direction and chastise myself for acting like a hormonal teenager. "So, Biology, huh? What do you plan on doing with the degree?"

Nina relaxes and exhales a long, slow breath. "I want to be a doctor someday." She starts to say something else, but she closes her mouth briefly and opens it again. "My father says men don't like career-driven women."

"I do."

"Really?"

"I like my woman to follow whatever it is she wants." Fucking slip of the tongue. I just referred to her as mine. Good thing it goes over her head.

"So let me get this straight. I'm allowed to have a career as a doctor?"

I put my fork down and lean back, intertwining my fingers over my stomach. "Allowed? Nina, you are my wife. I don't know what kind of marriage you thought this was, but you and I are equals. I will not tell you what to do and not do, but you

can do that to me.”

“I thought we’re equals?”

I smirk. “Maybe I like being ordered around. It’s boring being the boss 24/7.”

Nina cracks up, her eyes crinkling at the corners as she points the fork at me. “You are so going to regret that. I have never bossed anyone in my life, so yes, I will take you up on that offer.”

“Okay.”

“First order of business.” Nina folds her arms and rests them on the table. “You and I have dinner every night.”

“What time?”

“You have to be home at seven.”

“Done. What else?”

“I’ll think about them as I go. That’s it for now.”

“You hear that, Dario?” I don’t even have to raise my voice because I know those little shits are listening. “Dinner at seven every night with my wife. No ice cream.”

“Someday, I’m going to convince you to try them, and you’re going to love it.”

Little does she know she has the power to make me do whatever she wants.

NINA

I don't remember enjoying a meal this much. In fact, I don't remember engaging with anyone at dinner.

Back home, dinners were quiet affairs. We ate, we finished everything on our plates, and we went back to our bedrooms. Father didn't like talking over food. He said it was disrespectful. He always wanted to eat in peace.

"Thank you, Nina. I needed that."

Nikolai and I stop in front of our bedrooms. Watching him, the shy smile on his face, the glint in his eyes—my heart begins beating in a way that is different, almost unfamiliar.

Something's different tonight. Everything he says and does seems to wrap around me like a warm, cozy blanket, pulling me ever closer to him.

"Needed what?" I ask him.

He leans against his door and crosses his arms across his chest, highlighting his corded forearms and the veins on his hands. "Normalcy."

I shift my weight from one foot to the other, dragging my gaze to the paintings beside him before bringing it back to his face. "Can I ask you something?"

“Yes, you can ask me anything, and I’ll do my best to give you the truth. If I can’t, possibly for your safety, then I will tell you I can’t say anything at all.”

“What do you do on the regular? You leave at eight and come home at eight. What happens in twelve hours?”

He doesn’t miss a beat. “I keep both enemies and our men at bay. Most of the time, I gather and go through useful information about them, something we can use in the future, make sure they think twice before trying to cross us and mess with us.”

I lean against my door. “What do you do if they mess with you?”

“I make them regret it.” He stands to his full height, and his size always makes me want to stagger back. “Good night, Nina.”

I grasp the doorknob behind me. “Good night, Nikolai. That was the most fun dinner I’ve ever had.”

A storm of emotions sweeps across his features, his gaze dropping to my mouth for a fraction of a second, but I don’t have time to dwell on it as I enter my bedroom.

After changing into my pajamas, I flop down on the mattress and stare at the ceiling.

Another piece of the puzzle that is Nikolai slots into place. And yet, I am no closer to figuring him out than I was at our wedding.

The man is a walking contradiction. I don’t doubt he’s dangerous, but there are sides to him—like the way he interacts with his staff—that make my heart flutter.

I put a hand on my chest, feeling the rapid beat of my heart. I dreaded coming here, but in less than a week, I feel more at home than I did in my old house. I’m free, I

don't get yelled at for the smallest things, I don't get insulted for speaking my mind, and my words don't fall on deaf ears.

Most of all, I actually matter. Nikolai listens to me. He pays attention as though he values what I think.

That has never happened before.

When I told Father and my stepmother about wanting to be a doctor, they laughed. Then they dismissed me.

The man they call a monster won't do that. The monster makes me feel more important than all my family members combined, and it only strengthens my resolve to choose him over everyone else.

NIKOLAI

I push open the door, stepping into the grand room where my four brothers gather. The whole space is filled with the sound of loud, unrestrained laughter, which abruptly dies the moment they notice me and is replaced by heavy silence.

Our three eldest—Ivan, Maxim, and Luca—are sprawled across the plush leather couches, their smiles quickly fading as they glance at each other.

My fourth brother, Lev, and the only one I'm close with, sits at the far end of the room, completely absorbed in a stack of papers. As always, he's oblivious to the atmosphere and unaware of my presence.

"How's married life, brother?" Ivan asks, breaking the silence and pouring his drink of choice—vodka—into his glass. His black curly hair slides to his forehead, and he impatiently shoves it back, his black eyes unfocused. If I have to assume, it's not his first drink of the day, and it's not yet lunchtime.

"Can't complain," I say, which is true. Not that I want to elaborate it to them or even talk about my wife. I sit on the nearest single-seater couch and prop my elbows on my knees, weaving my fingers together.

"You have to be careful, brother," Ivan says, his speech slurring, his gaze wandering. "If she's anything like her mother, she's going to be fucking the gardener soon."

Maxim and Luca, even though they only tolerate me at best, turn away, looking like they want to be anywhere else but here. Ivan's comments suck the air out of the room, and the familiar rush of fury courses through my veins. My vision turns red, and the pounding in my temples becomes louder and heavier.

"Say that again, Ivan." My voice is low, and every one of them—the sober ones, that is—knows what this means. In the corner of my eye, I see Lev put down the papers and watch, ready to swoop in.

"What? You didn't hear me the first time?"

"Ivan, stop it," Maxim hisses and turns to me, his blue eyes narrowing. "He's drunk, Niko. Let it go."

"Why are you acting like you didn't think the same thing, Max?" Ivan spits, stumbling forward, a mocking grin across his flushed face. "Your wife's mother is a whore; everyone knows that. And we all know the apple doesn't fall?"

My jaw tightens, the burn of anger rising in my chest. The words hit their mark, and I am not going to sit here while he speaks this way about Nina.

I move way too fast for any of them to react, grabbing Ivan by the throat and shoving him against the backrest. His eyes bulge out of their sockets as he claws at my hands. Maxim, Luca, and Lev all try to pull me from him to no avail.

"You insult me all you want, Ivan, but never ever say a word about my wife, or I will put you in so much pain, you'll be begging me for your death," I snarl.

"Niko, let him go." Luca tugs on my arm, but I shrug him off. There's a reason why I'm the one they send to scare our enemies.

“Are you threatening me?” Ivan throws me a smile, meant to look like he’s amused, but I see the moment the fog of intoxication starts to lift, his eyes sharpening.

“You’ve known me for thirty-two years, Ivan.” The anger burns through the last shreds of my self-control. “I never make threats.”

Ivan blinks a few times, as if trying to clear away the last remnants of his drunkenness. His neck flexes as he swallows hard. “All this for a woman?”

I shove him again and let go, the other three giving me a wide berth. They all know I don’t lose my temper—not when they taunt me, make fun of me, or outright insult me. I always keep my cool.

But talking about Nina is an entirely different matter.

“She’s not just any woman. She’s my wife.” I whirl around and walk away, casting a glare over my shoulder as I reach the doorway. “You’d do well to remember that.”

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9

NINA

Sitting on Nikolai's right side at the dining table, the soft glow of the overhead lights cast warm shadows on his face. He's big, rough, and rugged.

I noticed it the first time I saw him, but for the past few days, the awareness has only intensified.

Nikolai is handsome. No, not in a conventional way, but in a way that feels sinful and forbidden. Rough around the edges but distinctively attractive. I keep sneaking glances at him, lust pooling in my belly, pulse pounding between my thighs.

I can't even taste the food anymore. I'm hungry for something else.

"Does it bother you, Nina?" His voice fills the space between us, and I'm watching him a lot closer than usual.

"What does?"

"My face."

He turns fully to me, the unexpected question catching me by surprise. The scar is nothing to me anymore. I barely even notice it. It's just part of him, like his hair, his stubble. "No, Nikolai. It doesn't."

“It can’t be easy for you to eat dinner every night and have to look at me.”

The desire forgotten, I set my napkin down and give him my full attention. “Nikolai, I don’t know what you mean. I like these dinners with you.” For a brief moment, I consider how much to tell him for the sake of my self-preservation, but to hell with it. He deserves no less than the truth. “It’s the best part of my day, and I always look forward to them.”

He searches my eyes, an incredulous look on his features, a flush of red on the tips of his ears. “You do?”

God, this man is so broken that he can’t even believe I enjoy his company. Why does he think so little of himself? Why does he think his small scar will send me running? Deep down, however, I understand. I am just as broken.

Here we are, two broken people trying to make their arranged marriage work.

And I want him so badly I ache.

“Nikolai, we’ve been married for two weeks.”

“We are. Do you regret it, Nina?”

“No!” Frustration fills me, and I yank my hair. “Why do you always think of the worst about me?”

“I don’t, but I know I’m not who you pictured getting married to.”

His voice is so calm, and it angers me. It has been building for weeks, the slow burn in my chest, the mounting pressure in my skull.

This is the last straw. That comment tips me over the edge. I am so tired of everyone telling me what to feel and how to react and dictating how I should live my life.

The fire smoldering within bursts into flames. “You think I’m suffering each day I’m married to you, is that it?”

“Are you?”

“Do not answer a question with another question!” I shove my chair back, the wooden legs scraping against the floor. I have never raised my voice at anyone, but I need to get this out of my chest, or else I will go mad.

Nikolai watches me pace back and forth, his eyes following my movements with a quiet calm. “I’m sorry, Nina. What do you want me to do or say?”

My words spill out in a heated rush. “That’s exactly the issue, Nikolai. I want you to stop tiptoeing around me. You don’t do that with Dario or Elsa or Wilma, so why are you doing that to me?”

“You’re my wife, Nina.” He says it so low that I strain to hear it.

“Nikolai, you’re too careful and considerate. Yes, I deeply appreciate that, more than you’ll ever know. I want to know what you think, what you feel. I don’t want you to hold back just because you’re worried how I’ll react.” I swipe a hand across my forehead. “I want you to say what you want to say and do what you want to do. I will not think of you any less, I promise.”

Nikolai’s eyes darken, the muscle beneath his jaw tensing as he rests his chin on his fist. “You don’t want that, Nina.”

“Why? What do you want, Nikolai?”

He stays quiet, and the tension is so thick I can taste it on my tongue. I don't know where I got this sudden burst of courage, but I step closer to him, fully aware that I'm provoking a bear—something I didn't even dare back home. “Nikolai, I asked you a question. What do you want?”

His nostrils flare, and he lets out a low growl before standing abruptly, his sheer size making me step back on instinct. “You, Nina. I want you. But I promised I would not go to your bed or touch you unless you want me to, and I've been doing my damndest to keep those promises.”

“Nikolai...”

His gaze turns dark and possessive, his breath growing heavier. “I lie awake at night, long after you're asleep, wondering how you'd feel under my hands and my mouth, how many sounds you'd make as I bury myself inside you...”

Dear God. My heart drums against my ribs, pleasure singing through my nerves. He braces both hands on the table on either side of me, trapping me. My body throbs with raw need as I raise my gaze to him, his eyes going hazy with lust.

“Now, I ask you, Nina.” He lowers his head and whispers in my ear, his hot breath making me wetter. “What do you want?”

Quick, ragged breaths escape me, fire plunging down my body and settling in my core. “Fuck me, Nikolai.”

We're both breathing hard, and I see the moment he snaps. One second, we're staring at each other, and the next, we're moving at the same time, crushing our mouths together.

And the world around us disappears.

NIKOLAI

I break the kiss only long enough to sweep a hand across the table in one motion. Plates, cutleries, glasses, and dishes crash to the floor. It's a lot to clean up, and I will have to pay my staff double, but none of that matters right now.

My breath stutters, my heart beating wildly against my chest, like someone is pounding a drum inside of me. Nina gave me permission to fuck her, and that's exactly what I'll do. Fuck her so good and well, she'll ask me for more and never want anyone else.

I lift Nina to the table, thankful for the loose dress she's wearing, which I hike up over her thighs. My hands graze the expanse of smooth skin from her ankles to her calves, and, laying her slowly on the table, I press a kiss on the inside of her thigh, enjoying the way she sucks in a sharp breath.

"Please. I need you inside me." It's the begging coupled with the look of longing in her eyes that undo me. Holding her gaze, I unbuckle my pants and let them drop to the floor.

Nina chews on her bottom lip as she watches me take out my cock and wrap a hand around it. "Tell me you want this, little wife."

"I do. Please. I can't take it anymore."

“Can’t take what anymore?”

“The need. Fill me, Nikolai. Fill me with your cock, and then your come.”

Fuck. She lifts herself on her elbows, and I slip a shaking finger inside her panties, groaning at how wet she already is. Still with that thin excuse of underwear covering her, I slide the finger along her slit, and she arches her back, lifting her face to the ceiling, a shaky breath leaving her lips.

I want to drag this out, tease her more, but we’re both so hungry for each other, I can’t wait anymore. With the way she digs her ass to the table and rounds her hips, I know she feels the same way.

Not bothering to take her panties down slowly, I tear them and drop them to the floor.

Jesus, fuck.

Her pussy glistens under the yellow lights. She’s so wet, it drips down to her asshole, and when I wedge the head at her entrance, I hiss at how easily I can slip it in.

She’s so tight around me, but her wetness helps. Inch by agonizing inch, I drive into her, breathing hard through my mouth because I’m about to bust and disappoint her. The electricity at the base of my spine and the tightening in my balls all signal I’m so close to the edge.

But I can’t do that to her.

She’s coming first.

My plan of attack is to take it slow, but my little wife destroys that by lifting her hips and using her heels on the edge of the table as leverage. She meets me halfway, and I

roar when I'm buried to the hilt.

I slide the straps of her dress down, exposing her creamy globes, her nipples turning into little peaks. Slower than I ever thought possible, I thrust into her, sliding in and out of her slick channel, my whole body strung tightly.

“Is this how you fuck your wife? Because I need more.”

The little seductress gives me a sly smirk, and I grin back, increasing my pace until the table rattles from under her. She slides away with every thrust, and I have to grab her thighs and slide her back to me.

I slow down and lean toward her, kissing her and invading her mouth with my tongue. She digs her nails into my scalp and pulls my hair, forcing my head down to her breasts.

I oblige.

I don't stop fucking her even as my mouth travels to her taut bud, rolling it between my teeth and sucking, doing the same thing to the other. I'm grazing her neck with my teeth when Nina stiffens under me, gripping my shoulders and bowing off the table.

“Nikolai...”

Her legs shake as she comes, and I watch her mouth open to a silent scream, but that doesn't slow me. Instead, I twine our fingers and pin her arms over her head as I continue to pound into her with everything I have.

Nina's pussy suctions up around me, and I stuff myself deeper. The tingling begins at the base of my spine, my balls drawing up, and I sink into her and drain my cock,

groaning against her skin that's damp with sweat.

I tunnel my fingers through her hair and take her mouth in another fiery kiss that leaves us breathless.

This ... this is the kind of happiness I never knew existed, and I don't ever want to live life without her by my side. Never.

11

NINA

Last night was glorious. It wasn't just the wild sex, which still makes me blush in broad daylight, but also what happened after. I didn't go back to my bedroom, sleeping at Nikolai's instead.

He didn't know about my fear of the dark yet, so he turned the lights off and slid on the bed beside me. I thought I would have to blurt out the confession so he'd turn it back on, but the moment his arm wrapped around me, pulling me close to his side, it quieted the terror.

For the first time since I could remember, I fell asleep with the lights off, waking up in the morning with my face pressed to his bare chest. The sound of his heartbeat, the steady rhythm of his breathing, his body protecting mine even in sleep—it tugged something in me, something long buried, something forgotten the day my mother died.

I touch my lips, my skin turning feverish as I recall the way Nikolai bruised my mouth with his.

“Good morning, Miss. Reservation?”

I look up to find a beautiful young woman holding a clipboard. I take a deep breath as I give her my stepmother's name, Allie. Looking around at the crystal chandeliers and polished marble floors, the opulent surroundings do nothing to calm my nerves.

I smooth my white slash top and ivory mini skirt. I paired it with black ballet flats and gifts Nikolai surprised me with earlier—rose gold viper earrings, a rose gold viper bracelet, and a rose gold single spiral watch.

Despite the designer labels I'm wearing, I feel out of place, like I always do in the company of these women.

Allie, Eleanor, Jade, and Mia turn in unison as I approach the table, all of them eyeing me from head to toe. No doubt taking in the flaws they can make fun of later in their group chat.

"You're late, Nina," Allie coos, her voice dripping with fake sweetness. "We were just talking about you. You never replied to our text messages."

I force a smile and take a seat. "Traffic was terrible. I also got swamped with all the subjects I have to study for next sem."

It's a lie, of course. I spent twenty minutes sitting in the car with Nikolai's driver, gathering the courage to walk in and pretend I enjoy dining with them.

They exchange knowing looks, and I resist the urge to squirm in my seat. The past me would do that, but not anymore.

"Are those new jewelry?" Mia remarks, pulling my wrist to check my watch and bracelet. "Your husband bought this?"

"Yes."

"Looks tacky. Rose gold makes you look washed out." Jade doesn't bother hiding her grin.

“Agree. What can you expect, though? Nina’s lucky she’s still alive.” Allie observes me over the rim of her wine glass.

I swallow past the lump in my throat, refusing to rise to their bait. “I like it. It looks nice.”

“Of course, you like it. You’re not exactly known for having good taste.” Eleanor chuckles. “Marrying the scariest man in the country, wearing his jewels, and what’s next? Have his babies?” Eleanor dramatically shudders, and the others laugh.

Every lunch is like this. A thinly veiled assault on me—my looks, my studies, my chosen career, my womanhood—disguised as casual conversation. They love picking me apart.

I used to shrug it off and ignore the barbs, but now that they’ve brought up Nikolai, I feel something simmering just beneath the surface. My hands clench into fists on my lap, my nails digging into my palms as I try to keep my composure.

Still, they don’t stop.

“I saw photos from the wedding. My God, his face is the stuff of nightmares.”

“Can you imagine waking up and seeing THAT? I’d die of a heart attack first thing in the morning.”

“His brothers are good-looking. He wouldn’t look so bad if he didn’t have that slash on his mouth.”

“Creepy, right? It’s what you see on Halloween.”

The more they talk, the more the fire inside me grows. My heartbeat quickens,

drowning out their words. I try to tamp it down, but it's no use. The rage has taken hold, spreading like wildfire, consuming every thought I have.

It finally boils over, unstoppable and fierce—the barely restrained fury threatening to explode. I am done being their target. I am done playing the part of a silent, dutiful victim who never speaks out. I am not going to sit here and stay silent as they insult my husband.

My husband. The only one who ever made me feel important. The only one who quieted my fears. The only one who didn't make me feel like my existence was a curse and a burden.

Last night, I told Nikolai to say what he wants. It was hypocritical of me when I couldn't even force the words past my lips in front of these women.

But no more.

Eleanor, always the ringleader, gives me a smile that doesn't reach her eyes. "Is it true, Nina, that he sleeps with a scythe under his pillow?"

"No way!" Jade dramatically puts a hand on her chest. "That's barbaric."

"Why are you surprised? He looks barbaric. Of course, he's going to act like it!" Mia adds, elbowing Jade.

Yup, I am so done with these bitches.

I take a sip of my wine and smile. "At least I'm happy with my marriage." I straighten in my seat and look at each of them slowly, letting my gaze linger on their faces. "I wonder when was the last time your husbands looked at all of you like the sun shone out of your asses, because mine does every single day."

As the words leave my mouth, the air freezes around us. I push my chair back and stand. They stare at me, their expressions a mix of disbelief and shock. The smirks and condescending smiles vanish, and I don't wait for them to recover.

I head for the entrance, but Eleanor has to have the last word. "That's not going to last. He's going to get tired of you and find someone else."

I can't stop the laughter bubbling within me, and I shoot her a sideways look. "Aw, El. Nikolai isn't like your husband. He buys me things because he wants to and not because he cheated on me with my hairstylist."

A wave of relief washes over me. Each step I take makes me feel lighter, as if I'm shedding layers of fear, self-doubt, and low confidence. Years and years of suffering, and I'm free. Finally.

The cool breeze hits my face as I walk toward the car, and I inhale deeply, savoring the crisp air filling my lungs.

I'm so damned proud of myself for standing up to them after all these years. They can't touch me anymore. I won't let them.

And now, I'm going home to my husband.

12

NIKOLAI

I 'm so focused on answering my emails that I don't notice Nina's arrival. I'm deep into my work, fingers flying over the keyboard and eyes glued to the screen.

A knock on the door breaks through my mental fog, and I blink, momentarily disoriented. Without waiting for an answer, the door creaks open, and my wife peeks in, eyes scanning the room before settling on me.

A huge smile creeps on her face. "Am I interrupting something?"

I stop hunching over the laptop and lean back. "Never, Nina. Come in. I could use the break."

She walks toward me and leans against my desk, her thigh brushing my arm. "I'm hungry."

"Didn't you have lunch with your sisters?"

Her smile disappears, and she rolls her eyes. "I didn't eat."

I gently rest a hand on her waist and turn her to me. "What happened?"

Nina sighs and runs a finger along my arm. "Just the usual. They joined forces to make fun of me, and while I normally ate my lunch in silence, letting them step all

over me, I didn't do it this time." Her gaze hardens as she looks away. "I gave them a piece of my mind and walked away."

I steer her to me and settle her on my lap, brushing a strand of hair sticking to her temple. "Tell me. What did they do? Do you want me to threaten their husbands?"

"You'd do that?"

"Of course. Anything for you, little wife."

The side of her mouth lifts, and she rests her head on my chest. "They talked shit about you. I didn't let it fly, so I told them their husbands had nothing on you."

Warmth and amusement flicker in my chest, and I chuckle. "Do you really think that?"

"Of course."

"But now you're hungry."

She groans. "I came to see you first, but I'll go to the kitchen and find Dario."

Nina wiggles on my lap, and the simple movement has my cock roaring to attention. With the thin fabric of her skirt, she quickly becomes aware of my body responding to her. She raises a brow at me. "You know what, on second thought, I might be hungry for something else."

"Nina..."

She slides her lacy underwear down, kicking it away with her shoes. Her skirt follows, and she stands before me in nothing but her thin top. With a wicked smile,

she straddles me and pins my forearms to the armrests. “No moving, husband, or I stop. I’m going to ride you until you come.”

Fuck me.

My office chair is a tight fit, even if it’s customized to sit two regular-sized men. She traps my legs with her own and fumbles with my belt and zipper.

As much as I want to help her, she doesn’t want me to move, so I will keep my hands to myself and let her do the work.

What my wife wants, she gets.

She opens my pants and fists my cock, and I have to white-knuckle the armrests. It feels too good. I focus on my breathing and close my eyes when she begins lowering herself on me, but she bites my earlobe, and my eyes snap open. “Open your eyes and look at me, husband.”

Jesus Christ. What kind of torture is this?

It takes Nina a few tries before she finds her rhythm, bouncing on my lap and rotating her hips before sitting back down on me again. I am about to go crazy with want.

I dig my shoes into the floor, my muscles tight, my balls aching.

Her arms around me are tighter, her movements becoming uncoordinated. I know she’s close, so I help her and slip a hand between us, but she swats it away.

“What did I say? No moving.”

My God. Who is this woman I married?

I don't have long to answer. Her eyes roll to the back of her head, and she shakes in my arms. That's when I hit release, gripping her waist and slamming into her from underneath.

And when I come hard, I yank her against my body and bury my face in her tits, growling against her skin. Her touch sears me from the inside and out, and I blow out a long breath as I realize something.

I'm in love with this woman. Hopelessly in love. She has my whole heart. She owns me, and frankly, I wouldn't have it any other way.

13

NINA

“Nina, your father wants to see you in the living room,” Elsa says as she enters the library, her voice carrying an unusual tension. I close my book and scrunch my forehead.

Why is he here? It’s not like him to show up unannounced. Did he time it perfectly so Nikolai is out? Did Allie tell him something?

A cold knot of anxiety tightens in my chest. I try to steady my breathing, but the sense of dread only grows stronger as I get nearer to him. Elsa and Wilma are both behind me, and Dario stands by the dining room.

Gratitude spreads through me when I realize they’re here to protect me, to step in in case Father does something.

My eyes fall on the familiar figure with his hands in his pockets, looking outside our window. He must have seen my reflection because he spins around, his expression unreadable.

My stomach churns, a heavy weight settling on it, and my throat feels as dry as a desert. “Father? What brings you here?”

As soon as his eyes meet mine, I feel a jolt of unease. His gaze is cold, assessing, and with a hint of displeasure I know all too well. It’s the same look he’s given me so

many times before, the one that makes me feel small, inadequate, and a failure.

His eyes narrow just a fraction. “You got what I asked of you?”

Hostility radiates from him, and my mind races. For a second, I’m confused with what he’s saying, but it dawns on me. The information on Nikolai.

“I don’t have it.”

“You’ve been here for almost a month.” His tone is accusing, and it doesn’t even bother him that Nikolai’s staff can hear every word he says.

The same anger that flared when I had lunch with Allie and my sisters surges within me. I spent years bending over backward to please him and meet his impossible standard, and he didn’t even bother visiting my mother at the hospital when she got sick. I initially thought it was out of the goodness of his heart—what’s left of it anyway—that he took me under his wing, clothed me, fed me, and paid for my studies.

Later on, I learned he wanted something—or someone—to bargain with the Petrovs. All his daughters were married, except for me. Father is many things, but he definitely doesn’t lack foresight.

“I’m not going to do it.” The anger grows, overtaking the anxiety that gripped me just moments ago and giving me the strength I didn’t know I had. “I won’t betray my husband.”

“Your husband.” His smirk is cruel and meant to make me tremble in fear, but he doesn’t have that effect on me anymore. I have Nikolai.

“I love him.” The words are out before I realize, but I don’t take them back since it’s

the truth.

I see a flicker of surprise in his eyes before he tosses his head back and laughs. It's cold and biting, laced with a venomous edge that makes discomfort crawl across my skin. He walks to me and raises his hand. "You love him? What kind of a whore loves a monster?"

The words are like a slap, but the raised hand makes me flinch. Before I can react, however, Nikolai has him in a chokehold, forcing his massive arm against Father's neck.

Father's face turns red, and he rakes his nails at Nikolai. But my husband pays him no mind, his intense gaze landing on me. He says in a calm voice, "Are you all right, Nina?"

I nod, unable to form words as Father looks like he's about to pass out. Nikolai loosens his hold and growls, "I will give you the same ultimatum I gave my brother. If you try anything with my wife, I will put you in so much pain, you'll be begging me for your death. And even in death, you will not go peacefully. I'll make sure your final seconds on Earth will break you."

Father gasps as he sucks in the air. "H-how dare you talk to me like this? I'm her fath?—"

Nikolai turns him around so they're facing each other. "My wife has no father. She only has me and the people in my household. People who actually care about her. You cannot sell her to the highest bidder and still call yourself a father."

Even as Nikolai clearly overpowers him, Father jabs a finger at him. "You won't get away with this. I have an army!"

“And I will have no qualms slaughtering each and every one of them. If you value your life, you’ll stay as far away from my wife as possible.”

His face is flushed with anger, the veins in his neck standing and bulging like twisted cords. His teeth are bared as his voice rises to a fever pitch. “You don’t tell me what to do!”

Nikolai’s face splits into a grin. “No, but your friend, Boris, can.”

This silences my father, and he staggers back, eyes wide, mouth slightly open. “Y-you...”

“You forget who you’re dealing with. You forget what I do in our business.”

When he whips his head to me, Father’s face transforms. Instead of fury, he’s pale, eyebrows drawing together and creating deep lines on his forehead. He continues to back away, clutching his chest. Without another word, he dashes outside toward his car.

The engine roars to life, the tires screeching against the gravel.

The suddenness of it all leaves me stunned and bewildered, but Nikolai’s eyes are full of concern as he grazes my cheek with his knuckle. “Nina, are you okay?”

“Y-yes.” I grab his hand and hold it between mine. “I have a confession to make. He asked me to spy on you, but I didn’t do it. Even as I explored your house, I didn’t give him what he wanted. I promise.”

His gaze softens, and his mouth coasts over my temple, pressing a kiss on my forehead. “I know, little wife.”

“I need to tell you something else.”

“What is it?”

“Our marriage...” Nikolai stiffens, his broad shoulders rising slightly as he squares his jaw, and I run a finger along it, kissing the scar on the side of his mouth. “Our marriage is the only good thing Father ever did for me. I love you.”

His face transitions from tension to disbelief, and then, he visibly relaxes. His shoulders slump, and he lets out a deep breath. A wide, relieved smile spreads across his face, his eyes softening. “I love you too, Nina. You’re the best thing that ever happened to me.”

Nikolai’s kiss is soft and possessive, his touch ragged and needy, and I cling to him, feathering my fingers over his arms, curving with heavy muscle. I pull back and shake my head, trying to clear the lust fogging my brain. “Wait. I have a request.”

“Anything, little wife.”

“Will you pay for my med school? I will pay you back when I get my first job.”

Nikolai hooks a finger under my chin, his voice husky with emotion. “Please do not insult me, Nina, I beg you. You will go to med school, and I’ll build a hospital in your name. If you want, I’ll beat enough men to always keep you busy.”

I choke out a laugh and smack his arm. “Don’t you dare, Nikolai!”

The kiss is deeper and hotter this time, and as the world melts away, happiness blooms within me. It was a long road to get here, but it was all worth it.

Nikolai is worth it.

EPILOGUE

NIKOLAI

For as long as I can remember, fear has always been a distant concept. Even when I was kidnapped as a teenager, I wasn't scared. I was in pain, physically and emotionally, and felt a dozen emotions, but fear wasn't one of them.

I've faced challenges at "work", navigated through tough, dangerous, and deadly situations, and even tackled life-and-death moments with a calm, steady demeanor.

But tonight, standing in front of a five-star hotel and waiting for Nina to arrive, a shiver of anxiety grips me like nothing I've known before.

The grand hall is adorned with soft twinkling lights, delicate flowers, and drapery the color of Nina's eyes. Two dozen of our family members, closest friends, and household staff, whom I discreetly invited a month earlier, are quietly seated.

I pace the ground, wiping my clammy hands on my trousers. I left Nina a box on her bed containing a beautiful white gown, white shoes, and new jewelry.

Finally, her car arrives, and as I catch sight of my beautiful wife, my heart pounds, nerves dancing just on the edge of panic.

She walks to me, her eyes scanning my face, and I take a deep breath, going over the speech I've rehearsed at least a hundred times.

Nina smiles and plants a soft kiss on my mouth. “What is this, Nikolai?”

I take her hand and brush my lips across her knuckles. “Our first wedding was a sham, little wife. You were so scared that your tears left tracks on your face.” As if on cue, tears well in her eyes. “That won’t do. I want you to have a wedding you deserve, one that makes you smile when you think of it years from now, where the only tears you’re crying are from happiness.”

“Oh, Nikolai.”

“I love you, and I will do anything for you, even if it’s pretending mint ice cream doesn’t taste like toothpaste.”

She smacks my chest, her eyes shimmering with love. “It doesn’t!”

I cup one side of her face, still wondering if this is all a dream and I’m not actually married to the most beautiful, amazing woman. “I love you, little wife. My heart is forever yours.”

Nina stands on her toes and wraps her arms around my neck. “I love you, Nikolai. My heart is forever yours, too, even if your taste buds suck.”

“I beg to disagree. My tongue happens to like your pussy just fine.”

Nina smacks me again before fixing her dress and hissing, “Someone might hear you!”

“So? Let them all know I worship my wife.” I smile down at her. “How about it, little wife? Will you marry me? Please put this poor bastard out of his misery.”

“Of course, Nikolai. I will marry you.” A single tear slides down her cheek, and I wipe it with my thumb. “You’re my person.”

“And you are mine.”

The End.

Thanks for reading!