



DARK
REIGN

GILDED THORN

HER THORNS WON'T
STOP HIM FROM
SETTING HER FREE.

EMBER DAVIS

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Gilded Thorn (Dark Reign Series) by Ember Davis

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Contains explicit love scenes and adult language. The suggested reading audience is 18 years or older.

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For the tricksters. May they be as sexy as this Bratva boss.

If not, at least there's Vlad.

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TRIGGER WARNING

This story has dark themes and a morally gray stalker/mafia hero. You'll still find an insta-love story that is spicy and isn't necessarily simple, but with darker themes, situations, rough spicy times and depictions of violence (not between the MMC and MFC).

There is no cheating with a guaranteed HEA, however, if you don't like darker themes, then this book may not be for you.



CHAPTER 1

LAUREL

I sit back and look at the painting on my easel. I don't know what is going on with it, but I know it's missing something. Something to take it from simple paint on a canvas to something worth looking at. I want to burn it.

I glance over at the stack I've started in the corner of my studio. This is becoming a problem. I don't even want to count the number of paintings I've started and never finished.

Do I not have it anymore? Is it something else? Is it the connection? Is it me?

I look around the room and want to scream. I want to throw everything, give into the rage my brothers always give into, the same rage I can never give into. Not because I don't feel it, but because it doesn't feel like I should.

Like I'm not allowed to. Because what do I really have to feel so much rage about? People would kill to be in my position. Hell, some have.

I have money at my fingertips. I'm protected at all costs. I'm strong and I don't take shit from anyone.

I'm also caged. I'm pampered when I haven't earned it. I'm coddled when all I want to do is fail and fall and mess up.

It's stifling and I can't blame anyone for it.

It's all biology, the genetic lottery, the fate of being born an Orlov. Not even that is all bad. There are women out there who are told their place in the world is to be small, to rarely be seen and never heard, and to be pushed aside.

I know this and it pains me. I have freedom, to a point. I was given a voice. I don't want for anything.

Yet, I feel the bars around me. The cage might be big, but it's still a cage. I can only fly so far.

I don't even think my brothers realize they're doing it which is almost the worst part. They see me as a princess, but I'm not one and I'm starting to hate the gilded tower I've been shoved into.

I can't go places alone and it's a double-edged sword. I'm glad I'm protected because I'm sure those who hate the Orlov name would love to get their hands on me. They'd use me as leverage against Nikolai, who is the head of our family's organization, and the rest of my brothers.

However, it also means there is always someone watching. It's hard to make your own mistakes and learn when you're always under a microscope.

Fuck.

As much as I want to throw my pallet to the ground and stomp all over my brushes, I stand up and head over to the sink and wash everything. I try and get lost in the action, but it's not meditative the same way it has been in the past. Because yet another unfinished and uninspired canvas is mocking me. I can feel it behind me just sitting there and waiting for...something.

I love my family. They firmly believe women are the center of the family, and that family is the most important thing in this world. It's a beautiful idea until you're smothered by it.

But it is something to see men who are feared wherever they go be teddy bears when it comes to me. Or is that my own ego talking?

I want something more. I want my own adventure. I want something that's mine.

It's the reason I sell my paintings under another name. I don't want anyone buying them because of the Orlov name. I want my work to speak for itself and be loved for what it is.

I can't do the same thing when it comes to my life. I am who I am, and I know what I was raised to be. I was raised to be powerful, to never cower in front of powerful men, to hold my head up high and know my worth.

I'm exhausted.

I slump against the sink and close my eyes. I need something to change. It won't be allowed though. I could run, but how far could I go? Where would I even begin? Does this power mean anything when I feel my soul shriveling up inside of my chest because it's not fed?

My strength is the thorns I wear because I can't trust. People outside my family want something from me. They want to use me to get close to my brothers or they want me to use my influence for their gain. I've been down that road and it only ends in heartbreak.

I don't spare another glance at the mocking canvas as I head out of my studio. It's tucked at the back of the mansion I share with my brothers; it has great light and it used to be my solace. Now it's just something else that feels like pressure and disappointment.

My brothers, Viktor, the youngest, and Ivan, the second oldest, are in the kitchen when I enter for a bottle of water. Maybe I should get a bottle of wine instead. It's the middle of the day, but it's not like I have plans.

I look longingly at the wine but go with the water. At least while my brothers are watching. I can wallow at the bottom of a wine bottle later.

I lean against the island and Viktor throws an arm around my shoulders as he looks down at my clothes. "Were you in your studio?"

I roll my eyes and snark, "Of course, where else would I be? Were you looking for me?"

He snorts out a laugh, "No, I wasn't looking for you."

"Well, if you were, you would have found me right where you expected me to be." I pull a face. "And if you weren't looking for me then why are you asking where I was?"

My brothers constantly checking on me is grating on my nerves now more than ever. Why? It's not like I ever welcomed it before, but now it's untenable.

Ivan is eyeing me as if he sees so much more than I want him to. There's a softness in his voice I only ever hear when

he's talking to me, "I guess it wasn't going very well in the studio?"

As much as I want to scream at my brother, I hold it back and go for an air of casually disinterested instead. None of them know about me selling my work under an assumed name. Well, if they know they haven't mentioned it. They probably know, there aren't many secrets when you're an Orlov.

I try to keep the whole thing as anonymous as I can—I sell through a website, I use a PO box, I have a broker who I work through sometimes. I've never done a gallery exhibit. Not because I'm above it, but because I've never been asked. It's a dream of mine though. My brothers don't know anything about it.

I'm not sure what they think my dreams are, but if they think it's to be trapped in a metaphorical turret my whole life, they're sadly mistaken. I almost snort at the thought because it's probably exactly what they think my dream is.

I'm not naïve. I know some prince isn't going to ride in here and save me from my life. You can't be me and believe in fairy tales.

When Sergei walks in the room he comes over to me and kisses my forehead before he looks between Viktor and Ivan and walks off, I'm sure to Nikolai's office. He's always been the quietest of the men in my life, but he's the one you really have to watch out for. He is angry and violent, which, of course, comes in handy considering who he is and what needs to be done sometimes. He would never hurt me or any woman, that's just a fact.

It's the way we were all raised. Women are the center and to be protected at all times. I can't remember how many times I heard our father remind us that without women there would be no families and without family we are nothing. It's tattooed on my soul.

I know it's why they protect me so vehemently and want to keep me caged and safe. It's also the reason I've grown the thorns I have because it's my only defense. Their hearts are in the right place, and I can't refute why they do what they do.

Ivan and Viktor say goodbye before following Sergei. Nikolai has been different for almost a year, ever since he couldn't save the life of a girlfriend of one of his men. He blames himself, even though he killed the bastard who was abusing her. He thinks he should have known sooner and prevented her death.

He's gone off to our cabin upstate and I hope his time there brings him some peace. He has never been the kind of man to give himself any grace, but he deserves it. He has so much on his shoulders.

I grab some yogurt from the fridge and sit down to check my emails. When I get to an email from my website where I sell my paintings, my fingers tighten around my spoon. It's from a gallery, The Jewel, in Atlantic City.

They'd like to talk to me about a gallery show. My heart starts to pound in my chest as I look down the hallway leading to Nikolai's office. If I ask, I have a 50/50 shot of being able to go to a meeting and even then, I'll have bodyguards. I'm not saying they aren't warranted, but at the same time, it'll only shine a spotlight on who I really am.

The meeting would be set up under my assumed name. I could fly under the radar. They'd track my car, but I can get around it by ordering a car to meet up with me in the city. I go to Manhattan often, so it wouldn't be odd, and I have cash.

Damn it, I'm getting ahead of myself. The first step is to get some information. I finish my yogurt even though my stomach is twisting with anticipation.

When I slip through the house on silent feet toward my room, I feel like I'm living out a spy movie. I shouldn't be sneaking around my own fucking home, but this is the way it has to be if I want to keep this quiet.

When I get to my room, I go one step farther and head into the bathroom. I might be being too paranoid, I might not, but I can live with that.

When I dial the gallery manager's number from the email, a chipper voice answers on the second ring, "The Jewel Gallery,

Cathy speaking. How may I help you?”

“Hi Cathy, my name is Lori Aigle.” She sucks in a sharp breath, and I push my nervousness away. It’s possible I’ve come off too eager. “I just received an email from you through my website?”

“Lori Aigle, it’s so nice to speak with you,” she gushes. “I really appreciate you calling. I hope I wasn’t too forward in reaching out to you through your website.”

I chuckle. “Not at all. I was taking a break from working in my studio and saw your email. Is this a good time for you?”

“Of course,” she chirps brightly. “I would really like to speak with you about having a gallery show here, but I do prefer to have these kinds of conversations in person. I’ve seen your work and think you would be a great fit for the gallery here. I’d like the opportunity to show you the space, unless Atlantic City is too far for you to travel.”

“I’d love to see the gallery.” My heart is pounding in my chest, my mind weighing how I’m going to shake my brothers and bodyguards. I’m not doing this with a tail. It just won’t work. “I don’t live too far from Atlantic City. When would you like to meet?”

I can hear some paper flipping before she answers, a note of hope in her voice, “I have some time tomorrow if it would be convenient for you?”

I fidget, but I keep my voice light, “That works for me. Is one in the afternoon a good time?”

I need some time to get my plan together. At least Nikolai is out of town, which should make this easier. If he was here, he’d already know I’m planning something. I swear the man has a sixth sense about when I’m up to no good.

But, since he’s not here, I should be able to slip out. I hope.

“One is perfect.” She pauses as if she’s writing me into her schedule. “Would you mind bringing some of your work with you? Especially if you haven’t posted it on the website yet.”

I bite my lip nervously, the stack of unfinished paintings taunting me without me even being in the studio.

“Not a problem,” I lie smoothly.

Once we hang up, I’m a little giddy. Both at the prospect of going to Atlantic City and knowing I’m going to have to give my brothers and security the slip. I’m not sure how I’ll manage it, but I’ve always been resourceful. It’s time to put that to the test.



CHAPTER 2

VLAD

Fuck. I can almost feel her getting closer. It was like a string which has been strung too tight, almost to its breaking point, and now it's starting to grow lax. It doesn't make the pull between us lessen, but it does make the constriction around my heart loosen slightly.

She has no idea what she's walking into, and that knowledge has me grinning. I can't wait to see the look of surprise on her face when she finds out my trap that has been sprung on her. What she might not see at first is I designed it because I need her, but she will in time.

I'll do whatever I need to do to make Laurel Orlov mine. I've been watching her and tracking her for years, but it was never the right time to pull her into my web. Once I have her in my arms, I have no intention of ever letting her go.

It'll cause problems. I know it, but I can't bring myself to care. Her brothers are going to flip their fucking shit. I can't wait.

I shouldn't want Laurel. I can't even remember all the times Father bitched and moaned about the Orlovs. He felt like he was pushed to the side and made to operate out of Atlantic City, whose lights were never bright enough. He has no idea how good he had it.

We have this city on lock, and we don't have to compete with other big organizations like the Agosti family. It's just us out here and I intend for it to stay that way.

I used to think just like Father. He told me the Orlovs were our enemy and I believed him, but then I took over the Petrov family, proud as fuck of my name and what we've built by any means necessary. Then I caught a glimpse of Laurel two years ago while meeting with a contact in the city and was able to snap a picture.

It was a chance sighting. Fate. Fucking magic. Whatever you want to call it.

The moment I saw her, I had to know everything about her. When I found out she was an Orlov, I wanted to deny what I felt and knew to be true.

I remember coming back to my casino that night after having gotten the file emailed to me from one of my men. Impressively, he was able to find out who she was from a grainy and blurry photo. Laurel Orlov, the bratva princess I was supposed to hate.

I felt sick because my cock was still hard for her even hours later.

I walked into the high-end bar at The Golden Crown and sauntered up for a drink where a gorgeous redhead was clearly on the prowl. Her dress left nothing to the imagination, not even pretending to be as classy as her surroundings.

I smiled at her. It was all it took, and she was fawning all over me. When I invited her up to a room, she didn't hesitate to agree, almost falling over herself with how much she wanted me.

When we got to the room I had selected, her voice was too high pitched to be seductive, not like how I imagined Laurel's voice to be, "Is this your room?"

"Of course, gorgeous," I lied through my fucking teeth. It was a random room, but there was no way I was going to take the woman up to my penthouse suite at the top of my casino and hotel. No fucking way.

The redhead, whose name I didn't even bother to ask, ran her hands over my chest the moment we walked in. Bile rose in my throat, but I swallowed it down, desperation pushing me to erase Laurel from my memories.

She pushed my suit jacket off my shoulders, her voice sounding like a sick cat, "You look tense, Baby. Let me help you with that."

I was tense. I had spent hours hard as a fucking rock, but with that woman touching me, my dick had softened, and I

was afraid nothing was going to change it. Well, nothing I was supposed to want, at least.

“You want to help me,” my voice was hard and cold, “then get on your knees.”

She smirked at me as if she had won something and was on her knees before her next heartbeat. She pulled my limp dick out of my pants and wrapped her fingers around the base. It felt wrong. So fucking wrong. I knew why, but I kept trying to push it aside.

When her tongue came out and lapped at the tip before she tried to pull me into her mouth, my stomach roiled, and I dry heaved. I slapped her hands away and stepped back before tucking my dick back in my pants. It wasn't going to work. I wasn't going to be able to do it.

She sat back on her heels and pouted, “What's wrong?”

“I think I ate something that's not agreeing with me,” I was already at the door, grabbing my jacket as I rushed away from her. As I opened the door, I threw over my shoulder, “Keep the room for the night.”

It was the least I could do. I went right up to my penthouse and to my office where I found a physical copy of the file on Laurel. When I flipped it open, a picture of Laurel greeted me and the twist in my gut unfurled and settled. I knew I had made the right decision, but I still hated it.

There was only one thing to do. In that moment I made the decision to make Laurel Orlov mine.

The more I found out about Laurel and the longer I watched her, the more I wanted her. I always had a man on her, even if they didn't understand why they were given the job or how important it was. I've been waiting for an opportunity to get her here to my city.

I've found it and now I'm waiting for her.

I look up at the painting of hers I already have in my office. The moment her anonymous website was uncovered, I looked through her art and was blown away. She paints with a passion I want to feel under my fingertips, a passion I want to own.

Laurel has no idea what she's walking into. Nikolai is going to be pissed, but it's only because he went off somewhere and left his brothers in charge that I'm able to do this. He opened the door for me with his absence and by the time he finds out she's gone, she'll be mine.

I'm going to have to move fast, and hope Laurel can catch up to me. She's been caged for too fucking long. The Orlov men think she is some defenseless rose, but I see her thorns. She's a force, but she hasn't been given the chance to thrive.

I'm going to give her that chance and so much more. I'll give her the love she deserves. She doesn't have to love me back at first. I am a patient man and I'll wait to own her heart, but she won't be able to keep her body from me.

My mouth waters at the thought of finally tasting her. I know she'll be sweet against my tongue and will melt for me. It's what has fueled my obsession for the last two years.

Since the night with the redhead, I haven't even thought about touching another woman and I won't for the rest of my fucking life. Only Laurel will do. I should have known it before I even took that redhead to a room.

Disgust twists my gut, but I push it away. I was fueled by hatred, but I know it's not a good enough excuse. Nothing will be, but I'll make it up to her, even if she doesn't know why I'm doing it.

My phone ringing pulls me out of thoughts of Laurel, which is probably for the best because I was moments away from pulling my cock out of my pants and fisting it until I came while looking at her painting. It's deranged, but that doesn't stop me from doing it at least once a day. Then there are her paintings I have hanging in my penthouse.

"Boss," Maksim, my casino floor manager, greets me when I answer. "We have an issue on the floor."

"I'll be right there," my voice is neutral even though I'm annoyed as fuck before I hang up.

Laurel will be here soon and the last thing I want is to be dealing with a problem. However, for Maksim to be calling

me, it has to be serious. I pull my suit jacket on and head out of my office.

Every time I walk out into my casino, pride fills me. It's nothing like it was back when my father was running the place. It was cheap then and covered with fake gold and way too much fucking velvet. Now everything is modern with clean lines and metal accents.

I remodeled everything from top to bottom when I took over after Father's death. It was the only way we were going to move forward. Our clientele were men in track suits over 70, but now everyone flocks to my casino when they want to get away from Manhattan and still enjoy the luxury they are accustomed to. We also get the tourists who just want to feel like they're rubbing elbows with the rich; honestly, they make better customers because everything is new to them, and they appreciate the effort.

I don't turn my nose up at anyone and make sure everyone is provided for. As long as the money is green, I don't care if they have deep pockets or are using their last few bucks for an adventure.

When I get to the casino floor, Maksim is there to greet me with a nod of his head before leading me down the security hallway. I glance in at the monitor room and notice the men working for him keeping a keen eye on everything.

I arch an eyebrow as Maksim leads me farther down the hall and toward the sound proofed interrogation room. Maksim opens the door for me, and I school my features when I step inside and am greeted with a greasy haired man. He's trying to look casual, but he's clearly scared out of his mind.

Good. He should be.

The man instantly starts to sputter, "I-I-I wasn't doing anything wrong."

I arch an eyebrow and then turn toward Maksim, not responding to the man. He's going to spin lies to save his life, not like I can blame him for it.

Maksim's voice is full of disappointment, but I know it's not directed at me, more on my behalf. "We caught him counting cards. At first, it was fine, he was winning a little, but then he got bold and greedy. He said he knows you."

I turn back toward the slimy bastard spewing lies and trying to cheat the house, my house. He doesn't look like a man who would count cards. Honestly, he doesn't appear smart enough for something like that, but I learned a long time ago not to make assumptions about people based on their appearance when it comes to being disloyal scum without morality.

My voice is cold and deadly, "You tried to use my name in my own casino to save your ass?"

He deflects, "I wasn't counting cards."

I don't even glance at Maksim because I trust the man. He's been the casino manager since I took over from my father and we reopened The Golden Crown. His loyalty is not in question. He also knows if it were ever to come into question, he would be thrown into the Atlantic without a second thought.

Fear can be a big motivator for people to stay in line, but it's not the only way I ensure my people remain loyal. I pay them well, I treat them like family, and I listen when they speak. Which is why I'm not going to question Maksim's surety over the man cheating.

I don't look at Maksim when I ask, "Have you caught him before?"

"No, Boss."

I make a humming sound and check my watch. I want to be able to watch when Laurel walks into The Jewel for her meeting. I don't want to miss it and if I stay here much longer, then I will. I won't make myself known right away, but I'll be damned if this piece of shit is going to prevent me from seeing her as soon as possible.

"Show him what we do to scum who cheat and steal and then let him go." The man starts to sputter a thanks and I cut him off. "This is your only warning. Do not step foot in my

casino again or next time you will not be leaving with your life.”

A wet spot starts to spread on his polyester dress pants, and I pull my lip up in disgust. A man with no honor doesn't embrace fear. They make decisions based on greed.

Trusting Maksim to follow through, I leave the room without looking back. There's only one thing I'm looking forward to and that's seeing my *malen'kaya ptitsa*, my little bird, and setting her free.



CHAPTER 3

LAUREL

It's strange driving into a town which is bright and lit up at night while it's still daytime. It seems to take the shine from the city, even though I can appreciate what it would look like. I imagine it as an oasis with the lights attracting people like moths to the flame.

You know, if the flame was gambling, alcohol, and good times.

Part of me still wants to look over my shoulder to make sure my brothers aren't right behind me, but I left them behind hours ago and my phone has been off. It makes me feel a little skittish to not have a way to contact them, but I also wanted to do this on my own.

I don't have any memories of a time when I was able to go out and do something on my own. The freedom is making me a little giddy. Or it could be the cups of coffee I've enjoyed on the way.

I thought about hiring a car service for this drive, but I ended up going a different way. If my brothers were able to track down the service I used then they would have a person to get the information from. Considering how...persuasive Sergei can be, I figured it would be a bad idea.

Knowing my car has a tracker and no idea how to disable it, I ended up renting a second car. Moving all my items from one car to the other made this whole thing feel very clandestine. It's a delicious and naughty kind of feeling.

Is this what freedom feels like? It's scary and exciting. I want more of it.

How am I going to be able to go back and know this will be even more difficult to pull off a second time. I don't even know if my brothers realize I'm not where they expect me to be. They're going to lose their shit.

I grin wickedly as I pull up to The Jewel and find a parking spot. It's sitting right next to The Golden Crown, which sounds very familiar, but I can't place why. Are the two connected?

I contemplate why The Golden Crown sticks with me as I grab the canvas bag which holds a few of my paintings. They're all on my website, but the unfinished ones couldn't come. How embarrassing would that be?

It's not the greatest first impression to not have new work because my muse has been having a fucking hissy fit recently. I want this to go well, and I can only hope it's not a problem.

I pull my jacket tighter around my body, the cold air whipping through the buildings even as the salt air fills my lungs. My heart is pounding as I make my way to the entrance of the gallery. I'm a little bit early, my excitement making me moving faster than I expected.

It's always better to show up early, right? I've never had a job because I haven't needed one, which makes me seem entitled as hell. Maybe I am.

Still, I want to make a good first impression.

When I walk through the door a woman with a blonde pixie cut is there with a big smile on her face. She looks over at the bag on my shoulder and I swear her smile grows even wider. I'm not used to someone being so genuinely glad to see me.

She steps toward me with her hand extended, "Lori Aigle?"

I slip my hand into hers and give it a firm shake, something I learned from my brothers and hope isn't too much. I've never been taught to be some simpering female.

"Yes. I take it you're Cathy?" When she nods, I have to stop myself from bouncing on my toes. "It's so nice to meet you. Thank you for reaching out to me and fitting me into your schedule so quickly."

She laughs, the tinkling sound has an edge to it I can't identify. Nervousness? I shrug it off because it doesn't matter. I'm here and I want this opportunity. Getting it without the

Orlov name being attached to it is a bonus, one I'm soaking up.

"Of course I would make the time. I love your work. We would be delighted to showcase your art." When she points toward a hallway, I notice a door to the casino next door. So, it is attached to The Golden Crown. "How about we go down to my office and we can chat about everything?"

"That sounds perfect," I concede and follow behind her.

I notice the gallery as we walk through it; it's all white walls and clean lines with a few paintings on display. There are some cameras in the space, but I would expect that to be pretty standard. I notice there's also a sign for a back exit at the end of the hallway Cathy is leading me down.

Butterflies are zinging around in my belly, but I don't feel like I'm in danger. Cathy seems genuine. If the art I saw in the gallery does well here, then I think this could be a great place for me to have my first show. I would imagine they get all sorts of people coming in at a place like this, especially with the proximity to the casino.

Cathy's office is minimalistic, and I love it. It's all white except for the few pieces of art on the walls to give the room some color. I slip the bag off my shoulder and prop it next to one of the chairs in front of her glass desk.

"Would you like something to drink?" She makes the offer before she sits as I slide into a chair. When I shake my head, she sits down gracefully. It's clear she's older than me, I'd say mid-30's if I had to guess. "I'll give you a full tour of the gallery when we're done chatting, but I wanted to give you some information first."

"What I caught a glimpse of looks amazing," I try not to gush too much and get ahead of myself.

She gives me a polite smile, nothing like the big stunner she hit me with when I first walked in. The first one had an air of victory to it. I guess if she really does like my work already, it makes sense.

“We have an opening on our calendar in four months for an exhibit. We’re always looking for new talent and your website was forwarded to me. The gallery, of course, takes a percentage of each sale and we spend money on marketing the event to ensure we give your art a chance to be seen by the right people. We utilize the casino quite a bit for that side of things and make sure gallery openings are on the event calendar. It’s quite common for the gallery to be full on the first night and for a good portion of the pieces to be sold at that time.”

I nod, those butterflies flapping harder as I second guess doing this by myself. Can I negotiate those percentages? What is even fair?

My heart sinks, even as I force a calm smile on my face. I’m out of my depth here. Ivan would have been the person to bring with me. He’s always been good with numbers, business, and negotiation.

“I would love the opportunity to show my pieces to a wider audience,” I force my voice to be casual. “How did you say you came across my website again?”

“I sent it to her,” the deep male voice behind me surprises me and has goosebumps covering my skin.

I spin around and take in the man who is taking up the entirety of the doorway. My eyes widen as I realize who it is.

I curse under my breath, “Fuck.”

It’s Vlad Petrov. Nikolai showed me his picture while also issuing a warning to stay away from him.

He didn’t go into detail about why there is bad blood between the Orlov and the Petrov families, but he said it was a long-standing feud born out of the need for more power, influence, and money. My father and Vlad’s father hated each other. They both lodged more than one attempt on the other’s life long before I was born.

For a moment, I’m frozen. I could pretend and keep going with my alias. The look in Vlad’s eyes tells me he knows exactly who I am and playing dumb has never been my style.

I nervously look around the room before I settle on Cathy who won't meet my eyes. I sneer at her, "This was all some kind of setup? You never wanted to show my art, did you?"

Cathy opens her mouth, but Vlad beats her to it. "I very much love your art, *malen'kaya ptitsa*." I whip around to look at him again, my eyes narrowing at his nickname for me. Little bird? I'm no little fucking bird. "I do want to show your art here, but it is not the only reason for the meeting today."

Those butterflies are now fucking albatrosses and the way they're flying around is making me feel off kilter. I stand up so fast that it makes me a little dizzy, but I recover quickly. I cast a disparaging glance at Cathy before grabbing my bag and hiking it up over my shoulder.

I square my shoulders when I turn toward Vlad. "I'm not interested, Mr. Petrov." I move toward the door, but he doesn't move. I force a strength I don't really feel into my tone, "Please, excuse me. I need to be going."

He moves quickly to reach out and grabs my arm. I would expect his grip on me to be punishing, but it's not. There's a gentleness to his fingers and I can't deny the way it feels like electricity dances along my skin with his touch.

Not the fucking time, Laurel.

Yeah, don't get turned on while being manhandled by the man who looks like a god who also happens to be the arch enemy of your family. Cue the illicit meetings, the asides, the fighting in the streets and the poison that leads to everyone's death.

This isn't going to end well for any of us and I feel like my dream is being ripped away from me. How is it possible I thought this day was going to be amazing not even an hour ago? I successfully got away from my brothers, I drove to Atlantic City, a place I've never been before, I walked into a gorgeous gallery where I thought I was going to have my first show and now it's all gone to shit.

I should have just stayed in my cage.

Vlad pulls me from my depressive thoughts, his blue eyes studying my face. “Laurel,” the way he rasps my name has my cheeks heating. I swear the man is undressing me with his eyes. “Why do you look so sad?”

I narrow my eyes and straighten my back. My brothers are not the only Orlovs who should be feared. I’m not helpless.

I sneer, “Move out of my way Mr. Petrov. We’re done here.”

He shakes his head slowly as he pulls me away of the doorway. I hardly notice when Cathy slides through the door and disappears down that fucking hallway, the one I thought was leading me toward everything I wanted in my life.

If I thought it would matter, I’d call her a fucking traitor, but it’s clear who has her loyalty, and I can’t really say anything about it. She works for Vlad, and she played along with whatever his plan is.

“My brothers will not be pleased to know you put your hands on me,” I spit the words, the threat clear and not untrue. They will be pissed, but it won’t just be at the man who is still touching me like I’m precious. The way he’s touching me is fucking with me. “You need to let me walk out the door right now before things go farther than they need to.”

He reaches over and swings the door closed before pulling me over to a couch on the other side of the room. When I try and tug my arm out of his grasp, he tightens his grip, but he’s not hurting me.

“There’s no reason to struggle, Laurel,” there’s admonishment in his tone. “We need to have a little chat. I’ve been waiting for a long time to get you alone.”

“You planned this,” it’s not a question, it’s clear he’s the puppet master here.

And I fell for it. My brothers will think they were right to have me on such a short leash and the freedom I used to enjoy, limited as it was, is going to vanish.

Vlad slips the handle of the bag from my shoulder and gently places it down so it’s leaning against the side of the

couch and out of the way. His blue eyes, intent and focused, swing back to lock with mine.

“Da,” his eyes dart down to my lips when I lick them, “I’ve been waiting for the right time to get you to my hotel.”

I swallow hard as he sits and tugs me down next to him. I keep my face neutral, but I’m pretty sure I’m not going to like whatever Vlad has to say. It’s not like I have much of a choice. It seems I’ll be hearing him out.



CHAPTER 4

VLAD

She's even more gorgeous than I remember and the pictures I have don't do her justice at all. Looking at her is like looking at one of her paintings. She's vibrant, full of color and leaping out at me. I want to be able to stare at her for hours while trying to understand everything I'm seeing, but knowing I'll never be able to.

Her hair is dark brown, and it flows over her shoulders. It looks soft and I want to run my fingers through it. I wonder if she would let me.

From the way she's glaring at me, her gray eyes narrowed to slits, I'm going to say she would have a problem with me touching her hair. Soon. I'll charm her into it.

I'm going to seduce her into doing a lot more than letting me touch her hair. She has no idea the ways I'm going to play her body. I'll have her moaning my name soon.

I need it and I've been waiting for far too long to get her here. She can threaten me with her brothers all she wants. She can even try and run. I'm still going to keep her. She's mine even if she won't admit it yet.

I've been a patient man; I can continue a little while longer. Even as I feel my control breaking with being so close to her and the way she smells like caramel apples. It's just a matter of time now.

"What do you mean you've been waiting to get me here?" If looks could kill, she would be leaving cuts all over my body. I would gladly bleed for her. "That doesn't make any sense," she snaps. "Why would you be waiting for me? And why use my art to trick me?"

She looks away from me with her last question and some of her own control breaks. I can see it shatter in her gaze as she

slides her eyes away from me. It's what bothers her the most and it guts me that I used her passion, her dream, against her.

I never said I was a good man. I was always going to use whatever means I could to get her here, in my arms and, eventually, in my bed.

I reach for her hands, but she tugs them deeper into her lap. I almost laugh, but the desolate look on her face won't let it come forth. I reach out and snatch her hands in mine, not taking her clear refusal to allow me to do so as an answer.

"Malen'kaya ptitsa," I keep my voice soft, "I could tell you I'm sorry to use your art to get you here, but I'm not." Her back snaps up straight and I can feel her constructing stronger walls around herself along with a mote. "I'm not sorry because it needed to be done, but I don't like that I hurt you."

She scoffs, "You didn't hurt me, but I won't tolerate being used and lied to."

I lean into her, my voice dropping to a whisper, "I think you'll very much like being used by me."

Her cheeks pink and a thought slams into me. This woman, this amazing vivacious woman who captured my heart, mind and body at a distance years ago couldn't be a virgin, could she? I certainly wasn't before I saw her, but I haven't touched a woman since that day.

The question slips from me without thought, "Are you a virgin?" Her eyes snap back to mine and widen this time instead of narrow. "You blush like a virgin."

The thought of me being the only one to ever touch her has blood pumping to my dick and making me even harder. She will be my last, but I want to be her only.

I realize how much of a dick that makes me, but I can't find it in me to care.

"I don't see how that is any of your business," her voice is cold and aloof. It's also not an answer.

"You can tell me," I coax her.

Something naughty and mischievous glints in her eyes as she arches her eyebrow. “Why would you think I am a virgin, Mr. Petrov? Am I not beautiful enough to have men wanting to fuck me?” My mouth hangs open, but before I can stop her, she powers on. “Do you think I am so weak or stupid not to be able to figure out a way around my overprotective brothers? That I have no life outside of the Orlov home?” She tsks me and sits back against the couch, crossing her legs and pulling my gaze to them. I desperately want to feel them wrapped around my waist as I plow into her. “You should know better than to underestimate a resourceful woman,” she shrugs casually with one shoulder, “or a horny one.”

My blood boils and my vision turns hazy for a moment. I growl, “How many? What are their names?”

She gives me a disapproving look, a small smile on her face as if she’s placating me and my ridiculous behavior. “I would never answer either of those questions,” her voice is soft and sweet, too fucking sweet.

“Laurel,” I warn her, “you’re playing a dangerous game.”

“No,” she snaps, her voice like a whip in the space around us, “you’re the only one playing games, Mr. Petrov. I’m simply the person you tricked into coming here. To what end? Why am I here? Are you planning to ask for some sort of ransom for me?”

I scoff, “I would never need your brothers to pay me for your safety.”

“It would be terribly disappointing to find out this place isn’t bringing in enough money for you when I haven’t even gotten to see the casino yet,” her tone is laced with boredom, and I hate it.

“The Golden Crown does very well,” I defend myself and my business.

“I’m sure it does,” she gives me that damn smile again, the one which tells me she thinks she is speaking to a child. I want to kiss it off her face. “If it’s not about money. Is it about

territory? A deal gone bad? This old story about a feud between our families?”

“No,” I growl, “I don’t give a fuck about the bad blood between our fathers. They’re both dead. I have plenty of territory. I was taught the same code as your brothers. Women aren’t pawns when it comes to the business, not around here at least.”

Her gray eyes are flinty, “Then what possible reason could you have for luring me here under false pretenses?”

The challenge in her eyes as she stares me down is sexy as fuck and my cock throbs, my pants uncomfortably tight. I’m going to need to be buried inside of her soon or else I’m going to lose it. I don’t want to hurt her and right now, with the vision of her with other men dancing in my head and her haughty posture screaming brat, I don’t trust myself not to teach her a lesson.

“You,” I bark. Her eyes widen and I force myself to take a few deep breaths. When I calm down, I add, “I want you, Laurel. Just you. I want you in my bed. I want you riding my cock like a good little girl. I want to put my babies in you. I want you to be a Petrov and not an Orlov.”

Her gray eyes are practically bugging out of her head as my words land while her mouth opens and closes in shock. I almost preen because I’ve been able to take the Orlov princess and make her speechless.

The word comes out as a broken whisper, “W-what?”

“You heard me. Every single word,” I grit out through my teeth while I clench my jaw in the effort to hold myself back from doing exactly what I just laid out to her.

It would serve her right to bend her over Cathy’s desk and rut into my woman from behind just to show her who the fuck is in charge here. I hold myself in check, but it becomes increasingly difficult with every breath I take.

“I’ve been watching you for two years.” She gasps and presses her hand to her chest. “That’s right, *malen’kaya ptitsa*.”

Two fucking years I've been waiting for this opportunity and I'm not going to let you slip through my fingers."

"Waiting to trick a woman into your hotel is hardly a feat which should be celebrated, Mr. Petrov."

I fucking hate the suits and the fancy words and the whole Mr. thing. I want her to call me Vlad. When she calls me Petrov, I think I should be looking over my shoulder to see if he's there.

My father would have probably already shot me for being this close to her and for wanting her. He'd spray my blood on my woman while she's screaming. Then she'd be next and only the devil would know what he would do to her.

I've never been happier to know my father is in his grave than right now.

When I reach over and grab Laurel by the waist and pull her onto my lap, she lets out a surprised yelp. Her body goes rigid when she feels the length of my hard shaft against the underside of her ass. I nip at her earlobe and her body melts against me like I've flipped a switch inside of her.

"I did trick you, Laurel," I whisper huskily, "and I'll spend the rest of my life making it up to you. It had to be done. I needed to get you here and Nikolai going off to his cabin and leaving your brothers in charge was the perfect opportunity."

She's seething, "You've been watching more than just me it seems, Mr. Petrov."

This time when she says my last name it sounds like she's cursing me to the seventh ring of hell and abandoning me there. I hate it more each time she says it.

"Call me Vlad, little bird," there's a demand in my voice even as I run my nose up the side of her neck and breathe in her caramel apple scent.

"I don't think that would be a good idea," she sasses me and, fuck, my cock throbs under her ass.

"Why not?"

“Because you might think we’re more familiar than we are.” She pulls her shoulders back and tries to fight her body’s natural reaction to me by sitting up straight. The more she pulls away from me, the more I want to tame her. “We are not familiar. My brothers are going to be pissed when they find out you had a hand in me being here.”

“You mean the brothers you evaded by leaving your car behind and renting a vehicle? The same ones who have no idea you are anywhere other than where you’re supposed to be?”

I hate, fucking hate, the way her breathing deepens as if she’s afraid of me. She has nothing to fear when it comes to me. I’m going to treat her like a queen. I’m going to keep her.

Before she can retort, I take a deep breath and lean back against the couch instead of invading her space, but I don’t let her go. My eyes slide closed as I confess, “I haven’t been able to look at or touch another woman in the last two years. I’ve only wanted you, Laurel. I don’t give a fuck that your last name is Orlov. The moment I saw you, I knew you were meant to be mine.”

The sigh she lets out is heavy and conflicted. “Vlad,” she whispers and my eyes snap open to find her looking at me, but there is pain in her eyes, “I’m not going to tell you that you aren’t an attractive man, but we know how this will end.”

“How?”

“With war and blood. I don’t want it to happen, but we both know it will,” she sounds so fucking sad, and I hate it. “Someone will get hurt and I’ll be in the crossfire, no matter what. My brothers won’t let this stand and you don’t seem inclined to let me go.”

“I won’t be letting you go,” there is only conviction in my voice.

I wrap my arms around her and stand quickly, loving the way she squeals at the sudden movement. “It doesn’t have to end badly. I’m going to make sure you’re safe and as long as your brothers don’t try and take you from me, I don’t have a problem with them.”

She gives me a pointed look as her arms wrap around my neck. As I start to stride out of Cathy's office, Laurel gives me a panicked look. "Where are we going?"

I kiss her forehead, "I'm taking you to your new home, *malen'kaya ptitsa.*"

She whispers, "What about my bag?"

"It will be taken care of, and this will not be the last meeting you have with Cathy." I look down at the woman in my arms and am captivated by her gray eyes. They are filled with so much emotion. The uncertainty makes me want to fall to my knees, but the hope is something I can latch onto and hold close. "The gallery exhibit might have been a ploy, but it wasn't a lie. We do want to show your art. I would be honored for The Jewel to be the first place to exhibit your work."

She bites her lip, but she doesn't say anything else. As I stride back through the gallery, she takes everything in with wide eyes. It's clear she likes the space and is impressed. It has me puffing up my chest with pride.

I can only hope she likes the casino and our penthouse as much as she does the gallery. It's going to be her home from now until she tells me she wants to move to a house as our family grows. I still need to track down every man who touched her, but it's a worry for another day.

First, I need to get past her thorns and make her mine.



CHAPTER 5

VLAD

“Please put me down,” my woman hisses before I can open the door leading into The Golden Crown.

I hate not having her in my arms, but I also know I’m not going to get anywhere if I don’t concede here and there. What I won’t be letting up on his her being here with me. I suppose I can let her walk on her own two feet. For now.

I scowl as I put her back on her feet and catch her biting her lip to stop herself from smiling as she looks up at me. It’s adorable and my heart lightens. It feels normal.

I know she doesn’t trust me, not yet, but I can work with this. She’s not running. I have a feeling she’s going to try, but I’m prepared for it. I’m not letting her go now that I have her here.

I do hate that I used her art to get her here, but I’ll make it up to her. Her first gallery show is going to be a hit. I’m not worried, but I have a feeling she’s going to dig her heels in about having a show at all now, even though it is her dream.

I open the door for her and then place my hand at the small of her back to lead her into the main part of the lobby. The reception desk for the hotel is ahead of us and then the lobby opens up into the casino. You can’t see all the tables from here because they are hidden behind the slot machines.

Laurel’s eyes bounce around the space, and she breathes out, “Wow.”

“Not what you were expecting?” There’s a tease in my voice, “Let me guess, you were expecting some last century throwback that looks like everyone should be over 80 to even step foot inside.”

“I mean,” she tosses her hair over her shoulder, “Atlantic City isn’t Vegas. Even you have to admit that,” she sasses me.

I throw my head back and laugh, surprising myself because laughter isn't something which normally comes easily to me. There isn't a lot to laugh about when you're in charge of so many people and have your fingers inside so many pots while straddling the line between legal and illegal. Then there was the extra stress of the last two years of having to watch my woman from afar and always being worried about her.

I find I can breathe a little easier with her at my side.

“Why the fuck would we want to be Vegas?”

She shrugs, a small smile tugging at her lips as I lead her through the lobby and toward my private elevator. The woman working the reception desk leans forward, her shirt unbuttoned a little too far to be considered professional. I don't even remember the woman's name, but she gives me a flirty wink as I walk by.

Laurel makes a sound in the back of her throat as we pass and when I look down at her, she looks away. Fucking hell. My woman jealous makes pre-cum drip from the tip of my cock.

The doors to my elevator open immediately considering I'm the only one who uses it. I lead her inside while putting my finger on the pad to get us up to the top. “We'll get your fingerprint inputted as soon as I know you're not going to run.”

She makes a humming sound, her voice aloof, like I didn't just spend time tearing down her walls, “Right.”

I back her up against the wall of the elevator and stoop down so my eyes are level with hers even though she won't meet my gaze. “Jealousy looks good on you, Laurel.”

She scoffs, “I'm not jealous?” She cocks her head to the side and meets my eyes. “Who would I be jealous of? The woman working the desk, the one under your employ who looked like she was about ready to lay herself out as an offering to her king?”

The spark in her eyes is sexy as fuck. I groan and press my body flush against hers so she can feel exactly what she does

to me. Her breathing goes ragged as I grind against her, even as she tries to look disinterested. What she can't stop is the flush working its way up her neck to bloom on her cheeks.

"I didn't notice," I tell her honestly.

Her eyes narrow and she presses her hands against my chest and tries to push me back. I don't budge. She hisses, "I won't tolerate being lied to, Vlad."

My head drops back, and I suck in a sharp breath through my teeth with the way my name trips over her lips. I fucking love it. "Can't wait to hear you screaming my name," I mutter.

"Dream on," she sasses me.

I drop my head back down and move so my lips are almost touching hers. It would only take one of us closing the distance for us to kiss. "Let's get one thing straight, *malen'kaya ptitsa*, I'm not interested in any woman other than you. You've been mine for two years and I've been yours, even if you didn't know it. You understand loyalty and so do I." My voice goes deeper, a dark place inside of me pushing forward, "Don't question my loyalty to you because you may not like the lesson I teach you to prove it."

She doesn't cower in fear with my threat. She squares her shoulders and looks like a damn goddess come down from on high to bless us mere mortals with her presence. "I do understand loyalty, Mr. Petrov." *Fuck*. "I also understand you are asking me to change my loyalties, to change who I am, and abandon my family. For what exactly?"

"For everything, Laurel, for fucking everything."

She blinks up at me, her jaw slack as if she wasn't expecting me to say that. She'll learn. I'm not giving up. She's mine. I just need to prove it to her.

The elevator doors slide open, and I pick her up to throw her over my shoulder as I stride directly into my penthouse. She gasps and shifts from side to side on my shoulder as if trying to take everything in. One entire wall of the living room is glass and gives an amazing view of the city and the Atlantic.

It's the best view in the city and I always feel like a damn king when I see it.

I don't stop in the living room and continue to our bedroom. When I get there, I toss her onto the bed, her hair fanning out around her as her chest rises and falls while her gray eyes take me in. She's so damn beautiful, it almost hurts to look at her.

Her voice shakes, "What are you doing?"

"I'm going to prove to you where your loyalty lies. I don't expect you to forget about where you came from, I would never ask that of you, Laurel." I stare into her eyes, wanting her to see my sincerity, "I'm simply asking you to open your heart to me."

I take a deep breath and reach for her clothing, stripping her slowly. She doesn't fight me on it and every inch of skin I expose feels like a fucking victory. When she's naked on the bed, it takes all my control not to pounce on her. Instead I stand at the edge of the bed and strip my clothing quickly, needing our skin to touch, needing to be one with her.

I start at her ankles and begin kissing up one of her legs and then the other. When I get close to her pussy, I can see how wet she is for me and even though she wiggles her hips to entice me, I force myself to continue up her body. I kiss her belly, knowing one day I'll be planting my baby in her, and then nip up her torso.

When I get to her perfectly round tits, I kiss her skin, my lips covering her completely and not leaving any without my attention and love. I avoid her nipples, loving the way her body trembles as if begging me to give her what she needs, what she wants.

"Vlad," she holds out my name and I chuckle against her skin. No more Mr. Petrov right now. I could beat my fucking chest, but I hold it back. Her whispered plea is almost too much for me to take, "Please."

"I'm going to make you feel so fucking good, Laurel," I promise before I suck one of her nipples into my mouth,

settling my hips against hers so my cock slides between the wet lips of her pussy.

When her knees come up and settle around my hips, I almost slam into her, the need to feel her wrapped around me making my vision a little hazy. I bite down on the hard peak of her nipple instead, making her feel a fraction of the pain I've been in for the last two years because I haven't had her where I've wanted her.

I release her nipple and she lets out the sexiest moan I've ever heard. I descend on her other breast like a starving man, taking as much of her rounded flesh into my mouth as I can. She arches her back, feeding me more of her and giving herself over to me.

I know she hasn't let go completely of what she thinks is right, but she's not fighting me right now. I'm not sure it would matter if she did. I'd still be taking her.

Laurel grinds her hips against my hard shaft, and I smear pre-cum all over her clit whenever I bump against her bundle of nerves. She holds onto my shoulders and digs her nails in. The bite only makes me want her more.

She's perfect for me and she has no idea. Maybe she thinks this is all I want from her, but I'll be proving her wrong. I just can't wait any longer. I've been imagining her in my bed for so long, so fucking long, and now she's right here with me.

I release her breast and kiss up her chest before licking along her collarbone. She arches her neck, opening herself up to me and making herself vulnerable. I bite down on her neck as her nails score my back.

"You want my cock to fill you up?" I rasp the words against her ear lobe, and she nods her head. "Words," I demand, "I need your words. I'm going to fuck you until you can't think straight, but if you don't give me the words then I'll keep teasing you until you tell me what I want to hear."

"Fuck," the word is a garbled proclamation of how much she loves the idea of me taking her. "Please, Vlad. Fuck me. I need your cock inside me."

“I need to know one thing, *malen'kaya ptitsa*,” I growl against her throat, barely hanging on to my fucking sanity.

Her voice is breathless and broken with need, “What?”

“When I come inside of your pretty cunt, will there be anything preventing you from carrying my child?”

She jerks backward even though there is no place for her to go. She pushes against my chest, but I’m not going to fucking move. I can’t. I need the answer. I already know what it is, but I need to hear it from her sweet lips.

“Yes, I’m on the shot,” she grinds her hips against my cock, mindlessly.

“Lies,” I snarl.

“What?” I can feel her throat working when she swallows hard. I pull back enough to look down into her eyes and watch as she shakes her head, trying to clear the fog. “It’s not a lie. I get the shot.”

“You missed your last appointment,” I tell her gently.

Her eyebrows furrow together. “No, I didn’t have a reminder. I mean, the doctor didn’t call and remind me about an appointment. I didn’t miss one.” I can see the wheels in her mind turning as if trying to remember when the last time she went and got the shot was. I know when it was. I canceled her last appointment well in advance.

I pull my hips back and then plunge my full length into her in one, hard thrust, wanting her to feel every fucking inch of me as her pussy stretches around my girth. I want her to feel the burn. I want her to know I’m claiming her fully.

She gasps and tears fill her eyes, but none of them fall. “Vlad. Fuck,” her eyebrows are pulled together, and I hate the pain I caused her.

I’m a big man and even though she told me she’s not a virgin, I know for a fucking fact she hasn’t had sex in the last two years. She doesn’t have to be untouched for me to cause her discomfort.

I reach between us and rub her clit with my thumb and groan as I feel her loosen up around my length. My voice is deep and dark, “I know you missed your last appointment because I canceled it. You should have gone three months ago.”

“Vlad,” she shouts, enraged, as her hands push against me.

I grin at her and start to slowly pump my cock in and out of her, allowing her to get used to my size. I want her to feel me, but I also want to be able to bend her over and take her whenever I want. It’s a delicate balance and I’ve never been a delicate man.

She hisses, “Don’t you dare come inside of me.”

“Oh, *malen’kaya ptitsa*,” I croon, “I’m going to be filling you with so much of my cum that it’ll be leaking out of you for days. Anyone you meet will know you’re mine because you’ll smell like my seed and then there will be no question when you start to grow round with my child.”

Her face screws up in disgust, but her pussy squeezes around me and she gets wetter. Fuck. I stare into her eyes, but I don’t point out how much her body likes my words. She doesn’t need me to say it; she knows.

I slam my lips down onto hers, prying them open and sweeping my tongue inside of her mouth. She tastes so fucking good, even better than I imagined. I’m not going to be able to go a day without having her riding my cock and her lips pressed against mine. Or fucking her from behind as my hands descend on the round globes of her ass.

Or having her tied up and at my fucking mercy. The image of my ropes crisscrossing her body, bright red against her pale skin, has me fucking her harder and faster. Soon. Very fucking soon.

I groan against her lips when I feel her stop fighting me. Her legs grip my body high on my waist and her heels dig into my ass as if she’s begging me for more.

“Vlad,” she moans into my mouth, “don’t stop. So close.”

“I’m never going to stop,” I vow.

Our bodies move together as we chase something far bigger than pleasure. We're chasing our future.

I know she won't stop fighting me anytime soon. She has thorns, which are ready to slice into my flesh, but I don't mind bleeding for her. I'll do it happily, an offering to everything she is and everything we will be.

For this moment, though, her walls are down and she's allowing me to give her pleasure. It's a gift and one I will not take lightly.

I flick her clit and the walls of her channel tighten around me, begging me for my cum. I'm fucking powerless. I suck her nipple into my mouth and pinch her clit at the same time, forcing her over the edge while my name falls from her lips.

She pulses around me, and my cock grows as my balls tingle with the need to release. I stroke inside of her, going as deep as I can before everything around us dissolves in a sparkling display of passion.

With every jet of cum that fills her, I hope to get her pregnant. It'll be just one more tie between us. It will happen eventually, even if it's not today.

I kiss her sweetly and roll us so I'm on my back and she's draped over me, my cock still lodged deep inside of her. As I run my hands up and down her back while her eyes are closed and a small smile plays on her lips, I know the last two years were worth it.

She's mine.



CHAPTER 6

LAUREL

I'm not sure how I went from being safe in my gilded cage to where I am right now. I'm not even sure I want to complain about it either. I've been off the Orlov grid for more than 24 hours and if I turn my phone on it'll be blowing up with messages. Which is why I'm not turning it on anytime soon.

I will have to call my brothers soon though and let them know I'm okay. If I don't, there will be some sort of manhunt. I'm not even sure where they would look for me first, but no one deserves to have my pissed off brothers banging on their door, especially if the brother doing the banging is Sergei.

That is a problem for another time because right now I'm sitting in a very swanky restaurant in The Golden Crown in a gorgeous dress Vlad picked out and had waiting for me this afternoon when I stepped out of my studio.

Yeah, my studio. I was surprised as well when Vlad showed it to me.

This morning when I woke up in his arms, it took me a moment to figure out where the fuck I was, but when I did, I shot up in bed, breathing heavily while the full weight of what I had done was barreling down on me. Vlad sat up slowly, regally, like he wasn't the man who tore my world to pieces with his subterfuge, his sweet damn words and his body. He was that man though and I tried to scoot away from him.

He sighed and ran his fingers through his hair. I glared at his damn hair. It was all messy and sexy. It really isn't fair how men can just be in the morning. They can just look sexy, and it takes zero effort.

It's a damn travesty of nature.

"Laurel," his voice was still thick with sleep and sounded all gravely. Also sexy. I wanted to punch him in the throat.

“Don’t push me away now,” he pleaded, his blue eyes shining with hope.

I took a deep breath and let it out slowly. What was I really going to do? I had already figured out that I had gone from one cage to another. If Vlad didn’t want to let me out of the penthouse, he didn’t have to. I was trying to tell myself that at least my new cage had a killer view. A higher perch must count for something. Right?

I couldn’t just give in though, so I bristled, “I’ll do whatever the fuck I want to do, Mr. Petrov.”

Something glinted in his eyes and before I could process what was happening, which I’m blaming on still being half asleep, I was pinned underneath Vlad with his head buried in my neck. “Part of me really hates it when you call me Mr. Petrov, especially considering you’re naked in our bed, but it also makes my cock harder than steel.”

I cleared my throat. I figured it was better than moaning, which my body was threatening to do. He moved slowly, removing his face from my neck to study my face. He climbed out of bed, naked and not giving a single fuck that I could see all of him. All of him. He reached down and grabbed my hand to pull me out of bed as well. I looked down at myself and bit my lip, unable to look into his eyes.

“Come on. I’m going to order some breakfast and then I have something to show you,” his voice was soft and coaxing, even though there was still a bit of gravel to it.

I looked at his cock and hid my smile as I sassed him, “I think you’re already showing me something.”

He barked out a laugh and shook his head. “Something else. Something you’ll like.”

I hate to say it, but I was intrigued. He led me into the closet where I found a bunch of clothes, all of them with tags and in my size. I looked up at him, hoping for an explanation, but all I got was a bashful shrug. I grabbed something casual and then moved past him toward the bathroom.

I couldn't stop thinking about the damn closet and wondering if it was all for me. His bathroom was already stocked with all my favorite products and my head was swimming by the time I made my way out into the bedroom to be greeted by Vlad, who was freshly showered and dressed in a suit.

My mouth went dry as I looked him over. There are some men whose suits wear them, but not Vlad. It looked like his suit was made for him, probably because it was.

I was distracted and I didn't even notice when he stepped closer, wrapped his arms around me and pulled me against his chest. There was a teasing note in his voice, "Like what you see?"

"No," I deadpanned which earned me a hearty chuckle.

He opened his mouth to say something else, but the sound of the elevator opening interrupted us. When he led me back into the main room of his penthouse, someone was delivering a cart of food, giving Vlad a chin lift before he stepped back onto the elevator.

Breakfast was tense, but delicious. At some point I couldn't take it anymore and broke the tension in the worst way possible, "I'd like to call my brothers."

He looked straight into my eyes, "No." I arched an eyebrow and he sighed. "Not until you agree to be mine and there's no way they can try and take you from me."

I refused to speak to him the rest of the time, but when we were done, he led me in the opposite direction of the bedroom and nodded toward a door. When I opened it, I was met with a blank studio space, but it was clear with one look he had stocked all of my favorite supplies. I wanted to ask how he knew, but I also knew that with enough money, anything is possible.

I spent most of the day working on a painting, surprised my muse wasn't being a complete fucking asshole and getting lost in my art in a way I haven't for longer than I would like to

admit. I wondered if it was because of Vlad, but also wasn't ready to admit such a thing. Nope, not even close.

When Vlad came back after work, he grinned at me when he saw me still in the studio. I rolled my eyes, but it didn't stop his damn blue eyes from twinkling.

"Finish up, *malen'kaya ptitsa*," his voice held barely contained joy and it thrilled me down to my core to hear it. "I left a dress for you on our bed. Be ready for dinner in an hour."

Then he was gone, and I moved quickly to get everything cleaned up and then myself. I was stunned with how beautiful the restaurant was when he led me inside. The food has been delicious and, even though I hate to admit it, the company has been wonderful.

I can feel myself softening toward Vlad Petrov. It's both thrilling and terrifying. I shouldn't even be here right now and I sure as hell shouldn't be cozying up with a Petrov. Nikolai is going to be so disappointed in me when he finds out.

Vlad wipes his mouth and places his napkin down. The way he studies me with his blue eyes has me on edge. I swear he's trying to see into the deepest parts of me and I'm not sure what he would see there.

I've learned over the years how to keep people away from the truth of who I am because knowledge gives them power which can be used to hurt me. I don't want to be hurt. The scars cut deep, and I've been down that road before.

I learned the best thing to do is keep people away, to prick them with thorns so they don't look closer or want to hold you tighter. It's served me well for years, but Vlad still looks at me like he wants to get closer. It makes awareness skitter down my spine; I don't like it.

"Do you want dessert?"

I narrow my eyes because I'm certain that is not what he wanted to ask me. I gently place my silverware onto my plate and shake my head slowly. "No, this was delicious. I'm full enough."

He smirks at me, and it makes him look even sexier. My pussy clenches and the memory of what we did yesterday fills my mind. It felt so good to have him inside of me. I was able to let go, and he wasn't going to accept anything less.

I felt safe in his arms and my body responded to him as if he owns me, as if he knows exactly what to do to make me sing for him. Maybe he does.

Maybe fighting him is fruitless and I'm going to end up in his clutches no matter what I do. If I were to run, which I could do right now considering I'm not locked away in my cage high above it all, he would find me. He would catch me.

Goosebumps cover my skin and I try to hold his gaze, but I find my eyes sliding away. When he looks at me as if he wants us to both be consumed by fire, I'm not sure what to make of it. He's the only man who has ever looked at me like that and it makes me feel reckless.

Before yesterday I would have said I'm never reckless.

"Very well," Vlad's voice is deep and there's a hidden meaning there, but my mind is bouncing around too much to figure it out.

Get your shit together, Laurel, you can't let your guard down around a man like Vlad Petrov.

Vlad stands up and slides around the table, holding his hand out to me and fully expecting me to slip my own into it. I stare at it for a moment, knowing that if I do this, if I put my hand in his willingly, I'm giving him so much more than a means to help me stand.

He's going to take my hand and run with it.

Is that what I want?

The way his hands felt on me yesterday slides through my mind and along my skin. I loved the way he touched me. I loved that he didn't treat me like I was spun glass. He took and I gave.

Is that how it's always supposed to be?

I'll never find out if I don't take a chance. When I glance up at Vlad, his blue eyes show patience, but also desire. He doesn't say a word and waits.

Fuck it.

I slide my hand into his and the smile he gives me looks like victory on a battlefield with blood dripping from his blade. He pulls me up and even though his muscles bunch with banked power, his movements are gentle. He tucks my hand in the crook of his arm as he leads me out of the restaurant.

I don't miss the way many of the women are looking at him. They desire him and it doesn't seem to matter if they are with a man or not. I don't blame them, he's a sexy man who exudes power.

When their eyes move over to me, I can see the hate there. The jealousy. It's not a good look on them, but it does have me standing a little bit taller. It's nothing I haven't experienced before. When women don't know who I am to my brothers and see the way they dote on me, I'm often met with jealousy.

This feels different though. Because possessiveness swirls in my gut. I don't want them looking at Vlad.

He's mine.

I almost miss a step as the realization slams into me, but Vlad tightens his hold on me, and I keep moving as if everything is fine. Even though it's not. What is wrong with me? Vlad can't be mine. Right?

Vlad keeps his voice low as he leans into me, his breath on my neck has me feeling reckless again, "Are you okay?"

"Fine," it comes out high, tight, and completely unbelievable.

He makes a humming sound but doesn't push as we step onto his elevator. The outside world is slowly shut away from me as the doors slide shut and I realize the opportunity for me to get away just closed and I didn't even try.

"Do you trust me, *malen'kaya ptitsa*?"

“Yes,” the word slips from my lips and I blink a few times as my mouth falls open.

When I look up at Vlad, he’s looking at me, his pupils blown wide and the blue of his eyes disappearing. As if my trust pushes him over the edge. As if it’s all he’s ever wanted.

“Good,” his voice is deeper and darker.

He hustles me out of the elevator and into his bedroom quickly. I get the feeling that if I couldn’t walk in my heels that he would throw me over his shoulder again to get me there. He’s so damn gentle when he drops to his knees and helps me remove one shoe and then the other. After he stands, he walks over to the dresser and opens a drawer. When he comes back, he holds a blindfold up in front of him and that same question is in his eyes.

Do you trust me, malen’kaya ptitsa?

He watches me carefully before he nods and slips the blindfold over my eyes. I suck in a breath as the world around me is plunged into darkness. I can feel and hear him as he moves around me slowly, circling, studying, marveling.

When he stops at my back and unzips my dress, he lets it fall around my feet before he starts to move again. His footsteps move away and then come back fairly quickly. As his breathing becomes ragged, I find my own matching his, the tension between us building with each inhale.

“Put your arms in front of you as if you’re praying, Laurel,” his voice is a gruff demand and I find myself complying instantly. I swear I can feel contentment coming from him as he starts to twine something around my arms. He wraps and twists, adjusts, and pulls. “You look so fucking beautiful bound, my beautiful little bird.”

He doesn’t go farther than my elbows and with each of his movements, my heart pounds harder and harder. I don’t know what he’s going to do, but it feels like my skin is alive. The anticipation is delicious and makes the thong I’m wearing wetter with my arousal.

When he's done, he gives a tug and I let out a small moan. I can feel the way my cheeks and neck heat and Vlad runs a finger from my ear to my collarbone. He mutters something, but I can't hear it over the way the blood is rushing through my veins.

When he steps away, he moves behind me and then I'm being shuffled forward a few steps. My toes slide over the fabric of my dress before a firm hand on my back between my shoulder blades pushes me down to bend over the edge of the bed. My bound hands are tucked underneath my torso and not allowing me to hold onto anything.

I feel both safe and untethered; it's a combination which has my mind spinning.

Vlad peels my thong down to my knees. He kicks my feet apart until I'm sure my thong is straining between my legs.

"So beautiful," he breathes, and I feel his words against the back of one of my thighs.

Is he kneeling? I shudder and try and shift away from him, knowing how I must look and how I'm on display for him. His hand comes down on my ass and I let out a strangled yelp as I bury my face in the bed.

"Don't shy away from this. You gave me your trust and I won't squander such a gift," the darkness in his voice has me arching my back, offering myself up to him.

Vlad blows across my wet pussy and it's the only warning I get before his tongue swipes between my folds. He growls in appreciation, and I push back against him, feeling his stubble against the sensitive skin of my thighs. When he spears my channel with his tongue, my eyes roll back in my head and my knees buckle.

It feels like I'm falling even though I'm being supported by the bed. I can't use my hands to hold onto anything. This is what being inside of an MC Escher work must feel like. I swear I could take one step in the wrong direction and fall off the page.

Vlad grips my ass cheeks and spreads me wide as he fucks me with his tongue, reminding me he's right there. He'll hold me in place. He'll hold me steady. He won't let me get lost.

With that thought I surrender to him, unable to hold back while knowing I don't need to. He must feel it too because he groans, the vibration making me buck backwards.

When he pulls his tongue from me, he slides it down and circles my clit. He plunges two fingers inside of me at the same time he sucks my clit into his mouth. It feels like he's attacking me with his mouth, and I know what he wants. I try and hold off, but I'm powerless against his onslaught.

When his teeth scrape over my clit, I scream into the bed and everything around me shimmers as I come. My eyes are squeezed so tight they almost hurt, and I can't take a full breath. Every muscle of my body feels like it won't ever work again and yet I also feel like I'm strung tight.

I don't understand, but my mind is floating and I'm pretty sure I don't care if I ever understand.

I feel hands on me and don't fight them when Vlad rolls me over and pulls the blindfold from my eyes. It takes me a moment to realize it's even gone, but when I blink my eyes open and let them adjust to the low light of the room, I swear everything looks different.

My arms are tied together with a red rope using intricate knots and loops. It's beautiful and my eyes well with tears which make no fucking sense.

Vlad is quick to undo my bindings and then scoop me up into his arms as he settles against the headboard. I drift off with his fingers gliding through my hair and his sweet words filling my ears.

"Thank you for trusting me, Laurel," he whispers with so much sincerity it makes my heart clench.

Maybe being in the cage he's built me won't be so bad.



CHAPTER 7

VLAD

I stand in the doorway of my woman's studio and can't tear my eyes away from her. What she does blows my mind. I can appreciate the finished product, but there's something about how it all comes together which feels so ephemeral.

How does she know how to make something from nothing? How does she see the shapes of things? How can she know it will end up being what she thinks it's going to be? Or is it all a mystery to her as well?

I'm in awe of her. I have been for two years, and it hasn't stopped. Now it's so much more because she's right here in front of me.

I admire her strength and her ability to roll with what life is throwing at her. This whole situation would be enough to send a lesser woman over the edge, but not my woman, my little bird. She stands tall and she steps up to me, toe-to-toe, not afraid and ready to take me on and the rest of the fucking world.

She has all that strength and then there are moments when she's just adorable.

This morning, while walking through the living room, was the first time in the handful of days she's been here that she took a good look around. I knew the moment she noticed and had to hide my smile as her jaw dropped and her eyes widened.

"That's my painting," she squeaked as she pointed at the canvas hanging above the fireplace.

"It is," I agreed. She whirled around and looked at me as if she was seeing me for the first time. I stepped closer. "I've bought quite a few of your pieces," I admitted. "I have one hanging in my office."

Her mouth opened and closed. I fell in love with her flustered. “You really do like my work,” it wasn’t a question, or an accusation, just a statement.

“I do, *malen’kaya ptitsa.*”

She eyed me as I led her over to our breakfast, pulled out a chair and then pushed it back into place. It was like she was in a daze, and I could only hope I didn’t look as smug as I felt.

Now, as I watch her work, her eyebrows furrowed in concentration and her gray eyes intent and focused, there’s something different about her. She was a confident woman before, at least she pretended to be flawlessly, but there’s a new quality to it now.

For some reason, a question pops into my mind and it slips out immediately because I want to know everything about her and how she works, “Did your brothers know about you selling your work?”

She lets out a little shriek and spins around, her hand pressed against her chest and the paintbrush clutched in her fingers, leaving orange marks on her top. “What the fuck, Vlad?” She hasn’t called me Mr. Petrov lately; I love it. “You scared the hell out of me.”

I step into her studio and close the distance between us. As I reach out and cup her cheek, I love the way I can see her pulse pounding at the base of her neck. If it makes me a bastard, I can’t find it in me to care.

I tuck a whisp of her dark hair that’s fallen out of her messy bun behind her ear. When I let my fingers trail down her neck, she shivers, and I can’t help but smile.

She sighs and glances away from me. “They know about my love for art, obviously, since I have a studio in the house, but they don’t know about the website or anything.” She scrunches her face up, her tone mulish, “Or, if they know, they never said anything about it to me.”

I nod slowly, wanting to go and beat the hell out of them for not knowing everything about her because without that information, she couldn’t be completely protected.

Considering I took advantage, I guess I can't be too mad. Still, they should have known; I never said I was a good man.

“Do you want to have some fun tonight?”

She arches an eyebrow and looks at me curiously before she narrows her eyes, suspicion in her tone, “What kind of fun?”

I smirk and kiss her softly. “As much as I want to strip you right here and show you how much fun we could have with your paint and our naked bodies, I was thinking about going down to the casino.”

She yanks herself back and practically bounces on her toes. There's excitement in her voice, “Are you serious? We can go down and do a little gambling?”

I chuckle. Fucking adorable. I pull her against me and kiss her again. It's a slow exploration of her mouth, one I've been thinking about all fucking day. The feel of her body against mine is so damn good, I can forget everything and all the stress when I have her just like this.

“I missed you today,” I murmur against her lips.

She sighs, “I missed you too.”

She jerks a little and pulls back to look up at me with wide, surprised eyes as if she didn't mean to say that. She might not have meant to, but it's out there now and I won't be letting her take it back.

When she looks away from me, her mouth falls open as she looks down at my suit. “Oh my,” she sputters, “I'm so sorry.”

My eyebrows come together as I look down to find a smudge of orange paint on my suit and her looking at the brush in her hand with horror on her face. I throw my head back and laugh before tugging her against my chest even harder and the brush hits another place on my suit.

I growl, “I don't give a fuck about some paint on my suit, Laurel.”

The next thing I know my woman has wrapped her arms around me and kisses me hard. It's the first time she's initiated

contact and I'm stunned for a moment. My cock isn't, it's fucking throbbing at the way her lips devour mine. When my brain comes back online, I plow ahead and take over the kiss to leave us panting and staring at each other in wonder.

I slide a hand down her back and give her ass a squeeze. "Go and get cleaned up, *malen'kaya ptitsa*. I'll be waiting for you."

She smirks, "You might want to clean up yourself, Mr. Petrov."

This time, the way she says my name, her voice husky and filled with need, doesn't annoy me at all. It makes me want to force her to her knees so I can feed her my cock and fuck her face. Damn.

I'm still thinking about the way her lips would feel around my cock as we're heading down to the casino floor about an hour later. How could I not? Her lips are so plump and pink. I love kissing them, I can only imagine what they would feel like wrapped around my shaft and how glorious her hot, wet mouth would be.

It's a weekend night and the casino floor is busy when we step off the elevator and make our way toward the lights. I try and keep the machines as classy as I can, but there's nothing like flashing lights and the sounds of money plopping out of machines to draw in someone who has money to burn and no concept that the house always wins.

Laurel is the picture of composure until she looks at me and I can see the joy dancing in her eyes. Damn, this woman was made for me. She's composed and poised on the outside and still so much fucking fun. She's not jaded about what she enjoys and the more I chip away at her walls, the more obsessed with her I become.

I head right over to one of the slot machines and feed it some cash. She glances at me and then the machine and then me. I wink at her and shrug, "Slots are kind of a right of passage and a great place to start."

“I’ve never gambled,” she admits softly. I’m not surprised, she’s been fairly sheltered. Her voice takes on a wistful quality, “There are a lot of things I haven’t done.”

Before I can say anything, she places a bet and hits the button. She watches with rapt attention as a giggle bubbles out of her. I would do fucking anything to ensure I hear that sound for the rest of my life.

I watch as the machine bathes my woman in light while she smiles and enjoys herself. She doesn’t care if she wins or loses. I don’t either. When she’s done, I offer her my arm and she takes it without hesitation.

As we slide deeper into the casino and toward the game tables, I notice how many men check out my woman. She looks gorgeous tonight, the green dress she’s wearing is almost sinful with the way it is showing off her body.

As much as I want to kill every man who is looking at her, I know I can’t. It would be bad business and, as much as I hate to admit it, I can’t really blame them.

I lean into Laurel, her caramel apple scent making my mouth water. I press a kiss to her neck, unable to help myself. “Are you familiar with any of the table games?”

She glances up at me, a wicked smile on her lips which is not helping the constant hard-on I have when I’m around my woman. She nods slowly, her words measured and controlled, “I’m familiar, but haven’t played at a table like this.”

I lead her toward the blackjack tables figuring it’s a good place to start. I catch Maksim’s eye from across the room and give him a nod which he returns. I informed him earlier I would be on the floor with my woman, and she would be provided with chips.

I lead Laurel to a table where a few people are already playing. She slides into her seat with grace which makes me want to slide under the table and feast on her pussy. There is no way she knows just what she does to me, but I plan to show her tonight.

I don't think there's anything this woman can do that I wouldn't find sexy as fuck.

I sit back in my seat since I don't play on my own casino floor and watch my woman. She keeps her face neutral as she plays, not even the light in her eyes giving her away. I don't watch her cards; I watch her.

By the fifth hand, it's clear that she's much more than familiar with the game. She's a fucking shark. It's a damn good thing everything I have is already hers, even if she doesn't know it yet, or I might think she's trying to hustle me.

I lean into her and whisper, "I'll be spanking your ass later, little bird."

She smiles softly and bats her eyes at me, her voice innocent, "I have no idea what you're talking about."

Before I can respond, I feel someone's hand on my arm trying to get my attention. When I look over, it's the woman who has been sitting on the other side of me. She's older than my Laurel, but younger than me and wearing far too much makeup along with a too tight dress. She looks like a whore now that I'm looking closely.

I wasn't paying her any attention before, my eyes fixated on my woman and how fucking sexy she is.

I try and keep the derision out of my voice and remember I'm the owner of this casino, "Can I help you?"

She slides her hand up my arm to my shoulder. I'm seething on the inside, but I'm not in the business of hurting women. When I glance over at Laurel, she has an unreadable expression on her face as she keeps an eye on the game play. You wouldn't know she's paying attention to my interaction with this woman by looking at her, but I know better. She's listening to every fucking word.

"I just thought that I might interest you in a drink, handsome," she smiles at me and leans closer, putting her fake tits on display to try and entice me. "You seem a little lonely."

Laurel's jaw ticks and she takes a deep breath as she splits her two eights. She doesn't look my way. Is she waiting to see

how I'll handle this?

She should know by now that she's always going to be my choice, but I have no problem demonstrating it for her.

"Remove your hand," I bite the words out and the woman blinks and pales. I lean back in my chair slightly and motion toward Laurel. "Maybe you didn't notice, but I'm here with the most beautiful woman in the room. I'm far from lonely. The things I'll be doing to my fiancé tonight would make even a whore like you blush."

The woman starts to sputter before she stands up while hastily collecting her chips. She huffs out some threat or something, but I don't give a shit. Not when I'm taking in the way Laurel is biting her lip and trying not to laugh.

When the hand is done, she looks at me with heat in her gray eyes. "I think I've had enough fun for the night," her voice is soft and soothing, none of the sass or thorns of when I first met her to be found, "at least, down here."

I stand up so fast I almost knock over the stool I'm sitting on and Laurel giggles. I don't bother collecting the chips Laurel has won, but I do notice she won more than lost. Pride fills me and if she's not careful then I'll be fucking her in the elevator instead of in our bed.

As I lead Laurel away, she doesn't look twice at the table or the woman fuming over on the other side of the room while making exaggerated hand motions to the man she's standing with.

I almost groan because I'm sure she's a problem I'm going to have to deal with, but it won't be right now. The only thing I'm interested in right now is taking my woman up stairs and fucking her until she can't keep her eyes open.



CHAPTER 8

LAUREL

There's something jittery inside of me, something unsettled. I've been here too long, and I know my brothers are probably going crazy. Knowing them, they waited to tell Nikolai because he went up to the cabin to get his head on straight.

I'm at the limit of how long I can go without any contact. I know it.

It's the warning bell inside of me, reminding, pushing, fucking blaring. I need to do something and if I don't do it soon then shit is going to go sideways and I'm not going to be able to stop it.

I have a window to do this right and if I don't take advantage of it, it's going to be gone and then everything is going to be out of my hands.

Hasn't enough already been out of my hands? I'm tired of it. I'm in charge of my own destiny.

I know Vlad is scared I'm going to run for it, especially if I talk to my brothers. I can understand his concern, but only because I haven't told him he convinced me to stay.

If I wanted to be honest, which I only partially want to be, I fell for Vlad Petrov the moment I saw him in person. Something tugged me forward, something kept me listening, something whispered for me to not fight too hard.

I wanted something new, something all mine, and I got Vlad. In him, I've gotten everything I've ever wanted and I'm painting again. If nothing else, that's a sign I'm heading in the right direction.

I'm a resourceful woman, if I really wanted to leave here then I could have figured out a way. Vlad locking me away in his tower and pretending like my thorns don't draw his blood isn't going to stop me.

I've still stuck around.

The longer I've been around him, the farther I've fallen for him. Now I'm in love with him and can't imagine waking up anywhere other than in his arms. I'm aware it might not make sense to some people, but my life has always been based on extremes. In the world I was raised in you learn quickly life is not guaranteed and things can go wrong in a moment.

Why can't the opposite be just as true? Why can't the good breeze into your life and make everything better?

Vlad proves to me it can.

I tug at the oversized sweater I have on when I step off the elevator on the floor where Vlad's office is located. He just put my fingerprint in the scanner this morning.

While he was doing it, his blue eyes were intent on my face and his deep voice held a warning, "You should know that you won't be able to access the lobby."

"So, I'm still trapped," I challenged him.

He huffed out a breath and ran his fingers through his hair as he continued to talk as if I didn't say anything, "I'll be alerted whenever you get on the elevator."

I bristled, "Vlad, I'm not a fucking child and I won't stand for you treating me like one."

I knew why he was doing it, but I was still pissed about it. Some of my anger melted when his eyes turned pained. "I can't lose you," his voice broke on the last word.

I knew I wasn't going to win the argument. He was hellbent on keeping me. He couldn't see the irony of the fact that he felt he rescued me from the way my brothers caged me only for him to cage me himself. He wasn't going to see it until I gave him peace of mind that I wasn't leaving.

I've been trying to figure out a way to show him all day along with how to call off my brothers before shit goes too far and they figure out where I am, then try and rain fire and brimstone down in some misguided attempt to get me back. I don't want to go back.

When I realized that, I knew exactly what I had to do and how to do it. I hope I'm taking care of two birds with one stone here, but only time will tell. I'm dealing with overly stubborn men who think they know what the right thing to do is.

When I walk into the office area, it's obvious where Vlad's office is, and I head toward it until I'm stopped by an older woman. Her voice is kind, "Can I help you? Do you have an appointment?"

I turn and face her to see her eyes light up with recognition. I give her a small smile, "I don't have an appointment, do I need one?"

"No," she laughs lightly, "Miss Orlov, you don't need an appointment at all. Please go right in."

A warmth spreads in my chest. She's just confirmed Vlad has let everyone know who I am. His obsession with me and my arrival isn't something he's keeping a secret. He's serious about his intentions and what he wants for our future.

I breathe a sigh of relief. He may have been trapping me here, but I know the real power I have. He does too.

"I'll knock first," my voice is light and teasing which causes her smile to spread.

She smiles indulgently, "I think you're the only person who could get away with never knocking. If you need anything to drink, buzz me and I'll get it for you."

I wave her off before heading toward the large double doors as she heads in the other direction. After I knock lightly, butterflies flutter in my gut. I hope this works.

"Come in," Vlad's voice is gruff.

When I open the door, I stride inside like I own the fucking place. Maybe, in a way, I do considering Vlad has told me many times over the last few days that everything he owns is mine. Vlad's eyes widen when he looks at me and the phone he seemed to just be picking up to make a call is slammed back into place.

“Laurel,” his voice is curious, “what are you doing here? Is everything okay?”

I smile at him as I walk around his desk and perch on the edge, close enough for him to reach out and touch me. “Everything’s fine, Vlad,” I assure him.

He still looks me over as if he expects me to have some injuries on my body or something. I barely stop myself from rolling my eyes.

I tease him, “I can’t just want to come and see you?”

His blue eyes meet mine and narrow. I almost laugh because he looks suspicious as hell. He should be.

“You can,” his voice is cautious, and I almost wonder where my big bad bratva man has gone. This is the same guy who told me I wasn’t going anywhere and that he stalked me for two years. He sits back in his chair and spreads his legs like a king. “You’re up to something, *malen’kaya ptitsa*.”

I shrug one shoulder and keep my voice light, “I am.”

I slide off the edge of his desk and onto my knees in one fluid movement, loving the way my man’s eyes widen at the vision in front of him. He’s taken me quite a few ways, but this is something new for him to enjoy. Honestly, I’m looking forward to it.

I run my hands up his thighs, the fabric of his suit pants is silky under my palms. I stroke up and down, getting closer to his dick with each pass, but never touching him. I can see the way he’s throbbing, and I lick my lips. I already know he’s going to be delicious.

“You’re worried I’m going to run. It’s the reason you haven’t let me call my brothers and why I can’t go down to the first floor,” I keep my voice soft.

“That’s not the only reason, Laurel,” there’s a thread of anger woven in his tone, but it’s not going to stop me from getting what I want. Not right now.

“I’m not going to run and I’m going to prove it to you.” He arches an eyebrow at me, and I run my hand over the length of

his cock, gripping it and stroking it through his pants. He lets out a low groan and his eyes slide closed slowly. "I'm going to call my brothers."

His eyes snap open and he growls, "No."

I don't back down even though I'm on my knees for him. "Yes."

I stand and then plop myself down on his lap, grabbing his phone and dialing before he can stop me. I hit the button so it's on speaker and listen to the phone ringing. Vlad's hands dig into my hips, his grip punishing, but I don't care.

"Ivan speaking," my brother's voice, rough and sleep deprived, has my heart sinking.

"Ivan, it's Laurel," I keep my tone even and not full of the emotion which floods me at hearing my brother's voice. I shouldn't have let this go on for as long as I did.

"Laurel," he growls, the sound a mixture of angry and relieved as hell, "where the fuck are you?"

I scoff, "I know you're not speaking to me that way."

He sputters, "Not speaking to you that way?" He snaps his fingers a few times and I have no doubt he's trying to get the attention of Viktor and Sergei. I can only hope they haven't called Nikolai. "Where are you? Are you okay? Safe? Did someone take you? Please, Laurel, you need to tell me what is going on."

"I'm fine. I'm safe," I rush those out because I know they are the most important things. "I'm not going to tell you where I am, though I'm sure it won't take you much to trace the call." When I look at Vlad, he's giving me a hard look. "I'm sorry I left the way I did and didn't tell you where I was going. No one took me, I left on my own."

"What the fuck, Laurel," Sergei sounds angry as hell and I'm sure, if I could see, him he would have steam coming out of his ears.

"We called Nikolai this morning, not knowing what else to do," Ivan informs me, and I slump back against Vlad's chest.

Even though I can feel Vlad's frustration at me, he still wraps an arm around me and holds me close. I keep my voice strong, "I already told you that I'm fine. I'm choosing to stay here. I'm not coming back anytime soon. I've found love," Vlad's hand tightens even more, and I can't bring myself to look at him, "and I'm happy."

"You're happy?" Ivan sounds sad and hurt.

"I am," I whisper. "I'm sorry I didn't call sooner and I'm sorry you worried about me. Stop looking for me. I'll be in touch soon."

Before they can say anymore and twist the knife inside my chest in the other direction, I end the call and sit there staring at the phone. I've hurt my brothers and they'll probably feel as if I've betrayed them.

My heart is hammering in my chest, and I know Vlad wants to ask about what I just said, but I'm not ready. I don't even know why those words slipped out. Instead of getting into it, I slide off his lap and back onto my knees.

I look up at him from underneath my lashes and I can tell he wants to push it. Since I'd rather not, I move quickly to undo his pants and pull his cock out. He's so hard and the tip of his cock is already coated in pre-cum. I'm sure the way I was wiggling on his lap wasn't helping.

Vlad's fingers run through my hair, pulling it back out of my face as he gathers it into a ponytail with one hand. As I lick up the underside of his cock, I tease the vein there with the tip of my tongue. I kiss the tip when I reach it and watch as Vlad's eyes go hazy with desire.

It's a fucking thrill being on my knees for him, one I want to keep chasing.

I take the crown of his cock into my mouth slowly and deliberately, bathing him with my tongue and collecting every dribble of pre-cum. I moan around him as I take him farther into my mouth.

I start out slowly, wanting to tease him the same way he teases me. He tastes so fucking good and heavy against my

tongue that it doesn't take long for my resolve to crumble. I'm bobbing up and down on his shaft before I realize it, taking more and more of his length into my mouth to hit the back of my throat.

When I gag, I pull back and hollow my cheeks, sucking him harder. His pupils are blown wide, and his fingers tighten on my hair. He's so fucking close to losing control. It's what I want, what I need.

I see the moment he snaps, a feral glint in his eye one second and then he's using his grip on my hair to move my mouth up and down his length faster while pushing me farther down his shaft. I gag, but then focus on breathing through my nose and relaxing my throat.

"You like that, Laurel?" His voice is rough, "You like gagging on my cock? You look so pretty with your lips stretched around me."

It's not perfect, but Vlad is not complaining. When I flick the underside of his cock head and hit that magical spot, his thighs start to quiver, and he gets harder in my mouth. I know he's not going to last long.

I moan around him, and he starts to use my mouth harder. All I can do is hold on to his thighs and try not to get swept away in how fucking hot this is. My pussy is begging for some attention, but this is about him and I'm going to show him just how much I appreciate the use of his phone, even though I didn't give him a choice.

"Going to come down your pretty little throat," he grits out through his teeth.

I reach up and give his balls a squeeze and it's what sends him over the edge. He presses himself in as far as he can go without hurting me as tears stream down my cheeks and he unloads in my mouth. I'm swallowing as fast as I can, but some of his cum still dribbles from around my lips.

The sounds he makes, masculine and unhinged, only make me wetter for him. The ache between my legs is distracting but I'm focused on swallowing his cum.

He's panting heavily and gasping for air as he pulls me from his length slowly. I make sure to clean him thoroughly as I go.

Vlad sweeps his thumb over my chin and then feeds me the little bit of cum that escaped with a big fucking smile on his face. Maybe this will show him I'm really in this and I'm not going anywhere.



CHAPTER 9

VLAD

Laurel called her brothers hours ago and I've been stewing ever since. I know what's going to happen and I'm pissed about it. I'm going to do whatever I must do to ensure she stays right where she belongs and that's with me. Here.

This is her home now. I'll fight for her, and I'll make sure she's safe.

I've increased security in the hotel and the casino because the feeling in the pit of my stomach won't let me rest. It pushes me to make sure everything is in place. She's too precious to play fast and loose with.

After her phone call and her sucking my fucking cum directly from my balls, she blinked up at me with her big gray eyes and I was dumbfounded for a moment. I was shocked when she told her brothers she was happy and didn't want to go anywhere.

I didn't tell her to say it, I didn't ask her to do it. She did it all on her own and it was everything I wanted to hear. She was sincere too because my woman can't lie to me. I could see right through her if she tried.

Her voice was tentative, like she was feeling me out even though I could barely feel my legs, "Can you give me full access now? I'm not going to run, Vlad."

Her sincerity and the hope in her eyes, along with the words she spoke to her brothers did me in. I kissed her forehead and gave in. "Of course, *malen'kaya ptitsa*. I never wanted to clip your wings, I just wanted to make sure you'd stay with me. You're mine."

"I'm yours," she whispered.

My heart was pounding in my chest, my instincts telling me it was a mistake to not be more cautious, but I also knew I couldn't deny her. I logged into the security system right then

and increased her access. She and I are now the only people on Earth who have complete access when it comes to The Golden Crown.

When I was done, she smiled at me. It wasn't some shy smile. It wasn't sly like she just won something. It was big and bright, and my heart clenched at the sight. I knew then I had made the right decision, no matter what my instincts were screaming.

I needed to give her a little trust because I know she had already given me a lot. I knew she could have put up more of a fuss about the whole thing, but she was willing to see it through. She was willing to get to know me.

I couldn't keep her confined anymore, even though I'll never let her out of my sight fully. No, she's far too important to me for that to happen.

The Orlovs aren't the only enemies I have. Really, the Orlov family are the only enemies I have that I have no idea why we're enemies. All of that was my father and I'm ready to put it behind me. I'm not sure it will ever happen, but I'm willing to entertain it.

Father can roll over in his grave for all I care.

I'm about to head back upstairs to see what Laurel wants to do tonight. I'm even considering taking her outside of the casino, even though the thought makes me want to chain her to my bed and never let her leave, but I have a feeling she would like it. Before I can even take a step around the desk, my phone rings and I stifle a groan.

"Petrov," I snap even though I mean for it to sound more professional.

"Sorry to bother you, Boss," Maksim sounds like he'd rather be doing anything else instead of calling me right now.

I sit down, trying to push thoughts of Laurel out of my mind since they will only continue to put me on edge. I sound more neutral this time, "Is everything okay, Maksim?"

I hear an angry male voice in the background and the hair on the back of my neck stands up. Whoever it is, doesn't

sound happy and I have a feeling I'm going to have to deal with it. I really don't want to.

"I have a gentleman here who would like a word with you," his voice is cold and I'm sure he's staring down the man in question.

"I'll be down in a few minutes."

I don't let him respond before I hang up and stand up, stretching my neck as I try to push thoughts of Laurel even farther back. I was so fucking close.

I tell myself it's better this happened now before I had been upstairs with my woman. If it's important enough for Maksim to call me, he would have tracked me down even if I was with Laurel. I'd rather not have to leave her later tonight and enjoy my evening being buried inside of her and not be pulled away by some asshole.

I'm distracted by thoughts of her tight, wet pussy as I ride the elevator down to the casino floor. Knowing I've fucked with her birth control, and I've filled her with my seed many times has me imagining her big and round with our child.

Will they have my eyes or hers? Will we have a little boy first or a girl? I don't care either way, I just want them to be healthy and happy. I wouldn't mind a little girl who is just like her mama.

I know I'd give my heart away a second time upon meeting her. They'd be strong like their mama too. Graceful. Joyous.

The elevator doors slide open, and I shutter all those happy thoughts away and set my jaw as I make my way towards the security offices where I know Maksim will be waiting for me. This better fucking be good.

When I knock on Maksim's door, I don't wait for him to tell me to come in before I swing the door open. There's a man sitting on one side of Maksim's desk while glaring at the man I trust to handle my casino floor. The stranger looks smarmy, his hair slicked back and his suit, which he hopes comes off as expensive, isn't cut well and doesn't really fit him.

Maksim gives me a nod, his voice neutral, "Boss."

The man whirls around and glares at me. I arch my eyebrow in question and offense. Does this man not know who he's dealing with?

I extend my hand, my voice clipped, "Vlad Petrov. And you are?"

I let the question hang between us. It's filled with malice more than curiosity. I don't give a fuck who this guy is. He's interrupting time with my woman which makes him scum in my book.

The man doesn't shake my hand, choosing to sneer at me instead as he stands. "Syd James." As he looks me over, it's clear he's not very intelligent because he doesn't think I'm a threat. I have a feeling it's about to bite him on the ass.

I keep my voice even, but it's a struggle, "What can I do for you, Mr. James?"

"You insulted my wife, Petrov," he spits the words.

My eyebrows go up and Maksim is fighting to hold in a smile or laughter. James doesn't notice because he's focused entirely on me. That's another mistake.

I get the distinct scent of alcohol wafting from this man. Not only is he stupid, but he had to get some liquid courage to find his balls. I swear the man has a death wish.

"I don't believe I know who you are referring to, Mr. James," my anger is starting to seep into my voice and Maksim stands, all the humor gone from his face as well.

"My wife was sitting next to you at the blackjack table last night and enjoying a few hands." His lip is curled in disgust, and I get a flash of a woman who tried to hit on me. Then, as I was leading my woman out so I could remind her just who she belongs to, the same woman was speaking to a man. "It is unacceptable and bad business." His voice gets louder, "Do you know who I am?"

I bark out a laugh and James turns bright fucking red from anger. Derision drips from every word, "Do I know who you are? I don't give a fuck who you are, Mr. James."

He sputters and I'm sure this is the first time in his life that someone doesn't bend over and let him fuck them. I'm not that man and if he thought that is what was going to happen tonight, he should have just swallowed down whatever headache his wife has been giving him.

He tries to puff up his chest, "You should care who I am."

I widen my stance and cross my arms across my chest. I shake my head slowly. "Well, I don't. Why should I give a fuck about you when you can't keep your wife on a fucking leash?"

"A leash?" He's almost purple now and the sight of it has me grinning. "You've insulted my wife again."

I curl my lip in disgust and spit the words, "I didn't insult your wife in the first place."

"You called her a whore," he shouts.

I shrug one shoulder casually. "If she didn't want to be called a whore, then she shouldn't have hit on me, especially when it was clear I was at the table with my fiancé."

"Hit on you? My wife didn't hit on you," his voice takes on a desperate quality, but it's clear he's not so sure about what happened now.

"Yes," my voice is flat, "she did. She put her hand on me and offered to have a drink with me and told me I was looking lonely even though I was there with the most beautiful woman in the room."

"I'm going to ruin you," James changes his tactics when it's clear I'm not going to budge on this.

"Ruin me?" I throw my head back and laugh, but the sound is far from jovial. It's menacing and if this man was in his right mind, he would recognize it. "There is no way you could possibly ruin me, Mr. James."

He wants to spew idle threats at me, that's fine. If he's staying in my hotel, it ends tonight, and I'll make sure of it. If he's a patron of my casino, I'll make sure he's banned from the premises.

“I’ll show you and your bitch of a woman who I am,” he hisses.

My blood runs cold while Maksim steps around the desk and closer to Mr. James. I know he’s not going to stop what is about to happen and is only going to help me. Rage fills me and all I see is red.

My voice is ice cold, “What did you just say?”

“You heard me. You and your slut fiancé are going to know who I am by the time I’m done with you.”

“If I were you, I would be very careful with your next words,” I warn him as I step right up to him. “Or you’re going to leave your wife a widow.”

“I bet your fiancé has a tight pussy. Don’t worry, I’ll use her just right before I throw her away.”

“Shit,” Maksim mutters.

I move quickly and it takes a good ten seconds of my knife buried in James’ crotch before he starts to scream. I twist my knife one direction and then the other, before I start to pull the blade upward. He tries to step back as blood pours out of him, but Maksim is there at his back and not allowing him to move.

I stare into James’ eyes, not looking away. I want him to see the man who killed him as I’m doing it. I want him to know exactly who he fucked with and why it was a bad idea. I can smell the fear coming off him and it’s glorious.

Maksim will call the people he needs to, and this will all get fixed. His wife will be given a plausible story with evidence and enough money to go and start her life somewhere else. As long as she never steps foot in The Golden Crown again, she’ll be safe.

It’s almost a shame because she’s the one who started this. Yet, her husband is paying for it, but he chose to run his mouth without thought or heed my warning.

Now he knows there are consequences to his actions.

I slice up the entire length of his torso. There are some places where I can dig the knife deeper and others where I can

only skim against his bone. Like when I slide right up to the base of his throat, the tip of the knife skittering over his sternum.

“Talk to me again about how you’re going to use my woman, Mr. James,” I snarl the words.

James tries to hold his chest together, but we all know it’s futile. I give Maksim a nod over the shoulder of a dying man before I turn around and walk out of the room.

I need to go and see my woman. The idea of anyone threatening her has my paranoia spiking. I need to know she’s okay. I need to hold her in my arms.



CHAPTER 10

LAUREL

I've now explored every corner of Vlad's penthouse and, other than my studio, I have found my happy place. The library. It's one of those magical ones where books are everywhere. There's even one of those sliding ladders.

There's a nice as hell library in the house I grew up in, but it always felt like a museum more than somewhere I could go and get cozy. And there was no sliding ladder. It's a real missed opportunity now that I'm thinking about it.

I could never get comfortable in the library in the house I grew up in. The furniture was so fancy and stiff. There weren't any nooks where you could get comfortable. There were also quite a few busts on display with lights shining down on them. I was afraid to breathe too hard in that library.

The one in Vlad's penthouse has big chairs you can sink into and lose yourself for hours along with a good book. Which is what I've done since I found the place.

After I left Vlad's office, I wasn't in the mood to paint so I decided to give myself a tour of the penthouse more than Vlad pointing at rooms and telling me where everything is. When he had pointed to the library and told me what was in there, I just assumed it would be like the library I was used to.

I was wrong. I would have been in here days ago if I had known.

When I look up, I realize it is already dark and that Vlad hasn't come looking for me. I get a little worried I pissed him off earlier and he is avoiding me, or he had some sort of trouble.

I pushed him in his office to give me something he wasn't ready to give me, but it was necessary. I know my brothers won't give up, but this might buy me, us, a little bit of time before they come barging in.

I told them I'm fine and am happy where I am. Will they believe me? I'm not sure, but I don't want them storming my home thinking they're knights coming to save me.

I pause and my eyebrows scrunch together. When, exactly, did I start thinking of this place as my home? That's strange.

I shake it off when I hear the elevator doors open and I head in that direction, holding the book I'm reading because I need to find a bookmark. I don't dogear pages, I'm not a fucking heathen. I was raised better than that even if I was raised around violence.

When Vlad steps out of the elevator, I grin, but when he turns toward me, my smile fades and I barely hear the thud of the book I'm holding on the ground. I rush toward him, my eyes wide with panic.

“What the fuck, Vlad? Whose blood is on you?” My hands hover over him and my voice rises and takes on a shrill quality, “Is it your blood?”

He grips my shoulders firmly, a sharp note to his voice that dulls my panic, “Laurel.” I'm staring at his suit. This isn't some orange paint on him. This is blood splatter. What a fucking waste. “Laurel,” he tries again and gives my shoulders a little shake. I bring my eyes up to his, those blue orbs filled with concern for me. “Calm down. I'm fine. This isn't my blood.”

I close my eyes, the fear ebbing and leaving annoyance and anger in its place, more at myself than anyone else. This isn't the first time I've seen a man in my life with blood on them. It won't be the last.

Part of me always expects it with my brothers, especially Sergei considering his temper, but for a moment I forgot exactly who Vlad Petrov is. Probably because he lives up here above it all in his tower. I almost forgot he's the head of his own bratva family.

The Petrov family has the same kind of reputation that my family does. Ruthlessness and violence are not foreign

concepts, quite the opposite. Both are used to maintain territory and deal with problems swiftly.

This is normal.

My heart lurches at the thought because I know it's not really normal. It might be for my world and the world of Vlad, but for the majority of the population, this would be the farthest thing from normal there is.

"Okay," I breathe out.

I take a deep breath before I grab Vlad's hand to tug him to our bedroom and straight into the bathroom. He allows me to tow him along, not fighting and gliding right along with me. Considering his size, Vlad doesn't have to let me do anything. Not to him. He could be a brick wall if he wanted to be.

I feel a little better about my life choices as he allows me this concession. It's almost like I'm his equal. Almost like he won't treat me like I'm fragile.

He is eyeing me warily and it makes me want to snap at him, but I hold my tongue and undress him slowly. I bundle up his clothing, knowing damn well none of it can be saved and all of it needs to be burned.

When I get him down to his boxer briefs, I try not to stare at his gorgeous body. He has tattoos on his arms that make me drool every time I see them, but now is not the time. It's the serpent wrapping around his arm and over his shoulder which seems to captivate me the most, but there's not a single thing about naked Vlad Petrov I don't find enticing.

Just looking at him makes me so wet that it's hard to concentrate. I wrap his clothing up and force my voice to be even, "Is there an incinerator on site?"

He arches an eyebrow, and nods, "Da."

"Okay," I breathe out and then I'm being pulled away from the vanity and into his arms.

Vlad's fingers dive into my hair before his lips slam down on mine to kiss me until I can't breathe and I'm clinging to him. He undresses me now, slowly uncovering my body to his

gaze. As his eyes rake over my body, I shiver at the hungry look in his eyes. He slips his boxer briefs down over his hips after he releases me.

When he walks across the bathroom and turns on the shower, I can't tear my eyes away from him. His body is a work of art and I just want to worship at his feet. If I painted nudes, I would definitely ask him to pose for me.

Such a shame.

When the water is a good temperature, Vlad holds his hand out to me. I don't hesitate this time to slip my hand into his. I want to feel his skin against mine. I want to help him wash the blood down the drain even though most of it was on his clothing.

He steps under the rain showerhead and tips his head back, his arms flexing as he reaches up and pushes his hair. It's strange to be surrounded by water and have your mouth go dry. It's just the way this man affects me.

I squeeze my thighs together to try and find some relief, but I know it's not going to happen. The only thing that will help me relieve this ache is having Vlad buried deep inside of me. Still, I'm curious and I need to know what the fuck happened.

My voice is gentle, "What happened?"

Vlad looks at me and pulls me closer, his hands running over my body the same way the water is. He's so gentle with me, but I know what he is capable of. He walked in wearing the evidence of the man he is just moments ago.

"The woman who was hitting on me at the table last night had a husband," his voice is cold and detached.

I arch an eyebrow, "Had?"

He smirks and I know the answer without him saying a thing. "I tried to give him an out and a way for him to save face, but then he insulted you." Murder flashes in his eyes and my hands come up to smooth over his shoulders, trying to soothe him. "That will not stand," he pushes the words out through his clenched teeth.

I lean forward and kiss his chest right where his heart pumps. He sucks in a sharp breath and then I'm being slammed against the tile wall of the shower. I moan and arch my back, my hard nipples grating against the smattering of chest hair there.

"You're mine," Vlad snarls.

It's the only warning I get before he fills me. He buries his length deep inside of me and drops his forehead to my shoulder, his breathing heavy and labored. He squeezes my hips while I wrap my arms around his neck.

I grind down against him, needing more. Now that he's started this, I'm fucking primed and ready for him to fuck me hard and fast. I need it. My body is demanding it.

"Please, Vlad," I whine.

His head snaps up and he looks at me through hooded eyes, his pupils dilated and swallowing up almost all the blue of his irises. He looks deranged, unhinged, right on edge. I wouldn't have him any other way.

Vlad presses one of his hands against the tile next to my head, the other squeezes my hip, the hold punishing and fucking amazing. It's just what I need. I tighten my knees around his waist and try to prepare because I know this is going to be rough and dirty.

"Don't hold back," I pant.

He growls, the sound bouncing around the walls of the shower and making him sound fucking feral. When he moves it's the movement of a beast, of an animal claiming his mate for the entire world to see. He pulls almost all the way out before slamming his hips forward to fill me so hard that I cringe and moan at the same time.

It's punishing and I don't mind him exacting his revenge on my body. I can take it. I want it. I need it.

While he fucks me hard and fast, my fingers can't grip anything as I fight against the water and the jarring thrusts. My pussy flutters around his length and I know I'm not going to be able to hold on for much longer.

I swear he grows bigger as he grunts and growls, fucking me harder and faster. When he widens his stance and starts using his grip on my hip to pull me down his length while he surges upward, I see stars.

“Vlad,” I yelp his name, but it doesn’t slow him down. It only feeds the animal inside of him and makes him go harder.

Everything is a blur as the pleasure between us builds. I know the explosion at the end of this is going to break me into little pieces. I also know Vlad will be there to put me back together.

“You like that,” he grits out through his bared teeth, “don’t you? You want me to use you how you need, Laurel? Use you how I need,” it’s not a question.

“Yes,” I hiss. The pleasure coils inside of me and is threatening to snap and unspool at any moment. I just need a little more. “I’m going to come, Vlad, give it to me,” I barely get the words out through panted breaths.

“That’s right. Come all over my cock,” he demands.

I don’t know what I need, I’m sliding up and down the tile, and the pleasure is almost too much to take. I just need... something.

Suddenly, Vlad lurches forward and bites down on my shoulder, growling around my flesh. The spike of pain along with the way he’s pummeling my pussy pushes me right over the edge. I come hard, the walls of my channel gripping his shaft and my vision going double for a second.

Vlad roars around my shoulder, his teeth still biting my skin and making my orgasm roll through me like thunder.

He pushes inside of me as deep as he can as he fills me with his cum. I can feel the warmth of him spreading through me. It’s exactly what we both needed

He releases his mouth from my shoulder and kisses the mark he’s left behind, muttering, “Fuck, Laurel.”

“I’m yours,” I whisper, my body boneless and fucking useless with the aftershocks of my orgasm.

He chuckles before kissing me sweetly. It's all I can do to return the kiss. I know he'll keep me safe though and take care of me which allows me to close my eyes and slump against him.

I'm his.



CHAPTER 11

LAUREL

I wish I had the unfinished canvases I left behind. Now that I have my inspiration back, I know just what needs to happen with them, but they are hours away and I'd have to wade through the surly assholes who are my brothers. Yeah, I'm not looking forward to that.

It'll have to happen at some point, but I'm not ready to see them or confront them. I know it'll be a shit show. They've never listened to me before and I don't have a good feeling about them listening now.

I know the bullshit they would spew, and it would all be anti-Petrov. I used to ride that train too, but isn't having a feud when you don't even know why or what started it exhausting? It isn't healthy.

I guess neither is killing a man for threatening me, but that's the life and it's one I know well. Sergei would have killed him too. Nikolai too. Ivan would have beat the shit out of him and Viktor would have helped.

They're the men in my life and, damn, I do love them. They're violent, possessive and a little off, but they have a code, and they take it seriously. Vlad follows the same one and if it's all I have to build a bridge between them then it'll have to be enough.

I'm heading toward The Jewel to talk with Cathy and to grab the canvases that have been in her office since the day I arrived. I really want to slip out of The Golden Crown and go and see the ocean, but I know it would be a step too far for Vlad.

He's already on edge and I know why. He knows my brothers aren't going to let this go. I wish I could tell him he's wrong, but I know the truth.

The confrontation is looming and unless I go to them, they're going to figure out a way to come to me.

The woman at the front desk who tried to flirt with Vlad is working again today and she glares at me as I move through the lobby. I flash her a huge smile and give a little wave. I don't need to be hostile to the woman. She doesn't know her place, which is unfortunate for her, but I won't be stooping to her level unless she gives me a reason to.

When I see her pick up the phone, I'm curious, but she is working. I shrug it off and walk through the door of The Jewel. Once again, I'm taken aback by how perfect the space is. When I asked Vlad about the gallery, he let me know he remodeled a restaurant to create the space two years ago.

He didn't say that he did it because he wanted to give me a space to show my art, but I can read between the lines. It's sweet, a little out there as far as gestures go, but damn sweet. It's also perfect. I don't think I could have designed a better space if I had done it myself.

I should walk down the hallway toward Cathy's office, but I find my feet moving through the gallery instead. It's been a little while since I've been to a gallery or a museum. I used to go all the time, but in the last year Nikolai became increasingly paranoid and worried about my safety.

At first it bothered me, but then Ivan sat me down and explained to me how the death of a woman one of Nikolai's men was seeing got under his skin. He's spent the last year blaming himself and feeling haunted by it. Considering none of my brothers would hurt a woman, I can understand why he was struggling.

A man he trusted was abusive and then killed a woman; he broke the code. When Ivan told me the man didn't even feel badly about killing her and Nikolai took the matter into his own hands, I was disgusted. Not at Nikolai, but at the man who worked and lived under the banner of loyalty with the Orlov family.

When the door to the gallery opens, I don't think anything of it considering the weather is nice, even for December. I

hope Cathy and the artist get a sale. The photographs on display are all taken locally in Atlantic City. Looking at them gives a different perspective than I've gotten from the top of The Golden Crown as I look down from above.

A hand grips my arm, but the touch is gentle. When I whirl around, I'm met with Sergei along with Ivan and Viktor flanking him. I try and tug my arm out of Sergei's grip, but it's clear by the set of his jaw he's not letting go.

Fuck.

"Sergei," I keep my voice level and calm, "you need to let go of me right fucking now."

Sergei's jaw clenches and it's Ivan who answers me, "That's not going to happen, Laurel. We're here to take you home."

"I am home," my voice goes cold as anger fills me.

Didn't I just tell them I'm fine? Didn't I tell them I found love? Why are my wishes so easily ignored? Why is my life something they think they can play with?

Viktor looks at me with pleading eyes and I hate disappointing my baby brother, but it has to be done. Maybe one day he'll understand. I hope he does.

"Please don't do this," I'm pleading with them.

Sergei's nostrils flare and his eyes are hard as he looks down at me. "Petrov is not a man you can trust."

I narrow my eyes at him and slam my free hand down on my hips as I square my shoulders, prepared to give them a piece of my fucking mind. "You don't know anything about him." Sergei arches an eyebrow as Viktor studies my face. "You don't. Don't even try and say you do. How do you know Vlad can't be trusted? Because our fathers didn't like each other and had some bad blood?"

I can see the moment Ivan falters, but Sergei holds firm. "Yes," he grits out.

"That's the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard, Sergei. You know it." I want to scream and stomp my foot, but neither

of those things would help me in this situation. I don't even know if I can reason with him. "Please," I whisper.

Sergei looks at me, really looks at me now. I don't know what he sees, but I see him soften slightly. Before I can say another word, Vlad comes barreling into the gallery, a murderous look on his face and my brothers in his crosshairs.

Perfect, just what this situation needs. I look at him and hope he gives me a chance to diffuse this. I know it's going to be more difficult now and gets worse when Sergei turns and shoves me behind him as if he's shielding me and Viktor and Ivan close ranks.

Vlad spits the words, "What the fuck do you think you're doing?"

Ivan, the oldest in this little trio of bullshit is the one to answer, "We're here for our sister. We're here to take her home."

"As I've already said," I don't even try to hide the scorn from my tone, "I am home."

Vlad's eyes light up when he looks at me and I know my words mean a lot to him. My chest warms because it's true. I am home. I do love him.

Now I just need a chance to tell him the second part. If this becomes a damn blood bath and my brothers are hurt, it will change things. I wouldn't be the woman I am if it didn't.

"You heard the woman," Vlad sneers.

I roll my eyes because that shit is not going to help.

I take the opportunity of Sergei's focus being split and yank myself out of his grasp. I move fast enough that he's not able to grab me again. I work my way around the room, giving all four men a wide berth to make sure each of them gets the full force of my disapproving look.

"I'm not some fucking object to be argued over," I speak with authority and make sure I'm standing at my full height.

Viktor's face fucking crumples. Ivan softens. Vlad looks chagrined. Sergei still looks pissed, but I'm not at all

surprised. Pissed is his default setting. I'd be more concerned if he had a different reaction.

“Of course you're not an object, *malen'kaya ptitsa*,” Vlad's voice is gentle. He declares, his tone not leaving any room for argument, “You're mine.”

Sergei runs his hands through his hair and mutters harshly, “Fuck.”

I glare at him and then turn toward Ivan. “How did you know to come into the gallery and try and grab me?”

Viktor crosses his arms across his chest and smirks at me. “I seduced the woman who is working the desk. She's there a lot of the time and for whatever reason, *sestra*, she hates your fucking guts.”

Vlad is seething and I hate the feeling of vindication, but it's there and burning in the middle of my chest all the same. Vlad pulls out his phone and fires off a text before slipping it back in his pocket and looking at me. There is so much love in his blue eyes, but he also looks resigned.

I'm not sure I like it.

Ivan tries again, “You should be at home, with us. We're your family.”

Viktor tries a different tactic, his voice light, “If you don't come home, you won't be able to meet Mistie, Nikolai's woman.”

My eyebrows shoot up to my hairline. His woman? Was I dropped into an alternate universe? Have I really missed that much time? He didn't have a woman before he went to the cabin, but now he does? I'm sure there's a story there and I do want to know.

I shake off my curiosity because I don't have to go home to find out the story. I don't even have to go home to be part of my family. Atlantic City isn't far, and people move away from their ancestral homes all the time and for many reasons, love being one of them.

Vlad clears his throat. “Laurel,” there’s something broken in his voice which has me pulling my focus from my brothers to the man I love. He’s clenching his jaw hard and my heart starts to race.

I can’t place why at first and then it slams into me. I’m afraid. I know I’m not going to like whatever he’s going to say.

Will it break me?

“If you,” he swallows hard, “would rather go with your brothers then I can understand.”

Tears well up in my eyes and I spit out the words, “You want me to go?”

Vlad closes the distance between us and even though I was trying to stay away from everyone to hope I could get them to see reason, now my feet are rooted on the spot and I’m unable to move. His touch is rough, but not unwelcome when he grips my hips and pulls me against his chest.

He buries his head in my hair and takes a deep breath as my hand fists the lapels of his suit jacket. His voice is muffled, but I can hear him. “Make no fucking mistake, my little bird, I will still fight for you, even if you go. If you think it is the best course of action to go with them, for now, I can understand that. I only want you to be happy. You going with them will not mean you’re not mine. It won’t change how everything ends, only the journey to get there.”

“If you let me go right now, I’ll hate you forever,” my voice is thick with emotion and I’m on the verge of breaking down into a sobbing mess.

It feels like my heart is breaking into a million pieces, but I can also understand his reasoning. I just don’t like it. If he lets me go now, after everything we’ve shared, I don’t know if I could ever believe that his feelings for me are true.

I hear my brothers speaking to each other, but I tune them out. Frankly, if blood was going to be spilled, it would have happened already. Instead of worrying about them, I cling to Vlad and hope he doesn’t let me just walk out the door.

Or is this his way out?

“Stop,” his voice is a command against the shell of my ear. “If you’re thinking this was all just a game or I’m trying to give myself a way out or any other thing you’re considering then you need to know you’re wrong. You’re mine, but I also know how important your brothers are to you. I’m trying to do right by you, Laurel.”

“Well don’t,” I sniffle and Vlad chuckles softly. “I don’t want to go,” I whisper.

He nods and then gives me a squeeze before he lets go of me slowly and tucks me into his side. When I look up, my brothers are staring at me with varied expressions on their faces. Sergei still looks like he wants to kill, but that’s normal. Ivan looks torn between his duty, which I’m sure was an order from Nikolai, and his love for me. Viktor’s face is the only one of complete understanding and acceptance.

Maybe this is how it needed to happen. Maybe they needed to see it for themselves.

“I’m not going anywhere,” my voice is strong and confident.

Ivan runs his fingers through his hair as he looks away. “Nikolai is going to fucking kill us,” he sighs.

“You all maybe,” Sergei taunts, “I’m not against throwing her over my shoulder, carrying her out of here, and killing anyone who stands in our way.”

I stiffen and then glare at him. “You would kill the man who is the father of my child?” My brothers freeze for a second before they look at my lower abdomen and then turn their ire back onto Vlad. I scoff, “I haven’t been here that long, but it will happen eventually.” I point at my brothers, “If you want to be uncles then this is a change you’ll just have to deal with.”

My brothers share a look and then Ivan closes his eyes and sighs. “You’ll need to speak to Nikolai.” He looks at me pointedly. “I suggest you do it in person. He won’t like this,

but he will listen to you. He loves you and only wants you to be happy.”

Sergei’s intense focus shifts to Vlad. “If you hurt her, you know what will happen to you. I don’t make idle threats, Petrov.”

“Noted.” Vlad and Sergei lock eyes, something passing between them.

My brothers approach me slowly and cautiously. Each one hugs me while Vlad is at my back. I don’t think he believes my brothers would hurt me, but now that I’ve committed to staying, he doesn’t want them to try and take me away. Again.

I promise my brothers I’ll speak with Nikolai. It’s enough to appease them. For now.

When they walk out the door, longing on their faces and sad waves in their wake, I slump back against Vlad’s chest.

My voice is cold, “I hope you’re dealing with that bitch. She does not know what loyalty means.”

The rumble of Vlad’s chuckle vibrates through me and has heat pooling in my core. He kisses the crown of my head and wraps his arms around me, one of his hands resting on my lower abdomen.

“Already taken care of, *malen’kaya ptitsa*.” He rubs his hand over my belly. “I can’t wait for you to tell me you’re pregnant for real,” he sighs.

I giggle softly and look in the direction of Cathy’s office. “I don’t feel like talking about the show right now. I think I’d rather take a nap.”

He releases me and leads me toward The Golden Crown with his hand on the small of my back. “Then a nap is what you’ll get.”

I can only hope Nikolai understands. Vlad is a man who has seen my thorns, they’ve even made him bleed, and he keeps coming back. He’s the only man I’ve ever loved. It’s only him for me.



CHAPTER 12

VLAD

I'm still on edge and it's been hours since Laurel's brothers tried to take her back home. I just can't seem to sit still. There was no way in the world I was going to be able to take a nap even though I wanted to curl up with my woman.

If I had gotten into bed with her, I would have fucked her until she passed out. That's not napping. I couldn't do that to her because I saw how exhausted she was. It took a lot out of her to go up against her brothers and choose me.

She did choose me too. It's the reason I've been pacing my office like a caged beast for the last few hours, unable to sit still and unable to think or be productive.

When I got the call from security there was something going down in the gallery, my heart was in my throat because I knew Laurel was going down to see Cathy. I didn't bother pulling up the feeds to see what was happening and, instead, got there as fast as I could.

It felt like dying when I gave Laurel the option to leave with her brothers. It wouldn't change the inevitable of us being together, but I hated to see her torn between her loyalties. I wanted to try and take some of the pressure off her. I know she loves me; I can see it in the way she looks at me, and I knew I would be able to get her back even if I had to watch her walk away.

To find out it was one of my own people who contacted the Orlov brothers to let them know she was in the gallery pissed me off. If I hadn't alerted my men to the feeling deep in my gut that the brothers would be coming for her, would they have been able to get her out of the building? I don't know, but I know she would have put up a fight. The tapes I watched of the confrontation proved it.

Watching the footage only made me fall deeper in love with my woman.

She's a force to be reckoned with. She's so damn strong and she knows her own mind. Maybe I shouldn't have given her a choice since she was telling her brothers she wasn't going with them.

I just know how important family is.

After I got Laurel settled back upstairs in our bed, my next stop was the security offices to have a little chat with the fucking snake working at the front desk. I didn't know her name before today and now I'll never need to know it.

She's fucking lucky I don't kill women because murder was definitely on my mind. I couldn't even rough her up. Her eyes were still filled with fear as I fired her and threatened her entire fucking family if she doesn't find a life away from Atlantic City.

She whined, "But I can't just move."

If she thought she was going to find sympathy with me, she was sorely mistaken. I was already fighting the rage inside of me, she didn't have a single fucking card to play. The longer I sat and stared at her, the more it sunk in.

With tears in her eyes, she nodded and whispered, "I understand."

That's fucking right she understands. I sent one of my men to follow her and make sure she packed up all her shit and got on the fucking road. I'll track her to see where she lands and keep tabs on her. If she was willing to deal with the Orlov brothers, for nothing more than thinking she could get in my pants, who knows what she is willing to do for a payout.

You can't trust a fucking snake.

When I was done with her, I retreated to my office, and now, hours later I'm still here. I want to touch Laurel's skin. I want to go upstairs and make sure she's here and didn't leave with them.

I know I'm going to have to face Nikolai and her brothers again soon, but I need to ensure a few things are in place before I do. I can't walk into their home and not have assurances Laurel is mine, even though her word means a

whole fucking lot to me. I'm just not sure if it's enough for them.

I can't have them trying to take her from me. I won't be able to make the offer I did today again. I just can't. I might be a man who knows power, but my *malen'kaya ptitsa* makes me feel powerless.

When I can't take it anymore, I storm out of the office and punch the button for my private elevator. I need to see Laurel and I need to do it now. I don't think I can contain this feeling, this panic, inside any longer.

The moment the elevator slides open, the view stretching out in front of me from the floor to ceiling windows, I feel like I can breathe. There's her caramel apple scent in the air and it helps to calm me, but not enough. Not nearly enough.

My feet are heavy as I make my way to our bedroom, and I fling the door open with a little too much force. When I don't see her in bed, my heart starts to pound in my chest, and I'm frozen for a moment. Could they have gotten in here? Could they have succeeded in taking her away from me?

I force myself to take a deep breath and then another. I move quickly to the other side of the penthouse. I come across the library first, where I've found her relaxing before, but she's not there.

Fuck. Okay. She's here. I know she's here.

When I close my eyes, I can feel this tug in the middle of my chest. It's her, a bright light, a golden thread, something that brings me closer to my humanity. All for her. Always for her.

Relief floods me when I open the door to her studio and find Laurel sitting there in front of her canvas, a silk robe wrapped around her body and hanging off one of her shoulders. I'm harder than a fucking rock in a second. She's focused on the canvas in front of her and doesn't notice me at first.

I strip my clothes quickly, needing to touch her, needing to remind both of us who she belongs to. I should have done it

the second her brothers left, but I wanted to give her the space she asked for. Now I can't wait, I can only hope she's ready for me.

When I'm standing right behind her, I reach out and smooth a palm over her exposed shoulder. She doesn't jump or spin around, she leans back against my chest and lets out a contented sigh.

"I was wondering how long it was going to take for you to come back," her voice is small and a little unsure.

I kiss the top of her head and reach around to tug the bow holding her robe closed. I continue to pull it out of the loops when it comes undone. As her robe falls open it exposes her beautiful body, and she puts the paint pallet down on the table next to the easel.

When I grip her shoulders, I spin her around carefully on the stool. I look deep into her gray eyes, but the lure of her body being exposed to me is too to ignore. My eyes travel down and take in the way her hard nipples are begging for my mouth.

"You're so beautiful, Laurel." She bites her lip and my voice drops, "Thank you for staying with me."

She wraps her arms around my neck and smiles up at me. "Vlad," her voice is soothing and something inside of me unknots a little bit more, "there isn't anywhere else I'd rather be."

I arch an eyebrow. "Even though I tricked you?"

She giggles and drops her arms to allow her robe to slide off her body, exposing herself to me fully. I growl, appreciation for how fucking stunning she is making my cock throb and leak pre-cum from the tip.

"Even though you tricked me," she confirms. She arches an eyebrow, her voice full of sass, "Even though you stalked me."

I smirk at her. "You like it."

She makes a humming sound, but I steal her words by slanting my mouth over hers and kissing her hard. I deepen the

kiss and don't stop until she's clinging to me, and our bodies are pressed together. We both need this. We need to make sure we're right here and aren't going anywhere.

Knowing that she needs it just as badly as me settles the worry inside of me completely. She didn't run. She could have. She stayed.

She fucking stayed.

When we pull back from each other, our gazes lock and I'm unable to look away. There are so many emotions in her gray eyes, and I don't want to miss any of them. They're so vivid, just like her, just like her art.

It's the reason I've displayed her art in the places which mean the most to me. It was the only way I had to be close to her for two years and I swear every time I looked at one of her paintings it was like she was standing right next to me. I don't think she even knows how talented she is.

I grip her wrists and move them so they're trapped behind her back in one of my hands. She lets me have my way with her, submitting to me and trusting me. It only makes me want her more.

It doesn't make me want to break her. I want to show her just how strong she is, and I want to prove that she put her trust and love in the right man.

My lips hover over hers, so close to touching that it's hard to resist. "I love you, Laurel."

Her eyes widen and her head jerks back in surprise. As her eyes turn glassy with unshed tears, she takes a deep breath. My heart is suspended in time, waiting to fall, waiting to shatter. The power is all hers. It always will be.

"I love you, Vlad," she breathes.

My heart falls, but she's there to catch it. I know she'll hold it close, treasure it, ensure it is safe; just like I will do with hers.

I use the tie of her robe and wrap it around her wrists, binding them together and the pulse at the base of her neck

starts to flutter faster with excitement. When she's secure I duck my head and suck one of her nipples into my mouth. I nip at it with my teeth before sucking it hard.

When she moans and arches her back, I release her nipple and then give the other side the same attention until she's pleading, "Vlad, stop teasing me. I need you deep inside of me."

I growl around her nipple and stand up fully. With her chest heaving up and down, making her tits jiggle, she looks like an offering. Her skin is flushed, and her gray eyes are dark with desire. She's a work of art.

I smirk at her before I reach around and grab her paintbrush and load it up with some of the paint on her pallet. Her eyes widen and her breathing goes ragged as I bring the brush to her skin and follow the lines of her body with the red paint.

"You're a work of art, my little bird," my voice is deep and filled with desire, "but I'm no artist. This will have to do."

Laurel's head drops back on her shoulders and with her arms bound behind her back, it presses her pretty tits up even farther. "Fuck, Vlad."

When I'm satisfied, I drop her brush and grunt, "Oh, I'm going to fuck you."

I'm not gentle when I grab her and push her down onto the ground, on the drop cloth surrounding her painting area. She lets out a noise of surprise, but I barely hear it. I can't hear a fucking thing over the chanting of my beast to fuck her and fill her with my cum and the blood rushing through my veins.

I need to be inside of her right fucking now.

When she's on her knees, I push her forward until her shoulders are pressed against the floor and I drop to my knees behind her. As I grip the base of my cock, I swipe the head through her soaking wet folds and groan.

I grip the sash binding her wrists for leverage and then fill her in one quick, hard thrust. She moans and bucks underneath me, but she doesn't have any fucking leverage or purchase. I

chuckle at how fucking helpless she is and her pretty pussy squeezes my length.

“Tell me how much you love my dick inside of you,” I grit out my command through my teeth.

Her words are muffled, but I hear them, “I love it. I need you to claim me, Vlad. Fuck me hard. Remind me I’m not going anywhere.”

My control snaps and sweat beads along my brow as I fuck her hard and fast. She cries out every time I hit the back of her channel, but she gets wetter and wetter with each thrust, loving the way I use her for our pleasure.

When she’s close, I reach around and pinch her clit and she screams my name. Her walls squeezing me is too much for me to take and I thrust as deep inside of her as I can and fill her with my cum.

Laurel collapses on the ground and I follow her down, keeping my dick inside of her and covering her with my body as I do. I kiss her shoulder, wanting her to feel my love for her.

She huffs out, “I love you too, Vlad.”

“I’m putting my ring on your finger and you’re going to become Mrs. Petrov as soon as possible,” I blurt the words and her eyes widen as her body becomes stiff.

When she relaxes, I know I have her right where I want her.

“Mrs. Petrov does have a nice sound to it,” she sasses.

She’s perfect. And she’s staying. Right here where she belongs.



CHAPTER 13

VLAD

It's been a week since the Orlov brothers came into my town, into my casino, and tried to take my woman back to a home that wasn't hers anymore. I'm both nervous, seething and, surprisingly, calm as we finish up the drive to the place where Laurel grew up.

I can't refer to it as her home, not anymore, because her home is with me. It'll always be with me from now on. From the way she's relaxed back in the passenger seat and nervously chewing on her lip, I think she agrees with me.

Then there's the way she's been riding my dick for the last week, as if she can't get enough, as if she's never leaving. Love shines in her eyes whenever she looks at me and I'm starting to see little touches of her in the penthouse.

I don't let her out of my sight often, but she's ordered some things and I've shown her around Atlantic City. I loved the way her eyes lit up when I took her to Steel Pier a few evenings ago. She took everything in with wide eyes and an excited spirit.

As we were walking in, I leaned into her and let her know, "All the rides are closed right now for winter, but The Wheel is still open."

The lights reflected off her face as she looked up at me with so much hope in her eyes, "Can we ride it?"

When I laughed and nodded, she launched herself at me and kissed me right there in the middle of the walkway. She didn't give a flying fuck who was around or what they thought of her.

I soaked up the moment and pried her lips open with mine, kissing her until we were both breathless and panting. When I pulled back and looked down into her gray eyes, it hit home that I would do anything for the woman in my arms.

It worked out perfectly for my plans that she wanted to ride The Wheel anyway. Once we climbed on, I slipped the operator a little money to stop us at the top for a moment. I loved the look of wonder on my woman's face as she looked out across the Atlantic, seeing the expanse of water. It has a way of making someone feel small, but it made me feel like a king, my kingdom stretching out in front of me.

I know a lot of it was because of the woman next to me and the way she lights up my world. I had been chasing the idea of her for two years, feeling the weight of the responsibilities on my shoulders because of my name. It's enough to drown a lesser man, but that was never an option for me.

I might have told her she was marrying me the day her brothers showed up, but I hadn't put a ring on her finger yet. While we were high above the world, the salt air in our faces and a chill in the air, I slipped my ring on her finger.

I didn't ask and she didn't say yes. It was already done, and we both knew it. She just snuggled into my side and smiled up at me as if I was the only man who could catch her attention.

Now I just have to make sure that Nikolai understands I'm the best man for his sister. I don't know what I would do if I were in his position. I'm an only child and I've never known what it means to have family by blood in the way Laurel and her siblings do.

Guilt weighs down on my gut. I know Nikolai is going to be pissed. I don't know what it means for the future, but I know I'm not letting Laurel go. If there is still bad blood between the families, we'll deal with it, but I know it'll hurt my woman.

And that is the last thing I want to do.

I reach over and grab Laurel's hand before pulling it over on my lap, following the directions for the last few turns before we hit the Orlov home. I don't know if I'm holding her hand for her or me. I guess it doesn't matter.

We both need the comfort.

“It’s going to be fine, Vlad,” she assures me, but the wobble in her voice tells me she’s not sure.

I take a deep breath and let it out slowly before trying to sound sure, “I know it will. I’m not letting you go, *malen’kaya ptitsa*.”

When we pull up to the large iron gates, the crest of an eagle on the outside, they open without us calling up to the house and I have no doubt it’s because they’re expecting us. It makes me nervous as I drive through, and they start to close automatically. What if they won’t let us out?

Laurel gives my hand a squeeze and I force myself to relax as much as I can.

Pulling up to the house, I see Sergei waiting for us, his legs spread, and his arms crossed across his chest. Laurel sighs and shakes her head, a small smile on her lips. I can feel the love she has for her brother, and it makes my chest ache.

When I step out, I move around the car quickly to open the door for my woman and help her out, even though I know she doesn’t need it. Sergei watches the exchange, and something shifts in his eyes as he does. Maybe he wasn’t sure I would take proper care of his sister and I can’t say I blame him.

He lifts his chin at me in greeting when we step closer before he wraps his arms around Laurel and tugs her into his chest. His voice is low as he murmurs, “Are you sure? Are you still happy?”

She chuckles against his chest and gives his middle a squeeze. “I’m very happy.” She pulls back and holds her hand up for him to see. “I’m even getting married. It would be a shame not to have my brothers there to support me.”

Guilt covers Sergei’s face before he tucks it away and his stoic mask is back in place. “There is no way in hell I’d miss my sister’s wedding even if you are marrying a Petrov,” he says the last part to me with a sneer, but it’s half-hearted at best.

I bark out a laugh and shrug. I’m not going to let him get under my skin. Now that I’m here the nervousness has

dissolved. Sergei leads us into the house, and I guide my woman with my hand on the small of her back.

The house is quiet, and we don't stop until we're standing outside of Nikolai's office where the door is open. It's not exactly welcoming, but it could be worse.

It's tense as we step in, but I wasn't expecting anything less. I nod toward Ivan and Viktor which they return before hugging Laurel. Nikolai's keen gray eyes, so much like his sister's, are watching intently. I would expect nothing less. Every time he looks at me, disgust covers his features.

Nikolai opens his mouth, but Laurel beats him to it. "Before you say anything, Niko, I'm sorry that I left without telling anyone. I wanted to do something for me and on my own and in doing so I met Vlad. I've fallen in love with him. I'm going to marry him." She holds her hand up to show him the ring. "This is my decision and if you're going to stand in my way then you'll find you no longer have a sister."

Nikolai sighs and runs his fingers through his hair. "Laurel, you're family and will always be family. I just," he looks at me with fire in his eyes as if this is my fault and he's not entirely wrong, "don't know about Petrov."

She makes a humming sound and looks around the office. "Where is your woman? I was hoping to meet her and get more of the story."

If I didn't know better, I would swear Nikolai Orlov is blushing. "She's out today. I'm sorry you won't be able to meet her today. I'm sure you would really like each other."

"Will you," she clears her throat and looks unsure for a moment, "bring her to visit soon?" She squares her shoulders and I'm damn proud of her; I'm in awe of her really. "I'm sure this all won't be resolved in one conversation. Next time we try and bridge this gap, you need to come to our territory."

Nikolai stares at his younger sister and studies her. I don't think he's looking for a weakness, he's looking to see if she is really happy, if this is really what she wants. Whatever he sees there has his shoulders relaxing slightly.

“Of course,” he acquiesces.

Laurel nods and then looks around the room, meeting each of her brother’s eyes before she looks at me. She lifts on her tiptoes and kisses my cheek. “I’m going to go and pack some things and leave you all to talk,” there’s a warning in her voice for all of us.

I can only hope we all heed it. I don’t want to see my woman pissed off. It would be glorious, but I sure as hell don’t want to be on the receiving end of it. To prove her point she looks at her brothers again, a warning glare in her eyes.

As the door closes behind her, the tension in the room builds. I sit across from Nikolai and meet his eyes, not looking away and refusing to be intimidated.

“Tell me why I shouldn’t gut you right here and now,” Nikolai’s voice is lethal, and Viktor shifts uncomfortably where he sits on a couch.

“If you did you would disappoint and sadden your sister.” I grin at him, but it’s not friendly. “She’s become quite attached to me.”

Nikolai’s lip curls up and his eyes burn with the hatred I was expecting. “Explain to me, exactly, how she came to arrive at your casino and meet you, Mr. Petrov.”

I’m sure he knows. If he doesn’t know the specifics, he’s pieced enough together to have a pretty good idea.

“I’ve been watching Laurel for two years.” Sergei leans forward in his chair, and I hold a hand up to stop him from attacking me. “I was upfront about this with her. Other than the initial deception of getting her in my art gallery, I haven’t lied to her, and I never will. She’s been selling her art online under an assumed name for quite some time.”

Ivan hisses, “What?”

I shrug one shoulder casually. They should have been paying more attention to their sister, but I can understand how she was able to keep something like that quiet. She was determined for them not to know so they didn’t. She’s just as formidable as they are when she has a mind to be.

“I’ve bought several pieces of her art. I had my gallery manager contact her through her website and set up an appointment about an exhibit of her work.” I lean back in my chair. “She jumped at the chance and the rest is, as they say, history.”

“You tricked her,” Sergei is seething.

“I did.” I don’t pull my punches. “I had to. You four kept her in a cage here in this big house. She didn’t have enough room to grow. With one look,” I meet Nikolai’s eyes, having a feeling he’ll understand this, “I knew she was mine. I waited and I planned. I’m not giving her up. She will be my wife and the mother of my children.”

Nikolai’s jaw tenses but he doesn’t threaten me, which is what part of me was expecting. “I don’t like it and I don’t like you.”

“I can understand that Nikolai.” I sneer, “I don’t particularly like you either. I love Laurel though.”

I think this is about as far as we’re going to get today. Nothing is solved. The bad blood remains, but they know where I stand, and I know where they stand.

There might be a way forward and there might not be, but it’s not going to be dealt with today. My skin is already itching to be closer to my woman and she’s been out of my sight for too long in a place where I don’t trust anyone but her.

I stand and give them a nod. As I’m striding out of the room, Viktor falls into step beside me. I glance at him and can see him pondering something.

“Treat her right, she deserves it.”

I stop and turn toward him. “I know it might not mean a lot, but I give you my word.”

He nods once and then leads me to Laurel’s room where she’s zipping up a second suitcase. She smiles at me, but it falls when she sees the look on my face. I close the distance between us and pull her into my arms.

“It’ll be fine, *malen’kaya ptitsa*,” I breathe against her forehead as I kiss her there.

“I know,” she sighs. “I didn’t really think one meeting would change decades of distrust, but I was hoping.”

I kiss her slowly, pouring everything I feel for her into it and getting the same back from her. It’s only when Viktor clears his throat and I pull back from Laurel that I realize he’s still there.

He offers his sister a small smile, “I’ll help you carry these down.”

I’m going to take it for what it is—a beginning. Maybe we won’t ever be more than this, but I’m not giving up my Laurel. She’s mine now and forever.



EPILOGUE

FOUR MONTHS LATER

LAUREL

Time moves fast when everything is as it should be. Honestly, the day I walked out of the house I grew up in for the last time four months ago, suitcases in hand a lot of doubt in my head, I wasn't sure how it would all turn out. I knew I wanted to be with Vlad, but everything else felt so up in the air.

I hated it and it gnawed at me.

Three months ago, Nikolai and his woman, Mistie, along with Ivan and Sergei came to visit us at The Golden Crown. I was nervous as hell and Vlad was stoic, wanting to keep the peace for me and also unsure how everything would play out. He told me he was honest with my brothers, and I didn't know if it was the smartest thing he could have done or the dumbest.

I was expecting violence when they walked onto our turf. I expected threats and ultimatums. Instead, Mistie smoothed the whole thing over by reminding us of a simple truth we all believe in and were raised with.

Family.

Mistie gained my respect that night and we both gained a sisterhood. We'll be the bridge between two families who have forgotten why they hate each other. Neither of us have time to indulge in such things and we have the ears of the men who can turn it all around. Maybe all we need is a little faith to get us through.

I don't know what the future holds in terms of the long-standing feud between the Orlov and Petrov family, but I know it's okay for right now and that's enough. Life is just one big work in progress anyway.

Tonight isn't about what went down months ago and my stomach is in knots because of it. This is huge for me and

knowing my family will be here makes it so much better. After a few months of working on new pieces and getting everything in place, The Jewel is opening their exhibit of my work.

I glance at myself in the mirror and smile. When Vlad appears over my shoulder, my eyes shift to meet his, but he's not looking meeting my gaze. He's looking at me in my dress with hunger.

"Don't even think about it. You can't mess this all up before we go downstairs," I warn him.

His eyes snap up to mine. I can see the challenge there, the need for him to claim me all over again.

His voice is deep and demanding, "Hands on the mirror, *malen'kaya ptitsa.*"

Goosebumps cover my body and I reach out to place my hands flat on the mirror as Vlad steps closer and starts to gather up the skirt of my dress. His eyes never leave mine, the reflection making this intimate in a way I haven't experienced before. It's like being watched, but he's right here and a shiver works up my spine.

When he flips my skirt over my ass his gaze drops, and he lets out a low groan. I'm not wearing panties, which wasn't something I was going to reveal to him until much later.

Words get stuck in my throat as he plunges two fingers inside of me and his thumb finds my clit. I arch my back and move my hips, though I'm not sure if I'm trying to move away from him or take his fingers deeper. Both? Neither?

He doesn't seem to care either way as he pumps his fingers in and out of me, the sound of him fucking my wet pussy filling the room. I moan and he growls in the back of his throat.

When he leans over and whispers in my ear, my fingers try and find purchase on the smooth surface of the mirror, "You're going to come all over my fingers and later, I'm going to punish you for not wearing panties, Laurel."

"Vlad," I moan, and he starts to move his fingers harder and faster.

His touch is exactly what I need to drown out the nervousness which has been filling me since I woke up this morning. Tonight is huge and I've been stressed out about it. Not just people looking at my paintings, judging them and, hopefully, buying them, but everyone being in one room together.

"Come for me," he commands and I fucking shatter.

My breath fogs the mirror as I pant and writhe and moan. Vlad is there to hold me up and absorb every aftershock of my orgasm, coaxing my body to give him all my pleasure. It's only when my shoulders slump forward that he pulls his fingers free and licks them clean, his eyes finding mine and holding my gaze as he does.

After I get cleaned up, he leads me to our elevator and then across the lobby to enter The Jewel. Now the nervousness is different, especially when Vlad grabs two flutes of champagne and begins to lead me over to where my brothers and Mistie are looking at one of my paintings.

He tries to hand me one glass, but I shake my head. "I can't drink that," I whisper.

Vlad freezes and turns toward me slowly, his eyes raking down my body and then back up to lock with mine. I can see the joy there, the excitement and I can't help but smile. I was worried for nothing and now all I can feel is that same joy, that same excitement.

Before he can say anything, Mistie is there and taking the champagne flutes from his hands and winking at me. "Congratulations," her voice is bright and full of so much warmth and love.

"Nyet," Nikolai comes swooping in and grabs the flutes from her.

She rolls her eyes and grumbles, "I wasn't going to drink them."

"You better not," Nikolai warns, but his eyes are full of so much love.

When we spoke a month ago, Mistie let me know she's pregnant. Our little ones will be close in age, both of them next in line to take over their respective families. They'll be the first generation who won't be raised on some feud and, instead, will be cousins.

Vlad cups my cheeks and forces my eyes back to his. His words break, "You're pregnant?"

I barely get to nod before his lips are pressed against mine, his kiss full of gratitude without a care in the world for who is watching. He doesn't even stop when one of my brothers clears his throat. I can't help but laugh against my man's lips.

The rest of the night is filled with success, congratulations for the opening and the baby, and happy memories. I don't care if a single painting sells because that's not what is really important. Vlad is never far from me, and I wouldn't have it any other way.

He didn't see the thorns I grew to keep people at a distance as a hinderance, he saw them for what they were. I was more than a challenge to him and his determination to win my heart and to make me his never wavered.

By the end of the night I'm tired, but I'm also excited to see what comes next.

Want more Vlad and Laurel?

Get [Gilded Thorn's Bonus Epilogue](#)

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

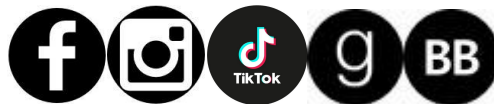


Ember Davis loves alpha heroes with a range of emotions, but a strong sense of how to take care of their women. She loves her heroines from all walks of life, just like her heroes, and she wants them to be real and relatable. Her heroines tend to be sassy, opinionated and smart.

Ember is a stay at home mom of two who recently refound her love of books and all things romance and is so glad that she did. She's always been creative but writing and creating stories that she would love to read satisfies dreams she had as a little girl. She loves butterflies, the color purple and enjoying time with her family.

Psst...it's totally a pen name, but everything above is 100% true.

If you enjoyed this book, or even if you didn't, I'd really appreciate you leaving a review and/or a star rating on Amazon! This is a whole new world for me so any feedback you're open to giving, I'd love to have.



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